

FOREST AT THE EDGE  
~ Book Three ~

The  
MANSIONS  
of  
IDUMEA

TRISH MERCER

## The Mansions of Idumea

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ISBN-13:978-1497494060

ISBN-10:1497494060

Cover design and photography is by Alexandria Mercer's mom and Dave Mercer's wife. The photographer would like to thank Alex for digging the cloak out of the costume box and growing her hair out just long enough, and thank Dave for once again dressing up, even though he kept channelling Bones from Star Trek for his inspiration. ("Dammit Jim, I'm a soldier, not a doctor!") The doors and stairs are from dreamstime.com, and bear a remarkable resemblance to the Parthenon in Paris, or so I'm told.

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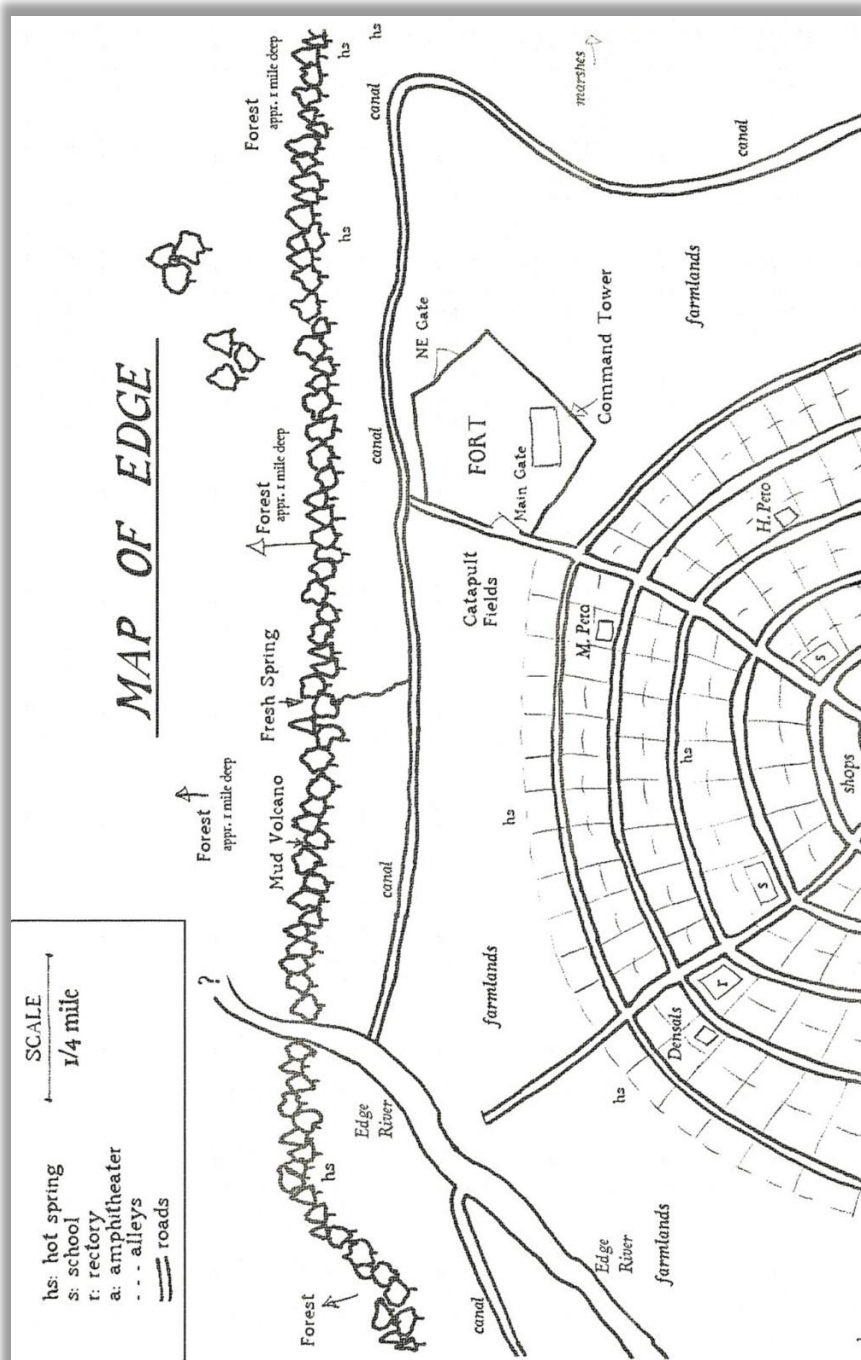
Because to the world,  
doing the right thing  
often looks like doing  
the dumb thing.



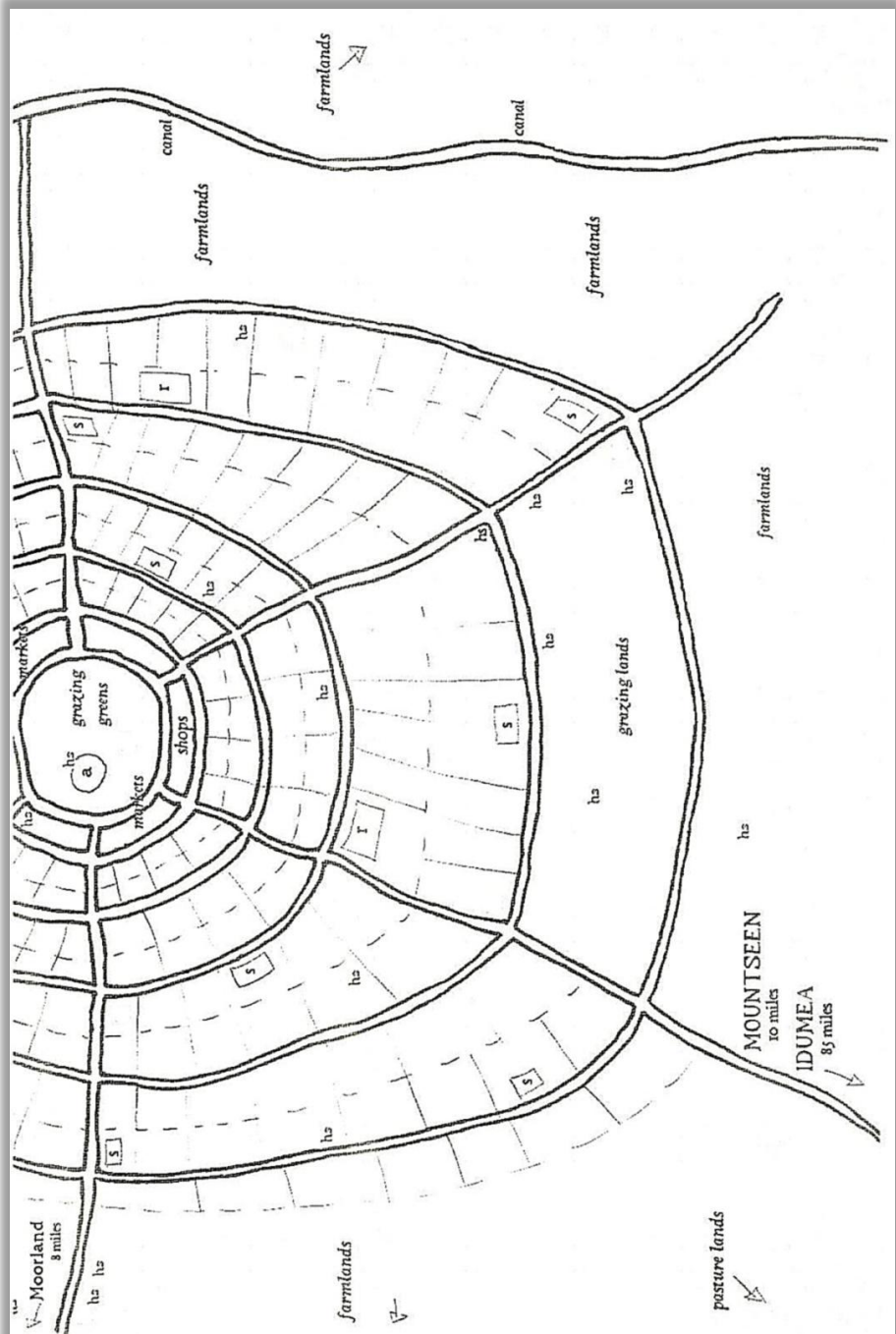
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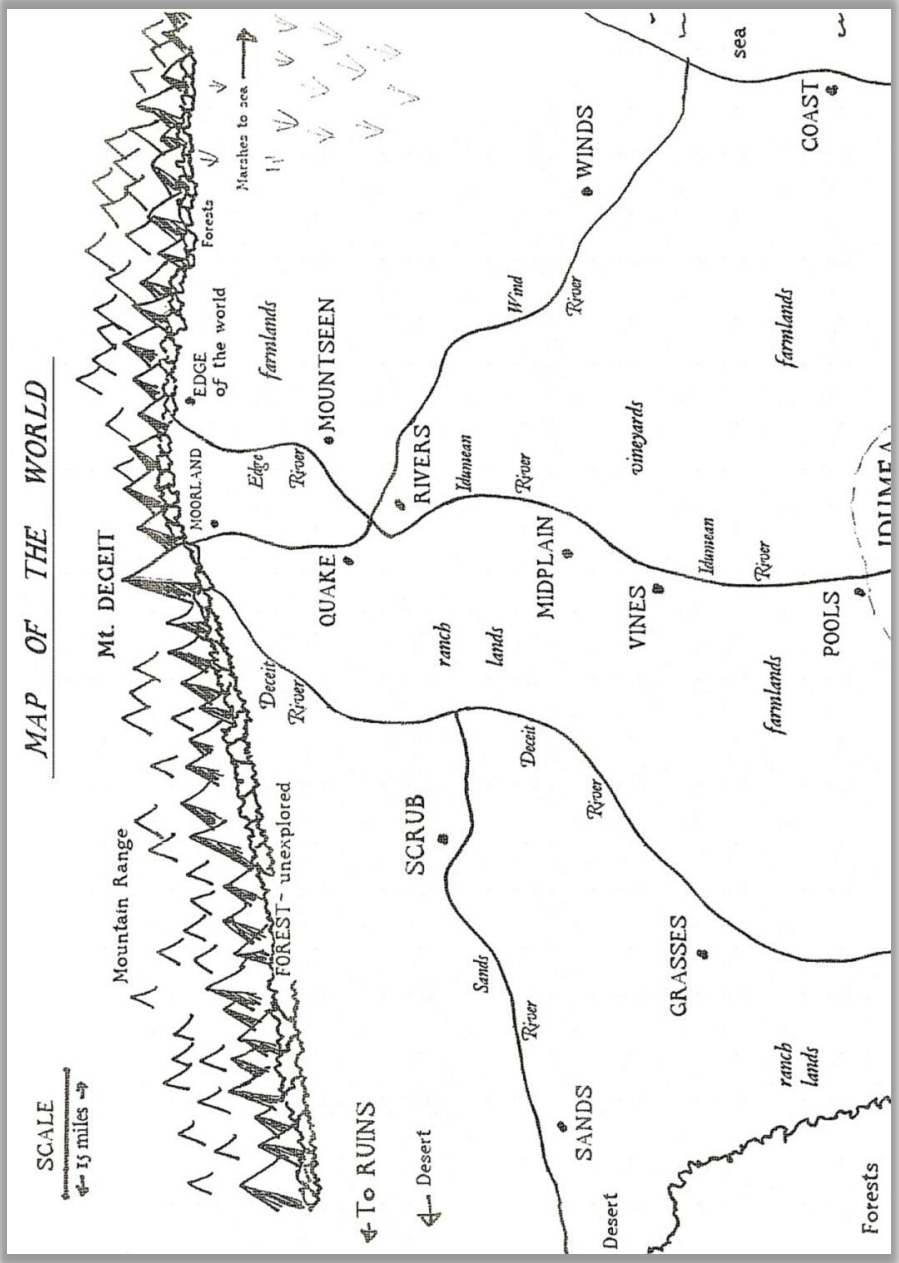
# The Mansions of Idumea



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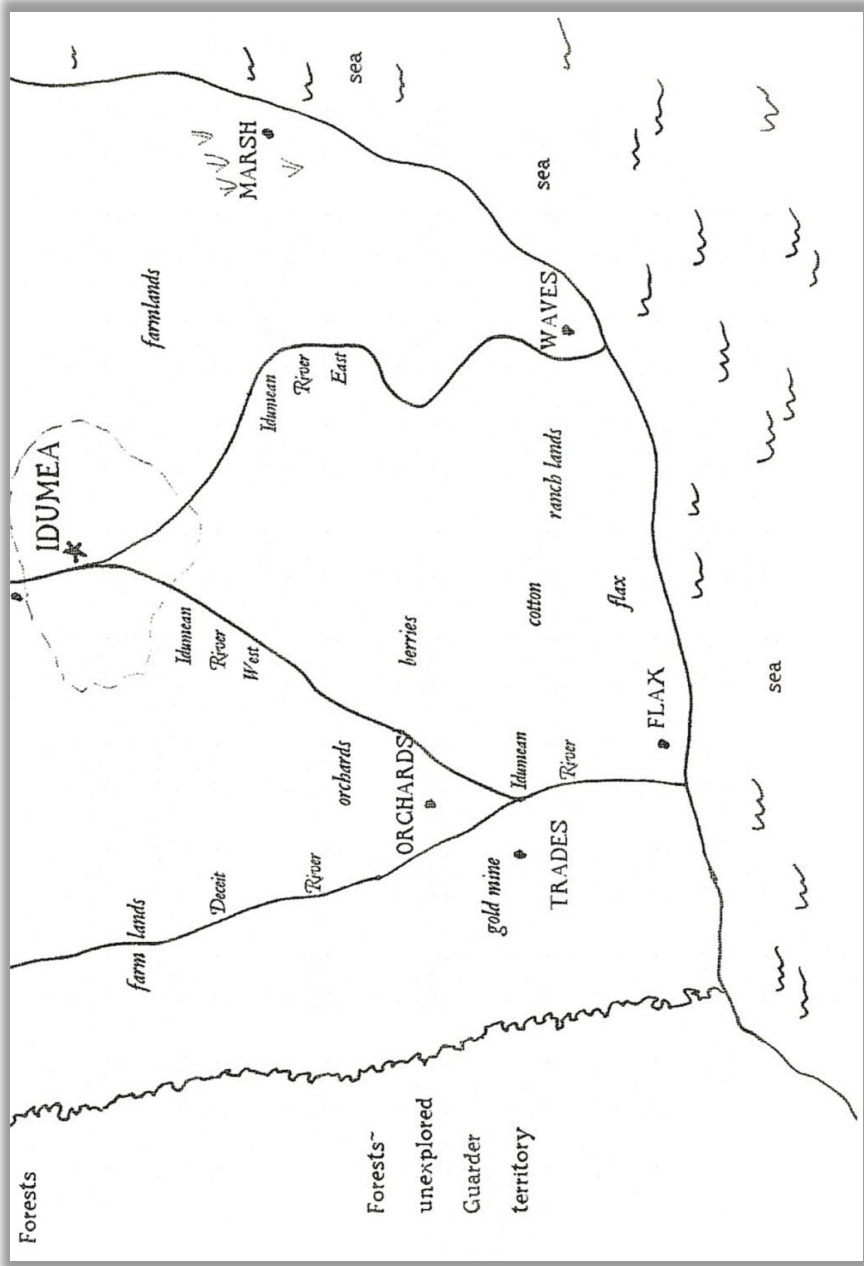


The Mansions of Idumea





Book Three



## The Mansions of Idumea

Book Three

A pronunciation guide to some of the more  
unusual names . . .

Nicko Mal	NEE-koh MAL
Querul	KWER-el
Idumea	i-doo-ME-uh
Hogal Densal	HOE-gal DENS-al
Mahrree Peto	MARR-ee PAY-toh
Hycymum Peto	HIE-si-mum PAY-toh
Hierum	HIE-rum
Sonoforen	sun-uv-OR-en
Terry	TARE-up
Jaytsy	JAYT-see
Brisack	BRIZ-ak
Gizzada	gi-ZAH-duh
Qayin	KAY-in
Kuman	KOO-min
Kindiri	kin-DEER-ee
Giyak	GUY-ak

For background information on all character names and derivations, visit [forestedgebooks.com/characters](http://forestedgebooks.com/characters).

## The Mansions of Idumea

## Prologue ~ “Oh, I remember Idumea.”

“Never in the history of the world has someone taken so long to eat a piece of pie,” the thirteen-year-old boy complained as he watched the old woman seated in the middle of the pumpkin patch regarding her dessert with too much fascination.

She was now dissecting a raspberry with her fork, trying to catch each tiny bump on the tines.

“Oh, *why* did you just say that?” the boy’s cousin whined. “She’s not going to take that as a reprimand, but as a challenge!”

The old woman pretended not to hear the conversation taking place in front of her, but examined a bit of berry closely. “Truly remarkable—it holds together, yet easily falls apart . . .”

The cousins rolled their eyes at each other.

A distance behind them, leaning against a fence and under the shade of a peach tree stood a tall, burly, graying man. His arms were folded, his face was concealed by the shadows, but his broad shoulders shook with quiet laughter.

“Good crop this year,” the old woman continued analytically, a tiny berry bit held up impossibly close to her eye.

She knew the man was behind her, watching. He always was.

“Need to appreciate each berry,” she said. “I’m getting *so* old—just don’t know how many more years left I have to enjoy these.”

The boy sighed in aggravation, and the girl let her head drop on the large pumpkin before her with a dull thunk.

“She’s doing this on purpose, Vid,” the girl told her cousin, or rather, the pumpkin. “Because of what you said.”

“I don’t think so, Hycy,” he told her. “I think she just can’t

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remember the rest of the story. So *old*, you see . . . Muggah? Can you still hear us?" he called loudly.

Muggah looked past the bit of berry and focused on the obnoxious boy. "Oh, I hear you all right, Vid. I just love raspberries."

Vid growled under his breath while Muggah slipped the last bite of pie into her mouth.

"She doesn't remember," Vid announced, hoping to nudge the woman to prove him otherwise. "She doesn't remember about the forest incidents, or the world changing, or even Idumea—"

His cousin's head popped up, and she tried to send a warning with her eyes.

But it was too late.

Muggah was already glaring at him. "Oh, I remember Idumea, Viddrow. I remember far too much."

For once the teenage boy squirmed. Had he noticed the older man watching them, he would have seen that he, too, had stopped chuckling.

"So tell us?" Hycy squeaked, hoping to take some of the glare away from her cousin.

Muggah's expression softened as she looked at the girl, then she sent a mollifying wink to the boy. "Thirteen-year-olds always find the parts about Idumea most interesting, probably because Peto was the same age. But a lot happened before—"

"No, no, no," Hycy begged. "Just . . . shorten some of that. There's not enough pie in the world to cover all of that time."

Muggah smiled slyly. "But we don't get any pie from the world."

The teenagers sighed. "You know what I mean," Hycy said.

"All right, then," Muggah said. "I'll get to the good parts as fast as I can."

Behind her, the man settled in more comfortably against the fence. After all, it was his story, too.

## Chapter 1 ~ “Change isn’t *all* bad, Perrin.”

Two men sat in the dark office of an unlit building.

“Are you sure you’re up to it, Nicko?”

Chairman Nicko Mal sat up taller. “Why shouldn’t I be, Doctor?”

Dr. Brisack shrugged. “Oh, let’s see . . . heart palpitations, chest pains, numbness—I can’t help but wonder if the previous experiments didn’t lead to your heart problems. Since we haven’t been taking an active role in directing the Guardians these past years, you’ve become much healthier. You know, you’re not a young man anymore. You’re not even a middle-aged man—”

He ignored the sneer of Nicko Mal; Dr. Brisack was used to patients not being happy with the truth.

“Your heart’s nearing eighty, Nicko,” the Administrator of Family Life reminded him. “So too is the rest of you. Your mind’s certainly capable of restarting our research about the animalistic nature of man, but if you’re *heart’s* not in it, then—”

“I’m perfectly fine,” Mal sighed. “In fact, I haven’t felt this invigorated in years. The Guardians have been flailing aimlessly for years now, and I think it’s time to send a bit of direction their way, along with a bit of gold.”

Brisack nodded. “Yes, we’ve certainly amassed enough to fund some truly creative studies. My only concern,” he said slowly, “is that they may not come back completely under our guidance.”

Mal held up his finger. “For enough gold, anyone will subject themselves to another man’s guidance.”

“I can’t think of a single instance where that hasn’t been

true,” Brisack agreed. “I must admit, I’m rather looking forward to this. And you’re planning a way to bring Perrin Shin to Idumea?”

“We need to establish some baseline. I haven’t even talked to the man in over fifteen years. How can I know where best to stab my test subjects if I don’t know what already hurts?” Mal folded his hands on his lap. “And a couple of moons ago I took the liberty of instigating some rumors around Idumea, that Guardians are living among us in disguise. Once people start growing paranoid, their imaginations fill in the rest. I do *so* enjoy priming the pump,” Mal smiled thinly. “Perhaps Relf will become antsy himself, and call for Perrin to come investigate to see if there is any truth to the rumors.”

After a moment’s hesitation Brisack asked, “And what about Perrin’s wife?”

Mal heard Brisack’s voice tremor when he mentioned Mahrree Shin. After all these years, the good doctor still had a faraway look in his eyes when he thought about the only woman in the world to question his studies and demand to know why children no longer learned how to debate.

Debate wasn’t needed; the sky was always blue, and the world had been quite accommodating to that and every other fact the Administrators had inflicted on it over the past eighteen years. Mal and Brisack even shut down their experiments for several years when it became apparent that the world was a timid mutt. Dogs were loyal, obedient, and willingly stupid.

Except for a few rogue dogs here and there. Well, actually one was a *bi*—

But even the Shins had been quiet for a surprisingly long time, and so the world had grown dull.

Yes, Nicko Mal was healthier for it, the stresses of directing the world *and* its enemy no longer taxing his heart—

But he had also grown bored.

Brisack would argue that boredom was an infantile response, but Nicko’s elevated mind needed his entertainment to be academic and cerebral. He wasn’t interested in asinine contests or predictable plays. He craved *real* drama, with genuine challenges and the possibility of suffering and death. That’s where you find honest edification.

And that’s why he called his old friend and research com-



“Change isn’t all bad, Perrin.”

panion to join him again in his darkened library that, many years ago under the four King Queruls and King Oren, housed a throne. The vast room was accustomed to displays of power, and Mal could feel it yearning for the old days again. And the best way to demonstrate power was to attack those who thought they had some. Even if—

No; *especially if* they live in an unimportant village called Edge of the World.

Mal stared at Brisack for a moment longer than it took for the doctor to become embarrassed about mentioning Mrs. Shin before he answered his question. “I suppose she’ll want to come along, considering what I’m about to put him through. If she truly has feelings for him, she won’t let him suffer alone, now, would she?”

Brisack squirmed a bit at that. “What does he look like, anyway?”

“Rather hard to forget Perrin Shin, I assure you. It’s been many years, but—well, picture the High General, but taller, broader, stronger, and deeper in voice. Like the offspring of thunder and a bear,” Mal said with a mixture of disdain and reluctant admiration for his preferred test subject.

No matter what Mal sent after him—three Guarder raids, two lieutenants intent on killing his parents, and specially trained “soldiers” to keep an eye and a blade on him—the man side-stepped and survived it all.

But his luck couldn’t hold. Mal would make sure of that. There was still one soldier trained by and loyal to the Guarders under Shin’s command: the Quiet Man.

Communications had broken down years ago, but Mal was sure his soldier, serving for nearly fourteen years now, was still there, loyal, obedient, and conveniently placed to earn Shin’s trust. And soon, the Quiet Man would be required to make a little noise.

“Now,” Mal worked his shoulders deeper into his cushioned chair, “let’s begin devising a variety of scenarios by which our *dear* Lieutenant Colonel—and even his wife—may be forced down here to Idumea for a little visit.”

---

Lieutenant Colonel Perrin Shin looked at the report in front of him dated the 29<sup>th</sup> Day of Planting, 335, and groaned.

“Well?” Major Karna asked with a knowing smile.

“Chief Curglaff is an idiot. Still.” Shin cleared his throat and read in the nasally tone of the chief of enforcement. “The continued thieving problems in Edge are not a result of teenage mischief but may indicate a Guarder presence, therefore all thefts and concerns should continue to be under the jurisdiction of the fort.”

In disgust he tossed the document on his large oak desk where it ruffled a few careful stacks of forms and reports. Sometime later Perrin would rearrange the disorganization he just caused, but not until he was more in control of his anger.

“We established the Guarder-theft connection years ago,” Perrin grumbled. “It’s just another excuse as to why his men aren’t going to do anything this season but pretend to direct traffic and drag home some drunks. Didn’t he promise he was going to retire this year?”

Karna, second in command of the fort, was smaller in stature than the lieutenant colonel. He was a bundle of muscle and fiercely accurate with a bow and arrow, but more frequently with the quill and a supply form. Against his light dirt-brown skin, his grin shone brightly, if not a bit mischievously. “Retires at the end of Weeding Season. Can you deal with him for that much longer?”

Perrin scoffed. “I’ve been dealing with that hard-nosed goat for fifteen years now! Where’s my medal for that?” He patted his dark blue uniform filled with patches declaring him to be the commander of the fort, the most frequently decorated Officer of the Year, and the most irritated lieutenant commander in the Army of Idumea.

Karna chuckled, and there was a knock at the command office door.

“Come in!” Perrin called.

The door opened and a tall, brawny master sergeant with light brown hair, gravel-pale skin, and sky-blue eyes leaned in. Instead of stepping into the private office, he cringed. “Oh, sir, I can see this is a bad time.”

“I still want to see you, Zenos,” Perrin waved him in.

Zenos closed the door behind him. “That look on your face

“Change isn’t all bad, Perrin.”

says, ‘Curglaff’s an idiot and when’s he retiring?’”

“Very good, Zenos,” Karna said, “but even I could have read that expression.”

The master sergeant sat casually on a chair next to the major without waiting for an invitation. Had there been lower ranked enlisted men around, he may have stood at attention. But fourteen years of service at the same fort allows one a certain license.

“So Curglaff’s still not wanting to direct the patrols in the village?” Zenos said.

“Of course not!” the commander spat. “All the thieving this season is Guarder related, after all.”

“Where’s his evidence?” Karna asked.

“Since when has he ever needed evidence?”

Zenos sighed. “I’ve been through this with him before. The fourth time we arrested Poe Hili for thieving, he admitted he had buyers for the goods, but he’d never met any of them. And no one was more prolific than Poe.”

“Shem,” Karna turned to Zenos, also employing such a level of relaxed familiarity that it would have sent the Command Board in Idumea into fits of sputtering, “where’s Poe now?”

“Not around here, that’s all I know,” Shem sighed.

“Been what, two years since he was released from his last incarceration?” Perrin said. “The couple of times I’ve had the unpleasant accident of running into his parents, they didn’t mention him. I don’t think they even know what happened to their sweet-yet-misunderstood lamb.”

“Lamb in wolf’s clothing,” Karna breathed. “All of those boys. Your son excepted, of course, sir.”

“Thanks, Brillen.” Perrin addressed his second in command by his first name, because, after all, Brillen was his second mind, as well as his third and fourth hands, and you had to call someone that close to you by his first name. The math required it.

And also because, even after all these years, Brillen Karna still winced slightly whenever his commander called him by his first name and Perrin simply loved to make the man squirm.

“Peto’s so small and wiry he’d be an excellent thief,” Perrin acknowledged. “Just doesn’t have any muscle on him to carry anything.”

“But if he did,” Shem said, “he’d be stuck in your wife’s class with all the other ‘special cases’ she gets to teach.”

“And that’s probably the main reason he’s remained such a good boy—he doesn’t want his mother as his teacher.”

The three men chuckled, a bit sadly.

“At least Mahrree’s in a position to see if any of those boys are looking at Jaytsy,” Brillen said. He’d given up long ago referring to her as Mrs. Shin. Her husband ignored him whenever he did.

“Why should they be looking at Jaytsy?” Shem burst out. “She’s only fourteen!”

Brillen recoiled at the master sergeant’s emotion and held up his hands. “Sorry, sorry . . . it’s just that she doesn’t *look* fourteen. I keep forgetting her age.”

The lieutenant colonel nodded. “So do I, Brillen. And she’s *almost* fifteen. Doesn’t help that she’s taller than her mother. And . . . and more, uh—” His hands moved in an odd way as if trying to demonstrate the shape of a body that alarmed him. He was still struggling to articulate—or gesticulate—what happened to her when she turned twelve. He dropped his hands in disillusionment.

His men cringed in understanding.

“Yes . . . all that.” Perrin sighed.

“Better not be looking at her,” protective Uncle Shem mumbled, his shoulder twitching.

Perrin suppressed a smile and picked up the report from Chief Curglaff again. “In a way, Brillen and Shem, I almost miss outsmarting the Guarders. Chasing down and chaining up Edge’s sons is far less rewarding and far more disturbing. Home grown criminals. I don’t like it, and I never want to get used to it.”

“Agreed,” Brillen whispered while Shem nodded.

“So,” Perrin said breaking the quiet moment, “have the new duty rosters ready, Zenos?”

“Right there, on the corner of your desk. I put them there before Curglaff visited.”

Perrin picked up the pages he hadn’t noticed before and smiled faintly. “You already put the soldiers on patrols again in the village, hadn’t you?”

“It’s Planting Season again, after all. Weather’s warming up, so our lizard-like thieves will be coming out of their slumber. We’ve got 250 soldiers itching to get out and do something.”

“Very good, Shem.” Perrin handed back the duty roster. “Just continue like that for the next two and a half seasons, until it

“Change isn’t all bad, Perrin.”

gets cold again and the boys go back into hiding.”

“Yes, sir,” Zenos smiled and stood up. Leaving the private office of the commander always reminded the men to adopt a more formal bearing. “Anything else, sir?”

“No, thank you, Master Sergeant,” Shin said, getting up too. “I need to make my daily sweep of the village. Can’t put it off any longer. Some of those new shopkeepers with the Idumean goods wanted to have a word with me about ‘security’ issues.” He rolled his eyes.

“Curgloff referred them to you?” Karna guessed.

Perrin grumbled back. “Few believe in hiring personal guards up here, I suppose. You have the fort, Major.” He put on his cap. “Headed to the stables, Zenos? I’ll accompany you.”

Out in the forward command office, the lieutenant colonel nodded at the older, gnarled sergeant major sitting at the large planning desk, painstakingly updating a soldier’s personnel file.

“Grandpy, I’m heading out for the afternoon. Karna’s on duty.”

Grandpy Neeks saluted and grinned his weather-beaten smile. At fifty-three, only ten years older than Perrin, his dried gray skin and white hair made him look like the last survivor of the Great War 135 years ago. “Lemme guess,” he drawled slowly, “them lovely shops in the center are getting their fine wools coming in. Worried about them being pinched.”

Perrin chuckled. “It’s Planting Season, Grandpy. The wools are going out, the silks and linens are coming in. More valuable, more anxiety causing.”

“A shame,” Neeks slowly shook his head, “that a man like you is reduced to having to know what kinds of cloth are in fashion.”

Perrin shrugged. “I know about the fashions only because I have a teenage daughter that’s been growing non-stop for the past two years.”

Neeks continued to shake his head in sympathy as the men trotted down the stairs.

“That’s probably why he never married,” Shem said quietly as they walked through the reception area, returning the salutes of the soldiers. “Doesn’t want a wife pestering him about fashion. A shame,” Shem drawled like the sergeant major.

“So is that why you’re still not married, Shem? A strapping

not-so-young man of now thirty-four? Men will start calling you Grandpy soon, too.”

Shem elbowed his commander. “I look nothing like a Grandpy! And neither do you, I might add.”

“I thank you for that,” Perrin nodded formally. Larger and broader than any man in the fort—or the entire village of Edge for that matter—Perrin Shin had also made sure over the years that he remained the strongest, fastest, and most physically intimidating officer in the northern half of the world.

What that really meant was still being able to beat Zenos in the annual Strongest Soldier Race which, he was hated to admit, was becoming harder every year. In fact, last year he lost to Shem by a few dozen paces, but it might as well have been a mile for the amount of celebration that occurred. The enlisted man finally beat the officer, after ten straight losses. Perrin had to give him his little moment of glory, and even smiled obligingly at the enthusiasm of the enlisted men as they cheered their new hero.

The loss had made Perrin feel . . . more mature. Even though he still thought of himself as a man only half his age, not even Shem was that young anymore.

“And by the way, you now finally look like twenty-one,” he nudged the master sergeant. “I thought I saw a whisker on your chin the other day.”

Automatically Shem’s hand went up to his chin to feel it.

Perrin burst out laughing.

Shem shook his head but chuckled. “Not funny, *sir*,” he sneered as they marched across the compound. The last remnants of the Raining Season’s snow piled against the stockade fence was finally melting, and the men’s boots squelched in the mud as they passed the mess hall and surgery on their way to the north-east gates.

“Mahrree’s still on the lookout for you,” Perrin warned him. “Although I have to remind you again, single women your age are getting scarce.”

“We’ve been through this before,” Shem sighed as they walked out of the compound toward the stables, “when I’m ready, I’ll find the right woman. Or she’ll find me, and then I’ll know I’m ready. We’ve just never crossed paths yet.”

“That’s because you don’t walk on any paths except when on duty, Shem! You need to go out and find some new paths.”

“Change isn’t all bad, Perrin.”

Shem looked around to make sure they were still out of earshot. “So, what . . . you’re saying you’re tiring of my company, Perrin? You’re ready to find a new best buddy?”

Perrin smiled. It’d be impossible to replace Shem Zenos. He became so much a part of the Shin family that more than once Perrin had to remind himself that he wasn’t actually a blood relation. For Shem’s 26<sup>th</sup> birthday he gave him permission to call him Perrin—and found out then he’d been calling Mahrree by her first name for years.

But somehow that step past propriety had sealed Shem Zenos’s connection. If only Shem had black hair and nearly black eyes like Perrin, he would have been tempted to guess they were distantly related. There was no way to prove such a thing, however, since all the records of family lines had been destroyed generations ago. But since Shem was from between Flax and Waves, on the farthest reaches of the southern border of the world, and Perrin’s family had all come from Idumea, there were obviously no connections. Besides, Shem’s hair was the same color as Mahrree’s, his skin was hued a different gravelly color than Perrin’s, and his eyes were of such a pure blue that Perrin knew no one in his family could ever have produced something close to it. Black and brown were the dominant colors in the Shins.

“Look,” Perrin told his master sergeant, “what you do with your life is your life. But you know Mahrree. ‘Coax him a little, Perrin!’” he said in a high-pitched voice. “‘Tell him how wonderful marriage is!’ By the way,” he added with cheerful deviousness, “did she tell you she received a letter from Sareen?”

The moan of despair next to him made Perrin smirk.

“Apparently not, then. It seems things didn’t work out too well with her latest conquest, and since Sareen’s likely gone through the full gamut of men in Quake and now Mountseen, she’s thinking of coming back to Edge. She was wondering about you.”

“Dear Creator,” Shem mumbled in earnest prayer, “please no, please no . . .”

Perrin chuckled. “Mahrree wrote to her that you’re still wholly committed to soldiering.”

Shem’s shoulders sagged. “Thank you, Mahrree.”

“She’s not the only one interested in you, Master Sergeant,” Perrin warned him. “Mahrree’s had a few other inquiries. She’s

given up trying to find Grandpy Neeks a wife, but there are a few out there your age still. And they are—shall we say—not as young as they used to be. A few of them are bordering on full-blown spinsterhood, although they can probably cook well, judging on the spread of their hips.” He cast a sidelong glance to Shem to see if he was taking the bait.

But Shem wasn’t.

So Perrin went on. “You can’t wait too much longer. You’re older than I was when I got married, by several years now.”

“I know,” Shem murmured. “I just . . .” He never finished those sentences about his reluctance to find a female. “Tell Mahrree thanks for fending them off for me.”

“Oh, but she’s not,” Perrin chuckled. “She’s feeling them out and I have to play along, you know. Do my duty to my wife, and all that. So, get married. Have a wonderful life.”

“Good man, Perrin,” Shem said solemnly. “I’ll tell Mahrree you did your duty, and I’ll take your words to heart.”

“You must be the biggest liar in the army, Zenos!”

“You really should be giving that lecture to Major Karna,” Zenos told him. “Brillen asked me to schedule him three days off in a row again. Seems he’s planning another visit down to Rivers.”

“I’ve already given him the lecture,” Perrin said. “It’s not as if their fort needs more training in his inventory projection procedures.”

A corner of Shem’s mouth went up. “So he’s still calling on that mystery woman?”

“She’s no longer a mystery,” Perrin smiled faintly. “Told him I needed some details as to why he’s been a bit distracted lately. Her name’s Miss Robbing. He met her when she was making a delivery to the fort’s kitchen and he was inspecting their paperwork. She’s their egg woman. Brillen seems quite smitten with her.” Perrin’s smile dimmed.

Shem frowned. “So what’s wrong? Sounds promising. He should bring her back here for a visit.”

“There’s a bit of a problem. Her parents are unwell. Something’s wrong with her father’s lungs and he can’t breathe properly, and her mother’s legs were injured many years ago, and she can’t walk without assistance. Miss Robbing is not only their sole support, she’s their caregiver. She’d never leave them or Rivers.”



“Change isn’t all bad, Perrin.”

“Ah,” Shem said slowly. “She could bring her parents here—”

“Doesn’t sound like that’s an option. They have other family that help from time to time, a good neighborhood that frequently assists—Rivers is their home.” Perrin sighed.

Shem cleared his throat. “Brillen’s long overdue for a promotion to lieutenant colonel, you know. Just like you’re long overdue to become a colonel.”

“So what?” Perrin said dully as his gait slowed. The stables were in view, but he didn’t want to get there just yet.

“Change isn’t all bad, Perrin. You’ve made a lot of changes to the forts, for example—”

“That’s not the same,” Perrin interrupted, and his shoulder twitched. “The changes *I* instigate are good—”

“He proclaims humbly,” Shem said in an undertone that Perrin tried to ignore.

“I came to Edge because I despised all that was going on in Idumea. But it’s followed me here. All good things change, Shem. Nothing wrong with fighting it, is there?”

The men had stopped walking now, and spoke just beyond each other’s shoulders, as if surveying the area for signs of trouble. Their ready stance kept younger soldiers away from their conversation.

“Bad things also change, Perrin, often to something better, and change is vital,” Shem said quietly as his gaze swept across the forest’s edge, a few hundred paces away. “As manifested by your improvements to the security of the world. But think about this: what if your children never grew? You and I have certainly changed, and I think for the better. So why fight that?”

Perrin grumbled quietly to himself. Shem was always far too logical. “Careful, master sergeant,” he said quietly as he watched passing soldiers who glanced back at him nervously, “you sound like you’re debating, and you know I’m not supposed to allow that.”

Shem scoffed. “Says the biggest hypocrite in the village.”

Perrin snorted, but kept his face still.

“Now consider this,” Shem said, pivoting as a signal that what he was about to say was going to end the illegal debate. “If Brillen were promoted and transferred to Rivers—you know the colonel there’s looking to retire soon—what kind of change

would Miss Robbing experience? And think if she were married to a man who brought home an officer's pay? She wouldn't spend so many hours each day in a hen house now, would she? Even her parents would benefit, and Brillen Karna would enjoy all those 'benefits of marriage' you keep going on about."

Perrin folded his arms and growled under his breath. They were robbing him of his major.

But he knew he was being selfish. Karna had been there with him from the beginning, chosen by his father specifically to be Perrin's second in command, probably because he was so by-the-book Perrin could use him as a reference guide.

But over the years, Perrin had rubbed off on Brillen, so that he ignored the High General's book of procedures nearly as often as Perrin did. Yet Karna was still an excellent officer, a careful planner, a most dedicated subordinate, and—worst of all—a friend who deserved to have a little bit of happiness, too.

Perrin rubbed his forehead in frustration.

"Lieutenant Rigoff's a good officer," Shem hinted. "He helped the major develop the new inventory procedures. He's bright, willing to learn, and *also* overdue for promotion to captain. You know, I see those forms arrive in the messenger's bag, but I think you lose them all on purpose. I'm sure Teeria would be happy to have her husband promoted to captain—"

"Yes, yes, yes—all right, I heard you! I heard you already," Perrin finally snapped at his conscience.

A passing soldier hustled away to the mess hall to avoid finding out if the outburst was pointed at him, and what noise he may have made to set off the lieutenant colonel.

Master Sergeant Zenos just smiled smugly and folded his arms.

Perrin mumbled, "I'll talk to Brillen after his next trip. See how things are going. See if he's . . . interested in requesting a transfer."

"I don't want to see him go either, Perrin," Shem whispered, "but how much longer should he sit under your shadow?"

Perrin blinked in surprise at that. The thought had never occurred to him.

Shem raised his eyebrows and tilted his head toward the stables.

Reluctantly Perrin nodded back. They'd pick up this conver-

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sation later.

As they neared the stables they found the group of ten new soldiers saddling their mounts for their training ride. Perrin and Shem both assumed a more reserved demeanor in front of the young men, which meant extending the distance between them another foot or so, as if to signal the familiarity all the soldiers knew existed wasn’t as close as it seemed. But it was a well-known fact that if you needed one man, just find the other.

Still, the expectations of the Army of Idumea simply couldn’t abide an enlisted man ever referring to an officer by his first name, not even in the privacy of the officer’s home, and with a family he considered his own. So it was a good thing that the village Edge of the World was about as far away from Idumea as one could get.

The men nodded to each other, took their respective horses, exchanged complicated facial expressions that said, *Mahrree’s expecting you for dinner*, and *I hope it’s steak*, then headed out in different directions.

Master Sergeant Zenos, in charge of new recruit training, rode straight to the forest’s edge to monitor the orientation of the fort’s newest soldiers, while Perrin shoved the worrying thought of Brillen Karna and a hopeful Miss Robbing into a recess in his mind—

—But he didn’t shove them *too* closely together.

Feeling a bit guilty about that, he decided to let them be a little closer . . .

He prodded the horse chosen for him for the afternoon—a brown mare the stable master hoped would be the right combination of strength and speed Perrin was always searching for but never finding—and headed toward Edge to show the village that the Eyes, Ears, and Voice of the Administrators was *there* for them.

“Comforting the citizenry,” was what his father cynically called it. The daily ride was insisted on by the Administrator of Culture who thought the world would feel comfort, in spite of the increased thievery, if they saw their fort commanders out among them.

It was stupid, Perrin frequently thought, but mystifyingly it worked to make people feel secure, even though they weren’t.

“Lieutenant Colonel!”

Perrin heard the hopeful call of the owner of what he privately called the Useless Additional Collars and Cuffs Shoppe. The store sold little bits of fancy cloth to attach to clothing that already had enough on them. The place was actually called the Adornment Shoppe, and Perrin suspected the extra *p* and *e* at the end of shop was to represent the absurdity of the place.

But, he dutifully put on his How May I Be of Genuine and Sincere Service smile—one that Mahrree made him practice until it was genuinely sincere—and nudged his horse over to the squat man and his towering wife. “And what can I do for you this fine Planting Season day?”

“You can promise me,” began the woman with a terrifyingly hooked nose, “that none of those snotty teenagers will be raiding our Shoppe!”

Perrin could even hear the extra *p* and *e*, along with the capital *s*. The woman’s husband bobbed his head happily but added a nod of apology.

“We’ve been through this before, Mrs. Snobgrass; I can’t promise anything beyond my soldiers and myself working day and night to keep the entire village safe.” His smile stayed firmly in place the entire time, although he could feel it cracking around the edges. “You are, however, free to hire additional guards yourself. There are many former soldiers who hire out their services.”

“Why would I want to do that?” Mrs. Snobgrass exclaimed, her crossed arms getting tighter. “It’s not my job to prevent theft!”

Perrin shrugged casually. “It’s not my job to raise the teenagers of Edge better, either, but it seems we’re both stuck with the problem. And honestly,” he said with a tone dripping so much honey to coat his meaning, “I can’t imagine why anyone would want to bother your establishment.”

Mr. Snobgrass puffed in pride, and Mrs. Snobgrass frowned, trying to figure out if she’d been insulted or not.

Before she could, Perrin tipped his cap and continued on his survey of Edge. There’d be many more stops like this one, and he wanted to get them over with.

Except there was a hog in his way, and it wasn’t a shop owner.

The 250 pound beast grunted at Perrin, and to his horse’s credit, the mare snuffed back.

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“Walter!” a man cried. “Get back here!”

Perrin never understood why people assumed food would comprehend what was yelled at it. But apparently Walter had some intelligence, because with a loud squeal the hog headed off into the village green.

“Sorry, sir!” a man puffed as he stopped in front of Perrin. He gestured helplessly at his fleeing pork chops. “He sort of got away from me.”

“Sort of?” Perrin asked, and noticed the man had come from the direction of the butcher’s.

“What do you know about catching hogs, Commander?” the man asked.

Perrin also never understood why people thought he knew everything. It wasn’t for the flattering reason that he had a Command School education, but likely because years ago the Administrators made all of the fort commanders their authorities in the villages. While Perrin never actually superseded the power of the magistrate or the chief of enforcement, still they and everyone else in Edge deferred to him. Occasionally it was useful; usually it was just irritating, assuming that Lieutenant Colonel Shin knew how to solve any problem.

Then again—and Perrin knew he was arrogant to think it—he felt he *did* know more than anyone else, and rather preferred his opinion was asked instead of anyone else’s. If nothing else, he was more logical than most.

“I know that you should probably remain in pursuit of your pig instead of chatting in the middle of a busy marketplace,” Perrin hinted.

The man nodded and obediently took off again.

There was something else Perrin could do for him. He glanced up at the village green tower, but already one of his soldiers was reading his mind and had his horn to his lips.

Two short blasts. One longer blast. Two more short ones.

The pattern signaled not an emergency of thieves or fire, but warned the citizens to keep an eye out for something unexpected. Such as a nervous hog barreling down on them.

Perrin smiled in approval as the corporal saluted him. The horns had been a logical additional to the tall wooden towers. Three soldiers manned this one, the busiest of the twelve constructed throughout Edge to look for Guardians or any other trou-

ble. Each tower had been originally outfitted with colored banners the soldiers hoisted as a signal to the fort that help was needed, or an official coach was on its way. But after a while Perrin realized villagers could use a bit of warning too. It didn't take much to come up with some simple patterns soldiers could trumpet to neighborhoods to signal that a child was lost, someone required a doctor, or stray livestock needed to be corralled.

No, what took much longer was to get Major Yordin in Mountseen to come up with it all.

Perrin realized that if he kept coming up with innovations to improve the world, he'd also keep being promoted. While his parents thought it was now tradition that the High General of Idumea needed the last name of Shin, Perrin wasn't one much for the tradition. So when General Shin sent out his son to all the forts in the world to bring them in line with his (a gesture that was met with a predictable amount of resistance and resentment), Perrin knew he needed to start scaling himself back.

When he met Major Yordin at Mountseen, a loud but personable fort commander, Perrin knew he'd found the perfect conduit. It was during his explanation of how the towers could best be placed throughout the village that Perrin began to hint at ways to make the towers even more useful. It took the entire afternoon, but by dinner Yordin had jotted down a variety of patterns and meanings, and had even sketched a crude drawing of a serviceable horn, modified by Perrin.

The next year when Major Yordin was named Officer of the Year for his contribution of the horn system, now adopted throughout the world, Perrin was more than happy to let him take all the credit.

It meant that Perrin's promotion to lieutenant colonel wouldn't be immediate, which meant his promotion to full colonel would also be delayed, and so too would be becoming general.

If Perrin stayed quiet enough, Idumea might forget about him altogether.

After Perrin helped corral the hog with a few other villagers, and the grateful owner said he'd later send over a few pounds of bacon as thanks, Perrin rode through the most expensive part of Edge: the Edge of Idumea Estates, with its appending Edge of Idumea Hot Springs Villas and Cottages for Citizens Over 50, where the name was bigger than some of the houses, or rather,

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*cottages*. Hycymum and many of her sewing group friends had moved over to the Cottages, lured by the promise that they could paint their homes in one of four approved colors to match each other.

The Cottages had their own private guards who were occasionally effective at catching the teenagers slipping into back doors while their owners were going out the front to catch the latest Idumea-imported entertainment at the amphitheater or the new arena. But more often than not it was Perrin and his men who nabbed the boys somewhere between their permanently borrowing baubles of gold and silver, and dropping them off somewhere down the slope that led to the marshes in the east.

Shem was the one who figured that out, many years ago now, when he spied a boy leaving a fine leather jacket under an old basket, then saw a man in black slip out of the trees to retrieve it. It wasn’t until Shem chased the man through two farms, tackled him in a pig sty, then watched, horrified, as the man used a jagged blade to kill himself that they had evidence: the Guardians were using the impressionable youth of Edge to do their thieving for them.

As Perrin peered hard into the concealing shrubs around the expensive houses, he took little comfort in the fact that Edge wasn’t the only village afflicted with raiding teenagers; the same thing happened in every village on the outer edges of the World.

“Yoo-hoo!”

Perrin cringed at the shrill voice.

“I know that’s you, Hycymum’s son-in-law! Over here!”

And Perrin knew it was his mother-in-law’s neighbor, again. The woman was frequently outside in the late afternoon on sunny days, and he suspected she was watching for him. He turned around, with his smile firmly in place, and nodded politely to the elderly woman standing just ten paces away from him but shouting as if he were one hundred. “Mrs. Reed. How are you, today?”

“Fine!” she bellowed back, oblivious to the fact that not everyone was as hard of hearing as she thought they were. “Just got back from my daughter’s! I’m two days early, but she said I needed to get home to . . .” She squinted in thought. “I don’t remember why she thought I should come home early.”

Perrin’s smile turned painful. He could think of a few reasons. “Well, then—glad you were able to return safely from

Moorland. I really need to be—”

“Did you see the house?” she shouted eagerly at him. “Going up just over there in the Estates? Much larger than our little Cottages here, and Hycyum was saying just a few weeks ago that you were thinking of moving—”

“*She’s* trying to move *us*, Mrs. Reed,” Perrin said loudly, annunciating every word to, once and for all, put an end to this move-into-something-bigger-and-richer nonsense that his mother-in-law had recruited help with. “But we’re not coming down here, understand?”

She pointed a wrinkled little finger at him. “But your mother and father were here last year, and I remember them—”

“—touring the Estates and trying to find something they could coerce us into, yes, yes, yes, I remember. And no, no, no Mrs. Reed—we’re not moving. Now, I really must go—”

“Shall I find Hycyum for you?” she bellowed. “Wait, she’s cooking at the Inn today, right? I need to cook too,” she said, a hazy gloss coming over her eyes. “Your Shem Zenos will be wanting cookies again . . .”

Perrin’s brow furrowed in worry. Mrs. Reed often flowed in and out of clarity, and the thought of her starting a fire made him nervous. Usually her friends looked after her, but he had passed Hycyum’s Herd—her group of a dozen biddies—ooing and aahing at new hats in a window. They wouldn’t be back for some time to notice that their neighbor had come home early.

“Mrs. Reed, I think you should go in now and have a nice lie-down. I’m sure your friends will bring you by some cookies when they come back.”

“Good idea, Lieutenant Corporal!” she called cheerfully. “I missed my pillow. We have such good chats.”

Perrin tipped his cap and made sure she shut the door tightly behind her before he whirled his horse again.

Little surprise she thought Shem would be by for cookies, although lately he’d been bringing them *to* her. Shem was every widow’s claimed son. He spent his days off at The Cottages fixing their cabinets, building them shelves, and listening to the same stories again and again. Little wonder he couldn’t find an eligible woman to marry under age sixty: he had his own harem of the hard-of-hearing.

Perrin spurred his horse into a trot out of The Cottages and



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into the grander Estates. As he passed the enormous houses his parents and Hycymum wanted them to buy with all the gold and silver hidden in their cellar, and a sneer formed on his mouth. He nodded to one of the guards, a former sergeant of his who sat in a little shack with his feet up and his sword down. Small surprise that they rarely saw anything out of their tiny windows. Throwing dices was always more entertaining, as if practicing by himself would finally help him win more slips of silver from his friends.

Perrin saw only one person in the Estates at that hour, and even a lurking teenager would have been a more welcome sight than Mrs. Hili, Qualipoe’s mother.

She was walking up to her broad front stairs, her arms loaded with colored boxes tied in frivolous ribbons, likely packages from the Adornment Shoppe. She turned quickly when she heard the horse trotting on the cobblestones, but her enormous jiggling girth stiffened as she eyed the commander of the fort.

He eyed her right back, matching her glare for glare. That had been their customary greeting for the past eight years. Mrs. Hili didn’t even try to hide her disdain for him, as if somehow it was Perrin’s fault that he first caught Poe Hili stealing silver and sweetbread, crumbs of it still on his chin, and trying to escape clumsily from a neighbor’s back window.

And Perrin sent back daggers to her, not bothering to tip his hat. Everyone thinks they deserve respect, but respect has to be earned. He had none for a woman who claimed Major Shin had framed her son, and then didn’t even have the decency to visit that son while he was incarcerated. Not her, and not her husband. And since Poe had been locked up on four separate occasions, the Hilis had ample opportunities to earn Perrin’s disdain.

He turned away from Mrs. Hili without a second thought. It’d be useless to ask her where Poe was nowadays. She didn’t know, and probably didn’t care, as long as it was far away from Edge.

Perrin rode on to the edge of the village, past the fields where adults labored while their children stayed home alone. He nodded to a large fat man sitting back on a bale of hay sipping from a mug while he supervised, although Perrin couldn’t understand why he wasn’t out there as planting in his fields; for some reason he felt he was needed more to just sit and watch.

Taking a short detour, Perrin headed along the road in front

of the old rectory, where his Uncle Hogal and Auntie Tabbitt used to live. Perrin grinned when he saw who he considered to be the antithesis of Mrs. Hili, and that was exactly what he needed.

Rector Yung, a tiny old man with mere slits for eyes but an enormous grin, looked up from his front herb garden. He playfully saluted Perrin, and Perrin returned it smartly. Shem had found the lonely widower in Flax and brought him back to be Edge's rector a year ago after the last rector died.

While only a few dozen people still attended Holy Day services—everyone else was too busy at the amphitheater, and now the arena, to bother with the words of the Creator—Rector Yung delivered sweet and stirring lessons that reminded Perrin of Hogal. Looking at his faintly yellow skin, Perrin hoped he and the rector shared a common ancestor. The Shins invited him to dinner frequently, and he cheerfully came so that Mahrree could try to fatten up the skinny man.

Those meals were now the closest thing they had to the after-congregation-meeting midday meals the village used to share each Holy Day. No one sat and chatted about farms or children or the state of the world over chicken and dumplings anymore. In fact, Holy Day had now even changed its name to *holiday*—a day each week when people worshipped themselves instead of the Creator.

"Tomorrow, midday meal after the meeting?" Perrin called to Yung, as if the weekly invitation actually needed reissuing.

The rector held up some new sprigs of parsley. "Of course! Mrs. Shin told me she's expecting this. She's down to only her dried preserves in her cellar, and I promised to bring her a fresh supply."

Perrin winked at the Shins' personal supplier of herbs and faith, and kicked the mare into a steady trot, past the dull gray block building that was labeled with the equally bland name of School Building Number 3. There were five of those now in Edge, built by Idumeans for Idumean education. Perrin could barely stand to look at the structure that housed his wife and children for seven hours each day, forcing them to memorize the drivel the Administrators required them to regurgitate on tests twice a year.

At least Mahrree taught Edge's special cases—the failing and likely thieving boys whom she had in her After School Care

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program years ago. She was allowed by Mr. Hegek to take great liberties with the scripts Idumea sent for teachers—

Actually, Hegek had pleaded with her to do whatever she wanted to make the class interesting enough to keep the boys in the building, because he was sure the commander of the fort wouldn’t report any of them for stretching the rules so far that they twanged. And since that was exactly what Mahrree was hoping for, she readily agreed.

Teaching also gave Mahrree access to the mundane scripts sent by the Department of Education so she knew what Jaytsy and Peto were being taught and could counter it at home. Perrin loved the delicious irony that the Administrators’ measures had only provided his family with even more topics to debate illegally at dinner each evening. That’s why Perrin’s perpetual sneer at the School Buildings always slid into a smug smile. Maybe the Administrators felt sure they were succeeding on the surface of things, but like a stomach ailment, nasty things they weren’t expecting still brewed under what seemed to be a calm façade. At least in the Shin family things were always churning.

Perrin led his horse to the outskirts of Edge and spurred it to a run north along the pathway that followed the canals. He slowed the animal only when the last of the neighborhoods flashed past him and before him lay the fallow fields and the forest beyond. He rode up to the border of the trees and peered in.

The forest was quiet, except for a steam vent about sixty paces in that seemed to be venting stronger than usual. Otherwise, there was nothing in the sulfur-scented trees.

He smiled, but without any real joy, as he saw the new recruits mounted on horseback approaching the fresh spring area. Right on time.

He nudged his horse into the darker shadows of the trees next to the cattle fence and watched from a distance. He knew the sergeant running the new recruits’ drill was describing the dangers of the forest, pointing out the features in the daylight so the young men could see them clearly. The soldiers respectfully nodded, some vaguely interested, but others obviously bored.

Perrin bristled. It used to be that all recruits were eager and appropriately afraid, but no longer. Over the past decade the young men of the world, probably hardened by their years of thieving, had become calloused and more violent, and eventually

turned traitor to their Guarder benefactors to become soldiers. Perrin rarely got anything useful out of the boys about their time as thieves because they really didn't know much except to leave the goods in one place and pick up a note about what to steal next. Each year the codes changed anyway, so last year's thieves were nearly useless in harvesting this year's crop. Their loyalties shifted easily because the army provided steadier wages for eighteen-year-olds than the Guarders ever did.

Even Shem had to alter his training methods for a physical, angry style which conflicted with his naturally gentle disposition. Later tonight these boys would be awakened from their sleep by Master Sergeant Zenos, ordered to dress and mount up, then given the same tour of the forest in the dead of night, complete with descriptions of how deadly and effective Guarders were in the dark. No one could beat Zenos for telling a story, and each of those ten soldiers would still be trembling by the time he stumbled into the mess hall for breakfast in the morning.

Perrin rested his hands on the horn of his saddle and silently counted down in his head. The sergeant led the soldiers directly to the fresh spring where the log cattle fence had another opening, and the horses and men were allowed to enter in just a few paces to drink the water. None of them noticed their commander further down the forest line.

Just as Perrin reached "one," a hulking body dressed in black dropped from the trees in front of the recruits. Several of them shrieked like little girls, while two soldiers fell from their horses in surprise. The massive black figure remained crouched before them, glaring menacingly through the slits of a black knitted cap which covered his face almost completely, while another soldier bravely tried to draw his sword until it tumbled to the ground.

The sergeant on duty did nothing but smirk sadly at the lieutenant colonel, whom he had spotted some time ago.

It took about fifteen seconds for the recruits to realize there was no real danger, especially once Shem pulled off the woolen cap and shook his head slowly, an admonishing technique he'd learned from Grandpy.

Perrin stayed in the shadows to watch the show and chuckle, partly in amusement, partly in exasperation. These were their new soldiers, after all. It was one of the few jobs the Administrators

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deemed these kinds of young men worthy enough to fill, but Perrin always hated getting the last bits from the barrel.

“As first instincts go,” Master Sergeant Zenos began loudly as the two soldiers who fell off their horses sheepishly climbed back on, “that was significantly less than impressive. A man in black jumps out at you in the forest, and three of you scream, two of you fall off your horses, four of you stare at . . . what—a pigeon? And only one man tries to draw his sword? And Private, last time I checked you were right-handed, so why were you trying to draw that sword with your *left*? From your *left* hip? That’s why it’s on the ground now, making you the perfect target!”

He shook his head and paced slowly in front of the soldiers as they squirmed in embarrassment.

“Pitiful. Weak. What will you be like at night? And several of you told me you were ready for the army . . . First instinct—DRAW YOUR SWORDS!” he bellowed.

Perrin smiled genuinely at that. Shem used the same words and cadence Perrin had used on him when he was a young corporal who hated to use the long blade. *You don’t have to kill them, Zenos, he’d told him. Just give them something to remember you by.*

“What good are your swords strapped to your bodies if you never use them?” Zenos shouted as he stopped in front of the now-trembling men. “At least with a sword in your hand you *appear* threatening.”

While Zenos was getting better at commanding, Perrin could still hear the apologetic undertone. No one else knew how much Shem hated to raise his voice.

“Appearances are deceiving,” Zenos continued, and Perrin knew the biggest example of that stood right before them, “—and in this case, a little deception is good since you obviously have nothing else going for you! Now all of you, dismount! Draw your swords! Show me some bravery!”

The soldiers—feeling humbled if not downright humiliated—scrambled to comply, each trying to be the first to hit the ground.

Perrin left the shadows of the tree line and rode his horse over to the recruits.

They jumped in surprise to see another figure arrive from what they thought was an abandoned forest. A few dropped their

swords, and two young men bobbed up and down, unsure if they should retrieve their weapons or stand at attention before their commander. They tried to do both, cracking their heads against each other as one went down while the other went up.

Lieutenant Colonel Shin kept his face perfectly still. He would share the laugh later with his friend.

Master Sergeant Zenos groaned loudly and gestured for the men to first retrieve their weapons, and then acknowledge the presence of the officer.

Shin waited and nodded at the men who finally, all put back together again, saluted him with wobbly hands at their foreheads. One of the recruits subtly tried to rub a growing bump.

Shin returned their salute and with a grave expression said, “Zenos, what have we here?”

“Not much,” said Zenos with obvious disappointment. “But I’m working on it, I assure you, sir.”

“Indeed you have your work cut out for you, Master Sergeant. But if anyone can turn these boys into something resembling men, it’s you. You know,” he said in a tone that was simultaneously casual and threatening, “two weeks ago Sands was raided. Seems some of the Guardians actually dared to go back into the village, and they were rather successful. Injured four soldiers and killed a fifth. And just this morning I received a message that Moorland was hit again. Several head of cattle were taken. Someone hacked a hole in the cattle fence with a hatchet, and the animals’ tracks headed straight for the forest. That means, *soldiers*,” he was sure to add a layer of doubt on that word, “that the Guardians are heading east—straight for Edge.”

The young men shifted nervously, which was exactly what Perrin hoped to see.

“Now,” the lieutenant colonel continued steadily, “we haven’t had a successful raid in Edge for over ten years. I like to believe that’s because the Guardians are afraid of the might of our fort. However, if they have any spies sitting in the forest today—and I assure you, they’re out there—they’ll have seen today that our recruits are timid and ineffectual. They may assume the entire army is the same way. And if they do, they’ll cut you down before you can even find the hilt of your swords.”

He smiled easily as their faces tightened.

“Just something to think about, boys.” He sent his friend a

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twitch and a nod that said, *Still on for dinner tonight?*

Perrin and Shem had developed a whole system of facial signals, from silly to subtle, by which they communicated a variety of messages. A few years ago ago, they sat in these same trees listening in on the conversations of sloppy Guardians. But there were also many other long, boring nights where no one showed up below them to spy on the fort, so they had nothing else to do but come up with winks, twitches, and wriggles to say everything from *This tree’s digging into my backside*, to *Is that a pack of wolves under us?* It was ridiculous, as his daughter frequently reminded them, but immensely useful. They could silently convey all kinds of things about soldiers and villagers, except sometimes they looked like they were trying to get a swarm of invisible mosquitoes off their faces.

Zenos sent back a quick grimace. Give his apologies to Mahrree; he’d be out late with this batch of soldiers, but he’d be by for midday meal tomorrow after the congregational meeting.

Shin nodded. “Carry on, boys.”

Perrin returned his horse to the stables at the fort, told the stable master the mare was adequate but to keep looking, spent ten minutes finishing up his paperwork in the command tower, and jogged home to try to be on time for dinner for once.

He almost made it.

“Anything left for me?” he called as he came through the back door and into the kitchen.

Jaytsy was carrying a tray—Shem was missing steak—to the eating room. “Mother, he made it!”

“Really?” Perrin kissed her cheek.

“Yep, because we decided to eat half an hour later than usual.”

Perrin chuckled and followed his daughter through the door to the combined eating and gathering room. As she walked, or rather pranced—she seemed to bounce and flutter everywhere—he assessed her height. She seemed to finally have stopped growing, settling in at a stature between her father and her mother, making her taller than the majority of women in Edge.

Mahrree frequently said their daughter was a perfect blend of their traits, but all her facial features came from her mother. His contribution was her height, her nearly black hair which she pulled into a long ponytail, and her large eyes that were as dark as

his.

In the eating room, Mahrree was just setting down the bread board on the table, and Perrin paused.

She'd told him that someday he'd realize his daughter was a growing—and even beautiful—young woman, but there was no way she'd ever match her mother.

Mahrree eyed him back, her gray-green-brown eyes—he'd given up trying to figure out their color—twinkling impishly at him. Occasionally people said a woman's appeal faded after thirty, but that didn't apply to his wife. Over forty now, she only seemed to intensify in everything appealing about her: thought, conscience, strength, humor . . .

Oh, and she was pleasant looking as well. Some men may not have thought her to be a stunning beauty, but she was much more than beautiful; she was *attractive*.

Her perfect pink lips that she pouted just to drive him to distraction, her light brown hair that she kept shoulder length because she knew he loved to run his fingers through it, and those eyes—those eyes that were as complex and clear as their color. It didn't matter that she had a slender slip of a body, was shorter than most women, and weighed a hundred pounds less than her husband. Nudge in her in the wrong direction and she was fiercer than a belligerent badger, capable of taking out targets much larger than herself.

Maybe it was the soldier in him, but Perrin found that immensely attractive.

But Mahrree didn't know how powerful she was, much to Perrin's relief. Uncle Hogal had once told Perrin she was the most dangerous woman in the world, and a sliver of Perrin feared that may be true. But all she ever said about herself was that she was a small woman in a tiny village, and no one would ever pay any attention to her. Perrin prayed *that* was true.

He took a step toward her. "Where's Peto?" he asked with a mischievous smile before reaching his wife.

"Here," said Peto, coming out of his room. "About time, Father. I'm going to wither away to nothing if I wait for dinner any longer."

Perrin had to admit that might've been accurate. The boy did look half-starved, even though he ate more than Perrin each day. When Perrin was that age he was already growing larger than



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his father, but Peto seemed destined to take after his maternal grandfather. While his face was an exact copy of Perrin’s, Mahrree said his gray eyes and brown hair reminded her of Cephas Peto.

“Then Peto, I have exactly what you need to kill your appetite.” Perrin pulled Mahrree into his arms and kissed her—

“Augh! Why do you always have to do that in front of me?” Peto wailed and covered his eyes dramatically.

Jaytsy just rolled her eyes and put the steaks on the table.

Mahrree laughed at her son once Perrin finally released her. She looked around. “Where’s Shem? Usually you save those ‘Advantages of being married’ greetings for when Shem’s here.”

“New batch of ten recruits,” he told her. “Full of bravado until ‘Shem the Guarder’ fell from the trees. At least two will need to change their trousers when he finally lets them run back to the safety of the fort.”

Mahrree winced. “Ooh, they must be very green if Shem’s missing dinner to start toughening them up.”

“He signaled he’d try to come by tomorrow.” Perrin took his chair at the table. “But that may depend on how well the recruits handle their middle-of-the-night training ride tonight.”

“I can’t wait until he takes me along,” Peto said as he sat and snagged the largest steak before Perrin’s fork could stab it. He ignored his father’s playful glare. “But Uncle Shem says it’s too scary and won’t take me until I’m seventeen or eighteen.” He sighed in frustration and dove into the bowl of potatoes just ahead of his father, who grumbled. “I know all the stories. I wouldn’t be scared.”

“Oh, yes you would,” insisted Jaytsy, buttering her bread in a less aggressive manner than her brother usually did. When Peto attacked sliced bread, it nearly regressed back into cracked wheat. “Besides, you’d have to go on horseback, and you’re too scared to even mount a horse. Peto the Puny,” she added in a mumble before biting primly into her crust.

“Jaytsy!” Mahrree admonished her.

“—the Giant!” Peto added with a wicked grin.

“That’s enough!” Perrin snapped at him. “What did we say about using those names?”

“I didn’t say, ‘Jaytsy the Giant,’” Peto pointed out, not one bit shaken by his father’s sternness. He’d seen him much worse.

“Mother said ‘Jaytsy.’ I merely said ‘the Giant.’ You’re the one who assumed they go together.” He shoved a chunk of potato into his mouth.

Perrin looked critically at his wife.

Mahrree pressed her lips together—her expression that meant she was proud of her son’s recognition of the rhetoric, and disappointed that he was still calling his sister names. But Jaytsy still started it, this time.

“Don’t you two think you’re getting a little big for name calling?” said Mahrree sharply to her daughter.

Jaytsy batted her long dark lashes. “*I* may be getting too big, but . . .” She raised her eyebrows at her *little* brother and left the rest of the sentence hanging.

Mahrree squinted in disappointment that also tried to mask a bit of amusement.

But her husband glared at her. “And you had to start teaching them to debate when they were six and five.”

“I wouldn’t go so far to call it debating,” Peto said to his potato which he analyzed with great adoration. “Maybe arguing.”

His sister rolled her eyes. “Given the context, arguing is the same as debating. Have you still not figured that out? Now, fighting: that’s different—”

“So Jayts,” Perrin said to change the subject—and so that he wouldn’t have to report himself for insubordination by allowing debating in his house, “what’s new in the world of teenage girls?”

She blinked at him. “Sometimes you say the oddest things, Father.”

“So there’s nothing new?”

“There’s always something new!”

“Well?”

She shrugged and indulged him. “If boys like it when girls cut their hair short above their eyes or not. They’re calling them bangs.”

“Hmm,” Perrin said with a studious nod. He rarely knew how to respond beyond, *hmm*. But that always seemed to suffice to show he was concerned about his daughter’s life, yet had no idea what any of it really involved.

“Truly ground-breaking thinking,” Mahrree said. “They’re not worried about the boys thieving, or what kinds of work the Administrators will decide for them if they fail to improve their

“Change isn’t all bad, Perrin.”

scores—just if they like shorter hair or not.”

“Girls are silly,” Peto said.

“I agree,” said Mahrree.

Perrin pondered that. “I don’t remember girls being that silly when I was fourteen.”

Jaytsy asked, “And how much of an expert on girls were you when you were fourteen?”

Perrin paused. “All right, probably not that much.”

His wife and daughter laughed. Peto ate some more.

“No, girls were silly,” Mahrree admitted. “Every time I hear you talk, Jaytsy, I find myself remembering more things from my childhood that I thought I finally forgot. But truly, I don’t think we ever fretted about our hair. I don’t think boys even notice that.”

“They don’t,” Peto said, gulping down his water.

“How would you know?” Jaytsy asked. “You barely qualify as a ‘boy.’ More like a pig-thing.”

“Oh, ha-ha.”

“Jaytsy!” Mahrree chided.

“Mother, I didn’t call him a name. I didn’t say his name *is* ‘pig-thing.’ I just said he is *like* a pig-thing. Big difference.”

“And you had to teach them to debate,” Perrin glared at his wife.

She glared back with a look that said, *You and I will finish this argument later. Alone.*

His saucy wink at her meant, *You better believe we will.*

“Back to the issue of the silliness of girls,” Mahrree started, biting back her grin that she knew her husband noticed, “now that they’re getting older, you’d think they’d be concerned more with truly worrying issues. Such as, will any of those boys be worth marrying in a couple of years?”

“Oh, don’t talk about marrying, Mother!” Jaytsy said. “I’m not even fifteen yet. Girls aren’t supposed to worry about marrying until they’re at least sixteen.”

“Or twenty-eight,” Perrin declared. It’d take him that long to figure out females. Peto was easy, as all boys are. They’re a mixture of a puppy and a colt: just feed them, let them run around, and rein them back in every now and then.

But girls?

Now Jaytsy rolled her eyes at her father. She was very prac-

ticed at it, exercising those muscles a few dozen times each day. “I don’t want to waste away until I’m twenty-eight, either! Practically a grandparent.”

Perrin and Mahrree glanced at each other and the stray gray hairs that each was beginning to sprout.

Distinguished on him, she frequently said.

Wiry on her, he never bothered to mention.

“I’m not marrying anyone off yet,” Mahrree promised. “I’m just saying they should start thinking about more important things, like . . . the condition of the world, the ideas from Idumea, the politics—”

Jaytsy scoffed. “Idumean politics—really, Mother? Teenage girls?”

“Well,” Mahrree said, slightly insulted, “you’re interested in what’s going on in the world—”

“Only because that’s all you and Father talk about! Only because you drill into our heads every dinner time what we should be worried about and how to fight it.”

“Hear, hear!” agreed Peto taking a bite of steak. “The Administrators this, the Administrators that,” he garbled as he chewed. “Good thing the Administrators don’t have ways to hear what goes on in this house, or you’d both be on that ‘watched’ list the Administrator of Loyalty supposedly has. Maybe the next time you punish me, I can threaten to write *someone a letter*,” and he raised his eyebrows.

Jaytsy laughed as Mahrree and Perrin exchanged looks of amusement and concern. Mahrree had mentioned to them once that she used to send letters many years ago, and got nothing back in return but form letters. It was part of a discussion they’d had about the unresponsiveness of the Administrators, but Perrin saw the flickers of fear in her eyes when she admitted to possibly overstepping her bounds.

But her children mistook her apprehension as annoyance, and occasionally threatened to write their own letters, just to watch her eyes bulge.

Mahrree sighed. “I’m sorry. I know sometimes we pour it on a little thick—”

“You’ve raised us to look at everything with a sufficiently cynical eye—don’t worry.” Jaytsy said, her voice suddenly serious.

“Change isn’t all bad, Perrin.”

That always surprised Perrin: one minute she was a flighty girl, the next she was a sharp-tongued young woman. The fact that he was never quite sure which was about to show its claws kept him perpetually on guard.

“And I agree with what you say, really,” his daughter said earnestly. “It’s just hard to be around everyone else when no one else thinks the same as we do. Sometimes I just wished we weren’t so different.”

Mahrree sighed.

“I just sometimes wished . . .” Jaytsy began, then stopped.

Perrin noticed she had picked up her mother’s habit of not finishing thoughts out loud. He counted to three—if he counted to ten, she’d completely forget what she was talking about; she was only fourteen, after all—before he asked, “Wished for what?”

“I wished we could just be like everyone else. Or rather, that everyone else could be like us. Maybe the Creator could just, I don’t know, shake everyone up a bit. Make them see things the way you force us,” she smiled apologetically, “to see things. Notice all the problems, instead of ignoring them.”

“Ah, Jaytsy, that’s not really something you want, is it?” Mahrree said. “What would it take to ‘wake up’ the world? Whatever shakes them will shake us as well.”

Jaytsy exhaled loudly. “It’s not like I want everyone punished, Mother! Just . . . make them awake, that’s all.”

“But Jayts, some people can be as impossible to wake up as our Peto here,” Perrin told her, hoping to lighten the moment.

“Father, I have to tell you,” Peto said gulping down the last bits on his plate, “most of the time when you try to wake me, I’m just ignoring you.”

Mahrree sighed again. “That’s exactly what the world does—ignores the problems. No amount of shaking can fix that, I fear.”

## Chapter 2 ~ “Did something happen?”

The last thing Mahrree remembered was Perrin snoring. It was still dark but dawn must’ve been coming soon. The air just had that kind of feel to it. She sighed and wondered how long her husband would continue imitating the noisy forest. She tried rolling him, but never had much success in budging the man that weighed twice as much as her.

It was only because she utterly adored and loved the swoon-worthy man, who was *usually* the most perfect husband in the world, that she didn’t hit him over the head with the rod of iron she kept by her side of their massive bed in an effort to silence him so she could get some uninterrupted slumber.

Random thoughts went through her mind as she tried to drift back to sleep. Things to clean. Things to cook. Things to tell her husband. Things to tell her mother. Things to tell her children. Things to tell her students . . .

Ugh.

Her students.

Now she definitely wasn’t going to get to sleep. Whenever her collection of twenty rowdy teenagers invaded her mind, she found herself tensing up in frustration. They caused nearly as much damage in her brain as they did in the village.

It wasn’t as if the Shins needed the silver slips she was paid; they always went straight down into the cellar, along with extra slips Perrin earned that they also didn’t spend. Mahrree became the “special cases” teacher when Peto was five and she learned Idumea would never allow parents to be their children’s teachers. At least the commander’s wife could give him leads on which students seemed overly tired in the mornings after nights of thiev-

“Did something happen?”

ing, and she could also keep in touch with her children’s education.

Mahrree sighed as she looked up at the ceiling timbers; Perrin’s snoring had developed a goose-like honking quality, which meant silence was about another thirty minutes away, so until then she had nothing else to do but fret about her students. The Instruction Department’s annual exam would be at the end of Planting Season, just a few weeks away. How the boys performed would dictate the rest of their lives, yet she couldn’t get them to fully grasp that.

Those who tested well could apply to a university and train to become just about anything: doctor, law assessor, university professor, Command School officer, or, laughably, an assistant to an Administrator.

Average scores on the exam meant an average job as well, not requiring excessive intelligence but the ability to learn a trade such as blacksmithing, farming, weaving, teaching—although don’t ask Mahrree her opinion of that mid-range designation which was also the same level as a mere *performer*—or soldiering.

The lowest scores meant one’s job in life would be nothing more invigorating than removing rubbish, digging ditches, or, disturbingly, also becoming a soldier.

That had irked Perrin to no end. The worst students could still join the army? The assumption that rebellious teenagers suddenly turned into obedient young adults when they stepped into a fort baffled both of them.

Perrin and Mahrree pushed their children to perform well enough on the final exams so that they could decide their own futures, as students used to until the Administrators stepped in to make *better* decisions for everyone.

Frequently Perrin and Mahrree grumbled that soon Idumea would dictate what they should eat for every meal so as to control weight gains and losses, and perhaps even issue clothing to each villager to remove the burden of what to wear each day. By not having to make so many decisions, the people would have more time to earn more gold and silver to pay in ever-increasing taxes to the exceptionally *benevolent* Administrators . . .

## The Mansions of Idumea

And that was usually when Jaytsy and Peto banged their heads dramatically on the eating room table.

So far neither of them showed an interest in any particular work, nor did Peto want to become an officer. Mahrree was secretly relieved by that, and happily Perrin also wasn't too eager for his son to join the army. High General Shin, however, had other plans for his only grandson.

At least that morning brought Holy Day again, and Mahrree wouldn't be facing any of those worries on the Creator's Day. She needed that one day a week to leave the world alone and focus on The Writings at the weekly Holy Day service that the Shins, and maybe only thirty others, still attended.

It wasn't because of the rector. Rector Yung was most inspired and capable, and frequently Mahrree wondered if Rector Yung's wife had been anything like Tabbit Densal—tender, gentle, and oh so kind. When Mahrree looked into the aged rector's eyes, she saw a loneliness there that panged her heart, so the late Mrs. Yung must have been a remarkable woman in her own right.

Mahrree groggily mused on what the topic for the morning's discussion might be, because her husband had finally stopped snoring—

She found herself on all fours on the floor, and it was inexplicably swaying. Her head hurt as if she smacked it against the wall. She vaguely recalled hearing something loud behind her fall off a shelf. Or maybe it *was* the shelf.

She looked up and saw across the bed she was no longer in, trying desperately to understand what was happening.

Perrin was in the same position on the floor staring back at her. "Under the bed!" he yelled and dove. He kicked storage crates out of the way and immediately appeared on Mahrree's side.

Mahrree couldn't comprehend what to do, her head still too foggy. But Perrin grabbed her arms and roughly pulled her down and under the sturdy bed frame he'd made before they were married. He wrapped himself around her and held her tight as the house bounced and heaved.

Finally she overcame her confusion and woke up.

Land tremor!



“Did something happen?”

Mahrree’s mind screamed it over and over, but nothing came out of her mouth. It would have been muffled in her husband’s chest, anyway. A loud cracking and tearing noise above them made her flinch, and Perrin clutched her even tighter.

This was nothing like the little tremors that visited Edge each season like a disoriented old aunt; this one would not be easily ignored nor quickly go away. Mahrree curled as small as she could into the protection of her husband’s bulk.

Above them the timbers of the massive bed frame bounced and impossibly sagged, and then the air smelled like dust. Bizarrely, there also seemed to be more light in the room.

The rough swaying slowed until it stopped altogether.

The Shins lay tense and motionless under the bed until Perrin heard a muffled voice. “I can’t breathe!”

“Sorry.”

He released his wife and Mahrree gasped for air. “The children!”

Perrin nodded. “In just a moment. We need to make sure we can get out safely. I suspect we may have that larger window you’ve always wanted. You just stay.”

Mahrree bit her knuckle in worry as he slid cautiously out from his side of the bed, pushing debris that tinkled like broken glass, and peered upwards. He looked over at his wife with his lips pressed tightly together.

“What?” she asked, trying to contain her panic.

“Mahrree,” he began slowly, as if a wonderful idea had just occurred to him, “have you ever considered making this roof, I don’t know . . . *taller*? I always thought the pitch was a little low for my height. It seems half the work is already done—”

“Oh no.” Mahrree moaned and carefully slid out of her side, pushing away a toppled bookshelf that was now mysteriously covered with leaves. She sat up and looked at their bed.

The peaked middle section of the roof had given way completely and rested where they had just moments before. Dirt, dried leaves, and a surprised family of squirrels sat there among the timbers and tiles as well.

She looked up, as was her custom each morning to check the color of the sky, but staggered to realize she’d never before seen

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the color of the sky directly above her bed. For once she was grateful that Perrin overreacted. Always she'd chuckled when the ground began to gently roll, and he dove under a table. But not today.

Mahrree and Perrin managed to get to their feet and stared at each other. They'd been seconds away from being crushed.

"Dear Creator!" Mahrree closed her eyes in a brief prayer of gratitude. When she opened them she murmured, "Oh Perrin . . ."

He'd already wrenched off his long bed shirt and was putting on his blue jacket. Even though his uniform was covered in debris, it still remained positioned on the chair by the bed where he kept it every night, only inches away from the fallen roof.

"We'll secure the children before I go to the fort." He stopped pulling on his trousers to look at her. "Mahrree, I'm so sorry. I should stay with you but—"

"But your duty is first to the citizens of Edge. I know. I'm used to it." But she wasn't. She knew it was a lie, and so did Perrin. Yet there was nothing else that could be done. Every citizen in Edge would be crying for one of his two hundred fifty soldiers to come help them. "You've already saved me, Lieutenant Colonel Shin. Go save the rest of the world!" She tried to smile.

He stepped over a splintered timber and kissed her quickly, hurdled something else that was now unrecognizable, and ran down the stairs shouting for Jaytsy and Peto.

Mahrree fumbled quickly to shake out a dusty dress and put it over her bedclothes, not giving time for her mind to catch up to what was happening around her. All she could think was, *My babies!*

She stepped over and around debris and scattered books, trying not to worry about what might have been destroyed. At the bottom of the stairs she found Jaytsy breathing heavily with panic in her eyes. She seemed as spooked as a filly, but unharmed. Before she could say anything, Mahrree heard Perrin shouting.

"In Peto's room! Now!"

Mahrree wouldn't let alarm set in as she and Jaytsy hurried over to Peto's door to see his wardrobe lying on top of his bed, with no Peto in sight. Perrin was just beginning to lift it and Mahrree rushed to help him. Together they heaved the large oak

“Did something happen?”

cabinet to find Peto underneath, wide-eyed.

“I’m awake, Father. Really. I’m not ignoring you this time.”

Mahrree sighed in relief.

“Are you hurt?” Perrin asked.

Peto just stared at him.

“Are you hurt? *Peto!*”

Peto sat up slowly and saw books, papers, and kickballs scattered around the floor. “Did something happen?”

In answer, the ground began to roll again. Jaytsy screamed and ran to her father, and something in Mahrree’s mind clicked. She grabbed her son and dragged him toward the front door as the house bounced and swayed. Perrin followed closely behind, half carrying a sobbing Jaytsy.

In their front garden the family collapsed into a heap with Jaytsy and Peto curled up between Perrin and Mahrree. Strange ear-numbing noises, like the ground cracking its giant knuckles, echoed up and down the road. A rumbling like thunder that didn’t know when to stop or where to go came toward them, and left them, then came back again.

Shouts and screams arose in the air around them. The Shins saw neighbors making their ways to their front gardens too, falling down stairs and stumbling over bushes. A spooked horse ran past and fell on the undulating cobblestones, whinnying in terror as it tried to right itself again, and bolted down a side road.

For a moment, Mahrree’s rational mind decided this was indeed the most bizarre event she’d ever witnessed. She kept looking around just to assure herself this wasn’t some strange dream, but reality.

But then the rational part of her mind decided it was done for the day, and the desire to become frantic nearly overwhelmed her. Only by looking into her husband’s steady and solid gaze did she find a bit of bravery to borrow.

A flash of orange caught her eye, and she noticed the tall tower near their home. Always the towers, a dozen throughout the village, were manned by two soldiers who kept careful watch over the neighborhoods. But right now the young men were keeping hold of the sides of the tower, trying not to fall over the waist-high walls of the swaying structures.

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“Lie down!” Mahrree murmured uselessly in their direction. Already they had sent up the orange banner, the twenty-foot length of cloth waving erratically in the breeze and the jerking of the tower. One of the soldiers was valiantly trying to signal for help with the horn, but his repeating pattern of two short bursts was interrupted by jolts and shivers from the ground. It sounded more like he had a bad case of the hiccups.

“Oh, for crying out loud!” Perrin said loudly as he noticed his soldiers’ vain attempts. “Wait out the tremor, *then* let everyone know what we already know: we have an emergency! First thing I’ll retrain—”

He didn’t get to finish his sentence, because a sudden lurch sent him almost flopping on top of his children. As he braced himself, a house down the road shivered and partially collapsed.

*This isn’t Edge*, Mahrree thought to herself. This isn’t . . .  
Words from a book poured into her mind.

*Before the Last Day will be a land tremor more powerful than any ever experienced. It will awaken the largest mountain and change all that we know in the world.*

The words of the Great Guide Hierum bounced around in her head as violently as the ground. She twisted to try to see Mt. Deceit, the largest mountain in the world, but her view was obscured by a neighbor’s tree.

No, she didn’t think this was the Last Day just yet.

But then again, if the land keeps trembling—

It abruptly stopped, the ground’s final movement an upward lift that brought down another house nearby; its crumbling sounded like a clay pot being thrown onto a stone floor. After that, there was no noise, no movement, nothing.

The Shin family held their collective breath for several moments, Perrin and Mahrree staring at each other as they hovered protectively over their children.

“Did something happen?”

Jaytsy started to wail. “I didn’t mean it! I didn’t mean it! I didn’t want this to happen!”

Perrin blinked and looked down at his daughter who threw her arms around his waist. “What?”

“I wanted people to wake up, but . . . but . . . not like *this!*”

Peto sat up and stared at his sister, then looked questioning-ly at his mother.

Motherhood has a strange way of putting everything suddenly into perspective. It took Mahrree only a fraction of a second to make sense of the world again.

There had been a land tremor, an enormous one. There was great damage, which likely meant cleaning up for weeks, if not moons. People were injured and perhaps even dead, which meant they would have to find bandages and shovels. Breakfast would be difficult to make today, as would be midday meal and dinner.

And her daughter, in the manner of all teenagers who think the world actually listens to and takes its cues from the sophistication of minds that are centered around haircuts, dress lengths, and clipped intellect, believed the land tremor was caused by her.

“*You* did not cause this, Jaytsy Shin! My goodness,” Mahrree said. “And you think your friends are self-centered.”

Perrin gave his family a cautious smile, the corner of his eye catching sight of the banner nearby which was now slumped against its pole. Even the constant breeze from the mountains had unexpectedly stilled, but the bright orange was still obvious, pleading for help.

“No one’s hurt, right?” he said.

Peto and Mahrree nodded at him, while Jaytsy sniffed into his stomach.

He gently pried her loose and lifted up her chin to look into her dark brown eyes. “Then I have to go, but you’ll be fine. Just listen to your mother. And all of you, stay out of the house!”

Mahrree had never seen his eyes so sad, not even at the Densals’ burial. If there was one time she didn’t want him to leave her, it was now. But there were others far more distressed than her. They were outside and safe, and most of their house was still standing, or so she assumed.

She swallowed hard and nodded at her husband. “You be

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careful, Perrin, and don't do anything overly brave or stupid."

"Mother says those are usually the same things," Peto said to demonstrate that his ability to turn anything into a joke wasn't crushed by the wardrobe.

Perrin winked at them and lifted Jaytsy into a sitting position. She wiped her runny nose with her hand and looked pleadingly into her father's eyes.

"Take care of each other," he said, kissing Jaytsy on the forehead, then kissed Mahrree on the lips. As he leaned toward Peto, his son fell backward.

"No, Father! I'm fine! You don't need to do that."

Perrin smiled broader. "Yes, you're definitely all right." He lunged and planted a kiss on his mortified son's forehead. "Help your mother, both of you. It's going to be a long day." He got to his feet and broke into a run toward the fort, sprinting faster than he ever did in the Strongest Soldier Race.

"Colonel Shin!" cried a neighbor. "Wait!"

But Perrin was already out of earshot.

Mahrree nearly cried out the same thing, but knew it was no use. Duty to the world, first. She was the brave wife of the lieutenant colonel, after all. She was the wife of the Commander of Edge, the daughter-in-law of the High General of Idumea, and occasionally she felt nearly as courageous as those men.

At least she feigned it well, or so she hoped. Deep down she knew she was a coward, and learned that when she ventured into the forests years ago to find the truth. She found a Guarder, then also found she was too terrified to do anything about it. She tried over the years to forget that humiliating night, but there were moments like this—when she knew she had to be brave—that the image of herself balled up in a crying mess at the edge of the forest overwhelmed her senses.

Well, on a day like today she simply had to overwhelm them back. There was no room for her fear of inadequacy.

Mahrree took a deep breath, got to her feet, and looked objectively at her house. Everything seemed relatively fine, except now it was only a one and a *half* story house.

Two feelings began to rise within her, fighting to get attention. The first was panic.

“Did something happen?”

*Look what happened to my house! it screamed. I could have been crushed! Look at our neighbors' homes! Something's burning, can you smell it? Did you hear that crashing noise? Someone's house just collapsed! Is that a new steam vent in the middle of the road? What will we eat? Can I even go back into my house? Someone help me!*

Another feeling rose up just as powerfully.

*You are not dead, it said calmly. Your children are fine. Get them changed out of their bedclothes quickly and get moving. The rains stopped last week so your work will be easier. Your mother could probably use that steam vent for cooking if the temperature's correct. Your larder is right by the back door, so you have food. Get breakfast and get going. There's plenty of work to do. You had no other pressing plans for the day, anyway. The world's not out to get you right now.*

The words in her head sounded remarkably like something her father would say. She still could count on him at times like this, as if he'd never moved on to Paradise.

“Right!” Mahrree announced to her house. She put her hands on her hips and turned to her children who still sat terrified on the ground. Several neighbors were rushing to her rocky front garden.

“Jaytsy, Peto. Get changed, do NOT go upstairs, grab the bread from the larder, and bring me lots of parchment and charcoal. Now!”

The teens startled at her command, then scrambled to their feet and cautiously approached the house.

“Move quickly—we don't know how long it'll remain stable,” Mahrree called after them.

Jaytsy looked back. “But Father said not to—” She stopped when she saw the determined look on her mother's face.

“You'll be fine,” said Mahrree. Didn't her father tell her that they should change and get breakfast? Since there was no lying in Paradise, she knew her house was stable. At least the main floor. “There's no danger right now,” she assured her daughter. “But let's hurry, just the same.”

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Jaytsy rushed in after her brother. Mahrree heard a noise behind her and turned around.

“Mrs. Shin! Where’s the lieutenant colonel?” Mr. Hersh asked as he opened the front gate.

Mahrree looked into the face of her next-door neighbor, who seemed more like a distressed porcupine than a fifty-year-old weaver. “He’s gone to the fort. He’ll start organizing and get us help when he can.”

“How could he go?” cried Mrs. Pail, who lived down the road and was still shaking even though the ground had stopped. “What will we do without the soldiers?”

“They’re coming, but we can take care of ourselves,” Mahrree assured them. “We don’t need the soldiers right now.”

Several more neighbors were now clustering around her yard like lost toddlers in the market place. Big eyes, trembling chins, and not a clue in the world as to how to help themselves.

Mahrree decided to save her internal commentary about the progressiveness of Nicko Mal’s “Trust the army and Administrators to take care of everything for you” measures for another time, when she could mentally rant undisturbed. The measures were working exceptionally well. No one could think for themselves.

No one could think *at all*.

“So what do we do?” pleaded another neighbor, panic growing in his voice.

If it weren’t for her suppressed rage with the Administrators, Mahrree wouldn’t have had any strength left herself. Obviously those twenty-three ridiculously stuffed frilly white shirts and red coat tails were good for something: making her furious that not even the men of the world dared make a move without governmental approval. If they lived closer to Idumea, they likely would have been drafting requests to Chairman Mal in triplicate at this very moment, asking for permission to relieve themselves by their trees.

But telling people what to do had always been one of Mahrree Peto Shin’s gifts. “We calm down and start surveying the damage, Mr. Mang!” She had practiced that official tone for years on her children, the same one Perrin used on her when they were first married and he tried to pull rank. Mahrree’s version had



“Did something happen?”

come out quite well, and Mr. Mang was visibly surprised.

“Now,” Mahrree continued, and paused when she saw Peto come out of the house with a stack of paper and sharpened charcoal. He handed them to his mother.

“We’ll begin right here,” she said in her best Mrs. Lieutenant Colonel voice, writing on the first page. “We need to go house to house looking for anyone injured or not responding to our calls. If anyone’s missing, we’ll begin a search, but don’t enter the houses immediately. We don’t know how stable they are, so we’ll need to record the level of damage to each house, evaluate if there are safe ways into them, and also check the surrounding land for new fissures or steam vents. If you must enter a house to help someone, first push on the standing walls to see if they’ll hold, then move in and out quickly. If the walls don’t hold or they look shaky, obviously don’t go in! *That’s* when we’ll get the soldiers to help.”

The neighbors gaped at her, some in surprise, some in doubt, and some in fear. But then again, she *was* married to the Commander of Edge, the authority of the village, which perhaps meant *she* also had some authority . . .

“If you find any wounded,” she continued loudly, which she had discovered was a good cover for fear, “lay them in the front gardens, so we can tend to them safely until the doctors can be found. We also need to keep watch for looters, so for every three or four houses someone should stay outside to watch for trouble. Patrol the area as the soldiers do, checking front and back gardens for movement. Anyone who can be spared will come with us to complete our survey of the neighborhoods. If we break up into several small groups, we can cover much more territory. Record all damage and injuries on these pages,” she held them out to stunned villagers who automatically took whatever was shoved into their hands, “and once the soldiers arrive, give them the lists so they can see the most pressing needs.”

The ideas flowed effortlessly into her mind, which she knew meant she was inspired by the Creator. She was never that direct on her own.

Mr. Mang puffed up his chest, apparently unsure if following the orders of a woman was the right thing to do. “I’m going to

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the fort to get help, now!”

Mahrree stepped up to him and wished she had a box to stand on to look him straight in the eye. Instead, she practiced her newest How to Intimidate Like Perrin strategy.

After she'd mastered an imitation of his command voice, he'd started a new trick: raising one eyebrow at his wife in challenge as if to say, *Oh really?* Mahrree had practiced trying to do that for hours as she stared into the small mirror in her bedroom. She'd hold down one eyebrow to get the other to rise upwards. At most she could manage a scowling look that gave the appearance of trying to launch an errant bedbug from her eyebrow.

But it was the best she could do, and she pulled it out of her meager arsenal now.

“Mr. Mang, do you smell smoke?” Her eyebrows moved in some sort of way. “Because I do. It's coming from the center of the village. If you turn around you'll see a plume rising and growing larger. That's a fire, and it's spreading. The village green tower probably has its yellow banner up, if it isn't already burned to the ground. And I see orange banners calling for help at every tower. That fire will come to our neighborhood if every last soldier isn't put to work on it. It would cause more destruction than this land tremor. Mr. Mang, do you *really* want to pull the soldiers away from that fire?”

Living almost sixteen years with an officer had rubbed off on her. If only women were allowed to be in the army, Mahrree was confident she could've made general by now.

Mr. Mang stared at Mahrree and her wiggling face, then glanced at the neighbors surrounding him.

None of them suggested an answer, but waited for his response. Who else was there to take orders from?

He released a deep breath before he said, “Mrs. Shin, where do you want me to begin?”

Oh yes. General indeed. That's why women weren't allowed to vote, run for magistrate, or be in the army, she'd concluded long ago. Women like her, who could suck down their private fears and put on public bravery, could take over the world. She wished she'd thought to take Perrin's long knife out of the table in the eating room drawer. It would have looked impressive with its

“Did something happen?”

handle poking out of the top of her skirt.

But then again, in sixteen years she'd never dared touch it because she was all talk and no substance. Fortunately, only she knew that.

For the next several hours Mahrree, Jaytsy, and Peto, along with several other villagers, plodded from house to house recording who was there, who was injured, and what kind of damage had been sustained. Together they moved the injured to the safety of their front gardens, where neighbors attended to them until a village doctor could be located.

Mahrree acquired more volunteers as they progressed—people frantic to do something, and even more frantic for someone to tell them what that something was—and by midday meal time a large section of the north of Edge had been evaluated, rescued, and secured.

But Mahrree didn't feel triumphant; only stunned. Hour after hour the enormity of this new reality sank in, weighing her down as if a boulder had been strapped to her back. She and her children walked carefully around each house, inspected each garden and road, and made crude maps on the paper. The number of new steam vents and cracks were startling. It seemed no road was void of new topography.

A few times Mahrree looked in the direction of the forest and wondered what was happening there. If it was inhospitable before, the forest might be impenetrable now. She saw new steam vents and smoke rising from areas that had been previously inactive. That could mean a variety of things: whoever might still be lurking there may now be dead, or moved on elsewhere, or were forced into the village to take refuge . . .

Once, Mahrree ventured a look at Mt. Deceit, the tallest peak down the range of jagged mountains that served as the northern border to the world. It was still intact, which she assumed meant it hadn't yet “awakened” as the prophecy said, but from its snow-covered top rose a steady stream of steam or smoke, she couldn't discern which. There were very few trees up there, so it couldn't be another fire like the one that burned parts of the forest decades ago.

After a few seconds of watching it and fretting uselessly

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about what it could mean, she gulped and turned back to her task of mapping a new gap in the ground that was the width of her hand and several paces long.

As they worked that morning, Mahrree wondered if what Jaytsy had hoped for yesterday might not have come to pass, if maybe the rest of the world might be jarred back to some sense of thought again.

But why would a mere land tremor change anything, she cynically thought. Witness this morning: no one even tried to think of what to do for themselves, but clustered around anyone they assumed had some authority. And trusting whomever they thought had power was far more dangerous than acting for themselves.

But no one in Edge or anywhere else would ever believe that, because no one believed anything anymore. They just *existed*, waiting for the next entertainment or the next line of goods to come from Idumea. Edge, along with the world, had grown willfully stupid.

And as she moved from house to house, she saw further evidence of that. People sat on their front gardens weeping and not working. Others rushed into their creaking houses to retrieve useless trinkets and clothing that were more valuable to them than their lives.

And everywhere villagers were whining about why the commander of the fort hadn't yet come by to personally rescue them.

To each complainer Mahrree said, "He's rescuing someone else right now. You're not hurt, so get up and help your neighbor who is!"

Horses and wagons from the fort speeding to the center of Edge passed the Shins frequently. Mahrree recognized Major Karna as he led the fire brigades back and forth, and she wished she could stop him and ask what was happening. The smell of fire was undeniable and the family tried not to think about whom it may be affecting or where their husband and father were.

In a small, sinister way that she was ashamed about, Mahrree rather hoped some of the finer shops were burning to the ground. At least those with an extraneous *p* or *e* somewhere.

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Maybe if Edgers did without their luxuries for a few weeks, they'd realize the luxuries never brought them happiness, but only a temporary euphoria of having got something. Then they'd have to get something again for the same feeling . . . Sometimes Edge was more insatiable than Peto at mealtimes.

But, her skeptical mind reminded, this event likely wouldn't change anything. Big things rarely do. The tremor may stun people for a moment, like an unexpected slap across the face, but once the sting is gone everything sinks back to normal again.

As she progressed through the neighborhoods looking for ways to help, Mahrree experienced a variety of feelings. Horror for the widespread devastation—no house was untouched—then a strange yearning of hope, that maybe, just maybe, this land tremor *would* wake up everyone.

It seemed to do it a bit for Mr. Hegek. The Shins ran across him near one of the two-story, gray block school houses. He stood in front of it, his hands on his waist, staring up at a cracked window.

Mahrree sidled over to the director of schools. “Evaluating if we can have school tomorrow?”

He jumped a little in surprise and turned to her. “It's remarkable! Look how well it held up. The only damage I see is that window up there. I must confess, I snuck through it looking for cracks, but didn't see anything major.”

Mahrree blinked in surprise. “You actually went in?”

“I pushed on the walls first,” he defended himself. “I didn't just blindly rush in there, you know. I do have a bit of common sense, Mrs. Shin.”

She smiled. “Well, not everyone here does. As for school?”

Mr. Hegek shook his head. “I'm cancelling it for a few weeks,” he told her, and Jaytsy and Peto emitted little cheers. “With this kind of mess, I think everyone needs to focus on cleaning up. The End of Year testing can be put off for a few weeks, I'm sure.”

Mahrree shook her head in wonder. “Mr. Hegek, you have more than a bit of common sense. Well done, sir!”

Hegek blushed at her praise. “Besides,” he said more quietly, “I've already told two families they can move into the lower

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classrooms, once the soldiers have deemed them safe. My neighbors lost everything, Mrs. Shin. My wife, son, and I dug them out of a pile of rubble this morning. The Administrators surely can forgive using their school building as a temporary home, don't you think?"

Mahrree squeezed his arm. "Absolutely. Especially since none of us will tell them, right?"

She decided then that Mr. Hegek was the best thing that morning.

Because shortly after that, the Shins experienced the worst thing. They turned on to a road to see that several soldiers had stopped at a pile of rock and planking. Mahrree froze in her tracks when she realized that what looked like a pile of debris had been a house. No damage they'd come across had been as bad as that, yet.

A soldier jogged over. "Mrs. Shin, I don't recommend you bring your children here. There are fatalities."

Mahrree nodded and Peto asked quietly behind her, "Mother, what are 'fatalities'?" The tone of his voice suggested he knew the meaning, but was hoping for some other definition.

Jaytsy began to weep silently. "I knew that family. They had a little girl, about ten."

Mahrree tried to keep her voice calm. "Peto, it means the Creator has taken them to Paradise."

"Oh," Peto whispered.

"Six hours of working and I thought maybe Edge had been spared something worse. . ." Mahrree murmured. She felt the undeniable urge to sit down and begin weeping like so many she'd passed that morning.

How obtuse of her, she thought, to demand the villagers to get up and get moving, to do something about the devastation around them, to swallow down their terror—

Another soldier approached her, but Mahrree didn't see him. Her eyes were blurring with the horror that people had died in their homes. Like a landslide, all the destruction of that morning started to pile on top of her.

"Mahrree," the soldier said and gently placed a hand on her shoulder.

“Did something happen?”

She recognized the voice of her favorite soldier and turned to him. Already Jaytsy was hugging him, and Peto punched his free arm in a nonchalant manner that carried the hope that his customary greeting would somehow make everything else normal as well.

Shem kissed Jaytsy on top of her head and ruffled Peto’s hair. Then he turned to Mahrree with his ever sweet and calm eyes. “Are all of you all right?” He looked each one of them up and down.

“Yes, we’re fine,” she sighed guiltily, her gaze shifting back to the ruined house. “Just seeing what we can do to help.”

“Go home,” he said softly, reading the emotion in her face. “Karna’s got the fire under control, Grandpy’s securing the southern part of Edge, so now we’re moving toward the northern houses to help Rigoff’s groups. Go home and . . . and . . .” He shrugged as ideas failed him.

“I *am* hungry, Mother,” Peto admitted as if he didn’t want to.

Mahrree sighed as she interpreted Shem’s expression. There was only more devastation ahead. His sky-blue eyes were clouding over with the images he’d seen that he didn’t want his claimed family to witness.

She nodded feebly at him. “Cooking. I need to start cooking, don’t I? You’re supposed to be by to eat. You missed steak last night,” she added absently. “There’s too much to clean right now. But I can cook.”

Shem squeezed her arm. “Consider that there may be many, many more who need dinner tonight. The lieutenant colonel said your house was in relatively stable condition, at least the larder. Whatever you can do for your neighborhood, Mahrree, you best start figuring out now. And Perrin told me to tell you he’ll be by later to check on you, so you better be where he expects you to be.”

Mahrree smiled at that. He’d sent Shem to find her. He was the only master sergeant messenger in the entire army, a task usually reserved for fast running privates, but he was always so much more than just their messenger.

She remembered the pages clutched in her hands. “Here,”

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and gave him her surveys. “This may help speed up your work.”

Shem sifted through the pages. “Perrin said you’d know what to do,” he said quietly. “Thank you. Now, go. Jaytsy, Peto—do what your mother says.”

Normally they rolled their eyes whenever their “uncle” sounded like their father, but not today. Peto nodded to him, and Jaytsy squeezed Shem one more time.

Shem patted Mahrree on the arm and turned to jog back to the destroyed house, but Mahrree needed one more thing.

“Shem!” she cried urgently. “My mother! Do you know anything about the Edge of Idumea Estates?”

He turned around and shook his head. “Got hit as hard as everywhere else. I’ll send someone to check on her for you, though, as soon as I can. All right?”

Mahrree nodded. “Thank you, Master Sergeant,” she remembered to call her ‘little brother’ by his formal title in public.

“Now, go home, before the colonel gets angry with us,” he ordered.

Seeing Shem always made her feel better, and hearing him shout commands to the soldiers moving debris gave her a surge of hope. Master Sergeant Zenos was on the job; it would be done right. Already he was handing out her surveys of damage to three smaller groups of soldiers, gesturing for them to start moving north.

“Be careful, Uncle Shem,” Jaytsy called quietly after him, knowing he couldn’t hear her, but still wanting to send the warning.

“Uncle Shem will be fine,” Peto declared, as if his words controlled the world. “He always is.”

Mahrree put an arm around each of her children and headed for home. She felt as if half of the landslide had just been lifted from her shoulders and placed securely on the strong back of Uncle Shem.

He’d be by later tonight, Mahrree was sure, with Hycymum. He’d check on her himself. That’s just what Shem Zenos did for them. Every illness, every injury, every family celebration, every Holy Day, Shem Zenos was there. When Perrin was gone training officers in other forts around the world, then-Sergeant Zenos put



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himself on guard duty at the Shins every night. He was theirs, even more than if he'd been born into their families. And Mahrree was still going to find him a wife.

As Mahrree, Jaytsy, and Peto slowly walked the several roads back to their house, evaluating the progress and stopping here and there to lend a hand, Mahrree talked to women whose houses weren't too badly destroyed, those who could still retrieve supplies. By the time she reached her road a dozen women had committed to come by when they could make dinner for those who couldn't, with whatever they could cobble together.

As they neared home, Mahrree was grateful to see Mrs. Hersh had watched over the Shins' house as well as hers. The woman held a large stick which she used unnecessarily for walking, for occasionally prodding a rock, and for shaking at things. As Mahrree approached, Mrs. Hersh brandished the stick as if it were a sword, and waved it about with as much determination, but only for a few seconds because the piece of wood was rather heavy for the dumpy woman with very little arm muscle.

“There were a few of them skulking boys around here,” she said with an insulted huff. “But I shook this at them—”

She waved the stick experimentally again, and Mahrree took a cautious step backward in case the weight of the wood got the better of the middle-aged woman.

“—and I told them, ‘We’re not putting up with that kind of nonsense today. So go get a shovel and go be useful!’”

Mahrree clapped her hands. “Well done, Mrs. Hersh! And what did they do?”

Mrs. Hersh let the wood fall back into walking cane position, and behind Mahrree, Peto sighed dramatically in relief. “Why, they left, naturally. Scowled a bit, but slinked away with nothing to pad their pockets with.” She sniffed proudly. “Should sign me up to be a soldier.”

Mahrree patted her son behind her in warning, knowing he was about to snigger. But Mahrree saw something in the woman's eyes that Peto wasn't mature enough to recognize. Sometime during the morning the cowering thing had found her bravery in the form of a piece of kindling and her ability to do something. Mahrree hadn't seen so much resolve in her neighbor in all the

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years they'd lived next to each other.

"Mrs. Hersh, if I could make it up to my bedroom, I'd retrieve for you one of my husband's blue jackets and let you wear it today. I'll be starting dinner soon for whoever in the area needs to eat. You're certainly invited for standing guard all day."

The woman smiled, waved the stick again, and Jaytsy snorted in worry. "Thank you, Mrs. Shin. I'll continue patrolling the area until dinner, then."

Mahrree saluted her as Mrs. Hersh snapped to some semblance of attention, and marched to the other side of her yard. Mahrree hoped Mrs. Hersh didn't hear the stifled guffaws of her children.

"She's doing us a service," she told them as she tried to squelch her own giggle. "Nothing quite as fearsome as a female with a stick. And I've never seen her so determined. Good for her!"

Still, Mahrree rather preferred their guard was someone just a bit more threatening. She actually wished their old smelly dog Barker was still alive. They could've tied him up to the front door as a guard. It wasn't as if he would have done anything to potential intruders except slobber on them, even though his drool was intimidating. But he had passed away almost two years ago, lovingly buried by Perrin, Peto, and Shem outside the fort walls, and Mahrree even surprised herself by shedding a few tears that he was gone.

But then again, on a day like today she'd be struggling just to feed her family and neighbors. Feeding an animal that weighed as much as her might not have been a wise use of resources.

Mahrree turned to her house with dread and hope. She'd put off thinking about its condition all morning, but now she had to face what she feared: that her beloved home might dissolve into a pile of rubble. She'd imagined it several times during the day when they saw other houses that appeared stable suddenly collapse, but she never allowed herself to linger on the thought. The home her father and the villagers helped build, and the additions Perrin put up—the thought of losing any of it was too much to bear. But now her mind was filled with the possibility.

"What do we do now?" Peto asked, eyeing his bedroom.

“Did something happen?”

“What we’ve been doing all day,” Mahrree told him. “Try to evaluate if it’s stable. You two, stay back a way.”

Jaytsy wrung her hands nervously as her eyes darted toward her parents’ bedroom, which was noticeably brighter and airier. One of their blankets flapped in the breeze like a volunteer emergency banner.

That blanket was too scratchy anyway, Mahrree thought dismissively as she inspected her house. A narrow fissure ran parallel to her house but didn’t turn to intersect the large flat stone that served as part of her foundation. She tentatively approached the back of her house, her children tiptoeing behind her.

Cautiously she put her hand on the back porch door handle and tugged. It was tighter than normal and she assumed the house had settled a bit, compacting the frame. She yanked open the door and jumped backward, in case the door was all that held up her house. Jaytsy and Peto, several steps behind her, gasped and held their breath.

They listened for any creaks or groans but heard nothing. Mahrree took a deep breath and stepped into the back porch and to the larder.

As quickly as she could she filled her arms with dried vegetables and beef. She walked it out quickly to the back door and into the waiting arms of her children, then went back to retrieve the ingredients for biscuits.

“What are we going to cook all of this in, Mother?” Jaytsy asked timidly.

“I need to go further in,” Mahrree said, picking up a sack of flour. She wished she had more goods in the cellar, which would have been safer to slip into. But at the beginning of Planting Season, her cellar along with everyone else’s was nearly empty. There were, however, plenty of slips of gold and silver hidden. It now seemed silly to have more than five year’s worth of metal stored when what they really needed was food.

“But Father said not to go back in!” her panicked daughter reminded.

“But I’ve asked the Creator if I can go back in,” Mahrree answered calmly.

“And what did He say?”

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Mahrree paused. "Still waiting for an answer," she admitted as she handed Peto the flour. "But I don't feel too concerned, so I'm going to test the house. Stay back, both of you." She stood on the back porch and faced the kitchen door.

Peto glanced at his sister and took two big steps back.

"Mother, this isn't a good idea," Jaytsy informed her.

"Thank you, daughter." Mahrree glanced over her shoulder at Jaytsy. "I'll remember you said that as I'm crushed by the stone."

Jaytsy's mouth fell open in horror.

"I'm joking! Goodness, I'm only joking. Still, step back, Jaytsy."

Mahrree tried the door that led to her kitchen. It opened freely. Taking that as a good sign, she pushed experimentally on the door frame, then the stone walls around it. "If you're going to come down, let me know so I have time to get out, all right?"

Several paces behind her in the back garden Jaytsy whimpered and Peto cleared his throat.

The house answered nothing.

Mahrree decided that was the answer she was looking for. "Here I come!" she announced and walked purposefully into her kitchen. Several cast iron pots were already on the ground, waiting. Their heaviness had dinged the wooden floor when they'd fallen out of the cabinets.

"That's all right," she told the house consolingly as she ran her finger into the grooves left by the pots. "It just adds character. We like character."

She picked up the pots and placed them on the work table, then she tugged on a drawer which stuck before opening.

"But you always stick, don't you." Mahrree patted the drawer and retrieved several large spoons and a sharp knife. She took a handful of cloths and placed them in the pots, then rushed all of it out to Jaytsy and Peto.

"One more trip is all, I promise," and she bounded back into the house, ignoring their shocked faces that once again she was going against the orders of their father and the Commander of Edge.

The house was still quiet, and she wanted to risk a look. In

“Did something happen?”

the kitchen she gently pushed on the door to the combined eating and gathering room. It stuck a little before giving way.

Mahrree held her breath to listen for any sound to signal it was all about to come down, but she was met with only safe silence.

She crept into the room and looked at the rock walls. Hair-line cracks traveled throughout the mortar, but no rocks bulged in unfamiliar ways. She smoothed her hand along one wall, then the next and the next, past the staircase and the door to the study, the door to Jaytsy’s room, the front door, and around to Peto’s room then back to the kitchen door. All felt normal.

With each aftershock that morning, Mahrree had visions of her house collapsing. She’d half expected to come home to a pile of rock and wood, with bits of paper floating around like huge snowflakes.

Satisfied with the walls, she finally allowed herself to look at the piles of books scattered all along the floor. Those would be easy to clean up. Easier than her bedroom, which she decided not to consider. She and Perrin might be spending many nights down here until their roof was replaced.

Her gaze traveled up to the ceiling and the large oak timbers that supported the upper-level bedroom and adjoining attic. She smiled. There was no obvious structural damage, but wasn’t ready to climb upstairs just yet.

“Mother!” Jaytsy called frantically. “Are you still all right?”

“Yes, yes, just checking things here. I’ll be right out.” Mahrree patted the walls of her old house. “Better than blocks, you are, aren’t you? Good old house. If you haven’t come down yet, I’ll bet you won’t at all. I’ll never abandon you!”

Then, on pure impulse, she gave a quick kiss to the largest stone next to her. Her father had placed that one, she was sure of it.

“Coming, children!”

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It was a bad idea to irritate the Commander of Edge on a

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good day, but to annoy him on a terrible day like this one was near to suicide. Perrin could scarcely believe that his efforts to clear out the market place, now that the last of the fires was mere smolders, were interrupted by such an errand. But when he intercepted the message sent to one of his sergeants, he glared at the worried soldiers around him and said in a dreadful tone, "I'll handle this one. Personally."

He scowled as he rode up to the arena, erected a year before the incarceration building was expanded—and he always suspected there was a connection there. The arena took up the vast area of the village green where children used to play organizing their own teams, deciding their rules, and negotiating their problems. Now none of the children played unless some adult was paid to direct their every move, and in the evenings they sat with their parents watching adults play bizarre versions of "Tie Up Your Uncle" and blatantly cheat at kickball. That was why Perrin took his family a couple of times a week to the fort to play games with other families like Mr. Hegek and his wife and son, and with soldiers who were also perennially eleven-years-old, like Shem.

As he tied his horse to the hitching post he evaluated the structural integrity of the building. To his disappointment, it seemed quite sturdy. Then again, it was made by Idumean craftsmen to be a smaller replica of the massive arena in the middle of Idumea, which every village now wanted to emulate.

Perrin retrieved a length of rope from his tackle bag and strode up a corridor to where he heard shouts of disparagement and some ugly laughter. When he reached the rows of bleachers, he paused and glared at the cluster of thirty or so young men. They didn't notice him because they were too busy mocking a friend who was on all fours in the dirt of the arena, with a bull slowly circling him.

"Come on!" one of the men called out, and Perrin remembered the plump pimply thing was one that washed out of his basic training, fortunately. "You're supposed to climb that scaffolding, then swing out over the bulls, and land on that spinning thing over there. You're not supposed to fall off the second rung of the scaffold!"

"I want my silver slips back!" another friend demanded.

“Did something happen?”

“Wait, we didn’t pay our silver yet, did we?”

“Because this isn’t entertaining. Release the other bulls!”

Perrin knew his boots were loud—he’d developed a way of thinking his heel when he needed his steps to sound particularly ominous. But even over the overgrown boys’ laughter, which sounded as if it was being helped along by a generous amount of mead—he wasn’t heard approaching until he was nearly on top of them.

“And WHAT do WE have HERE?”

Half of the young men fell off their bleachers in alarm, while the other half grinned and cheered.

“Ah, now we’ll get some action! Commander Shin—where are the entertainers? There’s supposed to be an obstacle course and bulls and molasses and feathers and girls—”

“Girls!” a few more men called loudly and looked around as if expecting them to materialize out of thin air.

“—but there’s just this, this, this nothing! Command something!”

Out of the corner of his eye Perrin noticed their friend under the scaffolding, looking a bit confused and slowly crawling toward a gate hoping the snorting bull wouldn’t notice the movement. Perhaps if the hapless contestant wasn’t belching so loudly, the bull wouldn’t be pawing the ground just now—

Perrin left his jeering friends and trotted down to the arena floor to use his little-known weapon: his ability to terrify steak. With one smooth movement he hopped over the stone and iron wall separating the bleachers from the action, and gestured for the crawler to come over to him.

“And get on your feet, for crying out loud,” he hissed at him. “The bull knows exactly where you are, and that you’re slower than frozen mud. I can see why he wants to trample you.”

Perrin strode past the now loping young man and stopped abruptly with his hands on his waist. He eyed the bull, which had stopped advancing.

“I remember the days when this field was filled with children playing their own games,” he grumbled. “Now adults sit around waiting for idiots to make up new ones.”

The bull snuffed, a tad unsure of itself.

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Perrin always had that effect on livestock. He narrowed his squint. At least he had a ready audience in the form of a nervous animal. Mahrree always rolled her eyes whenever he got started, and reminded him that she, too, lived in Edge during the good old days, but didn't remember them *quite* as well as he did.

"Used to make up our own entertainment," he told the bull, which was shifting its eyes away from his. "Our own plays, songs, even had debates. What do you think of that, eh? People discussing things intelligently. And now look what we have here: me, lecturing a future roast."

The animal took a few wary steps backward.

"And occasionally Idumea would send us broad-chested women who could sing so high the dogs were agitated for days, and skinny men who could make pyramids on top of each other, while juggling knives. Now *that* was entertainment," he said with a grunt of satisfaction. "Never did learn how they did that. But now we settle for throwing our own drunks at someone's cattle. Where's the talent and skill in that?"

The bull slowly backed away as if embarrassed it had any thoughts of charging, or being involved in anything Perrin deemed unworthy.

"Where are the screaming girls, huh?" he glanced around. "Those loopy-eyed things that chant stupid rhymes to get the crowd excited about whatever's about to happen here, but just get in the way of the action instead?"

The bull lowered his head and looked almost apologetic.

"It's all right if you ate them," Perrin said generously, taking a few more confident steps toward the middle of the arena. "Those girls are as bright as hay, I suppose. You shouldn't be here either. Instead, you should be on my plate, thick and pink and sizzling." He grinned as the bull backed all the way to the opposite wall.

Perrin nodded at it and noticed that the young man had scrambled to safety and was now sitting in the middle of his friends, fascinated. Perrin slowly backed up to the gate himself. The bull hugged the other side of the arena, waiting for the massive man to leave.

When Perrin climbed up the wall, it was to hear the cheers



“Did something happen?”

of the drunken young men.

“Now that was a show! Do it again. Scare some more bulls.”

“How do you do that? Can they smell you salivating or something?”

“Bullying bulls—is that an army thing? Slag, I shouldn’t have quit basic training.”

But Perrin wasn’t amused. “And just what do you think you’re doing here?” he repeated his earlier question.

The men looked at each other in surprise.

“And which one of you had the gall to send a message to my busy soldiers demanding that ‘The show must go on’?”

The men glanced blankly around, as if they thought that was a good idea, but now, in hindsight, maybe not so much . . . and whose idea was it anyway to insist the soldiers find the arena manager to get the scheduled entertainment on its way?

“There will be nothing interesting to watch here tonight,” Perrin intoned, “or any night, for a very long time.”

“Well what are we supposed to do?” one of men whined, while the others, a bit quicker on the uptake, tried vainly to hush him. But the cold smile on Perrin’s face told them they were too late, and he had a brilliant idea.

“What are you supposed to do?” He held up the rope and smiled grimly. “Five of you are going to take that beautiful piece of meat-on-the-hoof to the butcher’s on the south side of the marketplace. It’ll be easy to find because it’s the only building still standing there. Then, after the butcher turns that entertainment into meals for two neighborhoods, you’ll distribute the beef to those who have nothing to eat. The rest of you will follow me to do something more interesting,” he said, almost nastily. “It’s a new entertainment called Moving Rubble! And the loser will become my new best buddy tomorrow, going with me everywhere I go. No, no, no—don’t need to take off running. I have a dozen soldiers at the exits by now, ready to hand each of you a shovel and escort you to the areas of greatest need. Ah, nice to see you all so eager to get to work. And what do we have here, even *more* people looking for some entertainment? My, my, do I have plans for *all of you* . . .”

## Chapter 3 ~ “My . . . my . . . my sofa!”

“Dear Creator, please let it be enough,” Mahrree whispered as she saw more and more people streaming toward the house. Word had spread that dinner was at the Shin home, and many weary neighbors hadn’t eaten since last night.

But at least she hadn’t been alone in cooking. Mahrree looked down the line of cut logs with offerings of food set on them, and villagers queued to dish up food onto broken plates and small circles of sliced timbers.

Hours ago, women had arrived with a variety of ingredients and cooking supplies, and together during the afternoon they came up with ways to stretch the food they salvaged. Peto and a few other boys were tasked to dig holes for make-shift ovens for biscuits. And when two men brought by a deer that had died when it ended its terrified run during the second tremor by crashing into a barn, Mahrree thought they just might have enough to see them through the night.

She looked back toward the spit roasting the venison in her back garden and decided the spit should stay when all of this was over. It was an interesting and practical addition. They probably had enough to feed several hundred people, and that was what was coming.

“And dear Creator,” she murmured quietly, “look at them all—sitting together along the road and in gardens talking, sharing their experiences, giving comfort—I do believe this is the best Holy Day dinner we’ve ever had. You certainly seem to work in mysterious ways sometimes.”

“My . . . my . . . my sofa!”

Mahrree’s thoughts were disturbed by a horse approaching along the cobblestones. She looked up to see Shem’s mount with the most remarkable set of riders. In front of Shem, seated on the saddle, was her mother. Mahrree couldn’t remember the last time—if ever—she’d seen her mother on a horse.

Hycymum Peto’s face was flushed and she looked a bit winded. Shem nodded to Mahrree and redirected the horse to the alley behind the houses to avoid the crowd of people. Mahrree jogged to the back of her yard, weaving through villagers who helpfully trampled her weeds. She arrived just in time to see her mother turn bright red as Shem helped her off the horse.

“My, was that an experience!” Mrs. Peto said breathlessly to her daughter and leaned on her for support.

“Thank you, Shem,” Mahrree beamed at him. “Please, get something to eat before you head back.”

“I think I will. It smells a lot better here than the rations we’re handing out in the village green,” he grinned. “And by the way, the lieutenant colonel is still planning to come home tonight, but he’s a bit delayed. It seems there are some villagers at the amphitheater waiting for something to watch. Supposed to have been an obstacle course with bulls as motivation, and people are bored.”

Mahrree blinked. “You can’t be serious.”

“Unfortunately, I am. Their houses weren’t badly damaged, so they picked their ways through the smoldering remains of people’s businesses and shops as if the rubbish movers were just slow getting there today.”

“In the middle of Edge’s biggest crisis?” Mahrree exclaimed. “They’re waiting for a show? If anyone has any sense, those bulls are roasting in someone’s back garden right now!”

Shem shrugged in disappointed agreement. “That was what Perrin was hoping to accomplish. Last I heard, he was having some soldiers escort a group of drunken young men to where the old mill used to be until it crumbled. There were a few more groups of people heading to the arena looking for something interesting to watch, and Grandpy told me Perrin was waiting for them with that look in his eye. You know the one where no one leaves feeling very good about themselves?”

Mahrree smiled sadly in approval. “Well, when he comes, he comes. Plenty around here to keep us entertained.”

Shem nodded and resumed a more formal stance. “Well then, good evening to you. And Mrs. Peto,” he said to the older woman who had been staring steadily at him for the past five minutes, “I hope the ride wasn’t too rough.” He tipped his cap at her and she smiled vaguely.

As Shem strode off to get some dinner, Hycymum sat down primly on the log bench near the make-shift spit. Her shoulder-length curls were disheveled, her second-best apron was smudged with mud, and she wore her very best cloak which would take hours of soaking to get clean again. But amazingly, she didn’t seem to notice.

“Honestly, Mahrree, I just don’t ever remember such an experience! I’ll be thinking about this for weeks! Maybe even longer.” She fanned herself with her hand despite the cooling temperatures.

“I can imagine!” Mahrree said, putting her arm around her mother and hugging her. “I’ve been worried about you, wondering what you were going through all alone down there.”

Hycymum looked at Mahrree, baffled. Then a distant light flickered on. “Oh, you mean the land tremor! Yes, that was extraordinary too, wasn’t it?”

Mahrree stared at her mother who was still flushed. Hycymum seemed to try to pick out Shem among the villagers, but he was already lost in the crowd. People had made way for the tall and muscular soldier to get to the front of the line.

“Mother,” Mahrree began slowly, “what were you talking about?”

Hycymum went pink. “Do you know how long it’s been since a handsome young man had his arm around me? Ah, Mahrree, I now see the appeal of army men! So strong, so powerful. Sergeant Zenos is still unmarried, right?”

“Mother!” Mahrree sputtered. “He just turned thirty-four a few weeks ago, and you’re sixty-three! You could be his mother!”

Hycymum looked at her daughter, and Mahrree noticed her eyes appeared a bit vacant. “Hmm. I supposed that could be a problem. Does my hair at least look nice?” She patted her tousled curls.

Mahrree pursed her lips as she evaluated her mother’s stability. She wasn’t looking too secure. Something was definitely collapsing somewhere. “Mother, did you at all hit your head to-

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day? Because that’s the only excuse I can think of for you right now. When was the last time you ate something?”

“Well, yes, I did hit my head sometime this morning. And no one would let me back into my house! I’m not sure why.” She looked around. “It’s terribly bright in here, isn’t it? Why is there a skinny pig roasting in your garden? Did you invite all these people, or did they just show up? That seems awfully rude. I didn’t get an invitation. You should put some basil on that hog. Improve the flavor. Could take a few treefulls, though. Let me go find some.”

She stood unsteadily and noticed the condition of the house.

“Wait—Mahrree, are you remodeling your house? Without my advice?”

Mahrree gently pushed her mother back down before she crumpled on her own. “Jaytsy!” she called. “Come sit with your grandmother while I get her something to eat. I think she’s been without food for a little too long.”

Half an hour later Mahrree sighed in relief when she recognized her husband’s horse of the week coming down the road, just as the sun was setting in the west and casting golden hues on everything around them. She’d been standing on the side of the house waving goodbye to some satisfied neighbors, secure in the knowledge that she’d filled a plate to overflowing and hid it in the kitchen for Perrin before the last of the morsels were devoured. Even now there were only a few crumbs left here and there, and a bony carcass in the back garden. But the northern neighborhoods of Edge had full bellies. There was only one more to fill, and she smiled as her husband saluted her casually and rode up to the house.

But her smile froze in place when the last beams of sunlight illuminated who was sharing his ride behind him.

Qualipoe Hili.

“Oh Perrin, what were you thinking?” she murmured under her breath.

The twenty-two-year-old was so scrawny that two of him could’ve hidden behind Perrin’s broad shoulders. He hadn’t worn silk shirts for a few years, and now seemed to be wearing something so tattered under his soiled jacket that he may have taken it from a ruined house. Pinching a shirt would have been nothing compared to how much he’d stolen for Guardians over the years.

Mahrree clenched her fist as Poe peered cautiously around her husband. Today of all days he chose to make his return. Mahrree grumbled to herself that Edge probably quaked at the thought of housing him again. Of all nights to bring home a thief, Perrin had to choose this one when not one single house could be secured.

Her husband tried to catch her eye, but Mahrree was staring only at Poe when the horse came to a stop.

Then again, on such a night, how could she even think about turning away someone in need, even if that was a someone adept at filling every need he might possibly have with his proven snatch-and-run? She plastered on a welcoming smile, hoping the shadows of the coming evening hid her concern.

“Mr. Hili!” she delivered her old greeting as warmly as she could. “What’s the news, Poe?”

Poe slid off the horse and gave her a timid smile. While he stood at average height, he was skinnier than any man she’d ever seen. His black hair was a bit long and unkempt, his light-brown skin even darker for having been outside so much, but his brown eyes were somehow different than she remembered: a little brighter, less concealing, and almost honest.

He nervously nodded to her. “The lieutenant colonel said I could probably find something to eat here. I hope that’s all right with you?”

He scanned the house quickly, and Mahrree tried to push down the suspicion that he was casing it.

Poe sighed. “It really hasn’t changed a bit. That’s good to see. Except it seems a little shorter than I remember.”

“We’re adding a new roofline. Made the decision this morning, in fact,” Mahrree explained. Then, with all the enthusiasm she could find after the long, dreary day, she said, “Welcome back to Edge! Jaytsy,” she turned to her daughter who had been running up to greet her father but stopped in surprise when she recognized Poe. “Fetch the dinner I hid for your father, and put some on a second plate. I know there’s more than enough.”

Jaytsy looked apprehensively at Poe, but he smiled at her. She darted into the darkening back porch.

Poe shook his head and let out a low whistle. “She’s certainly grown up in the past two years, hasn’t she? Used to try to feed me weeds when she was a toddler, if I remember correctly.”

“My . . . my . . . my sofa!”

Mahrree cleared her throat and glared at her husband, hoping he'd notice how Poe's gaze lingered at where Jaytsy had been. One of these days—and it had better be soon—Perrin would realize his daughter was turning heads left and right. He still seemed to want to believe she was still the toddler who loved to scream at him.

Perrin looked at the thin young man, then in the direction he was still staring—

For once Perrin saw it, and his eyes enlarged in worry. “You look tired, Poe,” he abruptly changed the subject. “Go sit down on the bench by . . . is that a spit? In my back garden? Well, it looks like there are remnants of something for you to pick at for now.”

“Yes, sir!” Poe said amiably and left for the back garden, weaving deftly between stumps and rocks as if he were used to picking his way quickly through dark and unpredictable terrain, because he was.

Perrin turned to his wife who had just sprouted a new steam vent of her own. He pretended not to see her fuming. “Looks pretty good, doesn't he? His eyes are brighter than I've seen them in a long time. He's been spending some time in Moorland and Mountseen, but came home just two days ago. The Hilis weren't too thrilled to see him, though. I think he slept in the village green last night.”

Mahrree tried her one-eyebrow-raised look. In the growing dark she was sure it was almost menacing.

“Getting pretty good at that,” Perrin gestured at her face. “Need to work on the nervous twitch, though. Kind of ruins the effect. Hmm, now where's my daughter with my food?” He rubbed his hands together as if absolutely nothing else in the world was wrong, except for his tardy dinner. “I'm starving.”

“Perrin Shin!” Mahrree hissed when she was sure none of the departing villagers could hear them, “Why is Qualipoe Hili in my back garden? And where do you suggest he spend the night?”

“Right here,” Perrin said soberly. “With us. He's agreed to be our guard tonight.”

“Are you insane?” she breathed in fury. “Because I really don't need two crazy people tonight. I don't. First my mother comes here with fantasies of becoming Mrs. Shem Zenos, and now you've brought home a known thief to guard us?”

“It's all right. He'll have my sword.” He squinted at her.

“What do you mean, *Mrs. Shem Zenos*?”

Mahrree wasn't about to be deterred. “You're giving him your sword? Poe Hili, right? Do you know how much that steel is worth? Perrin, is that wise?”

“Yes it is, since he's going to be one of my new privates. He's going to enlist formally once things calm down a bit. Your mother thinks she's marrying Shem?”

“No, of course not. She was just a little confused and fell in love with her rescuer,” said Mahrree hurriedly to get that out of the way. “She's already asleep on Peto's mattress we brought outside. And yes, the house is secure enough to venture into, but I don't think we should sleep there yet. But Perrin—”

She glanced to the back garden and saw Jaytsy hesitantly hand Poe a plate of food. The spark was back in his eyes. Jaytsy ignited fires in the eyes of most men ages fourteen to fifty, but she was as clueless to that fact as her father was.

“—how do we know we can trust Poe?”

“I don't,” he admitted, watching closely as the most prolific thief of Edge eyed one of Perrin's most prized possessions. “But if no one does, what hope will he have? Mahrree, he helped a great deal today. He was as brave as any soldier and ventured into houses no one else dared to—”

“He's had plenty of practice!” she snapped.

Perrin ignored that. “—and he never did anything to lose my trust. He said he came home to get a new start, and I believe him. I really *want* to believe him. At the fort I can watch and control him.”

“But you can't control him when you're asleep in your garden!”

Perrin sighed. “He was a good boy, Mahrree. Remember? He told me his fondest memories were of coming to our house each afternoon for your After School Care.”

“That's a very sweet thing to say. And you fell for it.”

“Mahrree, give him a chance,” he said squeezing her shoulder. “Just one. If he was our son, wouldn't you wish someone would take him in?”

“Our son wouldn't be like him!”

“Mahrree,” Perrin's tone was both admonishing and pleading. “We're all family, right? In that way, he is our son.”

Mahrree closed her eyes in aggravation. It was easy to quote



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The Writings to others, but was quite another thing to have someone use The Writings back at you.

But she knew he was right. She didn't feel any threat from Poe. There was actually something in his eyes that wasn't there since he was ten years old.

“Honestly, Mahrree, what do we have of value that he would steal? Besides the sword?” Perrin asked quietly. “And everyone would recognize it anyway.”

“True,” Mahrree reluctantly conceded, looking up into his dark eyes that always seemed to convince her to see things his way, luckily for him. “Not a profitable market for our old books either, I suppose. Besides, you and Shem are experts in the field of Tracking Poe Hili.”

He winked at her. “I knew you'd see things my way. As usual.”

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No one rested well that night.

Every neighborhood in Edge had the appearance of an adventurous fishing trip; people shared stories late into the night as they sat around fires roasting pieces of animals until the outsides were burned but the insides were still raw and chewy.

But Camp Edge included amenities most families weren't accustomed to. Smaller land tremors that the world forgot to include in the morning's events were tossed to the surface as afterthoughts to rock terrified children and jumpy adults. Unnerving crunches of shifting rock and occasional house collapses broke the normal quiet of the night. Temperatures plummeted to near freezing. And, in the case of the Shin family, a long sofa appeared outside near the fire in the back garden.

The sofa moved to its new position while Mahrree and Jaytsy carefully picked their way to Jaytsy's room to retrieve her straw mattress and as many blankets and coats as they could find in the storage wardrobe. By the time Jaytsy had maneuvered her mattress over the debris in the dark house, and Mahrree made her way to the back garden with her arms loaded with things to keep them warm, the sofa was there. Slumped on either side, with their arms folded and their eyes closed, were Peto and Perrin.

“My . . . my . . . my sofa!” Mahrree wailed, but not too loudly as to awake her mother or to startle the neighbors trying to fashion beds in their back gardens. “How could you? It’ll get ruined out here, especially if it rains!”

Perrin opened one eye and looked at the cold starry sky, without either of the two moons lighting it. “Not tonight,” he mumbled and closed his eye.

Peto peeked open an eye in apology, glanced at his father for his cue of what to do next, then squeezed shut both of his eyes and pretended to snore.

Future Private Hili looked pleadingly at Mahrree from his spot on the bench across the fire from them. Perrin’s sword glinted in the firelight and the hilt rested lightly in Poe’s bony hand. “I’m sorry Mrs. Shin. I was told that I didn’t see any of it. But I promise it’s the last thing I won’t see tonight.” His eyebrows furrowed to work out if that was actually what he meant to say.

“But, but,” she spluttered hopelessly at her husband. “It’s . . . my sofa!”

Perrin sighed impatiently and opened both eyes. “And where do you propose we sleep tonight if not on the sofa? You best get used to it. We won’t be in our bed for quite some time. Staying in the house isn’t an option until we inspect it further. Now, unless you have any better ideas, give me a blanket.”

Mahrree kicked crossly at a clump of dirt and pouted like a four-year-old.

After all they’d done today for everyone else, now her beloved sofa was dragged outside and exposed to the elements. It was foolish and completely irrational to be upset about it. But she stood there obstinately, her arms full of blankets she wasn’t about to surrender, staring at her husband who now deliberately put a dirty boot on the armrest.

She gave him her best glower.

He reflected it right back.

Jaytsy and Peto knew what to do when these occasional stand-offs occurred: don’t look at either parent.

There was *arguing*, they knew, which usually resolved itself in their parents making various excuses to head upstairs to their bedroom. Mahrree always hoped they were subtle when they came back downstairs a little while later, but she was sure their smirking while smoothing down a skirt or buttoning a skipped

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button was obvious.

Poor Jaytsy figured out the hard way what “arguing” meant. A couple of years ago, after Perrin had chased Mahrree up the stairs to “settle this,” Jaytsy quietly followed them a few minutes later. She timidly opened the bedroom door and said, “Mother, I have another point for your side—”

That was all she got out before she emitted a yelp of shock and slammed the door. Perrin had laughed for several minutes, but Mahrree felt nearly as mortified as her stunned daughter, who couldn’t look either of her parents in the eyes for several weeks.

At least she knew they actively loved each other.

Then, just a couple of moons ago when they were *resolving issues* again, Mahrree heard the familiar gait of her son coming up the stairs. “Father, I forgot. I know you’re trying to finish your argument and everything, but I need you to sign something for school—”

“Peto, DON’T!” Jaytsy had yelled from the bottom of the stairs.

Perrin shook in silent laughter, but Mahrree cringed in dread that he’d open the door, and she wondered why they again in their haste had forgotten to lock it.

“Why not?” Peto called down to this sister from the landing.

“If you hate seeing them kiss, then I promise that what they’re doing right now will give you nightmares!”

Mahrree wasn’t sure if Peto fully understood the meaning of *arguing*, but he didn’t open the door that evening, and it gave Perrin and Mahrree something new to argue about: who was responsible for making sure the door is bolted.

But then—*then* there was the occasional fighting. And that never finished with a trip up the stairs. It usually involved the two of them glaring so heatedly that once Peto, trying to lighten the moment, pretended to warm his hands near them, only to find their furious looks pointed to him. Not even Jaytsy knew how to get him out of that one, so he slunk away to the kitchen where his sister joined him soon after, and they sat in there for over an hour while Perrin and Mahrree snapped and growled like caged wolves.

It had been a couple of years since their last all-out fight, but when one occurred, Peto and Jaytsy knew to make themselves as inconspicuous as possible until the storm blew over.

Jaytsy now looked up at the stars as if remembering it was her task to count them, and Peto suddenly became fascinated by a thread hanging from his jacket.

Poe picked up on their strategy and turned to look at the dark alley behind him. Hycymum snored peacefully on her grandson's mattress.

But Mahrree and Perrin glared deep into each other's eyes across the back garden.

Realizing the stars weren't going anywhere, Jaytsy dropped her mattress on the ground, turned to her mother, and slowly pulled a thin blanket from her arms and laid it on her bed.

Peto nodded encouragingly at Jaytsy and she started to pull another blanket from Mahrree's arms. Mahrree shifted her glare just long enough to stop Jaytsy in her effort.

She gave her brother a *You're on your own* look and sat on the mattress, wrapping the thin blanket around her arms that still shivered under her cloak.

Peto slipped off the sofa and snuck cautiously past his infuriated mother into the house.

"Mahrree," Perrin finally broke the uneasy silence, "I'm tired. So are you. We'll discuss this in the morning. Now, bring the blankets over here."

"Get your boot off my sofa first," she said coolly.

"After everything today, you're really worried about a little dirt on this thing?" He leaned forward, but stubbornly kept his leg on the armrest, which made for an awkward straddle only the acrobats of Idumea could have held for very long. Perrin's eye twitched.

Inwardly, Mahrree smiled. She was going to win this fight, one way or another.

Peto reappeared at the door wrapped in his heavy blanket and paused, wondering if it was safer in the house or outside where his parents both seemed upon the verge of battle.

"Today over sixty people lost their lives," Perrin said heavily. "We'll find additional bodies tomorrow, I'm sure. Countless villagers lost their homes. Half of the shops in Edge burned to the ground. Livestock is wandering and spooked. I don't know how much food's been lost, but we may be in trouble in a few weeks. I still don't know in what condition the fort's reserves are in. The forest is more active now than ever before. And if you happened

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to look beyond the forest to the mountains behind us, you would’ve seen smoke rising from the top of Mt. Deceit. What *that* means is anyone’s guess. The smoke looks wrong for a forest fire. I don’t even want to consider yet what the condition of the other villages, or Idumea, may be right now. Maybe they were hit even harder. And in the back of my mind is the awareness that the Guardians just might be a bit more desperate than we are, and we’re now highly susceptible to new attacks!”

Poe clutched the hilt of the sword more securely and glanced about the dark shadows around him.

Mahrree frowned at Perrin’s list of troubles and wondered why he insisted on adding their sofa to it—

“And you, Mahrree Shin, are fretting over dirt on a piece of furniture? Now,” said Perrin, his tone sharpening, “I’m tired. Morning’s going to come early, and I have a full day of digging through rubble ahead of me. Give me a blanket now,” he snarled, “and let’s get some sleep!”

Jaytsy immediately lay down and Peto jumped back to his side of the sofa and curled up in a ball under his blanket. He hastily kicked off his boots and looked at his mother imploringly.

Mahrree refused to move.

The sofa is to serve us, he would say in a moment, not the other way around. Don’t worship the furniture.

He would be right. And that made her angrier.

In reluctant resignation, Mahrree looked at the bundle she held and dropped it on the ground. She felt her husband’s eyes still on her as she pulled out his new woolen overcoat and laid it over her mother, hoping the thick weave and lining would be enough to keep her warm. Next she took Perrin’s old overcoat still sporting some of the insignias and patches, and brought it to Poe.

“You keep this fire going, Poe,” she said as she helped his slight frame into the coat that was several sizes too big. “It’s going to freeze tonight. If you need anything you come tell me, all right?”

Poe nodded to her gratefully and glanced down at the patches. He fingered one of them in admiration before wrapping the excess of the coat around to overlap his body.

Perrin still watched her, his eyes trying to burn a hole into her conscience, but she refused to look at him.

She laid another thick blanket on her grateful daughter to supplement the thin one, and tossed Peto's dark blue baby wrap, that had somehow managed to come along for the ride, on to her son's head.

With two down blankets in her hands, Mahrree slowly walked over to her husband who still kept his position on the sofa. His glare had become etched in his face.

"Get that boot off the sofa, and you can have a blanket," she said evenly.

Perrin pursed his lips as if considering the offer.

Mahrree knew he was fully aware of what that look did to her, but she wasn't about to be defeated that easily.

She took a step closer. "I realize you spend all day on a horse, but even when you were Peto's age I doubt you were that limber. You may pretend not to hear it, but I can. Your thigh muscles are screaming in agony. Move your leg!" She finally smiled.

Peto snorted in his blanket and Jaytsy giggled.

Perrin took a breath and said, with his voice tinged with pain, "I really wished I *could* move it, but Mahrree—I'm stuck!" His face finally released the glare and twisted into a painful chuckle. "Help me, wife—I'm getting old!"

"Forty-three is hardly ancient," Mahrree laughed quietly and carefully lifted his very stiff leg up and off.

"Owowowow!" Perrin whimpered as he rubbed his thigh. He noticed Poe smirking. "Not a word of this, Qualipoe Hili, to *anyone*. Especially Sergeant Zenos."

Hili straightened up. "Yes, sir. And sir, how many more of your secrets will I be asked to keep tonight? Just so I know?"

Perrin chuckled. "Just remember, I have my fair share of secrets about you too, Mr. Out All Night."

"I'm not that anymore, sir," Poe said with conviction and glanced at Mrs. Shin now sitting next to her husband and positioning a blanket around her.

Mahrree nodded at him, hoping that was true.

But Perrin smiled, without any doubt. "Now Hili, for starters, I've been told I snore—"

A polite cough from behind the sofa twisted Perrin around.

Mr. Hersh stood at the fence that divided their properties. "Actually, Lieutenant Colonel, that's not much of a neighborhood

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secret,” he smiled. But the commander was not who interested him.

With his eyes now as steely as the sword, Mr. Hersh gestured to Poe. “Young man, I *trust* you’ll keep an eye out for everyone tonight?” His words were heavy with meaning. He knew full well who sat armed in the garden next to his.

“Absolutely, sir!” Poe said resolutely.

And a part of Mahrree actually believed him.

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In Idumea, eighty miles away to the south, Joriana Shin massaged her hands. Standing before her, across the massive desk her husband kept in his office, were General Cush and two lieutenants. Their bleak countenances told Joriana all she needed to know.

Still, that wasn’t about to keep her from asking. “So we know of eleven places in the city that were heavily damaged,” she checked her meticulous notes again.

“Yes,” General Aldwyn Cush said patiently, while the two younger officers flanking him shifted in place.

“And Chairman Mal’s been notified?”

“Yes, he was most alarmed. He’s demanding updates.”

“Good. And you’ve interviewed all of the soldiers who were helping with the recovery efforts?”

“Yes, Joriana.”

She checked off a few items, reluctantly. “And we’re sure everyone at the garrison was asked?”

General Cush regarded her with sympathy in his tired eyes. “Joriana, there are thousands of soldiers—”

“*Everyone at the garrison was asked?!?*”

Cush glanced to the aid at his left. “Go get my wife,” he said in quiet undertones. “Mrs. Shin is going to need someone here with her tonight.” In a louder voice he said, “Colonel Thorne sent out messengers everywhere, asking, and all day long. Joriana, it’s dark now, and there’s little—”

“I don’t care that it’s dark, Aldwyn!” she seethed. “All I want to know is, where’s my husband?!”

Cush sighed miserably. “That’s what all of us want to know,

too.”

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The sun would be rising in just a few minutes, but Poe Hili was more than ready for bed. He found himself repeatedly nodding and banging his head awake on the ornate steel hilt of the sword that supported his leaning body. He'd been that way all night, fighting to remain conscious to pay attention. It'd been a while since he was Mr. Out All Night.

In the dirt in front of him, he kept tally marks with the tip of the sword: how many new tremors, how many distant rumbling noises that may mean another house had crumbled, and how many attempts someone made to sneak into the neighborhood. The marks were thirteen, nine, and—fortunately—zero.

His neck and back were stiff with exhaustion, but he was sure he'd remained awake most of the night, that nothing important had escaped his notice. The climbing, digging, and running of the day before had taken a mighty toll on his body. If he was going to be in the army, he was going to have to bulk up and shape up. Dizzy with fatigue, he worried that this was how soldiers felt every morning.

He hadn't realized his eyes were closed until he felt fingers on his hand prying away the sword.

Poe leaped to his feet, kicking an awkward spray of gravel, and found himself wrestling for the hilt with Lieutenant Colonel Shin.

“At ease, Private! I'm relieving you of duty.”

“I wasn't asleep, sir! I promise. I kept watch all night.”

“I know, I know,” Shin assured him. “I was up enough myself to see you doing your part. And I thank you, Private Hili. Now I'm ordering you to sleep.”

He sheathed the sword and put a hand on Poe's shoulder. The weight of it nearly melted Poe into the ground.

“You'll meet me in the village center after midday meal, Hili,” Shin told him, “then we'll put you back to work. The men are on rotating shifts. I want a group of soldiers on duty every hour patrolling and working. But everyone needs to rest, or they'll be of no help to the village. You'll be able to sleep well here. The



“My . . . my . . . my sofa!”

sofa’s available,” he added with a smile.

“Thank you, sir. I’ll be there. Midday meal.”

Poe staggered over to the now empty sofa and sat uncertainly on it, wondering what position would keep it clean. His body leaned to one side and he couldn’t resist the pull to lay his head on the cushion. A moment later, or maybe it was an hour, he smelled food and opened his eyes to see Mrs. Shin holding a plate of steaming something.

“Is it a good morning, Poe?” she asked. “Try these. My mother calls them craw-sants. She claims the vent in the road is the perfect heating element. She has plans for today, so you best return this evening to see what she’s cooked up.”

“Yes, Mrs. Shin. I saw her get up some time ago and sneak into your kitchen.” Poe tried to smile.

“Yes, she’s quite back to normal again, although I’m not sure she’ll be able to face Master Sergeant Zenos anytime soon,” she said more to herself. “My mother loves a cooking challenge. She just may well revolutionize the way everyone looks at steam!”

Poe took a large bite of the twisted bread which was surprisingly light.

“Pretty good, isn’t it?” Mrs. Shin said, ignoring the crumbs on the cushion.

“Yes, ma’am,” he mumbled wearily.

“Poe, how about you sleep first, then we’ll feed you later, hmm?”

Poe nodded and his eyes closed again. He stretched his legs but was alarmed when he felt someone lifting them up. He sat up quickly to see Mrs. Shin placing his feet on the end of the sofa.

“Much more comfortable that way.” She patted his knee kindly, ignoring the fact that his boots were dropping dried mud on the cloth.

Poe lay back down and a small, thick blanket, made of the same cloth as the overcoat he still wore, covered his eyes.

“That will keep things dark for you,” he heard a motherly voice say.

“Thank you,” he whispered as everything became blissfully dark and still.

A blanket was placed on top of him, and every last bit of pain slipped away. Not only that, but his worries and dread

seemed to fade as well. For the first time in too many years he felt, accompanying the fatigue that was slowly engulfing him, a sense of comfort, of depth, of . . . of lightness. He didn't know where it came from, but there was nothing else like it. Just as the blanket on his face told him it was all right to rest, the feeling in his mind assured him things would be different now.

Maybe the lightness was forgiveness. He'd heard a rector talk about it once, and Lieutenant Colonel Shin mentioned it a few times when he visited Poe.

It was a distinct sense of, *It will be all right. You can make it right, right here.*

He mumbled as he drifted to sleep, "It's so good to be home, Ma."

Mahrree walked quickly away before anyone could see her wiping the tears off her cheeks.



The dark figure walking up into the forest that night looked around him nervously. Nothing was acting as it should.

Things that used to bubble were now spurting.

Things that spurted were now gushing.

Things that gushed were now quiet.

And areas that used to be quiet were now emitting groans and smells that they never had before.

He was relieved to reach the warm spring that, for the moment, mystifyingly ran cold. He sat on a log and sighed heavily.

A few minutes later another body joined him. "Is it as confused down there as it is up here?"

The figure nodded. "Nothing's the same! You may have to make a new map."

"That's what we thought," said the other man, dressed in green and brown mottled clothing. "Are you all right, Shem?"

Shem nodded again. "Remarkable two days. The devastation is terrible. Every house has been affected. Found sixty dead the first day, another twenty-four dead today. Yesterday. I don't even know what time it is anymore." He exhaled and rubbed his eyes.

“My . . . my . . . my sofa!”

His companion patted him on the back. “As long as you’re safe. Many people were wondering.”

“Oh, I’m safe, all right. So are the Shins. Should be an interesting next few weeks, though.”

“Understood. How about we meet only if something arises? I can’t imagine anything else will be happening except cleaning up for a while. The whole northern world seems to have been affected.”

“Sounds good,” Shem said, massaging his bleary eyes again. He stood. “I’ve got to get more sleep before the morning. Just tell everyone I didn’t suffer anything during the land tremor other than surprise when a terrified private I just finished giving a night tour of the forest to ran into my quarters and jumped into my bunk with me.”

---

Joriana wasn’t as skittish tonight as she was the evening before. Perhaps the fact that she hadn’t had more than an hour’s sleep did something to steel her resolve, and make the men standing in front of her recoil as her voice became shriller. That was the only excuse the hardened officers could come up with.

Scattered over the broad desk were maps, detailed notes, and a hand that shakily made markings all over them.

“So we can eliminate the old Dripping Stream development and Zebra Eztates, along with the hat district—”

A long, low sigh caused her to raise her head, and the piercing nature of her gaze made two captains and a major take a cautionary step backward.

However, it had no effect on the colonel, the commander of the garrison. “Mrs. Shin, I don’t know how many more times we need to go over this. None of the reports has changed since dinner time. He’s simply disappeared.”

Joriana stood her full height, impressive for a woman, but nothing to the colonel. “Colonel Thorne,” she said pointedly, “I don’t care if the city has been inspected upside down and inside out. Something has happened to my husband—*your* High General—and I insist, no, I *order* that you continue searching for him!”

Colonel Thorne had the audacity to scoff at a woman in high distress. “You *order* me?”

The captains and the major had already assumed placating stances, as if eager to rush out into the night and continue their search, but Colonel Thorne merely folded his arms and cocked his head.

In the corner of the room, silent until now, sat a plump and overflowing woman, who barely squeezed into the cushioned arm chair that contained her. She cleared her throat and the colonel frowned at her.

“Qayin, please,” she said to her son-in-law. “You know my husband has already insisted on another’s day searching.”

Thorne blinked away from her and looked steadily at Joriana. “I take my orders from General Cush who, as pointed out, has already outlined search patterns for tomorrow. So unless there’s anything else, Mrs. Shin?” he said in a manner that suggested that at this late hour, the answer best be no.

Joriana tilted her head at him. “No, that is all.”

After the men had filed out, the major pausing to send an encouraging nod to Mrs. Shin, Joriana sagged into her husband’s chair, her head in her hands.

Mrs. Cush struggled out of her chair and rushed to her friend’s side.

“Where is he?” Joriana sobbed quietly. “Where is he?”

---

Two men sat in the dark office of an unlit building.

“So where is he?” Brisack said, mystified.

Mal shrugged. “If I could answer that, so many of my plans for the testing and trials of the Shin family would be finalized. But as it is?” He shook his head, perplexed.

Brisack rubbed his chin. “Odd to just vanish like that.” He peered over at his companion. “You didn’t . . . you didn’t, uh, issue any orders, did you?”

Mal scoffed. “I was about to ask you the same thing, wondered if you were trying to get an unfair start on our research by playing, ‘Where’s Relf Shin?’ By the way, did they ever find that contestant?”

“My . . . my . . . my sofa!”

“Oh, yes,” Brisack droned. “Apparently he got bored waiting to be found, downed some mead, and fell drunk into a wagon. Woke up in Orchards with a broken leg to see an unfamiliar woman who promptly punched him and demanded restitution for her goat.”

Mal blinked. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Brisack rolled his eyes. “No one knows. I’ve told them I will no longer take forensics requests for people involved in those arena shows. In my opinion, these new contests are a good way of eliminating those whom Nature would destroy anyway. Let the idiots speed up the process all on their own. Not only are they a waste of my time, but a waste of my mind.”

“I’m rather surprised you haven’t been asked to help with the Shin situation.”

“Oh, I was. I did. But there’s absolutely no evidence. I spent hours on it yesterday evening. Mrs. Shin showed me everywhere her husband had been the day before the tremor. Said they went to bed that night, she woke up to feel the bed swaying in the tremor, but there was no Relf. His uniform was missing, as were his boots, so he’d got up early and went somewhere, but there’s no evidence of anything amiss.”

Mal furrowed his brow. “Relf’s not the kind to . . . you know, find a little something interesting on the side? Got caught up somewhere else, *with* someone else?”

Brisack scowled. “He’s sixty-eight, Nicko. While he may find someone else interesting, I have a hard time believing another woman would feel likewise about him.”

“Just looking at possibilities.”

“I suggested to Joriana that she send for Perrin—” Brisack began, but hesitated when he heard Mal’s chuckling.

“Ah, how nice, how *convenient*. You just can’t wait to meet the man, can you?”

Brisack shifted in his chair. “I suggested that only because Joriana is so distraught. She needs someone stronger to comfort her instead of Mrs. Cush. The woman seems more interested in the furnishings than in helping her friend. But, Joriana refused,” the good doctor said with obvious disappointment. “Said she won’t send him a message until she knew what kind of news to send. Shockingly stalwart response, I thought.”

“You just seem to be enamored with all women called Mrs.

Shin, aren't you?" Mal said.

Brisack glared. "I'm merely gathering information, Nicko. In order to create a truly entertaining test with some bite, we need to know exactly who we're biting! But," he sighed sadly, "not until we find out what happened to High General Shin."

## Chapter 4 ~ “Your renovations will have to wait, Mrs. Shin.”

On day three after the land tremor, Mahrree scrubbed at the stain in her son’s trousers and sighed. She was tempted to just toss them and purchase a new pair, but the shop where she usually bought her son and husband’s work clothes had only ashes.

“Why am I bothering,” she said aloud, “because they’ll just get dirty again.”

“Am I interrupted something?” she heard Perrin’s voice in the kitchen, and he peered into the washing room. “I wasn’t aware you discussed your laundry with . . . the laundry.”

“No, I’m merely questioning my logic. Why are you home in the afternoon?”

He leaned against the doorframe. “Where are Jaytsy and Peto?”

“Out. I’ll join them in a bit—just needed to try to get these clothes clean and drying for tomorrow again. Jaytsy’s down the road helping to tend some children while their parents try to shore up their walls,” Mahrree said as she wrung out the cloth, “and Peto went to my mother’s to help some of the widows set their shelves aright. Brillen declared most of their houses safe now, and my mother’s friends were anxious to get their knick-knacks put back.”

Since Perrin didn’t have a clever or stinging commentary about old women and their clutter, she asked, “Something’s wrong, isn’t it?”

He nodded slowly. “Just got word about Moorland. Considering its proximity to Deceit, I think it’s clear that the land tremor

originated from the mountain. Moorland's devastated."

"Oh, no."

"The lieutenant who brought me the message said the commander of the fort and the magistrate both agreed there's really nothing salvageable. Probably three-fourths of the structures are a total loss, and hundreds have died, at least half the population. Since that leaves maybe only five hundred, they've decided that the survivors will simply leave for other villages. Moorland has died," he whispered the last words.

Mahrree's mouth fell open. "But . . . but . . . that can't happen! How can a village just . . . die?"

"They don't have the resources and manpower to rebuild," Perrin said quietly. "And you know Idumea doesn't care about the place. It was always the smallest village in the oddest place—at the base of a mountain that no one likes . . . what's its purpose? I was rather shocked myself, but the more I think about it, the more I reluctantly agree: there's nothing else to do but resettle the survivors. The major at the fort was trying to direct most of the villagers to places further away, where there hadn't been so much damage, but he said several families seemed determined to head over here. He asked that we make a list of temporary homes for them, anything where the owners died, or maybe even have rooms in a school building available until something more permanent can be decided."

Mahrree nodded sadly. "How awful. I can't imagine leaving a village that's been . . . ruined."

Perrin shrugged. "Guess we don't need to dream about visiting Terry's ruins anymore, now that we have our own."

Mahrree gasped. "I just thought of something! Mrs. Reed was visiting her daughter in Moorland! Oh, my poor mother and her friends—"

But Perrin's head shaking stopped her. "No, Mrs. Reed came back early. I saw her the afternoon before the land tremor. She wanted to bake something, but I told her to go in for a lie-down until Hycymum's Herd came back from the market . . . why are you looking at me like that?"

Mahrree swallowed. "Perrin, didn't you know? Mrs. Reed's house was partially collapsed, but no one worried about it just yet because they thought Mrs. Reed had stayed with her daughter—"

"In Moorland," Perrin finished her sentence quickly and



“Your renovations will have to wait, Mrs. Shin.”

rubbed his forehead. “I need to get a search team over there immediately.”

“Peto’s over there,” Mahrree reminded him. “What if he happens to go to her house and—”

The knocking at the front door startled them, and they headed quickly to the gathering room when they heard the door open.

Peto, his head down, was walking toward his bedroom. At the front door stood two soldiers, one of them Sergeant Major Grandpy Neeks.

Mahrree’s shoulders sagged as she read the expression on Grandpy’s bleak face.

“Ma’am, Sir,” Neeks said quietly as Peto closed his bedroom door behind him.

Mahrree was about to follow Peto, but Perrin caught her by the arm. “Grandpy,” Perrin said softly, “What happened?”

“Those women your mother-in-law mixes with? They were tasking young Mr. Shin there to go to each other’s houses to find what-nots and shing-bangs, I don’t know what else. Apparently in his jogs he passed the one cottage that was partially destroyed, and he smelled something.”

Perrin and Mahrree were both already wincing.

Grandpy winced back. “Poor boy was only trying to be helpful, being a good grandson—shouldn’t have to discover something like that at his age. Had a couple of soldiers in the area on their way over to evaluate the house for Karna. They got there just after your son noticed the hand under the debris—”

Mahrree’s hands were in front of her mouth, trying to hold back the horror, and tears streaked down her face. Perrin cleared his throat gruffly.

“The boy took it well, bravely trying to help the soldiers move the rubble off the body, but once Mrs. Peto and her friends came over, and started their shrieking—well, that was too much for young Mr. Shin. I was one road over when I heard the commotion, arrived just as your son sat himself down on some blocks and started crying. Didn’t say nothing to him; you know how men need to be. Sat with him for a time until he quieted down, then brought him home . . . He’s a solid boy, Mrs. Shin. Just needs to—” Grandpy shrugged.

Mahrree nodded vigorously, and Perrin cleared his throat again. “Thank you, Grandpy. Glad you were the one to be there

for him. I'll accompany you back to the site. And here I thought we were done uncovering the dead."

"Mrs. Reed makes number one hundred and two," Grandpy said. "Maybe she's the last."

Perrin sighed. "Corporal," he addressed the second soldier who had been waiting patiently, "find Rector Yung and see that he gets to the Cottages as soon as possible. They're going to need his attention." He turned to Mahrree. "Give Peto about ten more minutes, then go in and check on him. Treat him like a man—"

Mahrree frowned. "And what's that supposed to mean? Besides, he's only thirteen, and he's just discovered the corpse of the woman who always made him cookies. Granted, they weren't as good as Mother's, but he was always so sweet about eating a few in front of her . . ." Mahrree's chin wobbled too much for her to go on.

Perrin hugged her briefly. "Just sit with him, don't draw attention to the fact that he's been crying—in fact, don't say anything at all. Just listen to him, if he chooses to speak. That's how you treat him like a man."

"That's never worked with you," she said.

"How do you know? You've never tried it."

---

A few minutes later Perrin arrived at the Cottages to hear the chilling wails of two dozen old women. A tattered blanket covered a thin body, and before he could ask his soldiers if Karna's pushing cart was on its way to bring down the rest of the Cottage safely, he was surrounded by elderly sobs and grandmothers pulling on him for comfort. The sooner Rector Yung could get there, Perrin decided, the better. In the end he hugged each woman—a few getting in line twice, he noticed—then kept his arm around his mother-in-law who was the safest bet for the day.

"We didn't know, Perrin!" she cried as she twisted her apron in her hands. "We thought she was still in Moorland! What could we have done?"

"It wouldn't have mattered if she were in Moorland, Mother Peto," he told her and the women. "I just received a message from

“Your renovations will have to wait, Mrs. Shin.”

their fort. The destruction there is worse than here. It seems Mt. Deceit caused the tremors, and more than half of the village has died. Had Mrs. Reed stayed there, she probably would have met the same fate. At least she went while in her own house.”

Hycymum sniffed and nodded sadly. “She was on her sofa. Likely taking a nap that lasted until morning.”

Perrin cleared his throat and, seeing the devastated looks on the women’s faces, decided they were imagining themselves as the one dying alone on her sofa, so he hugged each one of them again. Fortunately by then Rector Yung arrived, winded but ready to help. As he circled the women for prayer, Perrin slipped over to some of his soldiers working on the rubble.

“Where’s Major Karna and his contraption?”

“A few roads over, sir,” one of them told him. “He said he could be over here by dinner.”

“I want him over here now. Get him.”

Less than an hour later Perrin and Karna watched the major’s contraption at work, one of three he had devised: a wagon with large timbers positioned at overhanging angles. A team of oxen were hitched backward to the wagon so that the timbers could push against weak walls to bring them down, or test the stability of standing structures. If the walls could withstand the oxen ramming team, the building was likely strong enough to house people.

Mrs. Reed’s house took only for the oxen team to be positioned in place before the last wall crumbled, much of the debris falling on the wagon and not on any soldiers, old women, or boys.

“Well, that was unnervingly easy,” Brillen said quietly.

“Sorry to call you over from your route, but I wanted this taken care of,” Perrin told him.

“Understood. Rather surprising that the wall didn’t come down while Peto was poking around—”

Seeing his commander’s jaw shift, Major Karna nodded once. “I’ll send out the message—no one should enter any houses or remove any debris until one of the oxen teams can clear the house.”

“Thank you.”

But Brillen noticed Perrin’s jaw tremble. “Got to me last night,” he said quietly. “Over a puppy, of all things. Someone had tossed it in the pit we have dug by the canal for the animals. I’ve

seen plenty of dead, but for some reason that blasted puppy . . .” His voice cracked. “Sorry, sir.”

“Don’t be sorry, Brillen. Never be sorry for feeling compassion. That’s what will make you an excellent commander someday, and probably soon. I don’t care what they told us in Command School, our duty isn’t to eliminate the Guardians; it’s to protect those who can’t protect themselves,” Perrin said as they watched two soldiers gently place the covered body on a stretcher. “From anyone and anything. You’ll find plenty of officers who know all the right names and have all the right connections, or so they think. But the people we really need to know are the ones who can’t bring us any power or prestige.”

“I know that,” Karna said as the soldiers lifted the stretcher onto a wagon. Several women stood near it, weeping. “Because I’ve learned that from you.”

Perrin nodded once to the driver of the wagon to take the body to the burial grounds, where a mass grave was waiting to be covered tomorrow. Slowly the wagon pulled away, and the widows hugged each other.

“No one cares more for the villagers than you do,” Karna said, almost reverently. “Which means you’ll make a fantastic High General when your father retires in two years.”

Perrin groaned quietly and put a hand on Karna’s shoulder. “Why’d you have to say that?” His grip became firmer, and his major began to sag under the pinch of his nerve. “We were having a moment there, and then you had to go and ruin it.”

Karna was nearly gasping now, trying to pretend nothing was wrong as the lieutenant colonel dug a finger into his muscle. “Because you need to get used to the idea,” he panted. “Because the only fort I ever plan to command is here in Edge, and I need you out of the way first.”

Perrin almost smiled at that as he finally released Karna, who exhaled in relief. “Edge is mine, Brillen. Forever. Find your own fort. Besides, think of Miss Robbing.”

Karna, straightening up again now that the pain was gone, shrugged. “Well, we *were* planning to talk—”

“You’re still going to talk,” Perrin said. “Go on Holy Day. We can spare you. See how she and her parents are doing, and if you can help them with anything. Besides, I need someone to drop by the fort and get an evaluation of the damage in Rivers.”

“Your renovations will have to wait, Mrs. Shin.”

“Oh, yes, of course. Report from Rivers, quite necessary, quite necessary. Thanks,” Karna whispered, and massaged his neck as he went to retrieve his oxen team.

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Armed with only a handful of hours of sleep, Mrs. Joriana Shin marched, albeit a bit unsteadily, with the aid of two lieutenants to the remains of the old garrison.

Three days of searching had revealed nothing, but on the morning of the fourth day, Joriana’s head had snapped up from her uncomfortable napping position on her husband’s desk. It was the idea that had awakened her; a whisper that she couldn’t discern if from a dream or from something else.

“But why would he be *there*?” she asked no one in particular, forgetting that a lieutenant was on guard in the room.

“Ma’am?”

“He goes there maybe once a moon, when his crates are full. Wasn’t he just there last week? He was. So why, early on a Holy Day, why would he go there *again* . . . Unless he thought he forgot to put something away, the worry of which can keep him up at night.” She massaged her eyes. “That’s where he went, wasn’t it? Oh, dear Creator . . . that man and his paperwork!”

She stood up abruptly and turned to the lieutenant. “Riplak, did he say anything to you the night before the tremor? About needing to file something?”

Lieutenant Riplak shook his head. “I would have remembered, ma’am. For the past three days I’ve been going over every conversation we had the day before, trying to think if he mentioned something—”

Joriana exhaled in exasperation. “And here I thought the point of having a personal guard was that everything was confided in said guard—”

“Ma’am, with all due respect, it’s very difficult to guard someone who doesn’t want to be guarded. What am I supposed to do, order the High General to tell me his every move? Sorry ma’am,” he apologized quickly.

“Not good enough,” she said, tucking some stray hairs into her bun that hadn’t been fixed in days. “Get that other lieutenant.

We're headed to the garrison. The old one!"

Half an hour later they arrived in the carriage, Joriana staring in horror at the near-complete devastation of what used to be the headquarters of the army.

"Good thing they built a new garrison a few years ago," the other lieutenant said under his breath as they stared at hills of rubble.

"Good thing they moved everyone out of this one," Riplak replied. "Guess they don't need to tear it down now. How could anything survive—" He stopped when he felt the dagger-like stare of Mrs. Shin. "I mean that . . . never mind, ma'am."

Word had already been sent out to the new garrison that Mrs. Shin was demanding two hundred and fifty soldiers come help inspect the deserted remains of the old garrison, and despite the complaints of Colonel Thorne, soldiers willingly complied, many even volunteering.

Relf Shin had a storage room at the old garrison, in a basement, where he kept all of his records . . .



Twelve grueling hours later, after small mountains of stone and timbers and papers that had once been a massive three story building had been moved and removed and moved yet again like a never-ending stacking game, the hundreds of soldiers weary of shifting debris took turns looking at the sky beginning to darken, then glanced at each other wondering just how much longer this was going to continue.

None of them dared look at Joriana Shin, who had circled the debris all day long, pointing out areas and calling for the scrawniest soldiers to wriggle into narrow crevices for closer inspection. Her fine woolen skirt was stained and torn at the bottom, her gray-brown hair was falling out of her bun in disheveled tangles, and her black cloak was now a dusty gray.

But despite her bloodshot eyes, and ignoring the frequently loud sighs of exasperation from Colonel Thorne who'd eventually joined the search, Mrs. Shin wasn't showing signs of giving up, so none of the soldiers dared to either—

Until one sergeant, on his belly peering into a dark opening,

“Your renovations will have to wait, Mrs. Shin.”

asked for a torch.

And then, once it illuminated the area, he swore. “Oh, slag . . . Colonel . . . COLONEL THORNE!”

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Five days after the land tremor, on the 41<sup>st</sup> Day of Planting, Mahrree woke up to see the beams on the ceiling of her gathering room. She groaned. Nearly every muscle ached. The ones that didn’t were numb. Confined to the end of the sofa again, because her bear of a husband was sprawled over the rest of it, she felt like crying.

During the night she’d dreamed she was stretched out on a beautiful soft bed, surrounded by pillows and blankets without a shred of debris anywhere. The dream was familiar, one that she had a dozen times a year of a large house made of weathered gray wood that was more solid than anything in the world, and was surrounded by gardens, orchards, mountains . . .

And then the severe kink in her neck brought her painfully back to reality. She’d never felt so weary before—physically, mentally, and emotionally. And now her neck was stiff. And her husband’s massive feet were on her lap. And his holey socks needed washing.

Miserably she reminded herself that at least they weren’t outside again, but finally back in their house. The sun began to peek through the windows and the sky promised to be clear again, meaning no Planting Season rains would come today. Mercifully all the storms Mahrree watched each day skirted Edge, as if to give the villagers yet another day to secure their homes.

Theirs was deemed safe to enter late yesterday afternoon—one of the very last to be tested—when Major Karna’s contraption pushed on each wall without so much as a budge. Karna turned to Mahrree and said, “Welcome home, Mrs. Shin! Let the cleanup fun commence.”

In a way it would be nice to stay home for once. Peto’s spirits had been low ever since he discovered Mrs. Reed, and Jaytsy was equally somber after helping a little girl discover her cat hadn’t survived after all.

Indeed, morale all over Edge was deteriorating. Oh, there

had been some moments of hope, such as the family with young twins who were pulled from the cellar under the remains of their home relatively unharmed on the evening of the third day, and the enormous herd of cattle that found their way back, via the busiest roads in Edge, to the pasture of their astonished owner just yesterday.

But waking up on the fourth day, Mahrree and the rest of Edge, it seemed, finally realized that “bouncing back” would likely take seasons, and some things would never be the same again.

Perrin had yet to hear from his parents, but that wasn't unusual. The family code was, no news means no problems: carry on, soldier.

He did, however, receive an official report from the Administrators last night proclaiming that the damage suffered by Idumea was of such a nature that all soldiers from the outer lying villages should be sent immediately to help with removal and reconstruction.

Perrin stared at the message, delivered to their back garden by a soldier, for several minutes before “accidentally” dropping it in the fire where a boar was roasting.

To Mahrree's questioning look he answered, “Wasn't signed by the High General, and I take my orders from him. No news from him, nothing to report.”

“Should we send them a message that we're fine?” Mahrree asked, already knowing his answer.

Perrin shook his head. “I don't want to spare a single soldier from the recovery efforts. My parents will know we're fine.”

Mahrree hoped that her in-laws weren't worrying about them, but strangely her thoughts yesterday kept returning to Relf and Joriana. Every five minutes she saw them again in her mind, and she wondered why.

Even now, her third thought of the morning was about Perrin's parents, but there was nothing she could do to assure them they were fine. Mahrree turned her sore neck to evaluate her sturdy rock walls and smiled in smug appreciation at how well they held up. Twisting to look up the stairs that led to her bedroom, she groaned, partially out of pain, partially to see books, wood, and clothing strewn at the top of the stairs, having been blown around by the winds that came off the mountains during the night.

“I feel the same way,” Perrin whispered, sitting up and



“Your renovations will have to wait, Mrs. Shin.”

glancing at the stairs. He tried to give her an optimistic smile, but the weary lines under his dark eyes gave him away.

She smiled feebly back. “How long do you think we’ll be sleeping down here?”

“No idea. We have to clean out the rubble upstairs, then evaluate what needs to be rebuilt, and then wait our turn like everyone else for available lumber. They hope to be getting the sawmill operational today. So at least a few weeks, but probably much longer.”

Mahrree closed her eyes. “Can we move the bed down here?”

“If we can toss it through what used to be the roof, and if it survives the fall—which it should, since I built that thing to withstand a land tremor,” he said proudly, “then we could maybe dismantle it, bring it in here, and rebuild it again.”

Halfway through his explanation she started rubbing her temples. “Never mind. Then we’d only have to reverse the process to get it back upstairs again.”

“Not exactly reverse the process, but we might be able to drag the mattress down here, *unless* it’s—”

But she put a finger on his lips. “Just . . . no more bad news.”

“Then I suppose we won’t discuss the potential food shortages right now . . .” he mumbled through her finger.

Mahrree dropped her hand. “What did Grandpy Neeks tell you last night about the reserves?”

“I thought you didn’t want—”

“Just tell me!”

“We have enough grain reserves that we can dole some out to the village for several weeks.” While his words were encouraging, his tone was flat.

“Exactly how many weeks?” she pressed. She wasn’t a farmer or even a gardener, but she knew the long Raining Season had postponed plantings in many fields. Usually by now the first snow peas were available at the markets, along with some early greens, but this year there was nothing yet.

And now, there wasn’t even a market system left; most of it had burned to the ground, along with many shops that normally supplied clothing, bedding, and tools. Just when the owners could have had their greatest business, they had no businesses left at all.

He shrugged. “We need to get a better approximation of what everyone still has available. Planting Season finds everyone’s stores a bit low, but many can’t even get to their larders or cellars. I kind of wished Gizzada hadn’t left the army to start a restaurant in Pools. I could have used him right now. Then again, his idea of ‘necessities’ include four courses and three different desserts. But Neeks has tasked Lieutenant Rigoff to start evaluating what the village has left. I’m sure whatever Milo needs help with, Teeria will be more than obliging.”

“There’s not going to be enough, is there?” she whispered.

He just looked down at his hands, massaging them. “I’ve identified four soldiers who grew up on farms. Today they’ll be tilling the old catapult fields across from the fort and sowing some of the grain we have in reserves. Then this afternoon I’m going to have Shem visit farmers and emphasize to them the need to get planting immediately. Their clean-up efforts can wait.”

She sighed. “Will it be enough? Soon enough?”

He looked back up at her. “Thought you didn’t want any more bad news.”

Her expression must have been pitiful.

“A bit of good news, then,” he attempted a smile. “I have the entire day off to stay here and work on our house with you and the children. Soldiers will likely come by for updates and direction, but we can spend all day working here.”

“Yippee,” she said dully.

“Or,” he said with a glint in his eye, “you could go back to the school and start teaching again.”

“This will be better! Besides, Mr. Hegek has allowed several homeless families to live in the buildings. And,” she said more soberly, “I think it’ll be good for Jaytsy and Peto to just be with us today. Getting back to some kind of routine here at home will do us all good,” she decided. “Even if it’s just for the day. Maybe I should even come up with a few school assignments—”

His curled upper lip stopped her. “I thought we were trying to make them feel better, not worse.”

Mahrree chuckled sadly just as Peto came out of his room. He ran his hand over his tousled brown hair and squinted at his mother. “What?”

“Your father doesn’t think it would be a good idea for us to do school at home today. He thinks we should just be cleaning up

“Your renovations will have to wait, Mrs. Shin.”

around here. How does that sound to you?”

Peto nodded once. “If you started teaching us at home, I’d have to write that letter to the Administrators I keep threatening to send. I’m sure the Administrator of Education would have an interesting response. Keep your wife under control, Lieutenant Colonel!” he said in a cadence the High General of Idumea would have used, and once again Mahrree felt something prick in her mind, flooding her with thoughts of Relf and Joriana.

Still, she chuckled with Perrin as Peto trudged off to the washing room, and Perrin winked at his wife. One child down, one more to go.

Jaytsy opened her door just in time to see Peto going through the kitchen door to the washing room. She rolled her eyes. “Why can’t he just keep going outside like he did for the past four days? He takes forever in there! I swear he falls asleep on purpose, just to keep me bouncing in the kitchen.”

“Looking forward to spending the day at home, then?” Perrin asked.

“With him?” Jaytsy exhaled loudly. “I guess I’ve got no choice.”

Mahrree winked at her husband as Jaytsy stomped loudly toward the washing room door.

It was a couple of hours before they began to consider going upstairs to evaluate the bedroom. They spent the morning putting away everything that had been shaken down. Jaytsy and Peto finished sweeping up the dust and debris, while Mahrree went to the cellar to evaluate the last of their own stores of food.

Three weeks at best, was Mahrree’s guess, and much less if they kept feeding the neighborhood.

But then again, all the villagers were making sacrifices. Many farmers and ranchers had offered cattle, sheep, and pigs to be butchered and shared. Old men sat at the river catching as many fish as they could to donate to someone’s coals. And early each morning a team of soldiers sat with their bows and arrows at the edge of the forest waiting for deer. They harvested a few each day and carried them to the Shins’ yard where now two spits awaited them. Those needing venison for a meal were welcomed to take enough for their family.

Still, Mahrree fretted as she patted her last bag of flour and wondered how she could make it last. Even with the combined

creativity and generosity of Edge, disaster could be coming.

When she came up the stairs to get their midday meal prepared—leftover venison stew with dumplings—she already felt discouraged, even though the main floor of their home looked as if nothing had happened.

Perrin was waiting for her in the kitchen. “Midday meal first, then the unveiling of our bedroom?”

“I’ve never been much of a procrastinator,” she sighed, “but today I am.”

“I’ve just been up there,” he admitted. “You didn’t hear the scream?”

“*You* screamed?”

“No, *your daughter* who accompanied me screamed.”

Peto came into the kitchen. “It was great!” he grinned, the first true smile Mahrree had seen on his face in days. “When she saw those raccoons sleeping in your wardrobe—”

“Raccoons!” Mahrree exclaimed.

“—she screamed as if they were rats.”

“They looked like rats!” Jaytsy defended herself as she came in behind her brother and punched him in the shoulder. “Giant ones.”

“Oddest rats I’ve ever seen, then,” Perrin said.

“Well, they stole her stockings!” Jaytsy folded her arms.

“My stockings?” Mahrree whimpered. “Which ones?”

“The beige ones Grandmother Peto bought you at the beginning of Raining Season,” Jaytsy whimpered back.

Peto put his hands on his hips. “Did you hear that, Father? The beige ones!”

As upset as Mahrree was about her unwelcomed guests stealing her clothing, Peto’s outraged face and scoffs in feigned fury even made Jaytsy’s mouth contort to hide a smile.

“Ah well,” Mahrree decided, “it’s supposed to be getting warmer anyway, and those were for Raining Season.”

“What stupid raccoons,” Peto rolled his eyes. “Wearing knits in Planting Season.”

Jaytsy turned to him. “Since when do you know so much about fashion?”

“Just how long have I been your brother?”

“You can’t count that high yet?”

Perrin put an arm around each of their shoulders, which at

“Your renovations will have to wait, Mrs. Shin.”

first appeared to be a loving gesture, until he covered their mouths with his hands. “Sounds as if our life is getting back to normal again, doesn’t it? Maybe I’ll head back up to the fort instead—”

“Don’t you dare!” Mahrree glared.

After midday meal she trudged up the stairs to see sunlight pouring down, brightly illuminating everything that a roof normally shields.

All she could do was sigh. Somehow it looked worse than it did that first morning. But then again, she hadn’t ventured up there since then, and there had been winds and raccoons and who knew what else wreaking havoc in what used to be her favorite sanctuary.

The peak of the roof rested on top of the massive bed, the eaves and clay shingles broken and scattered all over their wardrobes, desk, chairs, and bookshelves. Sticks, rotting leaves, and just plain old dirt littered everything. Had it rained, the mess could have been redefined as sludge.

“All right . . . where do we start?” Jaytsy asked.

Peto picked up a small piece of an eave and tossed it out over the top of the remaining wall. It landed near the wood pile in the back garden. “There. Done yet?”

Jaytsy picked up a larger piece. “Bet I can get this on the pile.”

“Bet it will bounce and hit the Hersh’s dog instead,” Peto sneered. “Or Mrs. Hersh.”

“We don’t bet in this family,” Perrin reminded them, picking up a few books and handing them to his wife.

Mahrree wiped off the dust, and looked around for where to place them. The unexpected voice right behind her made her jump.

“I’ve seen that tired and glazed look before, Mahrree. But it’s been a few years. Do you need a hand?”

“Uncle Shem!” the children cried.

Mahrree just felt like crying as she felt his arm come around her shoulders and he gave her an encouraging hug.

Perrin eyed his master sergeant. “You were out all night, Zenos. You’re supposed to be resting now so you can go on duty later this evening.”

Shem smiled. “I had a nap. And what’s more restful than spending the afternoon here? Mahrree’s a bit short and weak to

toss some of these pieces out, wouldn't you agree?"

Perrin patted Shem gratefully on the shoulder. "You have the oddest ideas about what's 'restful.' And for that I'm most grateful."

"Shem, normally I'd be insulted by one of your short remarks, but not today," Mahrree chuckled. "How can I thank you?"

"By getting me something to eat?" he asked timidly. "I understand Mrs. Peto left you with some of her interesting creations, and since they're rationing food at the fort now, I skipped eating there."

"Absolutely, Shem. I'll be right back." She plopped the books on the shelf with renewed hope. Perrin's muscle combined with Shem's, their upstairs bedroom just might be fully cleaned out by dinner time.

Down in the kitchen Mahrree readily pulled out a plate to pile for Shem. Of course he'd be here. He always showed up when they needed him, even when they didn't know they needed him—

Mahrree heard the knock at the front door. She hesitated before heading toward the gathering room, dreading it was someone asking the lieutenant colonel for help. But duty was duty. When she opened the door, she tried to suppress a gasp.

It was an official Administrators' messenger.

She'd seen them at her house only twice before. They came there when they couldn't find Perrin quickly enough, but they were regular visitors to the fort. With their system of horses stationed every twelve miles or so, a messenger could cover the eighty miles from Idumea to Edge in a little less than eight hours of hard riding. And somehow, when they arrived, the messengers always looked as fresh and crisp as a harvest time apple. Maybe that's why their red coats and rounded caps always tempted Mahrree to bite them. Each time they arrived it was with yet another decree, decision, or demand. Mahrree wouldn't deny she was less than delighted to see him.

"I need to speak to Lieutenant Colonel Shin immediately. I was told at the fort he is at home today," said the slight little man in a high-pitched tone.

She grumbled under her breath, but said, "Yes, he is. One moment please." Mahrree rushed, but slowly, to the bottom of the

“Your renovations will have to wait, Mrs. Shin.”

stairs, wanting to get this over with, but not wanting to pull her husband away from the work upstairs.

“Perrin, there’s an Administrators’ messenger,” she called up not too loudly. Maybe he wouldn’t hear her.

His voice was strained as he called back down, “Ugh! We’re a little—ooh, watch that end, Peto!—busy at the moment. Jaytsy, slide over! Tell him—yes, that way, Shem—to wait a bit.”

Mahrree turned back to the messenger with a half-apologetic smile. “We’re remodeling. In fact, the whole village has been bitten by the renovating bug.”

The messenger was not amused. “It is urgent, Madam!”

Mahrree bit her lower lip and narrowed her eyes at him. “It’s always urgent,” she muttered, matching his heated gaze. She heard a crashing sound upstairs and flinched, but continued to hold the messenger’s penetrating stare.

“It’s all right, Mother,” Jaytsy called down. “You wanted to rearrange that bookshelf anyway, remember?”

Mahrree continued to look at the messenger’s face, perfectly unmoved, and she wondered how he did that.

“One . . . ,” Perrin’s voice drifted down from the bedroom, “Two . . . ,” then a tremendous crashing sound came from the back garden.

The teenagers cheered.

The messenger’s face didn’t even twitch.

“Shem, I thought I said on three!” Perrin sounded slightly irritated.

“You were *about* to say three, correct? So I pushed it over when you would have said ‘three’.”

“No, no, no. You’re supposed to wait until I *say* ‘three,’ *then* push it over the moment after ‘three’ has been said.”

Mahrree tried not to smirk.

The messenger didn’t move a muscle.

“No one does it that way, Perrin!”

“Everyone does it that way, Shem!”

“Well, it’s down now, *sir*. Did you hear it, Mahrree? Your roof is officially kindling.”

The messenger, now sufficiently annoyed, stepped into the house without permission. Mahrree’s jaw dropped in shock as he pushed passed her.

“Lieutenant Colonel Perrin Shin! Would you please come

down here immediately!” he bellowed up the stairs.

Mahrree couldn't contain the stunned smile that spread across her face, so she covered it with her hand.

The messenger turned to her as if to say, “That’s how you call a lieutenant colonel!” but seemed slightly alarmed at her response.

Her eyes brimmed with warning.

One heavy boot thumped on the top stair.

The messenger slowly turned.

Then another boot thudded menacingly down another stair, and another, and continued until the full broad body of Lieutenant Colonel Shin faced the messenger. He was even less amused than the messenger had been with Mahrree.

Shem followed on tiptoe and crouched to sit halfway down the staircase to watch the show. Peto and Jaytsy sat behind Shem the Shield and sniggered quietly.

Perrin didn't even bother to veil his threats. “You do NOT enter my house without my wife’s permission. You do NOT raise your voice in my house, and should you EVER return, you will show the proper respect owed by WAITING until I am ready to address you. Is that understood, Messenger?” he snarled.

The messenger swallowed hard, but his voice was just as challenging. “Yes, sir!”

Perrin took his last few steps down the stairs slowly, wiping dust and dried leaves off his work clothes. He folded his arms across his chest and stood head and shoulders above the man in bright red. Impressively, the small man didn't shrink in the presence of the brawny lieutenant colonel.

Mahrree did a little, in sympathy.

“If the Administrators are disappointed that the last report I sent came as only one copy, they best understand that there was no time to create more. Every last soldier has been helping to rebuild Edge,” Perrin rehearsed steadily. “If the Administrators are unhappy that I didn't send the bulk of my men to Idumea as they asked, they best understand that my men's duty lies to Edge first. If the Administrators have a new law they need me to enforce, they best understand that I refuse to impose any new directives until Edge is secured, perhaps by the end of the season.”

The little man straightened himself up. He cleared his throat with a hint of nervousness before he said, “You may tell them



“Your renovations will have to wait, Mrs. Shin.”

yourself, Lieutenant Colonel Shin. You have been requested—*ordered*—to come to Idumea immediately.”

“By whom?” Perrin shouted.

“By Mrs. Joriana Shin, wife of High General Relf Shin, sir,” the messenger said with far too much superiority, and handed Perrin a folded message. “Your father was gravely injured in the land tremors and was recovered only very late last night. After you’ve checked on the condition of your father who, when I left, was still unconscious and unresponsive, you’ll report at Administrative Headquarters to pay your respects. Your mother expects you to leave within two hours of receiving this message.”

He turned from a paralyzed Perrin to a stunned Mahrree, “Your renovations will have to wait, Mrs. Shin. Good day.”

He marched out the door to leave the entire Shin family and Uncle Shem completely speechless.

No one in the history of the world had ever done that before.

## Chapter 5 ~ “Sometimes it feels like the world’s out to get me.”

An hour later after the Administrators’ messenger left, the Shin household was bustling.

Upstairs Shem and Peto held up debris while Mahrree sifted through the drawers still trapped under the remnants of the roof to find clean clothing and bags. Jaytsy was in the kitchen packing whatever kinds of food that remained and would travel well. Perin was in the study surrounded by officers the messenger had tracked down and sent to the lieutenant colonel’s house.

Major Karna, Lieutenant Rigoff, and Sergeant Major Neeks nodded at the instructions they received, again.

“Sir,” Karna tried to assure him, “trust us—we can handle this. Finish your preparations and be on your way.”

Shin sighed. “I know, and I do trust you. But I feel like I’m abandoning Edge when it needs me the most. It’s just . . . this is such an inopportune time to be leaving. Three weeks, my mother’s insisting, but I’ll try to get back sooner—”

Sergeant Major Neeks cleared his throat. Rarely had anyone ever heard Grandpy say something important without clearing his throat first. “Lieutenant Colonel,” Neeks started in his slow drawl, “with all due respect, the ‘inopportune’ time to leave would have been four days ago. But now your Rebuild Edge Plan is in place, and we have plenty of work to keep each soldier busy and out of trouble for a long time. The major has a plan for doling out the grain reserves, Rigoff has organized the effort to evaluate what food is left in the village, and we can certainly hold down the fort until you return in three weeks. You give my regards to the gen-

“Sometimes it feels the world’s out to get me.”

eral, and get out of our hair.” He smiled firmly.

“Sir,” said Lieutenant Rigoff, “I have a concern about your house. Perhaps we should shift the schedule and get yours completed as soon as possible. I can have a detail of men here this evening to finish clearing it out, then begin rebuilding the roof in the morning.”

“I appreciate the thought,” Shin told him, “but there are other houses in greater need. If we can just span the hole with a canvas tarp, we can close off the upstairs until I return. Keep to the schedule. I don’t want anyone to think I’m getting special privileges.”

“So let them think it!” insisted Neeks. “Your family needs to be safe. Let’s get this house secured in your absence, Lieutenant Colonel.”

“It’s the least we can do, sir,” Karna agreed.

“Again, I appreciate the thought,” the lieutenant colonel said evenly as Zenos appeared at the door to the study, “but I think just posting a guard during the day and maybe two at night, as allowed by the Administrators, will suffice.”

“You don’t have to do that, sir,” Zenos said. “We’ve got it all figured out already.”

Perrin turned to him. “Who’s ‘we’?”

“Mahrr—Mrs. Shin and I,” Zenos corrected himself.

One of Perrin’s eyebrows rose at Shem’s slip of familiarity. Each of the soldiers knew of the closeness between Zenos and the Shins, but still there were limits to be observed.

Rigoff and Karna exchanged glances, and Neeks shook his head reproachfully at the younger sergeant.

Zenos didn’t see it. “We discussed it when we were in the bedroom,” he told his commander, “and I was helping her with her clothes.”

Rigoff choked and Karna coughed nervously.

The colonel’s other eyebrow went up.

Neeks’s head shaking increased.

Somehow Zenos missed it all. “You won’t need a guard at night. I’ll sleep here while you’re gone,” he grinned innocently, “and take care of whatever your bedroom needs.”

The lieutenant colonel went positively rigid.

Neeks muttered, “Zenos, Zenos, Zenos . . .”

Rigoff and Karna glanced at each other anxiously.

“Sergeant Zenos,” Shin said in an eerily calm manner, “exactly *what* are you planning in my absence?”

Zenos cocked his head, puzzled by his best friend’s odd demeanor. “To do what you would do?” he squeaked. “Take care of needs?”

The commander’s expression remained wooden.

The master sergeant was still perplexed. “May I . . . get the coach now?”

“Coach?” Shin spat. “What coach?”

“The fort’s coach?” Zenos shrank a little under the furious glare. “Could use the airing out, really. Had it for more than ten years and I don’t think it’s ever been used. For Mrs. Shin to start loading?”

Shin squinted. “I don’t need a coach!”

Zenos swallowed. “But she and the children do.”

Comprehension hit both men like the sunrise.

On Shem’s face, it first glowed amused with a smile, which turned into abject horror.

On Perrin’s face the effect was reversed. He began to grin in relief as Shem paled.

“Ohhh, *sir*,” Sergeant Zenos said tonelessly, a bead of nervous sweat breaking out on his forehead. “You thought I was going to . . . *stay* with, with . . . your family while you were away? Do what you would do in the bedroo—Oh no, sir! No, sir!” He flushed redder than any man ever had.

Perrin began to chuckle and his men relaxed. A few looks were exchanged along the lines of, Never was anything to worry about, right?

“Sorry, Zenos. The suggestion that you were going to stay with my family shocked me,” Perrin said. “But they’re going with me? I think I need to sit down for a moment . . .”

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An hour later, as the coach drawn by four horses left the Shin house, the two sergeants watched it head south meandering as fast as it could through the rubble-strewn roads. When Neeks saw all that Mrs. Shin and her daughter had shoved hastily into bags, he thanked the stars again he never married.

“Sometimes it feels the world’s out to get me.”

“Should be an interested two days’ and one night ride,” Neeks said to Zenos as they walked back to the fort. “Two teenagers locked up in the coach with their parents, and Mrs. Shin insisting the lieutenant colonel would be more comfortable down with them rather than up with the soldiers watching for danger.” He shook his head and laughed softly.

Zenos chuckled as well. “None of his family has ever been to Idumea, and he’s been avoiding going there for years. I don’t know when I’ve seen him more anxious.”

“Oh, I do. When he thought you were planning to move in with his wife!” Neeks elbowed him.

“Ah, don’t remind me,” Zenos agonized, reliving the embarrassment. “That was terrible. I can’t imagine he even thought I would consider such a thing. He’s probably just not thinking clearly, certainly surprised about the news of his father, and his mother requesting they go to Idumea. Yes,” Shem decided, “he’s just a bit overwrought, imagined the worst—”

“Well, I suppose that’s how he got to be a commander,” Grandpy said.

Zenos still shook his head.

Grandpy Neeks gave him a sidelong glance. “You have to admit, though—you’re always over there. It’s just a little unusual. People may . . . think things.”

The master sergeant furrowed his brow. “Think what?”

What neither the lieutenant colonel nor the master sergeant fully understood was that those who served for an extended amount of time in the fort occasionally communicated about the relationship. Not with words, but with *looks*, especially when Shin sent Zenos to his house on an errand or with the message that the commander would be coming home late. It was never more than Karna exchanging silent questions with Rigoff as Zenos bounded down the stairs of the command tower, or Neeks scowling after him, then sending one of his meaningful squints to whoever was in the tower with him.

Their eyes always said the same things to each other: It’s all right, isn’t it? Have you heard anything worrying? Something the lieutenant colonel should be told?

It wasn’t that they doubted Mrs. Shin. It’s just that . . .

Well, there was something about Shem Zenos. No one could put their finger on exactly what it was, but then again his behavior

was never less than exemplary. Maybe it was because Zenos seemed to be so pure, and no man was *that* pure.

He never drank, never swore, never played dices, and in his free time if he wasn't at the Shins he was at the Cottages hanging out with the widows, of all people. Not just Mrs. Peto but all of her friends—fixing their fences, building them sewing tables, and sampling their newest recipes. He even spent many hours at Rec-tor Yung's, helping him to fix up the old place and tending to his garden. Zenos was faultless: charismatic, sweet, handsome, and seemingly perfect.

Which only meant that something was seriously wrong, but they just hadn't discovered what yet. It was almost as if there was another side to him, but just like the back sides of the moons, they could never hope to see what it was. So, like all good soldiers, they kept a careful watch, waiting for him to finally slip. No man was *that* good, without some secret part of him being bad.

But on the other hand, all of this had been going on for years, and no rumors of anything unsuitable had ever surfaced, so the senior soldiers didn't worry about it and generally ignored their concerns.

Until awkward and unguarded moments suddenly popped up, such as referring to Mrs. Shin by her first name, and realizing that maybe Lieutenant Colonel Shin had his moments of doubt as well. Otherwise, why would he have assumed the worst intentions about his best friend?

The road the two sergeants walked was relatively free of foot traffic, since most of the village was moving rubble. Now was a perfect time, Grandpy thought, to maybe get a peek at the other side of a moon.

Neeks smiled amiably. "Sergeant, how old are you now?"

Zenos looked at him as they headed north to the fort, not sure why he asked the question. "Thirty-four, beginning of the season."

"And you've been here for what, thirteen years now?"

"Almost fourteen. At the end of Planting."

"Fourteen years," mused Grandpy. "Lots of time to see lots of things, right?"

"I suppose," Zenos said, still sounding lost.

Neeks almost chuckled. It was just that Zenos was so . . .

Well, *naïve* wasn't the right word. It was if he simply didn't

“Sometimes it feels the world’s out to get me.”

notice things, or pay attention to what everyone else did. And Neeks wondered that Zenos hadn’t married yet. Mrs. Shin always had her eye out.

Poor Milo Rigoff hadn’t been at the fort for five weeks when Mrs. Shin, upon meeting the lanky officer, developed a gleam in her eye and told him she knew the perfect girl for him. And Mrs. Shin was rather put out, Neeks assumed, that Karna found himself an interesting young woman without her assistance. More than once Grandpy had caught Mrs. Shin’s attention, and the busybody was always ready to tell him about another one of her mother’s lonely friends, but Neeks put an end to that every time with, “If she’s not army issued, she’s not for me.”

Mrs. Shin was likely still trying to find Zenos a female. Or so Grandpy assumed.

Zenos noticed women, Grandpy was sure of that. It was hard not to. There was a steady stream of them on the road to the fort. Since the land tremor activity had gone down, but not completely. Neeks had noticed the parade of women had grown over the years. Maybe when the fort expanded to two hundred fifty men, so did the hopes of the women, both young and not so young. Edge may have been just a small village with only five thousand people, but the soldiers never complained about lack of company.

Even now as they walked to the fort Zenos nodded politely to what Grandpy would consider a sultry and silky young woman who approached from the opposite direction. Grandpy surreptitiously watched Zenos’s eyes as they got closer. Neeks definitely saw a spark, then Zenos’s eyes traveled down to the low-cut neckline on the young woman’s dress which left little for a healthy man to imagine, and Neeks was sure Zenos was a very healthy man. Zenos’s face flushed with what seemed like shame at having lingered at her ample cleavage, and he looked at the ground, probably not even noticing the slit on her skirt that revealed her leg all the up to her thigh when she walked.

The girl misinterpreted Zenos’s meaning and grinned flirtatiously, but Zenos kept his eyes on the road as she passed them. The young woman’s expression turned disappointed as Zenos refused to look up, but Grandpy nodded courteously.

While she wasn’t interested in the older man, she nodded politely back.

Grandpy’s thoughts churned. Maybe Zenos thought he al-

ready found himself a woman . . .

When the girl was sufficiently behind them, Neeks cleared his throat again. “How is it, Zenos, that after all these years in the army, you . . .” He faltered, unsure of how to finish his thought suitably, but still get his meaning across.

“Yes?” Zenos asked, looking at him askance.

“Well, on your days off, you’re not in the market enjoying a drink, or chatting to some beautiful young lady. I have a hard time believing that what they might call a ‘ruggedly handsome man’ like you can’t find someone to . . . talk with.”

Zenos smiled sadly. “None of the women here are the kind I would like to talk with,” he said, missing Grandpy’s insinuation that no conversation was implied. “I’m a little particular when it comes to women, I suppose.”

“Doesn’t have to be a long-term commitment, Sergeant. Many of these women aren’t looking for a long conversation—”

Zenos sighed. “Well, maybe I am. Things have changed since I first came here. It’s getting harder to find nice women.”

“Nice women like Mahrree Shin?” Neeks said with a hint of accusation.

Zenos’s eyes flared at him, then softened. “Yes, like *Mrs.* Shin.” He took a deep breath. “Grandpy, she’s so much like my sister. And the lieutenant colonel—he’s the brother I should’ve had. They remind me a great deal of what I left behind. I’m a family man, and they’re my family. That’s all.”

Grandpy had stopped walking, forcing Zenos to pause and pivot to face him. Neeks didn’t say a word, but folded his arms and gave the master sergeant *a look*.

Zenos knew what he was implying. “Even if I wanted one, I’d never have a chance, Grandpy,” Shem said quietly. “She’s completely devoted him. And so am I.”

Grandpy stared him down for another half minute, but Zenos held the gaze intended to determine just how honest the younger man was.

“You better be,” Grandpy said coldly.

“He’s the entire reason I’m in Edge, Grandpy. I promise.”

Realizing that was about as clear an answer as he would get, Grandpy nodded once. “Make sure it stays that way.” Then, as if the last exchanged had never occurred, Grandpy unfolded his arms and continued walking to the fort, Zenos falling in next to



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him.

“Well then, ‘family man’,” Neeks drawled in his lazy tone on to another subject, “you might want to recommend to the Shins to lock up that daughter of theirs for the next ten years. She’s quite a developing young woman, isn’t she?”

Zenos rounded on him. “How dare you talk about Jaytsy Shin that way? She’s only fourteen!”

It would take a lot more than that to rattle Neeks. “Taller than her mother already, although that’s not saying much,” he chuckled. “But Zenos, I’ve seen some of the soldiers noticing her. The colonel’s dark eyes and her mother’s features?” Neeks shook his head. “I’m warning you, Sergeant, that girl’s getting attention when she comes to the fort.”

“She’s just bringing her father a meal or a clean undershirt.” But Zenos was visibly disturbed. “That can’t be,” he decided. “She’s only a girl. Up until a few years ago she still sucked her thumb when she was nervous.”

“I thought Mrs. Shin said she’d celebrate her 15<sup>th</sup> birthday in Idumea?”

“So?”

“Many girls get married at sixteen and seventeen.”

Startled, Zenos said, “What would a soldier want with a sixteen-year-old girl?”

Neeks sighed loudly. “Zenos, Zenos, Zenos . . . How is that you’ve been in this army for so long and are still so . . . so . . .” He searched for the right word. “Innocent?”

Zenos regarded him for a moment, puzzling out his meaning, and scowled when he understood.

“I choose to be, Neeks. And I really wish I could stay that way. But it’s getting a lot harder. Sometimes it feels like the world’s out to get me.”

---

There’s a great deal of romantic mystique that accompanies riding in a coach behind four fast horses on the way to a huge city and an unfamiliar place. If that mystique lasted more than five minutes, the trip would be pleasant enough.

But when three occupants of the coach become ill from the

rocking before the coach even leaves Edge, two days and a night may seem like a very long journey.

And it was.

Under different circumstances it might have been exciting. They might have remembered to take books to read or paper to write on. But instead each of the riders in the coach was left to wonder what lay ahead, besides the headache and nausea of being bumped around unpredictably.

After an hour of head-banging, Peto discovered how to hold his body limply enough to roll with the jostling instead of fighting it. His mind wandered to Idumea and meandered its way through what he imagined would be crowded roads and narrow houses to the one place he hoped circumstances and time would permit him to see: the new kickball stadium.

Sure, he was worried about his grandfather. And in a way, it was Relf's fault Peto was thinking about the massive arena right now. General Shin went on and on last year about the enormity of the structure, so that Peto was hanging on his every word, while his father just sneered.

"Why would fifty thousand people want to be crammed together in one place?"

Peto tried to remember how his grandfather responded to that. Something about Perrin's cynicism, lack of appreciation?

Pangs of guilt hit Peto. Were those some of the last words he heard his grandfather speak, but now he couldn't even remember them?

Nah, he concluded. It's not like the High General could be snuffed out that easily. No, he'd be fine, maybe even take Peto himself to see the arena once he regained his strength—

Peto glanced over to his father sitting across from him and staring out the window, brooding so intensely Peto felt the air around him grow heavy and dark.

Perrin Shin never wanted to go back to Idumea, but now their entire family was rushing to the hated place. The Shins wouldn't be making this journey unless . . . unless—

Peto couldn't bring himself to think about the awful reasons, but instead sighed wretchedly about being such a selfish grandson.

“Sometimes it feels the world’s out to get me.”

---

Jaytsy, seated next to her brother, stared out her window but her thoughts were solidly in Idumea and the dress district her grandmother told her so much about.

It wasn’t that fashions interested Jaytsy that much. But it would be, well, *interesting* to see what others were wearing. Maybe she could find skirts and tunics that were bright and bouncy, but still fitting her parents’ idea of modest. Maybe she and her grandmother could go—

Immediately she was ashamed. There she sat fantasizing about shopping in the fashion center of the world, Idumea, when people in Edge were struggling to clean up, her grandfather might be near death, and her grandmother was so consumed with worry that she actually ordered the Shin family to Idumea.

And all Jaytsy could wonder was if silk came in orange?  
She miserably stared out the window.

---

Across from Jaytsy sat Mahrree, too lost in her own thoughts to notice her daughter’s eyes filling with shameful tears, or to notice that her son was unusually quiet.

A part of her had always wanted to see the city, just to understand what all the fuss was about and why her in-laws always pressed so hard for them to visit. She wondered if everything Per-rin had dismissed about Idumea was entirely accurate. He could take things a little far sometimes.

Then again, she couldn’t shake from her mind that Idumea was founded by the six men who murdered the first Guide, Hierum.

Then yet *again*, even though evil men had begun it, surely not everything was tainted by their influence. Some of it had to be fine, because she knew of good people who came from there, her in-laws included.

And now she knew why they’d kept popping up in her thoughts all morning; it was as if the Creator wanted to give her a little warning, and she was grateful for it.

But what would they find when they finally got to Idumea,

sometime later tomorrow?

Mahrree tried to shove that worrying idea away, only to find another ready to take its place: she was headed straight for the city that housed Chairman Mal and the Administrators.

Over the years, Mahrree had tried to swallow down her own anger with their ever-increasingly controlling tactics, and found ways to subtly skirt the teachings of the Administrators with her students and children.

But what if she came face to face with one of those men, and he saw the disdain in her eyes? Surely one or two might come by the home of the High General at some point. At least she knew a little about each man, thanks to what she had to teach her students about them.

She never thought she'd be *almost* grateful for the fifteen minute government appreciation lecture she was required to deliver each day, included in the teachers' scripts which she normally ignored. Along with reciting the dry homilies which emphasized dubious improvements to the world and the need for loyalty, she also had to read out loud about the backgrounds of each of the Administrators. Naturally, Mahrree was suspicious about those, and intrigued that the author of the scripts had, behind his name, the curious words "public relations."

At first, Mahrree's students were almost genuinely interested in the tales of each man, but by the time they reached the sixth Administrator, several boys pointed out they had heard the story before.

Mahrree had to agree the similarities of their backgrounds were opportune. All twenty-three men had been conveniently raised in poverty, suffered great hardships, lost one parent or both, worked up to three jobs twenty or more hours a day to afford a university education—although they must have reckoned time differently back then—and then later made an amazing discovery, or single-handedly fought and killed a Guarder, or rescued a woman/child/kitten in distress and was so moved by the experience that he now wanted to rescue the world.

One remarkable Administrator—the only one Perrin said was worth more than a sliver of silver, Dr. Brisack—even made a great discovery about the effects of noxious gases on the human body while fighting a Guarder near a bubbling mud volcano in order to rescue an old woman who was holding a kitten.

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The woman was a widow, naturally. And poor. And it was raining. And then it turned to a blizzard, naturally.

After reading that story to her skeptical students, Mahrree concluded the words “public relations” meant “professional, if unoriginal, story teller.”

Perrin had merely scoffed at the story. “I’ll bet Brisack hates cats. And old women. And snow.”

Mahrree grudgingly had to admire the calculated manipulation of the Administrators to assure the citizens that they were “one of them.” The students were to share the stories with their parents, and after that year all the citizens felt some odd kinship with the Administrators.

She wasn’t surprised, then, when Relf Shin later read through the scripts she showed him, raised an amused eyebrow and said, “So Giyak’s parents drowned when he was just thirteen? How tragic. Perhaps I should tell Gadiman to investigate the old people that live in his mansion that he calls Mother and Father.”

Remembering Relf Shin’s words brought Mahrree’s thoughts back to why she was in the coach, which was shockingly quiet considering it held four Shins. She glanced around and noticed each member of her family stared gloomily out the windows.

She sighed. The day had started out rather promising. Well, except for raccoons stealing her stockings, and her dismal evaluation of their food supplies, and facing her ruined bedroom . . .

All right, nothing about today had been going very well.

Still, she tried to think of something mundane as the fields flashed past, but instead other concerns filled her mind, keeping her from seeing anything but blurs. She watched her husband, hoping he might give her a comforting wink, but he seemed exceptionally sullen as he scowled at the window.

There were a few things Perrin and she never discussed. When she occasionally attempted to bring up those subjects, Perrin would send her a calculated glare which meant just drop whatever she was trying to express, and she always did. But now, thinking about what happened with the High General, she couldn’t.

What would happen if someday Perrin went off to stop a raid or investigate a threat on the edge of the forest and never returned? What would their family do in the event of his . . . no

longer being there?

Even though all the gold and silver hidden in the cellar would undoubtedly provide for them, she could never bring herself to ask him. Nor did he ever bring up the topic himself.

But a competing concern was the fact that Relf Shin was only two years away from retirement, and that a new High General would be appointed.

If they reached Idumea and found the worst had transpired, a replacement would be named in the next few days. Chances of it being Perrin were slim. He was only a lieutenant colonel and had enjoyed that ranking for nearly eight years since it was two rankings away from general.

He didn't want to be High General. He rarely said that to Mahrree, but she could read it in his eyes. They grew even darker and more brooding when Relf and Joriana visited each year and told their son about Idumea and their expectations.

One small part of Mahrree wondered if there even was a real emergency in Idumea, or if this wasn't some elaborate trick Perrin's parents were playing in order to get him to bring the family to see them. But Mahrree quickly dismissed that thought. As sneaky as her mother-in-law could be at times, she'd never drag her son away from a real disaster in Edge unnecessarily.

Still, Relf Shin had been actively campaigning for his son to become a High General ever since Perrin enrolled in Command School at age eighteen, but Mahrree couldn't imagine a life away from Edge. Even though the topography of Idumea, with its massive hot pools, intrigued her, it could never be home.

But as the coach raced south, she couldn't ignore the dread that she might be rushing to her new home. She had even hurriedly packed Perrin's dress uniform littered with medals and ribbons, not really sure why.

She watched Perrin again, trying to discern what he might be thinking, but he just glowered out the window.

---

Perrin knew his wife was looking at him, but he wasn't in the mood for one of her "What are you thinking?" conversations. She didn't understand what every man knew: there were times he

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just needed to let his thoughts wash over him.

And so he sat, mile after mile for hours, mulling over two thoughts.

The first: How would he react when he came face to face with Administrators he’d successfully avoided for sixteen years? Masking his contempt from eighty miles away was easy. But in the same room as them? A bit harder.

The second thought: Mother, why’d you wait so long to send for me?

---

Two men sat in the dark office of an unlit building.

“Not that I would ever profess belief in an intelligence greater than mine,” Mal said, “but I dare say that Nature had a far better idea than I did for revisiting Lieutenant Colonel Shin. Magnificent set of circumstances: Relf, hanging limply on the edge of death, and his son rushing to Idumea, unsure of what he’ll find. I can almost taste the tension!”

Brisack chuckled. “Every now and then the random forces in nature seem to almost gain a consciousness to conspire together for a remarkable result. We couldn’t have done it better ourselves.

“I must admit, I’m looking forward to bringing our boy Per-rin home for a while.” Nicko clasped his hands on his lap and sighed. “So many more possibilities now, and so many more friends for him to get to know . . . I can hardly wait.”

## Chapter 6 ~ “This is another reason why I hate Idumea.”

That there wasn't music playing when the tall buildings of Idumea first appeared on the horizon was a bit of a disappointment to Mahrree. She expected fanfare of some sort greeting her from the endless farm lands to announce the appearance of the greatest city in the world.

Then again, maybe there *was* a triumphant arrival melody, but she missed it because she was trying to stay awake to keep the two heads of her very heavy and sleeping children balanced on each shoulder.

How Perrin managed to get the opposite seat all to himself was still a mystery to her. He said it was less comfortable, but with his legs up and his nodding head bouncing in rhythm to the swaying of the coach, she gladly would have tried out the 'bumpy' bench alone, just for an hour. It must not have been too unbearable because when the soldier acting as footman knocked on the side of the carriage to announce Idumea was in view, Perrin woke up with a satisfied smile. Although he'd had an ominous air about him all day yesterday and during the morning after their miserable night of non-sleeping, he seemed to be attempting a more cheerful outlook this late afternoon.

“Actually, that wasn't so bad, was it?” He smiled at his wife as he stretched.

“I wouldn't know,” she said wearily, still feeling the kink in her shoulders from attempting to sleep while leaning against her husband during the night. “But I will know on the return ride home. That bench is *mine*. These children are *yours*.”



“This is another reason why I hate Idumea.”

Perrin grinned in a way that usually made her forgive him instantly. Even after sixteen years his eyes still had a powerful effect on her. He’s just lucky they do, she thought to herself, or he’d be walking home.

Perrin leaned forward as if to kiss her, but instead reached out and shook the knees of each of his children. “Jaytsy! Peto! Wake up. You didn’t want to miss the approach, remember?”

With matching moans the teens sat up and grabbed their necks.

“Ah, I’m so sore,” Jaytsy complained.

“*You’re* sore?” Mahrree said.

“Where are we, anyway?” Peto yawned.

“Just past the center of Pools, on the approach to Idumea,” said Perrin.

Jaytsy looked disappointed. “We missed Pools?”

“That’s where you were born,” Mahrree reminded Perrin.

He scoffed. “Not as if I remember that day. We moved just a couple moons later. But I have a feeling Jaytsy is disappointed about missing Pools for another reason.”

“I know I am!” Peto said, holding his belly. “I’m starving, and one of Gizzada’s sandwiches would have been perfect about now.”

Jaytsy nodded. “Or just a fourth of one of his sandwiches. Been years since I had one, but those were pretty hard to forget. I’ve never understood how he could get so many ingredients to stack up to six inches high without toppling.”

“I was thinking that maybe,” Mahrree said, “if everything goes well that is, we could try to come back here and pay him a visit. I’ve heard his restaurant is quite unforgettable.”

Perrin smiled. “We’ll see what we can do. And thanks for nothing, Peto. Now I’m craving a Gizzada sandwich.”

“You know how I hate to be hungry alone.” Peto stretched, turned to the side, and stuck his head out the window. “Whoa—I didn’t know Idumea had hills.”

“Those aren’t hills, Peto,” his father told him. “Those are buildings.”

Jaytsy turned quickly to look out her window. “How tall are they?”

“The tallest building is seven levels high, with a lookout tower on top, constructed all out of block. I’m curious to see how

they held up in the land tremors. Why aren't you looking, Mahrree?"

She held up her hands. "The children have the side windows, my back is to the driver, and you have that whole bench."

Perrin slid over and patted the seat next to him. "Waiting for an invitation?"

"Actually, yes," she said primly. "I understand that's the custom in Idumea. Yelling over fences to borrow some eggs isn't proper." She sniffed. "Simply patting a bench is, well, unsophisticated."

"There's another custom in Idumea," Perrin said, trying only sloppily to match her attempt at snobbery. "It's called Wife Grabbing." Faster than she expected, Perrin caught her arms and pulled her over to sit on his lap.

"Really?" Jaytsy squirmed. "Wife Grabbing?"

Mahrree chuckled but Perrin said, "Well, some of the Administrators have been known to—"

"Perrin," Mahrree warned. There were a few questionable behaviors in the big city that hadn't yet reached the furthest village of the world, and Mahrree wanted to keep her children as innocent as possible.

"Sorry," her husband murmured. "Can you at least see now?" he teased and kissed her on the cheek.

"Yes I can. And I thank you, sir, for the comfortable seat." She wrapped her arms around his and leaned back on him with a contented sigh. For as long as he was relaxed, she was going to take full advantage of it.

"Oh, you're not really going to act that way in Idumea, are you?" said Jaytsy, her voice a combination of disgust, embarrassment, and just a bit of delight. "You'll be kicked out of whatever society Grandmother Shin tries to take you to!" But her eyes revealed she was happy to see her parents flirting again. Mahrree realized it'd been nearly a week since they'd been so at ease. It certainly wouldn't last.

"That's why I have to get it all out of me now," Perrin said. "Besides, we're not going into anything of society. Living for so long in the north has drained all sense of deportment from me. In fact, I'll be surprised if we aren't run out of Idumea by tomorrow morning."

Peto's face paled. "Exactly how are we supposed to act?"

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“Oh, it’s not that bad,” Mahrree chuckled. “Just act like your grandmother and grandfather and you won’t have any problems.”

The look on her children’s faces told her that advice didn’t help.

“So,” Jaytsy started slowly, “I need to make sure my hair is perfect and my clothing is spotless and give everyone a careful smile, and Peto has to squint his eyes and clear his throat gruffly and tip his cap over and over. Peto, you need to get a cap.”

“Speaking of caps,” Perrin said guiltily. Using his boot he gestured to where his lay on the dusty floor of the coach. “Mahrree, would you mind?”

With her foot she kicked it up high enough to catch it. She attempted to brush off the dirt from the dark blue cloth and shading brim. “Hmm. We have been traveling, after all. They’ll forgive you for a little dirt on your uniform, right?”

Perrin only grunted as he took it from her and replaced it properly on his head. He promptly took it off and set it on the seat. “Not ready for that yet,” he murmured.

Mahrree hugged his arms again. “Well, we’re not here to make an impression. We’re just here to help your mother take care of your father. We won’t be going to any events—”

“I doubt anything is going on anyway,” Perrin cut her off, obviously uncomfortable at the idea, “if the reports of damage are correct. No one will have time to do anything but clean up.”

Mahrree nodded. “We’re here to help, not be entertained.”

Unconvinced, Peto and Jaytsy nodded and turned back to the windows.

“I can hardly see the mountains anymore,” Jaytsy said disappointedly. “Just a faint bluish-gray blur on the horizon.”

Perrin leaned out his window to look. “You know, I never realized before you can actually see the mountains from here. No one in the world ever wants to see them, so they just ignore them.”

“I think that’s how Mountseen got its name,” Mahrree said. “The first village where the mountains loom so obviously in the background that you can no longer ignore them.”

Peto looked to the north. “I kind of miss them. All of this feels so . . . open.”

This was the first time in two days the scenery was not pre-

dictable, Mahrree realized. As they had left Edge they traveled past field after field waiting for the plows to churn over the black and brown mud.

The landscape had a pattern—fields became spotted by houses, then were taken over by a village, then spotted again by houses, then turned back into undisturbed fields once more. And that's how everything blandly appeared for the last seventy-five miles. At first seeing the villages was exciting, but soon each place had an endlessly dull familiarity about it that wasn't even worth looking out the windows.

But now the fields were different somehow. Still dormant, but with a uniquely Idumean feel to them, as if they knew they were on the border of someplace important. The clods of dirt even seemed more precise as the occasional farmer squatted in the soil to analyze the dryness. And even the farmers wore tall silk hats, Mahrree couldn't help but notice, not floppy homemade ones fashioned out of straw like back in Edge.

Very few homes they saw as the coach whipped past them had any damage, with only a crumbled chimney here, or a shifted addition there. But everything seemed to be larger near Idumea. Windows, doors, rooflines—as if everyone near the city was two feet taller than the rest of the world.

“The damage here is odd,” Jaytsy remarked. “That neighborhood before had some crumbles of stone. But here—there's nothing.”

“I was thinking that too,” Mahrree said, leaning only slightly out of her husband's embrace. “It's as if the land tremor was feeling temperamental when it reached here, picking and choosing which houses to hit and which to miss.”

“I don't remember so many houses through here,” Perrin mumbled. “Used to be fields. Farms. Dairies. Ranches. Now it's all just these sprawling block homes with—what was that name? Zebra Eztates? They *named* the neighborhood?” Perrin rolled his eyes. “That's Idumea for you. Give something real the name of something imaginary,” he grumbled.

Mahrree was glad her husband couldn't see her face. She gave a warning look to both her teens, but they were already nodding slightly back to her. He was only getting started, so they should just stay out of his way until it was over.

“Look at that—that isn't a garden. What *is* that?” he ex-

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claimed before Mahrree could point out they didn't have a proper garden either. “It's just an expanse of short green grasses. What good is that but for goat feed? I think I even saw someone cutting that stuff back with some slicing contraption! Not even letting the sheep eat it? We need to cultivate every patch of land we can for either produce or orchards or livestock, but this—what a waste.”

“Well, Perrin,” Mahrree patted his arm more firmly as if his complaining would stop with just the right amount of force and rhythm, “at least they've taken your road labeling idea to heart. Every house we've passed has a number, and every road has a name.”

He shrugged behind her. “Used to be a time when you were promoted for defending a village or killing a Guarder. Now it's for making people *name* things,” he said dully.

Mahrree gently elbowed him. “I'm far prouder of you developing systems making it easier for soldiers to defend their territories than I am for when you single-handedly killed nearly a dozen Guarders.”

“Well, of course. So am I,” said Perrin dismissively.

“What kind of name is that, Father?” Peto asked, distracting his parents from the fact that Lieutenant Colonel Shin had been little more than a glorified law enforcer for many years. “Wapiti Way?”

“Oh, for pity's sake,” Perrin groaned. “Just let me die now. And there's another—Elephant Elms! Idumea's gone stupid. Mythical animals, likely mythical houses and people as well—”

“I remember how Terry described elephants,” Peto said. “Those giant animals in the carvings at the old ruins, right? With flapping ears? But what were wapiti?”

“Giant deer,” Mahrree told him. “With massive antlers. Terry saw carvings with three people riding them.”

“And zebras,” Perrin said moodily. “I'd give anything if those were real. Striped horses. Now that'd be something to see. They ran in huge herds, according to what Terry saw in the carvings. They'd stampede this place properly. I hate Idumea.”

Jaytsy sighed. In a loud whisper to her mother she fully intended her father to hear, she asked, “How long is he going to be on this self-righteous ‘Why I hate Idumea’ rant? Because, I have to tell you, he's sucking away all the excitement like a mosquito. I'm almost tempted to *smack him*.”

"I agree," Mahrree whispered loudly back and patted her husband's thigh.

Perrin reluctantly shrugged. "I'll complain only until your grandparents' house. Maybe again later, after I've seen some more of this place. Definitely probably on the way home, though, I must warn you. But I'll be good at my parents' house. All right?"

Jaytsy sighed again. "That's the best you can do, Father?"

Perrin couldn't contain his smile anymore. "No, but it's the best I'll *try* to do. When we get to the first road jam, you will be joining me in complaining, I'm sure."

"What's a road jam?" Peto asked.

Perrin leaned out the window. The houses were clustered more closely together here, and the people seemed to multiply as well.

"You're about to see one, Peto. Corporal!" he called out the window to the driver. "It's going to get messy up ahead. That's why they call it a jam. Remember, you're driving an army coach. People tend to be afraid of these. Don't be shy about blazing through, understood?"

"Yes, sir!" the cheerful corporal called down. It wasn't every day he was ordered to drive aggressively.

Peto's eyes grew big as he noticed the convergence of two roads and dozens of carts, wagons, and even another coach all approaching at the same time. He looked worriedly at his father.

"We're the biggest," Perrin said, sizing up the traffic. "That means we get to go first. The problem is getting everyone else to understand that. That's when things get complicated. Hold on!" and he wrapped his arm tighter around his wife.

The corporal cracked his whip and shouted, a bit too eagerly, "Make way! Make way!"

The Shins watched worriedly through the windows as people stepped quickly off the road, a wagon turned suddenly out of the way, several horses reared and nearly tossed their riders, and two carts stopped abruptly. The other coach on its way to intersect their path had to veer to their right to fall in behind the army coach. Its driver shouted some words that Peto and Jaytsy had never heard before, but made their mother blush.

As their coach made a sharp turn, Mahrree slid out of Perrin's grip and off of his lap, and Jaytsy crashed into Peto, smash-

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ing him against the side.

Perrin just smiled dourly. “Welcome to Idumea.”

“How many of those will we encounter?” Mahrree asked, breathless on the floor, and cautiously pulled herself to get back up onto the seat next to Perrin.

“Until we reach my parents’ place?” He gave her a steady-  
ing hand and brushed some dust off her skirt. “Considering it’s  
near dinner time and everyone’s trying to get home—maybe a  
dozen or so. It’s called ‘dawdle hour.’ Everyone’s delayed.”

His wife paled.

“My father had a good idea for regulating the roads, but no  
one would implement it. He thought people should take turns.  
Have someone hold up a red flag for a while for one road, then a  
blue flag for another, signaling when those on the road could go.  
Could have saved a lot of aggravation. But his idea was killed by  
the Administrator of Transportation.”

“Why?” Mahrree asked, baffled.

“That Administrator has a lot of connections with those who  
work in wagon repair. The more damage to vehicles, the more  
business they get. If they reduce accidents, they reduce work.”

Mahrree was shocked. “But, but . . . people get hurt in those  
accidents, don’t they?”

“Sometimes there are fatalities, but mostly people just get  
injured. So that’s more business for the doctors as well,” Perrin  
said with sad smugness. “The Administrator over Health and  
Wellness pointed that out.”

Mahrree was stunned silent, but Jaytsy had an opinion.  
“That’s terrible!”

“Ah,” Perrin smiled dismally at his daughter, “now you’re  
beginning to sound more like me.”

The next jam was a perfect illustration of why the adminis-  
trators over transportation, and health and wellness were upheld  
by their supporters. Two wagons had collided and spilled their  
cargos, one wheel was broken, and so was someone’s leg.

Perrin grumbled as he saw the mess. The traffic had slowed  
to an old woman’s shuffle as each wagon and rider turned to look  
at the scene as they passed.

“They call this ‘grandmothering’—creeping along to see  
what’s happened, then making a few snide comments about the  
general decline of people today. This may take some time. Cor-

poral?” he called up, “Can you turn around?”

“Already looking for a way, sir.”

Suddenly the coach door jerked open and there stood an older man with a jolly face, his great girth forced into a dark blue uniform full of medals. “Well, Perrin, since you might be delayed for a bit, I thought I’d come join you.”

“General Cush!” Perrin exclaimed. “I haven’t seen you in what, sixteen years?”

“Then I’m surprised you still recognize me. Never come home, never visit the old timers—” He smiled as he hefted himself into the coach which swayed under his weight.

Mahrree dove for the opposite bench between her children, grateful that she hadn’t been sitting on her husband’s lap again when the general surprised them. Jaytsy let out a tiny yelp of anxiousness, and Peto actually tried to sit at attention. Mahrree snatched Perrin’s cap from the dusty floor and tossed it to him. While General Cush was turning slowly to aim himself at the seat, Perrin frantically wiped off his cap and replaced it properly on his head.

By the time the general sat, making the coach sway dangerously in his direction, Perrin was the very model of a composed officer.

Even though General Cush wore a dust-free cap, Mahrree could tell he had only a fringe of dark hair remaining around his head, and a thin dark beard and mustache trimmed short to conform to the grooming standards of the army. But Mahrree was sure he was never in hand-to-hand combat with a Guarder that could grab hold of his beard. A Guarder could, however, get a handhold on his ample belly, she thought impolitely. Perhaps there was a size requirement for generals, and if they couldn’t meet it in height and bulk, they could make up for it in width.

General Cush stuck his head out of the window and spoke to an unseen officer on horseback. “Lieutenant Riplak, I’ll ride with the Shin family the rest of the way. You go on ahead and tell Mrs. Shin we’re in a jam at the beginning of the shopping district. They’re trapped just where I predicted they would be.”

The coach lurched again, caused by another weight joining the corporal holding the reins of the stalled horses.

“My best driver will get us out of here in a bit,” Cush assured them. “I have a feeling your corporal hasn’t seen congestion



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like this.”

“Cush, how’s my father?” Perrin asked urgently.

The general patted Perrin’s leg. “He may be sixty-eight, but he’s a tough old wolf. He’s very weak, though. Hasn’t had food or water for days, but the surgeon’s trying to get some down him. Some broken ribs possibly, concussion, and he lost blood from a deep gash in his leg. They found him trapped and unconscious in that storage room of his, in the cellar of the old garrison. He was under such a mountain of debris it took another three hours to dig him out. Frankly, we were all surprised he still had a pulse. Everyone, except for your mother.”

Perrin’s eyebrows furrowed. “What was he doing down there early on a Holy Day morning?”

Cush shrugged. “You know your father and his paperwork. Probably had a nightmare that one page in one file was slightly out of place, so he had to go see for himself.”

“Why didn’t anyone tell me? As soon as he was missing?”

“And what would you have done if a messenger had come that first day?” Cush’s tone turned sharp. “Would you have left your duty in Edge? Was there anything you could’ve done here to make a difference? Everyone in Idumea was searching for survivors. I doubt one more body would have found him faster.”

“But my mother—”

“Was the one who wouldn’t let anyone send you a messenger,” Cush cut him off. Then, more gently he added, “Not until she knew what kind of news to send you. Duty first, Lieutenant Colonel. Remember?”

Perrin nodded, but he slouched and stared blankly out the window.

Mahrree tried to catch his eye, but felt Cush’s gaze instead.

The general brightened as he took in the scene across from him. “Now, speaking of remembering one’s duty . . . Perrin, you’ve yet to introduce me to your family.” He nudged Perrin with his elbow.

Perrin blinked and sat up. “I’m sorry, sir,” he said formally, and Mahrree was impressed with how quickly he shifted back into officer mode. “Advising General Aldwyn Cush, may I present my wife Mahrree, my daughter Jaytsy, and my son Peto.”

The general smiled broadly. “Wonderful to finally meet you. Joriana was hoping you’d be along. Talks about you all the time

to my wife.”

“Thank you, sir,” Mahrree smiled. “The Shins have been trying to get us here for a long time. I guess they decided to do something drastic to force the visit.”

Cush chuckled pleasantly.

The coach had turned around and was heading down a narrow side road, filling it nearly entirely. Mahrree pitied anyone thinking of coming in the opposite direction; they likely were fleeing into adjoining alleys.

“I find the lack of damage here remarkable,” Mahrree said as she peered out the window. “The reports suggested Idumea was in far worse condition.”

“Some areas are, ma’am,” the general said soberly. “The land tremor acted like a wave in a small pool. Some of our men on the towers could actually see a wave ripple from the north, then suddenly bounce back from some point in the south. Where two crests of the waves met, that’s where the greatest damage occurred. Everywhere else simply rode out the waves with just a few things falling off of shelves. Strangest thing I’ve ever experienced. Many of the poorer and older neighborhoods were completely demolished, though. And one of the crests hit the old garrison causing complete devastation.”

“As if the land underneath the area is all water, or some other kind of fluidic matter?” Mahrree wondered.

“Very good, Mrs. Shin. One of our scientists suggested that at the briefing this morning.” The general elbowed Perrin again. “I didn’t know you married a thinking woman. Makes me wonder, what was she thinking when she agreed to marry you?” He laughed loudly at his own joke, and Mahrree smiled at Perrin’s discomfort.

“So, young man,” the general sized up Peto. “Do you have aspirations to follow in your father’s footsteps?”

Mahrree watched her son closely from the corner of her eye. She knew the answer, as did Perrin, but she wondered if Peto would have the courage to confess the truth to the second most powerful officer in the world. His grandfather still hadn’t accepted the answer, expecting that time and maturity would change his mind.

Peto squirmed a little as he addressed the large general. “Not really, sir.”

“This is another reason why I hate Idumea.”

“Not really?” Cush blinked, incredulous. “Three generations of Shin men have been generals in Idumea, well it *will* be three if Perrin here ever shapes up,” he nudged Perrin again who smiled obligingly, “and you don’t want to be the fourth? Why not?”

Peto shifted under the study of General Cush. “Because I don’t like horses and I don’t like getting hurt.”

The general was thoughtful for a moment before he burst out in a short laugh. “Good reasons, boy! So you’re not like your father, eh? You look a lot like him, from what I remember. But it’s a good thing for your mother you’re not Young Perrin Shin.”

Jaytsy began to smile. “Just what kind of trouble did Father cause, General? Sounds like you’ve known him a long time.”

General Cush pointed a chubby finger at Jaytsy. “I *like* this girl, Perrin. Watch out for her! Beautiful young lady.”

Jaytsy blushed.

“Miss Shin, I’ve known this boy,” and he slapped Perrin’s thigh loudly, “since he was just a little thing. What kind of trouble? Perrin, hold up your hand. No, the other one. You know what I mean.”

Reluctantly, Perrin held up his left hand.

The general took him roughly by the wrist and forced his fingers together.

Perrin winced slightly.

“Hmm. There. See it? How that last finger bulges out from the others? I can tell you exactly how that happened.”

“Father already told us,” Peto said. “An incident with the Guards, right after they were married.”

“Wait a minute,” said Mahrree slowly. “You weren’t injured in that, except for a lot of scrapes and cuts.”

“I didn’t tell you about my hand. You were sick with expecting Jaytsy, and I didn’t want to worry you.” He was almost believable.

“Liar!” Mahrree exclaimed. “I noticed that gimpy finger of yours before we were married. I even asked you about it once, remember? You gave me some lame explanation. I can’t remember now . . .”

“So General,” Perrin said abruptly, pulling his hand from Cush’s grip and turning to face him properly. “How are the rescue and recovery operations going on here? I’d like to see what we

could do to improve our response time in Edge.”

The general looked at him for a moment, then ignored his diversionary tactic and turned to his family. “He jumped. Off the stockade fence that surrounded the old garrison in Idumea.” He turned slowly to look at Perrin. “To impress a *girl!*”

Mahrree’s eyebrows rose. “Please tell me he was younger than twenty-seven when he did that.”

The general smiled. “He was eleven.”

“Ohh,” Mahrree said, remembering. “You told me,” she rounded on to her husband, “that when you were eleven someone *sat* on your hand! I thought that sounded fishy. But you jumped?”

Perrin looked at the expectant faces of his two children. It was time for damage control. “It was a foolish thing to do, and I was *not* trying to impress a girl. I was trying to prove her wrong. I seem to have a compulsive need to do that, quite to my detriment.” He glanced at his wife.

The general began to chuckle, and Mahrree snorted.

“She said it would be stupid to climb up there and jump—” Perrin tried to explain.

“So you proved her right,” Peto finished for him.

His sister giggled.

“I almost succeeded,” Perrin defended. “I landed quite well on my feet, but my momentum caused me to fall forward and I fell on my hand.”

“Is that also how you got that scar on your forehead?” Mahrree prodded. “That was the first thing I noticed about you. Also another injury you never elaborated on.”

The general cleared his throat expectantly.

Perrin gave him a sidelong glance. “Yes, I injured my head at that time as well.”

“HA!” the general barked so loudly that each Shin jumped. “That’s not entirely accurate—I know. That girl who was arguing with you was *my daughter*, and she’d fallen for young Perrin here something fierce.”

Mahrree burst into a grin. While she knew her husband didn’t have the highest opinion of the Cush—his father called him “Mal’s lapdog,” which made Mahrree wonder just how large a lap the Chairman possessed—she recognized a wealth of information when she met one, and was always eager to uncover the mysteries from the past. “General, I have a feeling I’ll need to spend some

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time with you. I don't remember hearing this from Mrs. Shin.”

The general laughed. “I don't think she knew!”

Perrin looked down at his hands guiltily.

“But don't worry, my daughter got over that puppy love quite quickly, because of what he did to her.” He jerked his thumb in Perrin's direction.

“Wait, wait,” Mahrree said. “Let me guess—she's the girl who 'sat' on his hand?”

“That's what he told everyone, too: my daughter's fault he dislocated his finger because she sat on it! Well, when she heard that, and got in trouble by her mother, she marched over to the Shins' house and had it out with him.” Cush smacked his hand loudly again on Perrin's thigh, which would be red by the time they reached the Shins' house. “She didn't care he'd just come back from the fort's surgeon and was in terrible pain. She was going to have her revenge for his lie.”

Jaytsy clapped her hands and squealed. “What did she say to you, Father?”

Perrin looked at each member of his family before glancing at the general. “This is another reason why I hate Idumea,” he said in a low voice.

The general laughed. “Tell them, Lieutenant Colonel. And that's an order!”

Perrin sighed loudly. “She didn't say anything. She just took a stick and—” He pointed to his scar on his forehead.

“She hit you?” Mahrree exclaimed. “Really? After our first two debates, I wanted to beat you with a stick, too.”

Over the laughter in the coach Perrin said loudly, “I did apologize—”

“—Six year later, at her wedding!” the general pointed out.

“I hate Idumea,” Perrin said under his breath as his family howled. “Of all the people to rescue us from a traffic jam . . .”

When his family finally regained their composure, Perrin, trying to sound pleasant, asked, “So Cush, how's Versula?”

“Doing quite well. Her husband's been a *full* colonel for a few years now,” the general nudged him again, “and commander of the garrison. My daughter found a man even more promising than Perrin here.”

“Well—Qayin Thorne, was it? He was a few years older, too, Cush, when they married,” Perrin reminded him. “He was

graduating from Command School when Versula was, what, seventeen?"

"And their boy is graduating at the end of the season himself," the general puffed up. "Lemuel's a most ambitious young man. Sharp mind, aggressive leader, wants to command his own fort. If there's time, I should introduce you two. I think my grandson could learn a few things from you."

"Well, I'd be happy to meet with him," Perrin said, and Mahrree could tell he didn't mean it. "As long as he isn't carrying a stick," he added quietly.

Cush elbowed him once more. "Now, about that scar on his right arm—young Mr. Shin, you'll appreciate this . . ."

Perrin kept his eyes trained on the scenery moving outside of the coach, and Mahrree smirked at his behavior. It seemed the general had quite a good memory. Mahrree realized they were passing the famous shops she'd heard so much about over the years, but listening to her husband's more tarnished days was far more entertaining than looking at dresses displayed in the clear windows.

As the coach turned into the row of old large houses, Perrin sat up and interrupted the general. "You'll have to finish that story . . . never. We're almost there."

The Shin family put their heads out of the windows to see large trees canopying above them, the first leaf buds beginning to show.

Mahrree bit her lip in worry. How ridiculously small and quaint her house must have appeared the first time Perrin's parents came to visit. Despite the three additions, it was still just a fraction of the size of these majestic stone houses with elaborate gardens.

Each yard seemed to try to outdo the other in color and vibrancy. The earliest flowers were already blooming, and Mahrree couldn't imagine how the later flowers would find any room to grow. She groaned inwardly about her pitiful little garden now complete with two hunting spits in the back garden and without a vining and blooming trellis anywhere near them.

But, Mahrree realized, Mrs. Shin had never said anything unkind or revealed any disappointment in their home. Yet now Mahrree could see why the Shins so frequently suggested it was time for Perrin to move on to something grander, because, as she

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noticed in one back garden, the size of their current home was about the same size as the sheds.

Mahrree turned slowly to look at her husband.

His face was frozen in anxious anticipation.

“Why did you never tell me where they lived?” she whispered to him.

“What? You never asked.”

“In all these years, it never occurred to you to tell me that . . . Look at these houses! I mean, I can’t imagine how you could grow up in this—”

“I didn’t grow up here,” he reminded her. “And I didn’t think you’d care. My parents moved here when I started Command School. King Oren worried his influence was slipping away, and thought that moving the High General into the mansion that he had built for his—”

Perrin stopped and looked at his children, who were gaping out the window and likely heard only bits of what he said. Still, Mahrree raised her eyebrows in warning at him.

“—for his *friend* and her children,” Perrin finally decided to call Oren’s favorite mistress and sons, “would help secure my father’s allegiance. The king’s *friend* had already left him. When the Administrators took over, they continued to let my parents stay here. No one needed a mansion—”

Mahrree’s mouth went dry at the word *mansion*.

“—except maybe the administrator over law who always seems to have another—”

Mahrree gave him a deliberate look that told him the sordid relationships of the Administrator of Law didn’t need to be detailed to their two impressionable teens.

General Cush winked knowingly at her.

“So you’re telling me,” she started slowly, “that we’re about to enter one of the largest—”

“Second largest, actually,” Cush informed her. “In the world.”

“The second largest mansion *in the world* that used to be home to King Oren’s sons?”

“Yes,” Perrin said simply.

“I don’t believe it! Us? We don’t belong in something like that!”

Perrin waved that off, trying to look nonchalant, but he was

too stiff. “It’s not quite as grand as the kings’ old mansion. Chairman Nicko Mal lives in that one now. But my mother appreciated the large house for entertaining visiting officers, holding dinners—you know, all that stuff.”

Mahrree’s mouth fell open. “No, actually, I don’t know all that ‘stuff’. Is that still expected?”

The general laughed lightly. “The generals are expected to put on a show. And the High General of Idumea? Well, his house must be the best, and his shows the best, right?”

Mahrree gulped and looked at her children.

They pulled their eyes from the windows, shared her worried look, and glanced at their father who was watching out the window.

He smiled glumly. “And . . . there it is.”

His family twisted to poke their heads out the windows—  
Big wasn’t a big enough word.

Fanfare definitely should have been playing.

The two soldiers holding shut the large iron gates certainly could have held horns in their other hands. There would have been plenty of time for them to play a melody or two as they opened the gates and the four horses of the coach trotted easily up the long cobblestone drive to a house far bigger than the Upper Level Schools of Edge, all put together.

It was a home Hycymum Peto would have walked by again and again in hopes of catching someone’s attention, then securing an invitation to tour. Getting her back out would have required all the soldiers in the area.

The stone was perfectly matched and rose to great heights, with enormous windows scalloped by silk curtains. On the first level were five massive, rectangular windows extending on either side of two ornately carved great front doors, attended to by another soldier who seemed to be watching for them. The second full level had another row of matching windows, only slightly smaller. At least a dozen chimneys rose up from the house, covered in ivy which also draped parts of the house in such an artful pattern that Mahrree wondered if someone had deliberately guided the vines to grow that way.

“Now *that* is a house you could get lost in,” Peto said with a hint of planning in his voice.

“Don’t even think it, whatever you’re thinking!” Mahrree



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warned him. Turning to Perrin she asked, “Is there a back door?”

“Yes, three in fact. Why?”

“Look at us!” she wailed in a whisper. “We’ve been traveling for two days and a night and look like nothing that should walk through those!”

The coach lurched to a stop at the terrifying front doors.

“Please, Perrin! Ask them to go around.”

Perrin just smiled. “Don’t worry—my mother’s great, remember?”

The general chuckled at Mahrree’s fretting. “Mrs. Shin, it’s not like there’s a formal dinner tonight.”

The coach doors opened, and the Shins saw the great oak doors open as well. Joriana Shin rushed out, holding up her skirts as she hurried down the perfectly aligned flat stone stairs. For a woman in her late sixties, she ran with remarkable speed and, as always, grace. No one in the world moved quite as smoothly as Mrs. Joriana Shin, even when she was beside herself with worry and joy.

“You’re here! You’re here!” she yelled uncharacteristically. Mahrree had never heard more than absolute calm from her. But this evening Joriana Shin wasn’t anything like the picture of Idumean elegance she normally was. While she was still slender and shapely, there was a sense of frumpled panic in her movement. Her skirt, while still finer than anything Mahrree owned, was wrinkled, the sleeves of her blouse were rolled up, and a small lock of graying hair was out of place and falling in front of her eyes, with no hat in sight to shield the rest.

For Joriana, that was inexcusable.

Perrin bounded out of the coach first and caught her in a firm embrace. “As fast as we could, Mother. Are you all right?”

“I am now!” She squeezed her son, not caring who saw her public display of affection. She reached out an arm, not ready to let go of her son. “Mahrree!” She caught her daughter-in-law who had stepped out of the coach with the help of the footman, and pulled her into the hug. “I can’t tell you how excited I am you and the children came! I’ve been trying to convince Perrin to bring you for years. Who knew it would take something like this to finally get him to do it.”

Mahrree chuckled softly as she patted her mother-in-law on the other side of her husband. “Actually, Mother Shin, I had to

convince him to let us come.”

“Mother, here’s an idea,” Perrin offered, trapped uncomfortably between the two women. “Release me so I can see Father, and so you can maul your grandchildren.”

“Yes, of course! Look how tall they’ve grown!” she cried as they unloaded from the coach and beamed at their grandmother who rushed them. “And thank you, Aldwyn. I appreciate you bringing them here.”

“Anytime, Joriana,” said Cush as he emerged from the coach. “Perrin, your father’s in the study. Easier access for the surgeon. I’ll take you there in case you’ve forgotten the way. Your mother seems to be in the middle of a smothering.”

Perrin looked back at Mahrree and held out his hand.

Mahrree was startled. He never held her hand in public, and rarely in their house. After they were first engaged he told her he needed to keep his sword hand free, along with his number two-hand for punching the enemy.

But perhaps being at a house guarded with armed soldiers, he felt for the first time that he could spare one hand to hold hers.

She willingly took his hand, and he gripped hers tightly to pull her close. She’d never seen him behave like this, and wasn’t quite sure what it meant. But she didn’t have time to wonder, because he pulled her through those massive doors.

It was called a fo-yay, she found out later, but never figured out why. All she knew was that the ceiling stretched to the top of the second floor. On one side was a long side table covered with vases and flowers, and on the opposite wall was a row of carved hooks to hold visiting soldiers’ caps and jackets. Perrin tossed his cap casually onto one of the hooks, as if he’d done it every day for years, then continued to pull his stunned wife to the Grand Hall.

It was easy to figure out that name. It was a hall. And it was grand.

Grand enough to put their entire house in it, Mahrree thought. The ceiling extended up to the second floor again, and for the first time Mahrree saw chandeliers, filled with hundreds of candles to light the Grand Hall for guests, but not tonight. The Hall extended all the way to both ends of the house, with massive fireplaces on both the west wing and the east wing. Doors along either side of the Hall lead to bedrooms, washing rooms, and,

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Mahrree fancied, probably another house because . . . why not? This was Idumea, after all.

On either end of the Grand Hall were tall, clear windows. The setting sun in the west hit the Hall directly, bathing it in a warm golden hue, and Mahrree realized that the rising sun would also fill the Hall with light. For some reason that made her smile.

Coming down the middle of the mansion, and opening on to the Grand Hall and the fo-yay, was a staircase.

Well, that seemed to be an understatement for something wide enough that could have accommodated their entire family walking up it side by side. The sides were an open fretwork—Mahrree learned later it was called, likely because any mothers of young children would fret their heads would get stuck in it—the wood railings carved in an elaborate design of flowers, vines, and even a squirrel or two, as if climbing the twenty or so stairs was like climbing a tree to the second level.

All Mahrree could think initially was, What a misery to dust all those grooves . . .

The fretful fretwork continued along a railing of the upper level extending through both the east and west wings, creating an open balcony. Along the balcony were additional doors, many of which Mahrree suspected led to nowhere because she couldn't imagine what else could possibly be there. But maybe the house-wide balcony existed only to allow people to stroll along and look out the front windows across the Grand Hall, or down upon its floor.

The floor! Mahrree noticed it only briefly as her husband dragged her along the floor that was also wood, but *such* wood. Not a nick, not a ding, not even any knotholes, but utterly smooth and polished so highly that she slipped and slid along it as if it were ice. She couldn't imagine why anyone would want such a useless floor that didn't catch your boots as you trotted along it, but then again she was Edgy, which meant all she could think was, Just how long does it take to sweep up this place?

With her senses fully overwhelmed, and her mouth gaping stupidly, she followed her husband and General Cush as they headed for the first large door on the left of the fo-yay.

Cush quietly pushed open the door to allow them to enter, and again Perrin had to drag her along because she could no longer make her feet move properly.

She now knew the meaning of “rich.” The study walls were lined with more carved wood, this time in the form of shelves higher than her head that held more books than Mahrree knew existed. Their firm leather covers were so carefully aligned that it seemed none of them ever left their positions. The windows were draped in deep red silk curtains, pulled halfway shut to keep the light subdued. A large desk to the side seemed to be out of place there, as if it had been shoved a bit wonkily to make room. On top of the desk were obsessively neat stacks of papers, quills perfectly lined up and standing at attention in a holder, and three bottles of ink patiently waiting for something interesting to happen.

That was also the impression the soldier sitting next to the desk gave off. He was perched on a cushioned chair at a semblance of attention, but with a hint of hopeless boredom in his eyes.

And there, in the middle of the opulent study, was the wide bed which made Perrin stop suddenly in the room. Mahrree tried not to skid into the back of him, but the thick rug on the floor didn't stop her fast enough. Perrin noticed only his father lying very still in the white sheets. Mahrree peeked cautiously around her husband, afraid of what she might see.

The general looked much paler and thinner than the last time he visited Edge five moons ago, and Mahrree had never seen him out of his uniform, which seemed wrong at the moment. By the concerned frowning of Perrin's eyebrows, she wondered if he thought that way too. The general wore his white army undershirt, however, which still made him officially presentable. His cap sat on the desk, ready for him to don it.

Perrin's grip on Mahrree's hand became so firm that she patted his hand gently with her other, hoping he'd ease up a bit. He did so only slightly. They both ignored the sound of footsteps behind them, too engrossed in staring at the jarring form of Relf Shin. It was as if seeing a bird stopped ludicrously in midflight, hanging impossibly in the air, and wondering if it would fall to the ground or eventually, miraculously, suddenly fly again—

“You must be the famous Lieutenant Colonel Shin,” said an unfamiliar but friendly voice next to them. “Mrs. Shin's been talking non-stop about you.”

A middle-aged man gently pushed past them to the general and, as if breaking through some invisible barrier, picked up his

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wrist and began to count. Judging by the overcoat he wore he was a surgeon, likely from the garrison. But still it seemed to Mahrree an offense to Nature to disturb the tenuous bird.

Next to her Perrin fidgeted uncomfortably, also unsure of what to think or do next.

The surgeon nodded at them amiably, not noticing their reticence. “Pulse steady, but weak. Unchanged,” he reported. He glanced toward the study door, noticed they were alone, and said in a low voice, “About your mother, Lieutenant Colonel—I’m rather glad you’re all here. I haven’t been able to calm her since the tremor. She’s hardly slept in five days. I understand her grandchildren have come, too. It might do her some good to take them to the shops and spend some gold, just to get her mind on something else than sitting and fretting. Ma’am,” he nodded to Mahrree. “Get her some distractions, then convince her to at least take a nap?”

“I’ll do what I can,” Mahrree said.

“Doctor, what do you think?” Perrin asked, gesturing to his motionless father.

“I have hope,” the surgeon said cautiously. “We need to keep getting food and water into him, but he’s very weak. I’m not even sure that he’s fully regained consciousness yet. He opens his eyes, but can’t seem to communicate. Maybe some new voices will help.” He patted Perrin on the back.

Since the surgeon had touched the High General, it seemed obvious that was the next thing for them to do. Perrin released Mahrree’s hand and pulled a chair over to his father’s bedside. He sat and looked blankly at her for suggestions.

Mahrree tiptoed to the side of her father-in-law, picked up his limp hand, and put it in Perrin’s. “You’ll likely detect any movement first in his hand,” she explained. She didn’t know, really. It just struck her as a good idea.

Perrin smiled dismally at her and looked at his father’s hand. He cleared his throat roughly and announced, “Soldier, you’re on duty and out of uniform! When you come out of this, I’ll expect an answer for that.”

Mahrree smiled at her husband and squeezed his shoulder. “I’ll go check on the children and your mother. You stay here and keep berating him. It worked for Shem years ago, it just might work for him.”

## The Mansions of Idumea

“Except that officers,” murmured the surgeon as he lifted up Relf’s eyelids and peered into his unresponsive eyes, “never listen to anybody.”

## Chapter 7 ~ “Finally found a way to get them to Idumea.”

An hour later the Shin family was installed in their new quarters, three large bedrooms on the main level of the east wing of the house, usually reserved for visiting officers from outer lying forts.

While Perrin sat with his unconscious father telling him all about the land tremor in Edge, Joriana gave Mahrree, Jaytsy, and Peto a tour of the magnificent house and showed them their rooms.

Mahrree could hardly take it all in. During the tour of both levels, taking in rooms and furnishings and tables and windows and fireplaces and candlesticks and washing rooms and stables and gardens, Mahrree kept asking herself, What have we got ourselves into? Never had she imagined such luxury or grandeur. It was most overwhelming and, when she thought of her little house that seemed to shrink by the minute, humiliating. She belonged there as much as those raccoons belonged in her wardrobe. In a moment she would probably be noticed, screamed at, and then would have to run away with someone’s stolen stocking.

Except when Mahrree saw the massive bed she and Perrin would share. Suddenly, she realized she just might be able to tolerate living there for a time, if the mansion would tolerate her.

“A bed! A real bed!”

“You don’t have a bed anymore, Mahrree?” Joriana said.

“Under all kinds of debris I do. Perrin and I have been sleeping on the sofa. He tends to hog it all, too.” She slid her hand longingly across the smooth and clean covers. “At least we could

move it back inside a few days ago.”

“That beautiful sofa was outside?” Joriana asked, horrified.

“It really wasn’t that bad,” Mahrree waved off the concern. “It served us well. And I don’t think it was damaged too much.”

“But the sun could have faded the colors!”

“Well, usually there was a soldier sleeping on it during the day, so it was mostly protected.”

It seemed silly to Mahrree to be fretting about the sofa now, especially after she saw five in the enormous sitting room. Who cares about furniture when lives are at stake? But right then Mahrree could focus only the beautiful bed covered with light blue matching blankets and pillows, just begging her to test it out.

Her mother-in-law noticed. “I think you best try it first, to see if it’s comfortable enough. If not, there are four more bedrooms you can try. Go on—lay down.”

Mahrree shook her head at the thought of four more rooms and laid down gingerly, not sure how to negotiate around all the pillows. She closed her eyes, sank into utter delight, and sighed.

Her mother-in-law chuckled quietly. “So I suppose this will do? Oh, it’s so good to have you all here!”

Mahrree felt marvelous for two seconds until Peto came into the room. “Mother, I’m hungry.”

“I think that’s all you ever say anymore,” she mumbled with her eyes still closed.

“Dinner will be ready soon.” Joriana kissed her grandson on the forehead. “Cook will ring the bell when it’s ready.”

“You have a cook?” Jaytsy joined them and looked around. “Oh, Mother, this room’s nice, but not as nice as mine. Everything in there is a shade of green.”

“I have the red room,” Peto bragged as if red were somehow inherently better than green.

“Yes, we have a cook, Jaytsy,” her grandmother told her. “And also two maids who live upstairs as well, in the smaller bedrooms I told you about, because this house is just too large—”

So that’s how you sweep this all up, Mahrree thought groggily as she sank deeper into the bed. You pay others to do it. Why didn’t I ever think of that?

“—so you won’t need to make your beds in the morning,” Joriana told her grandchildren.

“Oh, Mother?” Jaytsy said in an annoying sing-song voice



“Finally found a way to get them to Idumea.”

she saved for when she knew she was about to win an argument.

“Hmm?” Mahrree answered from the bed, her eyelids pressed together in a futile attempt to ignore her children.

“A cook *and* two maids . . . exactly why is it you don’t want Father to become a general?”

Mahrree sighed. “Ah Jayts, I hardly remember right now.”

And that was the truth. One somebody to cook, and two more somebodies to clean up? Then all she’d have to do was take care of her husband? It sounded like Paradise . . .

“Perrin not be a general?” Joriana exclaimed. “Why, it’s in his blood! Mahrree, surely you must see that.”

“But Edge doesn’t need a general, does it Mother Shin?” Mahrree murmured, the conversation blurring in her mind as she barely considered that maybe all of this was just a dream, and she’d wake up a moment later on her old sofa with another kink in her neck. “If he gets promoted to general, where do we go?”

“Why, here of course!” Joriana squealed so loudly Mahrree realized she would have woken up from the ringing in her ears had it been a dream. The neck kink might have been preferable.

“Oh Mahrree, children, you’d love it here! You’re staying for three weeks, right? That’s what I said in the message, and when Relf improves we can show you what you’re missing.”

Mahrree cringed inwardly. They had no idea *if* Relf would improve, but right now Joriana was clinging to any kind of happiness she could snatch. Mahrree wasn’t about to bat that away.

“Perrin’s been ill-tempered about Idumea for years now,” Joriana went on desperately, “but I’m sure you’ll enjoy it. And if anyone can change his mind, it’s you. Imagine how wonderful it’d be if you were here all the time.”

Mahrree smiled from her prone position. “You’re right, Mother Shin. It’s wonderful to be here right now.”

A bell dinged from down the Grand Hall.

“Peto, I believe that’s for you,” Joriana said cheerfully, as if everything was working out just as she planned. “After dinner I’ll relieve Perrin and sit with Relf so you can start telling him—”

“No, no!” Mahrree forced herself to sit up, even though every muscle in her body disagreed with the effort. “That’s what we’re here for. I mean, not to convince Perrin to love Idumea, but to take care of the general. It’s my turn after dinner. You show me how to get the water down him, then you take your grandchildren

on a walking tour of this marvelous neighborhood. Doctor's orders."

"No, those are *not* the doctor's orders. He told me to take them shopping," Joriana told her smartly. "But, since the shops are closed for the night, maybe a quick stroll around the neighborhood? Stretch out those long legs of yours?" She squeezed Jaytsy's arm.

On the way through the Grand Hall down to the eating room—Grand Eating Room, Jaytsy decided it should've been named because of its massive size and the table that could seat forty people, but Peto countered that the name suggested the room was eating *them*—they passed the study.

Mahrree crept over to the open door and listened to Perrin talking to his father, giving him details of each rescue effort. He still held Relf's hand but gestured enthusiastically with his other. At least the soldier on guard seemed entertained.

During dinner, Mahrree decided that under any other circumstance she would have felt guilty eating as she did. The spread before them was even greater than at Harvest Festival, and although Mahrree knew the food was also destined to feed the maids, the cook, the soldier sitting at guard, and the stable hands, she was still overwhelmed at the variety.

Maybe it was because she knew back home in Edge people were scraping together the last of their larders to make just one satisfying meal. It was only with the worry about her father-in-law, and the anxious prodding of her nearly hysterical mother-in-law to "Eat! Eat more!"—probably because her husband couldn't—that Mahrree gorged herself to be nearly sick.

She was just starting to feel queasy, and saw the same affliction on her daughter's face but not her son's, when Perrin appeared at the door. "Mother—I felt him move. I'm sure of it!"

Joriana dropped her fork, leaped from her chair, and rushed across the Grand Hall to the study. Her son, grandchildren and daughter-in-law followed close behind.

Joriana sat in Perrin's chair and gestured madly. "Where? What?"

"His hand, Mother," Perrin motioned for her to take it. "He squeezed my hand."

She turned to him. "You held *his hand*?"

Perrin reddened a little. "Well, the best way to sense move-

“Finally found a way to get them to Idumea.”

ment.” He glanced accusingly at his wife.

Joriana scooped up her husband’s hand and squeezed it. “Relf?”

He moved a few fingers on her hand in a purposeful manner.

“Mahrree, get the soup!” she cried.

By the time Mahrree returned, knowing she had sloshed some broth on the shiny floor in her hurry but that’s what maids were for, Perrin had propped up his limp father and Joriana was holding a mug of water to Relf’s lips, which he appeared to be drinking, although much dribbled down his chin and to a napkin tucked into his white undershirt.

“His eyes moved!” Peto shouted, startling his grandmother.

“I saw it too!” Jaytsy said, but quieter.

Mahrree set down the bowl on the desk as Joriana dabbed fastidiously at Relf’s face with another napkin.

“You’re going to be all right, Father,” Perrin said, still supporting him.

“Yes,” they all heard the whisper. “Now.”

No one took a walk that evening. The family sat clustered around the general spoon-feeding him broth, helping him sip water, noticing parts of him that moved, and waiting to hear him whisper something else. Even the staff sergeant on guard duty for the night put down his book and watched intently for the High General’s progress.

Twice the surgeon came by to check on him, and late that evening he smiled guardedly.

“Pulse is stronger, he’s swallowing on his own—Mrs. Shin, Lieutenant Colonel, I think he’s going to make it.”

“Thank the Creator!” Joriana breathed and sat next to her husband on his bed. She took up his hand again and unexpectedly kissed it.

Mahrree’s eyes widened. She’d never seen open affection between her in-laws, but she realized that didn’t mean it never happened. She caught her husband’s eye and smiled at him.

Perrin’s eyes were shiny as he watched his father weakly squeeze his wife’s hand.

Relf forced his eyes open to briefly gaze at Joriana. When he whispered to her, “Yes, and thank *you*,” Mahrree thought it was the sweetest thing she’d ever seen an officer do. Relf’s eyes closed in exhaustion, and his hand slipped from hers.

“I’ll have two assistants come by every hour through the night to get more fluids into him,” the surgeon said quietly. “They’ll let me know if anything changes. I’ll be by again at dawn. In the meantime, all of you get some rest. And congratulations,” he smiled at Joriana. “You married one tough wolf.”

As the surgeon wrote out instructions, Perrin said, “Mother, get some sleep now that the danger’s passed. I’ll sit with him for the night and help the assistants—”

“Oh, no you won’t! Now more than ever I need to be—”

Mahrree gestured to Jaytsy and Peto to follow her out of the study.

“Where are we going?” Jaytsy asked as the argument continued.

“To end this. Can’t have anyone hearing the High General’s wife and son *debating* now, can we?” Mahrree chuckled. “Bad enough the staff sergeant and surgeon are witnessing it.”

She led them into one of the guest rooms with two beds in it, pulled off the pillow and blanket from one bed, handed them to Jaytsy, and pulled the bedding from the other to give to Peto. Mahrree picked up a small stuffed chair and nodded toward the study. Smiling, the three of them returned to hear Perrin and his mother still arguing over who should spend the night.

It was quite easy to make up their beds on the chairs since they were both standing, hands on hips, trying to prove who was more exhausted.

The surgeon, taking the sleeping general’s pulse one more time, nodded in approval as Mahrree and the children laid the blankets on the chairs, placed the pillows, and then gently led Perrin and Joriana to sit each in one of the seats. It wasn’t until they sat that they realized they both could spend the night by Relf’s side.

“Besides, Perrin,” Mahrree explained, “I don’t feel like sharing that glorious bed tonight, since you had the coach’s bench all to yourself.”

A little later Mahrree slipped into bed and melted into silk sheets. She didn’t even know sheets could be made out of silk, and they were more slippery than she would’ve imagined. She felt like oil trying to make an impression on water. Cozy under the thick woven blankets that she didn’t have to share, she dreamed about living in a big house. All she could remember later was that

“Finally found a way to get them to Idumea.”

it was noisy and chaotic, but wonderful.

Early in the morning Mahrree sat up and immediately thought of her father-in-law. She dressed and tiptoed down the Grand Hall, past the fo-yay and to the first door. Sunlight wasn't yet peeking through the massive eastern windows, but the coming dawn illuminated her way enough that she didn't bother with a candle. Two surgeon's assistants were just leaving, and they nodded a brief greeting to Mahrree.

“Surgeon will be by in an hour,” one of them whispered. “General continues to slowly improve.”

“Thank you,” she whispered back, and the men headed toward the kitchen and the middle back door.

She crept to the study door to find her husband and his mother both sound asleep in their chairs, their pillows cockeyed, and their blankets askew. Mahrree cringed in sympathy about how their backs and necks would feel when they awoke, and made her way to the general's bed. His eyes were closed but even in the filtered light his color looked a little better.

Relieved that he was still all right, Mahrree turned to leave.

“Don't go,” she heard a whisper.

She turned back to him. “General?”

His eyes barely opened. He slowly held up his hand and Mahrree knelt down on the floor next to him, taking his hand.

“Can I get you something?” She was startled by her desire to hug him. One never hugs a general. Perrin told her that the day she had met General Shin before they married and asked Perrin why he didn't embrace his father. No one had ever broken that regulation, so she squeezed his hand instead.

“No. Just good to see you, Mahrree,” he whispered. His eyes closed again and his hand relaxed in hers.

Mahrree didn't know what to do next. Perrin and Joriana still slept, and the night guard was reading one of the books from the shelf by candlelight. He looked up at her and she nodded politely to keep reading. Her position wasn't very comfortable, but she didn't want to shift and bother the general. So she stayed there, trying to discern if her father-in-law was still awake and wondering why no one had ever told her how to take care of sick people.

For the next hour or so she remained on the rug, holding her father-in-law's limp hand, counting the books on the shelf, and

studying the painting of High General Pere Shin that hung over the desk. In the portly man's stern expression Mahrree could see a bit of her husband—his grandson. He seemed overly severe—as a High General should be, she assumed—but even in the painting there was a hint of a twinkle in his eyes.

Mahrree nodded at him once, silently apologizing for breaking his first rule of the army by entering the forest to find a Guarder so many years ago. In the dim light of the coming morning, she thought he winked back at her.

The fort surgeon arrived just as the sun was rising. When he noticed the sleeping figures of Joriana and Perrin, and Mahrree keeping vigil next to the bed, he rushed over. "Has he taken a turn for the worse? Why didn't anyone send for me?"

"No, no," Mahrree assured him. "He even spoke recently. I just didn't . . . feel like getting up."

The doctor picked up the general's other arm to check his pulse and nodded, satisfied.

"Stronger. Good." He leaned over to lift the general's eyelids when Relf opened his eyes suddenly.

"I can do that myself now, Doctor." His voice was low and threatening, but his eyes were soft.

"Even better," the surgeon smiled broadly. "Still ornery. Cush called you an old wolf, you know."

"And so did you last night. My eyes may be closed, but my ears never are." The general smiled faintly and squeezed his daughter-in-law's hand.

Many movements and motions that week had startled Mahrree, but nothing more so than the gentle pressure applied to her hand by the High General of Idumea. Something was different about Relf Shin.

"Relf!" Joriana roused herself. Perrin woke up as well, rubbing his eyes and trying to orient himself.

"Sleeping on the job," Mahrree shook her head at him. She got to her feet, giving her father-in-law's hand one last squeeze, so that Joriana could take her place.

"How are you this morning?" Joriana asked Relf.

"Better," he breathed. "Hungry."

Joriana burst into a smile. "Just like your grandson! He's here, remember? And Jaytsy?"

"I remember," he whispered. "Finally found a way to get

“Finally found a way to get them to Idumea.”

them to Idumea, didn't we, Dear?”

---

Two men sat in the dark office of an unlit building.

“Question,” said Brisack, “When might he come in for a little chat with the Administrators? I saw the report this afternoon that Relf is expected to recover.”

Mal eyed him. “Are you a bit eager to meet Perrin?”

The doctor shrugged. “Well, after all these years, one develops an image of what someone should look like, and one gets a little interested to see if the man matches the image.”

“Uh-huh,” Mal said, unconvinced. “I promise he won't be volunteering to visit. We'll have to force it.”

Brisack blinked in alarm. “What do you mean, force it?”

Mal sighed loudly. “Nothing so threatening, my good doctor. We'll have him brought in on some pretext, some . . .” he waved his hand around as if swatting at unseen flies, “recognition or the other. Shin and Cush put him in for a promotion to colonel some time ago. We can approve it now and have him brought in for . . . services to the world, something inane like that. He can't refuse.”

Brisack exhaled in relief. “What about her?”

Mal clasped his hands on his lap. “You just can't stand it, can you? I'll bet you've been conniving ways to visit the mansion and check on Relf yourself, haven't you? Just in the hope of running into Mrs. Mahrree Shin?”

Brisack examined his hands. “Of course not. It's just that if we're to begin testing them again, we really should establish a baseline evaluation of both of them. Assess where they are, make suppositions—”

“Yes, yes,” Mal interrupted in a bored tone. “Point made. You'll get to see her. We can make up some reason. I just received a report from Edge about the clean-up efforts. Something was mentioned about her in there that we could use. Gadiman's already been poring over it, salivating for something new and juicy.”

Brisack twitched. “You're letting him in on this again? I thought we agreed that—”

Mal rolled his eyes. "I'm just letting the Administrator of Loyalty do what he does best: ferret around for potential threats."

"He can weasel out a confession from an innocent rector," Brisack murmured.

"We need *something* to start with again," Mal reminded him. "Gadiman's just helping me find that soft spot we can stab."

Brisack rubbed his chin. "Speculation: Gadiman won't find a soft spot."

"Oh ho," Mal sneered. "Shin doesn't have any weaknesses? How impervious to Nature do you think he's become over the years, my good doctor?"

He shook his head. "My speculation wasn't about Shin; it was about Gadiman," he said coldly. "The weasel will sniff out nothing useful."

"He already has a rather thick file on her that says he will."

Brisack swallowed.

Mal chuckled.

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Mahrree looked at the scene she was spying on and sighed in contentment. The High General improved seemingly every hour, and insisted that by tomorrow he'd be ready to try his crutch and walk about the house a bit.

But that wasn't what was so astounding; Relf was sitting up in his bed talking earnestly to—and Mahrree still couldn't believe it—his granddaughter. Jaytsy was on her two-hour shift, sitting with the general and handing him drinks and soft foods as the family had been doing for the past two days. Mahrree couldn't remember a time when the two of them had exchanged more than a few predictable pleasantries before Jaytsy sneaked off or Relf cleared his throat and began a conversation with his son.

But right now it was just the two of them, and Jaytsy sat on the edge of his bed listening intently to his story. A few times her eyebrows went up in surprise, and Relf smiled at her responses which inspired him to tell her even more. Mahrree had never seen his face so animated, nor his eyes so warm. Jaytsy's time was up, but Mahrree wasn't about to interrupt them for anything in the world.



“Finally found a way to get them to Idumea.”

Everything about the past two days had been remarkable, she considered. They’d remained cloistered in the mansion hovering around the High General. That first full day no one wanted to leave his side, but brought in more chairs to keep close and watch for improvement. Mahrree convinced Joriana to take the children on walks a couple of times, but she always returned quickly just to check on her husband.

The day after that was Holy Day, but no one left the house to attend the congregational meeting—even though Joriana said the extra Shins’ attendance would have doubled the usual crowd. Perrin sat next to Relf the longest, repeating all the details of the land tremor and recovery efforts he told him when he was unconscious, and relaying updates from General Cush.

Relf even chuckled last evening, gripping his sides in pain. When Mahrree asked Perrin later outside the door what made his father laugh, he said, “I told him about a misunderstanding Shem and I had right before we left to come here.”

“What kind of misunderstanding?”

“Doesn’t matter,” Perrin assured her. “Because, as my father pointed out, officer’s wives always trade *up*.”

“What in the world are you talking about?”

He just grinned, and Mahrree heard Relf chuckle again—then groan in pain—in his study.

This morning, the 37<sup>th</sup> Day of Planting, General Shin sat himself up, ignored his broken ribs, and demanded bacon for breakfast, much to his wife’s delight. He even called for a formal briefing from Cush and his advisors. They’d left after less than an hour, worried about tiring the general out.

Jaytsy went in to sit with her grandfather while Perrin handled some of his father’s paperwork in another smaller office, and Joriana discussed some matters with her staff. Peto wandered around the large gardens looking for something round to kick, and Mahrree spied on her father-in-law from the crack in the door.

She grinned as the conversation in the study came to a finish, with Relf beaming at his granddaughter who giggled at something he said.

Without turning his head he said, “Mahrree? I know you’re out there, and have been for some time. You can’t sneak up on an old soldier.”

Mahrree blushed and opened the door wider. “I didn’t want

to interrupt.”

Relf looked over at her and nodded once. “Get Joriana for me, would you? And Perrin and Peto? I have something to say to everyone.”

“Of course,” Mahrree said, a little startled at his earnestness.

Jaytsy just shrugged at her mother.

A few moments later his family surrounded him again, a little worried as to what he had to say. Everyone had noticed his new gentler yet earnest demeanor, but none of them knew quite what to make of it.

“Joriana, I’ve decided that it’s not seemly for me to be surrounded by so many females for so long,” he announced solemnly, but with a mischievous twinkle in his eye. “It’s time for you to go shopping. And take these women with you, too.” He winked at his bouncing granddaughter.

Mahrree chuckled, but Perrin shook his head at the suggestion. “Nothing here they’d care to see here, Mother. Sorry.”

“Oh!” Jaytsy wailed dramatically. “I’ve been patient for days! See, Grandfather? I told you he’d be unreasonable. Please, Father, we do want to see the shops. Right, Mother?”

Perrin scoffed loudly.

Mahrree bit her lower lip. “Actually, Perrin, umm, I would like to see what all the fuss is about. I mean, I’ve heard so much, I think I should probably see for myself . . .” She trailed off when she saw the expression on his face.

“What, seriously?” he said, as if utterly betrayed by all he loved. “Mahrree, since when are you interested in—” He turned to his mother. “Where would you take them?”

Joriana beamed and clapped her hands. “Relf, are you sure? We can take midday meal in the city! First, we’ll go to some dress shops, because someone has a birthday coming up, and fifteen is such an important age!” she squealed. “Then maybe we’ll try on hats, then if there’s any time left, shoes!”

Horror stricken, Perrin turned to his wife. “Really? All afternoon?”

Mahrree had begun to feel a bit concerned herself, especially when Joriana mentioned hats, which she never wore, but she knew her mother-in-law had a fondness for, as well as a full closet of. “Oh, I can’t imagine it’d take all afternoon—”

“It can. Trust me,” the general groaned. “So you best get

“Finally found a way to get them to Idumea.”

started. Peto will keep me company for a while, right?”

Peto’s eyes grew big, but he eeked out a “Right.” He hadn’t yet spent time sitting by his grandfather’s sick bed, because no one had asked him, nor had he volunteered.

His eyes darted nervously over to his mother, but the general’s comment drew his attention back to him. “Just for an hour or so, Peto. Then I’ll need to nap while your father takes you to see the new kickball arena.”

Peto grinned. “I’ve been hoping to see that!”

Perrin shrugged in reluctant agreement. “Could be worth a look. Just to see what the *fuss is all about*.” He sent one last scathing look at Mahrree.

She really didn’t know what to do with it.

Not that she *wanted* to go shopping; she never enjoyed having to wade through what others considered desirable, choose one, then hand over hard-earned slips of silver for it. She never saw the appeal of the process, especially when she spent an hour and didn’t find anything she really liked or that was worth her metal.

But she had been intrigued, she was loath to admit, about Idumea for years. Anything that so riled her husband must be analyzed more closely. Just to understand. That was all.

She shrugged apologetically at him.

He just shook his head.

“So we’re off!” Joriana chirruped like a woman fifty years younger and clapped her hands again. She turned to Mahrree and Jaytsy. “We’re going to have so much fun! Let’s make you presentable.”

Even Mahrree couldn’t help but let escape a giggle as the three women rushed out of the study to their bedrooms. But she stopped suddenly at the study door, looked back at her husband with another apologetic expression, shrugged helplessly, and rushed off.

Perrin turned slowly to his father. “You know how I told you yesterday that I briefly worried that a certain enlisted soldier was moving in on my wife? I think I just lost her anyway, General. I have no idea who that woman is with my mother.”

“I guess this is another reason why you hate Idumea?” Peto asked.

Perrin pointed to his son. “Yes, exactly!” Turning back to his father he said, “Cush told me again this morning that he want-

ed me to meet his grandson. I could head over to the university now, but only if you're doing all right. Do you mind if I go for an hour? You've got Peto, after all."

"I was hoping for a way to get rid of you. See you in an hour." Feebly he saluted his son, and Perrin returned it with a grin. He winked at his nervous son and headed toward a back door.

Peto gulped now that he was nearly alone with the general.

"Riplak," the general said to the lieutenant sitting in the corner drearily thumbing through a book, "I won't be needing you for a while. You maybe be excused."

"But sir, I have strict orders to stay—"

"Lieutenant," the general said more forcefully, "I still override any command you may have been given by Colonel Thorne. There'll be no classified information shared between a grandfather and his grandson that the garrison needs to monitor."

Riplak looked down uncomfortably. "Of course not, sir. My apologies."

"Son," said General Shin more easily, "go to the kitchen and find something to eat. For drawing the dullest assignment in all of Idumea, you should have some kind of reward. I'm sure Kindiri could use the company."

The lieutenant's face brightened. "Thank you, sir! I'll make sure she's cooking your midday meal properly."

"Oh, I'm sure you will."

As he left, the general gestured to his grandson to come closer. "He won't be back for a while. He's got a thing for our cook."

Peto frowned. "A thing?"

Relf studied him. "You're not quite fourteen yet, correct?"

"Yes."

"So . . . if you happen to see those two alone, just don't listen to anything they say, all right? Especially if they start talking about cucumber sandwiches."

Peto scowled. "Why would they talk about that? Cucumbers aren't even in season—"

"Yes, yes, yes," Relf said hurriedly and rubbed his forehead. "I know. When you're seventeen you'll likely understand better."

Peto stared at him, completely lost.

"Now," his grandfather leaned over to him conspiratorially,

“Finally found a way to get them to Idumea.”

“I smelled Kindiri baking my favorite sweet rolls earlier. Your grandmother thinks I can’t handle them yet, so she’ll have hidden them in the second pantry, near the bottom shelf. That’s where she always hides things she doesn’t want me to eat. Go get us a few, and then you and I will have a little talk.”

Peto swallowed again. One of these times, his tongue was sure to go down too.

## Chapter 8 ~ “Peto, have you ever had . . . a dream?”

Perrin felt agitated the moment he stepped onto the campus of the University of Idumea and headed toward the buildings devoted to the Command School. He knew he would, though.

When he left over twenty-five years ago, he promised himself he'd never return. There'd been some good moments, true, but there were also many others that he'd shoved to the back of his mind, hoping to never again revisit.

Yet there they all were, flashing in front of him like a manic lightning storm. People and memories and arguments he'd nearly forgotten, all brought to the fore as he gazed at the tall trees, stone and block buildings, and young men in uniform coming and going along the paved walkways.

He took a deep breath, steeled himself, and headed toward the mess hall where most of the cadets would be. He didn't get very far before *it* started. The looks. The double takes. The salutes.

They recognized him.

It wasn't as if he was a perfect double for his father, but there was enough family resemblance than any young soldier who knew the High General also knew his son. Since he was in uniform they had to salute, but it was more than that. They looked at him with some kind of expectation. His stomach twisted at the idea that all these young men thought that someday he would be their High General.

He was the only one there who didn't.

The ones that held his gaze longer were those pre-

“Peto, have you ever had . . . a dream?”

commissioned as lieutenants. The top of their classes, the leaders of their peers, the most ambitious—and therefore the most obnoxious—of the future officers. Perrin knew, because he’d been one of them.

One even nodded knowingly at him, as if they shared some secret, but Perrin ignored the sanctimonious effort. It was all such a game, to be the greatest and bravest and most arrogant breed of soldier Command School could produce. All for the hope of being placed in the right fort, with the right possibilities to reach the position of commander, and to be in charge.

Why was that so appealing? Being in charge? It sounds like one is afforded great power, but what one really is given is overwhelming responsibility. People live or die because of your decisions. Why does anyone crave that kind of control?

Perrin certainly didn’t. One time he did, but now? Edge was more than enough responsibility; he didn’t want his father’s. No one was more grateful to see him improving than Perrin, and mostly for the selfish reason that his survival pushed back again the question of who would be the next High General. Certainly not a lowly Lieutenant Colonel, but Perrin suspected that would be changing soon. Maybe it was the way his mother had checked the size of his jacket before she left for the shops with his wife and daughter. A new one was likely being ordered.

Perrin realized he’d stopped walking as he stared at the door of the mess hall with young men streaming into it. Cush’s grandson would be a lieutenant, but beyond that he wasn’t sure who he was looking for—

It didn’t matter. The strapping boy with short blonde hair leaking out from under his cap saw him first and immediately marched over to him. Before he even arrived, Perrin recognized the features of his mother Versula Cush Thorne. He plastered what he hoped was a convincing smile on his face and returned the salute of the young future officer.

“Lieutenant Colonel Shin, I presume?” the boy said confidently. His eyes were determined, his stance self-assured, his demeanor sharp and focused.

Perrin hated him.

There was no reason for it. But it was just like when someone places a new dish of food in front of you, and even if you’ve just come off a long ride and hadn’t eaten for two days, you in-

stantly know there's no possible way you can swallow *that* down. You haven't even tasted it, or even know the ingredients for that matter, but it's completely unpalatable.

Maybe it was just the effect of Idumea, tainting all that he encountered with the natural repulsion he felt toward anything associated with the city. He knew nothing of the boy. Young man. Except that he was Versula's son, Cush's grandson, and his features were so perfectly chiseled that undoubtedly the young women considered him handsome.

As long as one particular young woman didn't think him handsome. Or even meet him—

Perrin held out his hand. "You presume correctly. Thorne, then is it?"

"Yes sir! *Lieutenant* Lemuel Thorne, sir."

As the lieutenant—and Perrin noticed the emphasis on the title—shook his hand, Perrin did his best to hold in his sneer.

"Sir, my grandfather told me to be watching for you. I'm relieved to hear your father's improving. Gave us all quite a scare there, didn't he? But he's a wily old wolf, as my grandfather's fond of saying, so I was confident he would improve."

He was talkative, almost rehearsed.

Perrin hated anything practiced and contrived. "Well, we're grateful too that he's growling again. Lieutenant, I don't want to keep you from your midday meal, now—"

"I don't need to eat," Lieutenant Thorne said as if he needed food only once a moon.

Like a snake, Perrin concluded.

"I'd much rather learn about the fort at Edge, sir. If you have a few minutes?"

"I do," Perrin smiled, and bit his tongue to avoid adding, *unfortunately*. "I understand it's your ambition to become a commander of a fort?"

"I intend to be the youngest, sir. Next to you, of course." His steel blue eyes were as sharp as blades. "Even though my own father is already a colonel—" the smugness oozed from a corner of his mouth—"everyone knows you were the youngest commander, and the youngest captain. That's why I wanted to meet you. I intend to learn from the best, sir."

"Of course," Perrin sighed. He was glad he was missing his midday meal too. He had absolutely no appetite left.



“Peto, have you ever had . . . a dream?”

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Peto licked the last of the sweet roll off his fingers and looked hesitantly at his grandfather. “Grandmother doesn’t know that you’re on to her hiding spot?”

Relf brushed his stubbly chin to make sure no evidence remained. It was time to share some grandfatherly wisdom. “An important key to good soldiering, son, is to never let the enemy know you were there.”

Peto blinked uncertainly.

His grandfather continued. “So remove food from the *back* of the plate, then subtly rearrange what remains so she doesn’t realize it’s been disturbed.”

Peto grinned. “That’s what Kindiri told me to do.”

Relf squinted worriedly. “So you . . . talked to them? In the kitchen?”

“They weren’t discussing cucumber sandwiches,” Peto assured him. “Just going on and on about the sweet rolls.”

Relf only nodded slowly, grateful for his grandson’s extreme innocence.

“So . . . what’d you want to talk about?”

His grandfather sighed. “I’m not quite sure where to begin. Cush told me this morning he’s disappointed in you because you still don’t want to be an officer.”

Peto looked down at his feet and ground some of the crumbs into powder. “I’m sorry, I don’t. I’m not sure what I want to be. I know you told me once that when I get older I’d—”

“That’s all right, Peto,” his grandfather told him. “You don’t have to join the army.”

Surprised, Peto looked up. “But . . . I’m supposed to be the fourth Shin general,” he said helplessly.

“There will be a fourth Shin general, boy, when your father makes general. My great-grandfather was the first,” he whispered.

Peto had never heard this story before. “Your great-grandfather?”

“In fact,” General Shin continued in a low voice, “he was one of the first generals *ever*, appointed by King Querul the First during the Great War.” He leaned forward slightly. “There were

five generals all together then, and my great-grandfather was to have been appointed the first High General, but he wasn't. No Shin earned that title until King Querul the Fourth gave that honor to my father nearly eighty years later. I always thought my grandfather Ricolfus who became a lieutenant colonel before he died was the first officer in the army, but the truth is, his father was first!"

Peto shook his head, fascinated. "Why didn't we know that?"

"Because *no one* knows, Peto." Relf's eyes darted around as if concerned that someone who should have been dismissed from the room was still lurking in a corner. "His name isn't even recorded in the history books, only the name of the first High General, but none of the other generals at the time."

"Why not?"

"Because my great-grandfather failed the king in his most important mission. He was made a general and given command over fifty men to track down his own wife's traitorous family."

Peto's eyes widened.

"They left suddenly after the last Guide was killed—my own great-great-grandfather, great-great-grandmother, and their three daughters. Peto," he whispered, "they were Guarders!"

Peto's mouth dropped open in shock, and he wondered just how clear his grandfather's mind was at the moment.

"The only one of that family that remained in Idumea was my great grandmother," Relf continued in an urgent whisper. "I'm fairly certain the first general never found his in-laws and brought them to justice, otherwise the story would be told over and over again and his name wouldn't have been lost to history. As it is, there really is no story. My father told me only a couple of times about his grandmother, that general's wife. I guess she wasn't a pleasant memory for him, because I remember him saying his grandmother was always sad and lonely."

Relf paused and looked off into some distant thought.

Peto fought the urge to look in the same direction to see if he saw anything.

"She was already an older woman, around thirty-five, by the time she gave birth to my grandfather Ricolfus, her only child," Relf continued, as if suddenly remembering his grandson was still there. "She was sixty-six by the time she became a grandmother

“Peto, have you ever had . . . a dream?”

to my father Pere. Then she died before Pere reached adulthood.”

With a sad smile he said, “My father told me he never remembered his grandmother smiling. He never even told me her name, and I don’t know what happened to her husband the general. But he was gone before my father Pere was born, and he may not have known his grandfather’s name.”

Peto’s mouth couldn’t have fallen open any further. “There were Guardsers? In our family? Does Father know?”

Relf shook his head. “Perrin doesn’t know. I didn’t even know until almost two weeks ago. I found some files, in a crate in the cellar storage room dug out in the old garrison—my storage room. I was there bringing down some work. Hate to have piles of paperwork sitting around.”

He gestured in irritation at his desk where several stacks waited.

“I decided to reorganize the place a bit while I was there, to make it easier to find older documents. I emptied out a large cabinet to move it to a better location. It’d been leaning against a wall, and behind it is where I noticed the crate. It was dug into the earthen wall, but it appeared as if the wall had partially collapsed. The crate was half buried by dirt. I don’t think those papers had been touched in over one hundred thirty years. They were rather brittle, but still readable. They were family histories, Peto!” Relf breathed.

Peto stared in astonishment.

“Not all of them, but a lot. I found my family’s near the back in the S section. Actually,” he said wincing in pain as he tried to reposition himself in the bed, “that’s where I was when the tremor hit. I’d gone back early that morning to try to read more history. No one would be there on a Holy Day, so I knew it’d be a safe time to explore the crate. I thought all of the histories had been destroyed in the great fire over a hundred thirty years ago. You know about that, right? The destruction of all of the family lines, Terryp the explorer’s findings, maps, and nearly everything else important that was supposed to be compiled?”

Peto snapped out his astonished reverie long enough to say, “Have you ever met my parents, the lovers of history and all things Terryp?”

Relf’s demeanor softened a moment to let him chuckle. “Sorry. Stupid question. Of course they’ve told you, likely many

times.” Immediately his intensity returned. “But Peto, *these* records never made it to that holding room where the fire destroyed everything. I don’t think anyone knew it was still around, hidden behind that cabinet that stayed in the same position since probably your father was a cadet.”

He sighed sadly and leaned against his propped up pillows.

“Well, now I fear it’s all destroyed, buried again by the tremor. That’s why it took so long for them to find me. No one knew where I went that morning, not even Joriana. I still haven’t told her what I discovered. I only told her I went to rearrange the room.” Relf shifted his gaze to his grandson to gauge his reaction to all that he’d revealed.

Peto leaned forward. “Did you bring back any papers?”

“Not the first time, nor would I have dared the second time, even if I could’ve got to them,” he whispered. “Just consider, Peto, how would it look for the High General of Idumea to have forbidden family lines? To be holding documents written in his great-grandfather’s hand explaining how he was ordered to find his wife’s family? Evidence that some of our ancestors were Guardians?”

Peto pursed his mouth. “Yeah . . . I guess I can see one or two problems with that.”

“So you’re not entirely slow,” Relf winked at him before becoming serious again. “Even if I had just one page, too many questions would be brought back up again, Peto, with people searching in buildings they have no business being in. And our family’s loyalty would be under scrutiny.”

Peto nodded soberly.

“*But,*” Relf said with surprising mischief in his dark eyes, “I remember two names, Peto.” He took his arm in earnest. “And I want you to remember them as well. The name of the first general Shin, Ricolfus’s father, was Lek Shin. His wife was Lorixania. I wished now I’d paid closer attention to the names of their ancestors, or looked up Lorixania’s maiden name. But I think this is all we need to have.”

Peto frowned. “Lek and Lorixania? It would be hard to forget those names. I’ll remember, Grandfather.”

Relf firmed his grasp on his grandson. “There’s something more, Peto. I hardly know how to speak it.” He looked hard at him, searching his young, suddenly anxious, face. “Peto, have you

“Peto, have you ever had . . . a dream?”

ever had . . . a dream?”

Peto looked at him oddly. “Yes, everyone has dreams—”

“No, Peto—I mean, a dream that *means* something.”

Peto shook his head. “But The Writings talk about them.”

His grandfather nodded. “I had been neglecting those for a while—old Hogal always got on me about that—but I’ve been reading them more closely recently. I wonder if that’s why I was led to the crate,” he added more to himself.

He looked back at his grandson’s bewildered face.

“Before you leave with your Father this afternoon, find my copy for me, will you? Should be by my bed in the west wing. There are some things I need to check. But Peto, I’ve . . . *dreamed* since the tremor. I’ve had the dream a few times now. Maybe it was a hallucination, brought on by lack of water and food, or maybe it was because it was the first time in years I was actually still enough to listen, and the Creator finally had my attention—”

He stopped and looked at his grandson who was waiting eagerly. No more procrastinating.

“Peto, your father *will* be a general. But not just any general: the greatest general the world ever saw.”

Even though Relf’s intensity was palpable, his words weren’t anything Peto was expecting. He involuntarily scowled. “Are you sure?”

Relf smiled understandingly and tilted his head. “I know. It’s hard for a son to see his father as anything more than the man who yells at him to help his mother and always ends up with the biggest piece of chicken.”

Peto nodded. “And he never wants to move to Idumea.”

Relf gripped his wrist tighter, and Peto tried not to wince. “You may have to help change his mind. I don’t understand it, but Peto, there’ll be a great conflict. Maybe something with the Guarders. Your father will be at the head of that conflict, organizing the battle, fighting it, bringing it to an ultimate end that all the world will see! Ah, Peto!” Relf said with a faraway look on his face as he released his grandson, “How I wished I could be there by his side! He will be *great*, not some general-for-looks as I am. At times I’m nothing but a glorified law enforcer, sitting in this showy mansion to make the people feel protected and the Administrators look good. We work for peace, but the uncomfortable truth is that peace is a useless time for soldiers.”

His grandson watched him worriedly, not sure what to say.

Relf regarded him with a miserable smile. “Don’t listen to *all* the ramblings of an old man, son. My purpose in this life has been to prepare your father. I know that now, and I also see how much I’ve neglected that duty. I was gone so much, and I never really talked to him unless I phrased it as an order. These past few days I’ve spent more time listening to my son than I have in forty-three years. I don’t know from where he gets his thoughts, or how he’s learned to think and feel so deeply. Not from me, that’s for sure. He’s become a wonderful man, my boy has!” Relf’s voice became shaky. “I don’t deserve him.”

Peto looked down so as to not see the emotion that rose suddenly in his grandfather’s face.

“Grandfather,” he said quietly, “why don’t you tell him this?”

Relf gripped his wrist again, and for a moment Peto wondered if it were to transfer something of himself into his grandson.

“I will tell him, some of it. But Peto—one other thing about that dream. I’m sure it wasn’t just for me. It was for *you*. That’s why I was so happy to hear you’d come.”

Peto looked up quickly to see his grandfather’s eyes brimming with tears. Seeing the general this way startled him, as if he could be startled by anything more that morning.

“Why me?”

“I don’t know, Peto. But you’ll live to see your father become something great, something greater than he already is.” Relf’s voice quavered again. “That was made very clear to me. *You will see it all!* This was all for *you*. Now, Peto, write it down. All of it!”

Peto raised his eyebrows, the only part of his body he could move.

“There’s parchment—that will last longer—and a quill in the top drawer.” Relf released his wrist and gestured to the desk. “Use the best ink on the side. You need to remember this, and keep it for your children.”

Peto, stunned by his grandfather’s fervor, obediently got up and slipped behind the desk still pushed against the wall. He pulled out the parchment and quill and glanced up at his grandfather.

He twisted in his bed to see his grandson, and his face con-

“Peto, have you ever had . . . a dream?”

torted in pain at his awkward position. “Begin with the names I told you. Some day you will want to know them again.”

“I’ll remember, Grandfather.”

“Not good enough! You must write it down, boy! Then write down what I told you. Neater than that, Peto! I can see the scribbles from here.”

Peto wrote as carefully and quickly as he could, the odd combination of words spilling sloppily on the parchment. Peto didn’t know what to think of any of this, so he thought of nothing but obeying his grandfather and his unusual commands.

He brought the parchment to his grandfather for inspection. Relf took the quill and struggled in his slouched position to write a few clarifying words and the day’s date. Then he signed his name to verify it in two places: once by the names of Lek and Lorigania Shin, then at the bottom of the parchment.

He handed the quill back to Peto, but held on to the parchment, running his finger along the side of it. He blew gently on the damp ink and immediately regretted it as his ribs reminded him they were broken. Finally, he looked at his grandson.

“You’re not yet fourteen, son, but you’re old enough to understand. This is important,” he said holding up the parchment. “I don’t know why, and I don’t know when. But it will *become* important. Guard it with all you have. Keep it hidden, but take it with you if ever you should leave somewhere for a long time. And, this may sound strange to you now, but I feel distinctly that I must tell you: show it to no one, except your wife.”

Peto’s mouth dropped open again. “I’m not planning on getting married anytime soon!”

Relf smiled at him. “Of course not. But your children and grandchildren will come to treasure this parchment. The one written by their father and signed by their great-grandfather. Not only do I know that, but I *feel* that. Promise me, Peto.”

There was nothing else to say but, “Of course, Grandfather. I promise.” He took the parchment and pressed it to his chest, wondering where to put it. He saw an envelope on his grandfather’s desk and reached for it.

Relf took the parchment back from him, folded it carefully, then gave it back to his grandson who slid it into the envelope.

Relf then put his hand on Peto’s face, effectively paralyzing his grandson. Relf had never held his face before, nor had Peto

ever seen such emotion in his eyes.

“We speak of this never again, Peto. By going through those documents and rerecording those names, and not revealing to anyone what I uncovered, I’ve just committed some serious offenses, and now I’ve dragged my grandson into it, too.

“And say nothing of this to your parents,” he added in a low tone as he released Peto’s face. “I’m fairly confident your mother’s going the same direction as your father in regards to him becoming a general. And maybe this is why you must know all of this. Perhaps it’ll be *you* who finally gets him where he needs to be.”

Peto swallowed. “No pressure there, Grandfather.”

Relf scoffed quietly. “And as for the dream, well, I don’t think the Administrators would like to hear about that conflict. They don’t hold The Writings or dreams in much esteem. They’d consider me a crazed old man. Honestly, I’m not in any condition to be tried by the Administrators. And neither are you.”

Peto smiled uncomfortably at his grandfather. He wasn’t sure if it was a joke or not. Something in the air told him there was nothing funny about what General Shin just said.

Relf gave him a genuine smile to ease his worries.

“I have to break one more regulation. I know it will be painful for you, but it will be far more painful for me. Peto, give the general a hug.”

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It was one of the longest half hours Perrin had ever endured, and by the time his interview with the young lieutenant was over, he was sure three weeks had past. Thank goodness for afternoon classes.

He saluted away the lieutenant, who was immediately flanked by several other cadets eager to ask him questions about the time he spent sitting on a bench discussing the secrets to running a fort. The boy hadn’t really cared about what Perrin had to say, as much as he cared that Perrin noticed he was asking him questions. Thorne’s purpose had been to be *seen*, not to learn. That was how all the pre-commissioned lieutenants ran, Perrin knew, and why he felt the urge to run from the campus.



“Peto, have you ever had . . . a dream?”

As soon as Perrin’s feet hit the road outside of the university, his chest immediately felt lighter. Only going back to Edge would allow him to breath easily again, but this would have to do. In just a few minutes he’d be back at the mansion, then he and Peto could—

“You must be Lieutenant Colonel Perrin Shin!”

The voice rang over to him, stopping Perrin in his tracks. Reluctantly, he turned and stiffened in surprise.

What caught his eye was the red jacket. It was impossible to miss, with its deep dye and long coat tails in the back. It topped the black pants that were part of the uniform, along with the ridiculously white ruffled shirt.

An administrator.

But this administrator was unusual. He was wearing a broad, genuine grin as he jogged over from a bisecting road.

Perrin put on his practiced smile again. “That’s what I hear, Administrator,” he said, shaking the man’s hand.

“Yes, yes,” the Administrator said, looking him top to bottom as if inspecting a horse for sale. “Indeed, you do favor your father, but you’re definitely larger.”

Perrin’s shoulder twitched. “So I’ve been told. Been compared to a bear a few times. Not favorably, though.”

“And thunder,” the man mumbled more to himself, still evaluating him with his ready smile. “But I don’t see it. I’m glad I ran into you! I was just on my way to your father’s mansion to check on him—”

The last thing his father needed was an Administrator by his bed. Even one who was now anxiously smoothing down the last of the hair that circled his head as if he was worried that he didn’t look presentable.

“I don’t think he’s up to visitors yet, sir,” said Perrin. “He had Cush and a team of officers by earlier wearing him down, and by the time I reach home, I’m sure he’ll be ready for a nap. He’s already sent away my mother with my daughter and wife to see the city.”

Something in the brightness of the Administrator’s eyes dimmed slightly when Perrin mentioned “wife.”

“Ah. I see. Well good, good!” The brightness tried to return, unconvincingly. “Sounds like he truly is making remarkable progress.”

“He is, Administrator . . . I’m sorry, I don’t know your name.”

The man chuckled in apology. “Of course you don’t. Forgive me, forgive me—Dr. Brisack, at your service!”

Perrin’s smile warmed a notch. “Nice to finally meet you, Dr. Brisack. I’ve heard good things about you, and my father’s spoken highly of you over the years.”

“Has he now? Why, I’m flattered. To get Relf’s compliments is rare indeed.”

Perrin nodded. “It is. I’ll be sure to let him know you were inquiring after him,” and he took a deliberate step to head home.

“Uh, Lieutenant Colonel, there’s something else,” Brisack said with a slightly different tone.

Perrin stopped. “Is there?”

“I was also on my way to meet *you*. You see, now that your father’s improving, we at the Administrative Headquarters would like you to pay us a little visit. Been so many years since we’ve seen you, understand. Most of us have never even met one of our greatest officers!” His smile developed a decidedly crisp quality.

Perrin swallowed. “Yes. Well. I intended to come by—”

“Tomorrow, then. Mid-morning,” Brisack insisted. “That’s when we all meet together. Give you the opportunity to report to all of us about the condition of Edge and how things are in the northernmost part of the world.”

Perrin went wooden, trying to let the words penetrate his mind.

All of them.

A report.

Tomorrow, mid-morning.

Sixteen years of avoiding them was about to come to an end. So, too, might many other things, if he didn’t do this correctly. The problem was, he had no idea what the correct thing to do *was*.

“I . . . suppose I best be there then.”

Brisack patted him on the arm as if they were old friends. “Nothing to worry about, Shin! We just want to see you again. Or for the first time, as the case may be,” he chuckled amiably. “Just a friendly check on our favorite officer.”

“Yes. Of course. Thank you. I’ll be there.”

“You could bring along your wife, too,” Brisack suggested, something lighting again in his eyes. “Let her see the seat of gov-

“Peto, have you ever had . . . a dream?”

ernment? Rare opportunity for our citizens, you know.”

That would be very worst idea in the world since the formation of Idumea, is what Perrin *wanted* to say. Instead, he merely scoffed an easy chuckle. “Oh, I don’t think so. That’s not really her thing.”

Again the light mysteriously dimmed in Brisack’s eyes. “Oh. Well then. Guess it’ll have to be something else,” he said vaguely. He grabbed Perrin’s hand once more and pumped it vigorously. “Again, wonderful to finally meet you, Perrin Shin! You’re almost exactly what I expected.”

Perrin couldn’t help but smile at that evaluation. “I thank you. I think.”

“Say hello to your father for me, and good day, Perrin Shin!”

Perrin waved at the doctor who turned on his heel and headed in another direction. Perrin exhaled and jogged all the way home before anyone else in a blue uniform or a red jacket felt the need to call out his name.

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When Perrin returned to the mansion it was to find his son running out from the study and stuffing an envelope down his shirt.

“I’ll be back, Father,” he assured him as he ran down the Grand Hall to his bedroom. “Then we can leave.”

Perrin walked to the study and knocked lightly on the door frame to get his father’s attention.

Although Relf attempted a smile, he cringed in extreme discomfort.

Perrin rushed over to him. “Are you all right? What’d Peto do to you?”

“Nothing, I’m fine, I’m fine. I just don’t remember broken ribs hurting this badly when I was Peto’s age, or your age.”

“Let’s get you lying down,” and Perrin helped him to a more comfortable position. “You’ve already done too much today. Your ribs are probably tired of trying to mend again after all these years. Only so much abuse a body can take.”

“True, true,” the general murmured.

“What was Peto leaving with?” Perrin asked, sitting down on the chair next to him.

“Grandfatherly advice, son. Things he should do for his father when he gets older. I’ve had some time to think about that during the past few days.”

Perrin looked down at his hands. “So have I. I’m sorry I didn’t know what happened sooner. I would’ve come here that first day and joined in the search for you. That would’ve been the right thing to do. My duty is to my family first, not to the government. That’s not what the Creator intended—” He looked suddenly around the room. “Where’s your lieutenant?”

“Probably chatting up the cook,” Relf waved. “They have a thing going.”

Perrin nodded and winced.

“I recommend keeping your children out of the kitchen when they start whispering about sweet rolls. We’re alone, son. No one will hear you spewing your anti-Administrators prattle.” He gave his son a warning glare.

Perrin matched it. “Father, I’m supposed to meet with the Administrators tomorrow morning. One of them caught me on the way back from the university and told me I’ve been expected. Brisack wishes you well, by the way. I have to admit, I’ve been a bit . . . insubordinate in my thoughts about them.”

“Obviously,” Relf said. “I see it in your eyes.”

Instinctively—childishly—Perrin briefly shut his eyes.

“Don’t worry, no one else can see it, I’m sure,” his father assured him. “You’re doing an excellent job in Edge. Everyone knows that. I don’t think they’re looking to confront you. You’ve *done* nothing insubordinate. In fact, I think they may want to find a way to bring you back to Idumea. Say the right things tomorrow, and you can soon take over my position.”

“I’m not high enough in rank,” Perrin said smugly.

“Easily fixed. You’re well overdue for promotion to full colonel. Be that for a year or so, then become general. In less than two years you’re back here. It’s tradition for the High General in Idumea to be a Shin. Your grandfather, me, next you.”

Agitated, Perrin got to his feet, walked behind the chair and braced himself against it. “I can’t. I just can’t leave Edge.”

“I know,” his father said in a bored tone. “You hate Idumea.”

“Peto, have you ever had . . . a dream?”

“It’s more than that, really. From the first time I went to Edge it was like I *belonged*. As if I’d been looking for that place all my life. It’s where the Creator needs me to be. When I come here, I’m out of sorts. Everything feels off, like I’m riding on a saddle backward. Still getting around, but nothing’s right.”

Relf exhaled. “Is it because Edge is where you met your wife? Where your children were born? Maybe the problem is that you’re too comfortable. No one likes change, Perrin. But change is always good.”

“I’ve thought of that. It’s not *always* good, and I don’t have a problem with change.”

When his father gave him a challenging look, Perrin restated it. “All right, I don’t enjoy change, I’ll admit it. Now what’s *that* look for? Yes, all right, I fight change! Satisfied?” he grinned mischievously at his father who nodded at him.

Perrin sobered again. “But really, that’s not it. It’s deeper, somehow. Please, Father,” he moved to sit next to him again, “whatever you can do to keep me in Edge, please do it. I must stay!”

The general was thoughtful for a moment. “It’s rare that an officer doesn’t get transferred. Sixteen years you’ve sat out there. I’ve even let you keep Karna all that time. Granted, no one has *wanted* to go all the way to Edge. Much rather enjoy the beaches at Waves, or the warm Raining Season of Grasses. I’ll do what I can to convince the Command Board you should stay, but I can’t guarantee anything.”

He tried to sit up a little, but settled for resting on his arm.

“Perrin, your mother and I were really hoping to hand this house over to you and your family when I retire. We’d be happy to stay in the guest house in the back. Just consider: your mother could help Mahrree with all the entertaining duties, your son and daughter could attend the best schools—with a general’s pay you could afford those private schools that bribe the Administrator of Education so they can bend a few rules—and I could sit in the corner and tell you what to do, and you could tell me all my ideas are bad ones.”

Perrin leaned forward on his chair, resting his elbows on his knees. “Father, I can’t tell you how many elements of what you just said actually sound very appealing to me. But, I just can’t be *here*,” he said. “Now, you consider: what’s to keep you and

mother from coming to Edge when you retire? We could find you a great house, Mahrree might even consider moving from our little place into something closer to you. Her mother keeps begging that anyway. Don't worry—you wouldn't have move to the same road as Hycymum Peto and her band of eager widows."

His father thought for a moment and said, "And there are many elements of what you just said that's appealing to me as well. Avoiding the lonely widows would be important, however. But Edge is a charming little place, and I think I'm one of the few people in the world who enjoys the mountains. However, there's one flaw: what's to keep you in Edge once I'm retired? Who will be *here* to keep you *there*?"

Perrin breathed out heavily. "I hadn't considered that." He sat back in the chair, dejected. His eyes searched the floor looking for an exit of some sort, but there was none. "Father, I'll be transferred out of Edge!"

"Is that really so bad, son?"

"Yes! Yes!" He stood up and paced the floor.

"That really bothers you, doesn't it?" Relf said, surprised.

Perrin stopped. "What if I retire too? Just . . . quit the army when they want to move me?"

"No!" said Relf decisively. "You have to stay!"

"Why?"

Both men saw Peto standing at the door, clutching a copy of The Writings to his chest. Neither man knew how long he'd been there, but his face was white with worry.

"Because you have to be the next general in Idumea, Father," Peto said quietly. "Besides, what else could you do? Be a rancher? Cows hate you."

A smile began to spread across Perrin's face as he saw the anxious expression on his son's. He knew he had to erase it, quick. "You're right. Cattle hate me. Never understood why. And Mahrree hates gardening, so there goes farming. I could be a builder. Your room didn't collapse in the land tremor. Maybe Chief Curglaff will be ready to quit sooner if I put a little more pressure on him. I could be chief law enforcer. I already do most of his job—"

Peto still looked troubled.

"Ah, Peto. Don't fret about it right now. All of this is years down the road. Much can happen in a few years. Much can hap-

“Peto, have you ever had . . . a dream?”

pen in just a few days. Two weeks ago would you have imagined yourself standing in your grandparents’ house in Idumea? Well?”

Peto dared a small smile and placed The Writings on his grandfather’s bed.

“And would you have imagined your father about to take you to see the new arena?” his grandfather reminded him.

“That’s right!” Perrin said, eager for a new topic. “Go get something to eat, and send that lieutenant back. The general’s getting feisty and I want to make sure he doesn’t get any ideas while we’re gone and do something foolish.”

“I’m too tired for foolishness, Perrin. And don’t you think for one moment this discussion is over yet.”

“Of course not. I’m already thinking about available houses you and Mother would enjoy in Edge.”

“Perrin!” the general barked his best at his son as he left the study.

“Sorry, General, on my way out. Talk to you later, if I remember.” He waved without turning around.

Relf watched his son put his arm around his grandson as they headed to the kitchen. When Perrin was nearly fourteen he was already as tall as Relf. Peto’s form was much slighter, and he’d never be as tall as his father, but he had the same face.

Relf smiled. It was shocking how good it was to have them here.

Worth almost dying for.

## Chapter 9 ~ “Says the most competitive woman in the world.”

Mahrree tried to sort out the variety of emotions that caught her completely by surprise that afternoon. As her mother-in-law played dress-up doll with Jaytsy, Mahrree mentally created her List of Shame.

Top of her list was the utter embarrassment she experienced in the first shop they walked into. Her dress, which she had always liked, felt terribly ‘old fashioned’. Suddenly she understood the meaning of the phrase as she looked at the variety of dresses and gowns—there was a difference, Joriana told to her—on display. But no one was about to look critically at the daughter-in-law of Joriana Shin.

The next emotion she experienced was surprise at how marvelous the fine linen of the dress she tried on felt against her skin.

Then, when she saw herself all gussied up in the mirror she felt—

Mahrree shook her head again. Yes, that was the humiliating emotion: giddiness.

How completely ridiculous. Forty-three years old and she actually giggled with delight that she could look like a beautiful woman. Jaytsy even pinned back her hair with twisted silver fastenings the shop sold, and clapped her hands in approval.

Mahrree looked Idumean and *liked* it. Jaytsy insisted she wear the dress out of the shop and Mahrree stuffed her old frock into a neat box.

Now she was experiencing a strange mixture of guilt and glory. She still didn’t know what Perrin would think of the pale



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green dress with useless ruffles on the sleeves. But as she walked through the busy clothing district of Upper Idumea on to a shop specializing in fashions for younger women, she enjoyed the looks and nods she received as part of her mother-in-law’s complement.

But she knew full well people were merely glancing at her before staring at her daughter.

Mahrree hadn’t realized until this trip just how much Jaytsy had matured. In the company of children her age in Edge, it was easy to think of her as a little—albeit rather developed—girl. But when she saw her daughter as complete strangers did, she realized this tall, shapely child was actually a young woman.

That was a very fast fifteen years.

Sometime during the past couple of weeks her daughter had grown up. Maybe it happened when Jaytsy spent hour after hour moving rock to find someone’s lost toy or another undamaged dish.

Maybe it was when she sobbed with a little girl upon discovering her cat didn’t survive after all.

Maybe it occurred when she was sitting by her grandfather’s bed this morning listening attentively to stories he never told anyone before, but now felt the urgent need to share.

Whatever or whenever it was, there was something changed in Jaytsy, something that lurked under her occasional silliness and rolling eyes, that knew life was much more than clothes and boys and being liked, contrary to what her friends believed. Mahrree could even see it in the way she walked. Jaytsy was developing a sense of purpose; a greater understanding and an appreciation for the fullness of life.

And then there were moments like *this*. Moments when the ‘young’ in ‘young woman’ reared its head . . .

. . . and giggled.

Jaytsy bounced out of the changing room of the fancy dress shop wearing a fluffy light pink dress and twirled. “Isn’t this pink delicious! I could just lick it!”

Joriana, sitting next to Mahrree on the waiting sofa—not a bench, but a true sofa in a shop of all places—clapped her hands. “Ooh, it’s positively you! Don’t you think so, Mahrree?”

Mahrree still hadn’t mastered the voice of “ooh!” as she was beginning to call it, and had lost the ability to appropriately label

things as “cute” by the time Peto was five—although the grandmothers retained that skill—but she could still be genuine.

“It’s very nice, Jaytsy. That pink makes your cheeks even rosier. But I’m a little concerned about the sleeves,” *of which there are none*, she added to herself. Her mother-in-law was tugging on the narrow strips of cloth on Jaytsy’s shoulders to reveal even more of Jaytsy.

“I don’t think Mother approves of that,” said Jaytsy apologetically to her grandmother.

“Yes,” Mahrree said slowly, trying not to grit her teeth, “that may be how it’s designed to be, but I’m sorry Mother Shin. Shoulders—and especially all points below—remain covered. That’s your son’s rule, by the way. Looking appealing doesn’t mean a-peeling off one’s clothes.”

“He does say that,” Jaytsy muttered. “Frequently.”

“But it’s an event gown!” Joriana exclaimed. “She’s *supposed* to show a bit of that beautiful skin. It’s not like it’s cut down to here.” She drew an invisible line low on Jaytsy’s chest and Jaytsy’s eyes flared in embarrassment. “Perrin simply doesn’t understand.”

Mahrree sighed. As a tall man, Perrin understood more than most the problems of fashionable cleavage.

“Besides, Mother Shin, where would Jaytsy wear such a beautiful gown? We don’t really have ‘events’ in Edge.”

Grandmother and granddaughter exchanged knowing and dangerous glances.

“Oh, no,” Mahrree said, dread filling her head to toe. “What’s this all about?”

“The Dinner, Mahrree!” Joriana squealed. “It’s still on! With Relf improving every day, he agreed to still hold it next week. After all, we made all the arrangements over a season ago—”

Mahrree frowned. “What dinner?”

“Only *The Dinner*,” Joriana emphasized. “The Dinner Perrin escaped from the second year we held it, the one we hold every year . . . He didn’t tell you? He didn’t tell you about it *ever*, did he? Oh, that son of mine. He’s going to hear about this.”

Mahrree growled under her breath.

Joriana sat next to her and put on her teaching face. At least, she likely thought it was a kindly explanatory expression, but re-

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ally it was a look that said, Obviously you’re clueless in everything that’s truly important in the world, so allow me to set you straight.

“Each year, to celebrate the advancement of the Administrators to power, the High General of Idumea gives a dinner for all of the dignitaries and officers ranked colonel or higher. It’s a yearly tradition, has been for eighteen years. It’s *The Dinner!*” Joriana gestured wildly with her hands, as if that should say it all.

Two women sorting dresses—or more precisely, gowns—nodded smartly at each other, then looked expectantly at Mahrree as if she’d suddenly remember all about The Dinner in just another moment.

Mahrree saw Perrin’s out. “He’s only a *lieutenant* colonel, not a full colonel. That’s probably why he didn’t think it would matter to us.”

“Bah!” Joriana scoffed. “He knows that entire families are invited. Always have been.”

Mahrree winced. “*Entire* families?”

“That means you, my dear!” Joriana beamed. “We’re getting you a dress next!”

Jaytsy squealed again and clapped her hands like her grandmother. How long Jaytsy had been in on this, Mahrree was going to find out later.

“I really don’t know how I feel about that,” Mahrree said slowly. “I’m pretty sure I know how Perrin feels, though. And poor Peto! Oh, I don’t think this is a good idea at all. We came to help, remember? Not get dressed up and be presented to Idumean society.” She shook her head, ill at ease and now feeling fake in her new dress. “We wouldn’t know how to act or what to say! We’re Edgy, Mother Shin.”

“Mother,” Jaytsy whined. “Just once? To see what the other side is like? What could it hurt to dress up and be fancy?”

A part of Mahrree felt herself being tugged over to Jaytsy’s side. She liked to believe it would only be ‘just once,’ but the look on her mother-in-law’s face suggested she expected this to be the first of many Idumean events for her son’s family.

And if Perrin were ever to become High General, and they moved into the mansion, then the responsibility of The Dinner would be—

Mahrree hated it when her mind ran too far ahead. The

speed made her head swirl.

“We’ll have to talk to your father about this dinner,” was all Mahrree could think to say. “He’s the head of our family, the decision must be his.”

“I’ll talk to him first,” Joriana assured Jaytsy. “He has to listen to his mother. In the meantime, I want to see you in that yellow dress next, before we make our decision. Mahrree, start looking around. If you don’t choose something, I’ll choose it for you! This is all part of my plot to keep you here, you realize that, right? Win over the children? Parents will follow?”

“That’s downright sinister of you!” Mahrree teased her mother-in-law.

*And very Administrative, too,* she worried to herself.

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It was nearly dinner time when the women returned home.

Relf was outside on the flagstone terrace, reclining upon a sofa he had Perrin and Peto drag outside from the large gathering room and place in the back garden so he could see something besides the study door and breathe something fresher than the air of waiting papers and ink.

When the coach pulled up along the back drive and stopped before the terrace, he shook his head. “Perrin’s not going to be happy,” he muttered and smiled.

Footsteps came from the large gathering room that opened to the terrace. “There you are . . .” and Perrin’s voice dropped off as soon as his feet hit the flagstones.

Peto joined him. “Where are they?”

“Somewhere behind those boxes, I fear.”

“So help us, Perrin!” the muffled voice of Joriana came from behind a stack of brown and gray boxes that jammed the windows.

Perrin and Peto looked at each other.

“This is the worst rubble I’ve seen yet,” Perrin murmured. “Remind me sometime to tell you about a horrifying shopping trip to the hat district I barely survived when I was eighteen.”

“So sorry I can’t get up and help,” the general chuckled, and propped himself gingerly on an elbow for a better view of the

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coach.

The driver sent a worried look to the High General, and another soldier acting as footman hesitated at the door. All the men cringed as he cautiously unlatched and opened it. A wall of boxes greeted them, and the footman looked warily at Perrin.

Perrin cocked his head to excuse the soldiers. “This is officer’s work,” he said grimly. “Peto, I see you slinking away. Get over here.”

His son tentatively approached the coach which shifted when someone inside stood up. “But *I’m* not an offi—” A narrow box on the top of the pile popped out and bounced on Peto’s head.

“That one’s for Peto, by the way,” came Joriana’s voice.

“He got it,” Perrin said, watching his son rub his head dramatically. “Not so sure he’s happy about it, though.” Sensing impending disaster, he began to pull down boxes and piled them on the ground. Soon he uncovered his daughter.

“What do you think?” Jaytsy asked, standing in the doorway of the carriage and posing in a bright orange dress.

“I think I could see you in the dark,” Peto snickered. “Who needs a lantern when Jaytsy’s dress is around?”

“Not very clever, Peto. Besides, I don’t care about your opinion.” She looked earnestly at her father.

It was one of those moments men are never prepared for. The “what do you think?” question. Relf held his breath in empathy.

Perrin evaluated her. “I can see that you love it. Good for you!”

Relf released his breath. “Smart man,” he muttered to himself. “More tactful than any Administrator.”

Jaytsy bounded down the coach steps and snatched up some of the boxes. “This one’s also for you, Peto. I chose it out myself,” she said in almost a threatening tone.

“Then I’m not wearing it,” he insisted as Jaytsy handed him a stack of boxes to carry.

“Oh yes you are! Grandmother will make you. Now help me get these inside,” she ordered as she picked up more packages.

“Why would I want to wear something you chose? I don’t need to look like a glowing carrot.” Their bickering echoed in Grand Hall as they carried the boxes to their rooms.

Joriana stood at the door of the coach with two more large

packages to hand to her son.

“Mother, what have you done today?” asked Perrin, astounded at the level of shopping that had been committed.

“Just had a little fun,” she smiled. “It’s been such a terrible week, but now so wonderful to have women with me.”

Perrin helped her down the steps and waited at the bottom for the next presentation. “I know you’re in there,” he called.

There was no answer from the dark coach.

“My mother’s had you all day, and I know she’s done something to you. Might as well get it over with. I’m getting hungry for dinner out here.”

Mahrree appeared at the opening, not looking anywhere nearly as orange as her daughter.

Perrin actually smiled. She wore Idumea well.

“Oh, that’s not bad at all.” He offered her his hand. “Not purple now, is it.”

“No, not *this* one,” Mahrree warned as she came down the steps, another box under her arm.

“I think she looks lovely!” Joriana said. “Not that she didn’t before, but you know what I mean.”

“She always looks lovely,” Perrin smiled at his wife. “What she wears doesn’t change that.”

“And you don’t want to be a general,” Relf said under his breath. “With that ability to twist anything to your favor . . . what a waste of talent.”

“Come Perrin, help your wife with these things,” Joriana ordered. “And then we need to talk about next week.”

Perrin’s eyebrows furrowed. “You mean Jaytsy’s birthday?”

“I mean the day *after* her birthday,” Joriana said.

Perrin went gray. He looked at his father.

Relf shrugged and wearily nodded.

“You’re *still having it*?” Perrin nearly shouted.

“What better time? To show everything is still well, that life continues in Idumea,” his mother insisted.

“But, but . . . surely the resources could be put to some better use.”

Joriana waved that off. “Clean up in Idumea is going as scheduled. The outer lying villages seem to be fine—”

“I haven’t heard anything from Edge,” Perrin said tensely.

“No news, son, remember?” the general said. “Standing

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rule? Grandpy Neeks served under me long enough to know that. Besides, The Dinner will be good for morale. Mind you, I’ll be moving a bit slowly that night, so some of the duties may fall to you—”

“Absolutely not! No!” Perrin declared.

“You said you had come to help, right?” his mother said just as firmly, her hands on her hips. “Or was that just a line? Because if you really want to help, you *will* help! You will do all that your father needs you to do, and all that the Administrators expect of the Shin family. Honestly, Perrin—it’s just a dinner. How can you be so stubborn and selfish as to object to that?”

He looked down for a moment before meeting his mother’s glare and offering a penitent smile. “Of course I’ll help,” he said quietly. “Just tell me what to do. No complaining.”

Joriana stood on her toes to kiss him on the cheek and then wiped it off with her thumb. “Let’s eat dinner and discuss matters. Now go help your father into the house and let’s see how well he does at the table tonight. He needs to start practicing, after all. Only ten more days until the 47<sup>th</sup>!”

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Mahrree had committed all the words of her mother-in-law to memory, and the order in which she said them to her son when she insisted he help with The Dinner, because the immediate compliance of Perrin was positively stunning.

But he was unusually quiet at the beginning of dinner.

Mahrree didn’t think it was because of her dress, but perhaps because he was having second thoughts about The Dinner. Or maybe it was because Peto and Jaytsy dominated the conversation. Both tried to outdo the other in what was more significant, the shopping district or the arena.

“We saw this huge carriage called a bus!”

“It seats fifty thousand people!”

“One store had all kinds of hats in all kinds of colors!”

“You can even buy food there during the events!”

“Some shops were three levels high!”

“This place was at least *four*, with at least forty entrances on the side Father and I walked around!”

“The glass is so thin on the windows you can see all the way through, even to the windows on the other sides!”

“It can be flooded for canoe races!”

“Especially when it’s raining, right Peto? At least the shops are enclosed!”

“They’re devising a way to cover up the arena, and the cover *might* be big enough for your mouth, Jaytsy!”

“Enough!” Mahrree finally said, rubbing away the headache that was forming near her temples.

The family was seated together at the end of the massive table, Relf at the head, Joriana to his side, and Perrin next to her. Across from Perrin sat Mahrree, with her children on either side of her. She wondered how she ended up with them *again*, both trying to talk louder than the other, and through her head.

“Please—just eat. And it’s not a competition, you two.”

“They always have competitions, Mother. That’s the point of the arena,” Peto said.

“And the shops, um, the uh . . .” Jaytsy stammered not knowing how to outdo her brother without sounding absurd.

“Why?” Mahrree asked. “Why does it have to be a competition?”

Behind her, Jaytsy and Peto stared at each other, having just discovered that their mother was hopelessly stupid.

“To see who’s the best,” Jaytsy reminded her.

“Yeah, what’s the point of . . . running if you don’t know if you run the fastest?” Peto added.

Mahrree sat up and narrowed her eyes.

Jaytsy murmured, “Oh, no.” She knew what that look on her mother meant.

“*Interesting*,” Mahrree said slowly, putting down her fork. “What’s the point of doing something if you can’t be judged to be the best?”

Jaytsy shot a warning glance to her grandparents and murmured, “Here it comes.”

Mahrree folded her hands in front of her in a modified debating position. “Why not just do something to experience it? You know, running has its purposes, not just as a race.”

“Ah, Mother—you know what I mean,” Peto grumbled, and took a big bite of pheasant to avoid being dragged into the debate.

But there were times when Mahrree saw a lesson could be



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taught, and some lessons just can't wait, even if her husband and in-laws were watching her closely.

“No, I don't think *you* know what I mean. Peto, how often do the boys in Edge play kickball?”

“Well, besides being part of the Idumean-organized teams *that you won't let me join*—” he added bitterly.

“I'm not talking about the teams. See, that's precisely it. There's nothing stopping you and your friends from starting your own games. When you were still a baby, children started their own games nearly every day.”

“I've heard this before,” Peto muttered.

But Mahrree was never one to cut a good speech short just because someone complained. “They chose their own teams and played just for fun, not hoping to be recruited to Idumea. No one was worried about who was best—they just wanted to have fun.”

“Some of the teams look like they have fun,” said Peto, unconvinced.

Mahrree eyed him. “That's not what Bloch said last year. Remember? I think it was something like, Thank goodness practices are over so I can do something else with my life for the season.”

“He didn't say it exactly like that!” Peto scoffed. “Why do parents and *teachers* always translate what they think teenagers are saying?”

“So what did he say?”

Peto sighed. “I don't remember. But it wasn't that.”

“I do remember that his marks improved significantly when he wasn't obsessed with impressing his trainer,” Mahrree pointed out. “Good marks in school and performing well on the final exams will do far more for his life than being able to kick a ball. What kind of job will the Administrators allow him for something as inane as that? As far as I can tell, it's only the trainers who benefit from these new teams—and the silver that they're paid for them—rather than the boys. What a waste of time.”

“Come now, Mahrree,” Relf broke in. Propped up by several pillows squeezed around the chair, he appeared to be more of a stuffed toy than the High General. “If that's all you see to competition, that's a rather narrow view.”

“No, that's not all of it,” she agreed. In the past, she would have felt anxious allowing the High General into her unauthorized

debate. But in his present state—gaunt, pale, and with a yellow blanket tucked around his waist to keep him warm—he was as intimidating as a wilting flower.

“In fact, I use competition with my students all the time,” she told him. “Boys aren’t motivated if they aren’t ranked somehow. But there’s a difference: I list the boys’ names on the board for many things. Those whose marks have improved, who’s got into the least amount of fights, whose name I haven’t heard my husband utter in contempt.” She smiled at her husband.

Oddly, he didn’t return it.

Unperturbed, she continued. “But in my competitions, everyone’s pushing each other to improve. The goal is to have each boy’s name on the list of those who are passing the class. I bring cake when that happens,” she added. “Food’s a marvelous motivator. This competition pushes all the boys to succeed.”

“So everybody wins?” Relf asked. “That may work for your class, but in everything else that seems a rather poor system. You have to lower standards to let everyone win. Then if you reward mediocrity, it breeds only more. We don’t lower standards in the army. If a man can’t run fast enough, he’ll bring more harm than help. The group is only as strong as its weakest member, so no one better be weak. Not everyone makes the cut. That’s competition!” He pounded the table in emphasis. In his frail condition, that meant his fist barely bounced off the tablecloth.

“I’m not advocating lowering standards,” Mahrree told him. “Mine are even higher than the Department of Instruction’s. And do you know why? *They* keep lowering the standards, General, so that it their testing appears successful. *They* cheat to pass everyone.”

When she caught Perrin’s icy warning glare, she quickly looked back to her father-in-law.

“But General,” Mahrree continued, “don’t you give your new recruits time to improve before you make your cuts? A lot simply don’t realize how strong they can be. I know Shem has pushed many young men to the breaking point, only to discover they could bend and rise to the standard. Everyone who reaches that standard signs up. They ‘win,’ if being a part of the army can be deemed as winning something,” she teased her father-in-law.

He scowled, but a hint of a smile was in his eyes. “You have a point. But even then, there’s always one man who’s the fastest.”

“Says the most competitive woman in the world.”

“And why’s that important?”

“So everyone knows who gets to be the messenger,” Perrin said miserably, finally speaking. “Not much glory in *that*.”

“Perrin was the fastest when he was eighteen,” General Shin said proudly, leaning back onto a poufy flowered cushion. “No one could beat him, not even some of the older, stronger men. Then he spent that Weeding Season with the Densals baling hay in Edge and came back three inches taller and many more inches broader all around. Too many muscles to sprint the fastest anymore.”

Mahrree was speechless.

Joriana squeezed her son’s still-muscular arm admiringly. Perrin was turning red. He glanced at his wife and was greeted by her stunned expression.

But Joriana began her boast. “Yet he was still fast enough to beat *you*, my dear, when he came home. And nearly every other man in the fort. Only two could outrun him. I’m sure he’s still fast, and he’s even older than you were when you raced him.”

Peto laughed. “You should’ve seen him last year against Uncle Shem! That was the best Strongest Soldier Race ever.”

“Peto . . .” Perrin said heavily.

“What happened? You know, I don’t seem to remember you telling us about last year’s race,” Joriana said to her son.

Since Perrin was glaring at Peto, Jaytsy took up the story. “Shem finally beat him—by several minutes!”

“Shem’s ten years younger, too,” Perrin reminded her. “And I’d just beaten him in a demonstration duel the night before. Flattened and pinned him to the ground, in front of all his new recruits.” He smiled thinly at the memory of it. “He needed something to make him look good in front of his men again. I *had* to let him win, to get back their confidence in their sergeant.”

“Ha!” Jaytsy exclaimed. “You lost because you’re getting old. He couldn’t walk properly for the next few days,” she told her grandparents. “He claimed he did something to his back.”

“I did,” Perrin said. “I’d tripped on that stupid little yapping thing Mrs. Tott carries around. It was hiding in her alley when I was trying to clear the ditch.”

Jaytsy giggled. “She was grateful you found him, though. She’d been looking for him for a while.”

“Yeah, but her son was disappointed you didn’t fall on

him,” Peto laughed. “He’d been hoping for a proper dog for years. If that thing had been squashed under *you*, he could’ve had his wish.”

Perrin watched his wife who still wore her stunned expression. “You’ve nothing to add to this? I find that hard to believe.”

“You were in Edge? When you were eighteen?” Mahrree almost wailed.

For sixteen years she’d lived with the man, and thought she knew everything about him. But now there were surprises about him daily. No, hourly! “I thought your first time in Edge was when we met.”

“Before he started Command School at the university,” Relf interrupted her pouting, “he wanted to see the world. Bit of Terry the explorer in him, I suppose. So I sent him to the *edge* of the world,” he chuckled. “Figured he’d be pretty safe with Joriana’s aunt and uncle. They nearly proved me wrong.”

“How so?” Mahrree was still baffled and a bit put out that she never knew any of this.

Perrin sipped cider from his mug and didn’t make eye contact with anyone, especially his wife staring pointedly at him.

“They tried to turn him into a rector,” Relf scoffed. “Can you imagine? Perrin as Rector Shin? Had him reading *The Writings* every morning and discussing it every evening.”

“It was only because they could never have children of their own, Relf. They always thought of Perrin as their grandson,” Joriana told him. “And they took very good care of him that season.”

“I wasn’t about to become a rector,” Perrin said quietly, tearing his bread in half and watching it distractedly. “But it was a good season. I learned some things about myself. That’s why I wanted to go back when the opportunity arose.”

“I don’t remember ever seeing you, and I was at the Densals’ rectory every Holy Day!” Mahrree was on the verge of frustrated tears as she tried to imagine what he would’ve looked like at eighteen.

“Weren’t you already going to the university in Mountseen?” he reminded her. “Started early?”

“Oh, yes,” she grumbled. “I missed you! We could’ve found each other ten years earlier. I think I would’ve enjoyed seeing the eighteen-year-old version of you.”

“Says the most competitive woman in the world.”

“I don’t think you would’ve,” said Perrin tightly. “And I certainly wasn’t ready for you. Can we get back to discussing The Dinner?”

Of course they couldn’t get back to discussing The Dinner! Not when such an astonishing nugget of her husband’s past had just been revealed. She was perplexed and fascinated by his reticence. Why did he never tell her about this before?

But being as guarded as he was, she knew he’d never answer such a direct question. Instead she tried, “Well, I didn’t like you entirely when I first met you, either.”

“I wasn’t the same person. You never would’ve married me then.” He shifted uncomfortably and pushed his food around his plate with his fork.

“And I suppose I was a little pushy at eighteen as well,” Mahrree confessed, filling her fork.

“Says the most competitive woman in the world,” her husband intoned, still fussing with his plate.

The room fell silent.

Someone may have whispered, “*Uh oh . . .*”

Mahrree stopped, her fork in midair, and glared at her husband who still didn’t meet her eyes. She put her fork down with purposeful clatter and sat up straight in her chair.

Relf leaned back into a fluffy pillow and simpered. “Oh, good.” He put down this fork and folded his arms. “I haven’t seen any action for a while. This should be excellent dinner entertainment.”

Mahrree looked at Perrin, aghast. “*What did you say about me?*”

“*What?*” Perrin mimicked and finally looked up. “You! Listen to you. ‘I don’t like competition,’ ‘There shouldn’t be one winner,’” he whined. “You, who can never bear to lose an argument, arguing for no winners?” He rolled his eyes more expertly than Jaytsy.

Mahrree’s mouth opened and shut several times trying to find the right words to say. Instead she spluttered, “Prove it!”

He jabbed his finger across the table at her. “Tactic number one! You always want to be right, and when you know you’re wrong, you shift the burden of proof to someone else. Did that at our fourth debate with that stupid midday meal mess you brought to the platform. Couldn’t prove it’d never ‘progress’ into some-

thing smarter, so you forced me to prove you wrong. You could never admit defeat. You *always* have to be right!”

Mahrree was so furious and surprised she instinctively fought back. “Being right is *not* the same as being a ‘winner’!”

Relf nodded to his wife. “Maybe we can put them on a stage next week. Dinner and a show. Could be a new tradition.”

Joriana fretfully shook her head at him.

Perrin shot his father a warning glance, and Relf tossed it right back.

“There’s a difference between being right and being the best,” Mahrree insisted. “I’m not trying to prove anyone worse than me. I’m not taunting or putting down—”

“Are you sure?” Perrin snapped. “Isn’t being overly opinionated just as bad as someone taunting? ‘My ideas are better than yours?’”

“Overly opinionated? What’s wrong with having opinions?” she said, her voice rising to the pitch of a trapped cat. “What’s *more* frightening are people with no opinions at all. ‘Oh, that sounds nice, let’s do it! Let’s end all debates. It just feels good!’ What’s wrong with thinking?”

Relf turned to his wife again. “You did say the administrator over education is coming to The Dinner, didn’t you?” He smiled wickedly at the thought.

Perrin skipped glaring at his father and instead launched into Mahrree. “But why do you have to express that opinion everywhere, at every time, and in every situation? You could cause trouble!”

Mahrree threw her hands in the air. “But if it’s the truth, Perrin, there’s more trouble in *not* expressing it! You know that. That’s why we’re here. To find the truth and live it, no matter what!”

“Gadiman!” Relf snapped his fingers. “*That’s* who we should invite. Make this dinner truly memorable, except that man never leaves his office.”

Joriana smacked him lightly on the arm.

“But you can’t always know the truth,” Perrin countered loudly. “Some things are just never revealed. You have to deal with what you’re given, and stop fighting it! Stop wishing for what you can’t have!”

Mahrree shook her head in confusion, not sure how that last

“Says the most competitive woman in the world.”

sentence fit their argument, but also knowing too well that there was a time she faced the truth and shrank away from it.

But that was years ago, and a different situation and, well, what happens when people stop wishing for the truth? She hadn't given up completely finding it. She just . . . was putting it off for the right day.

But this argument wasn't about her; something was going on with her husband. She hadn't seen him this confrontational in years, as if he'd regressed to the duplicitous captain she knew long ago. She couldn't imagine why, but his behavior enraged her.

“You do the best you can, but if you stop fighting, the truth won't win!” she yelled. “If you give up completely, who wins? Not the Creator or His will. So whose will are *you* fighting for, Lieutenant Colonel?”

They stared across the table at each other, a feeling of betrayal hitting both of them at the same time like icy water.

No one had been eating for the past five minutes. Jaytsy and Peto watched their parents anxiously, their eyes shifting back and forth, hoping one of them would end it somehow.

Joriana bit her lower lip in worry, but Relf still smirked, his eyes smoldering in amusement.

Perrin shook his head slowly, his expression softening as he stared at his wife. “How'd we get here?” he whispered.

Mahrree's eyes filled with tears. “I don't know,” she whispered back.

“We'll finish this later,” Perrin said quietly.

Mahrree nodded.

“I think we should talk about the arena again,” Peto suggested in a timid voice.

Perrin smiled at his son. “Absolutely!”

Mahrree sniffed appreciatively.

Jaytsy released a sigh of relief.

Relf shook his head. “That's too bad. Great entertainment. I guess we'll have to have that ridiculous dancing instead of your debate.”

Mahrree wiped away a tear. “Dancing? When?”

Joriana looked up at the ceiling as if she was eating with idiots. “After The Dinner! Tradition? Honestly, do I have to spell everything out? That's why fifteen is so important—the age when

girls can begin dancing! Jaytsy's dress?"

Couples dancing had yet to gain popularity in Edge, and that was fine with Mahrree. They had dancing, but it was watching an individual or a group moving to music, not couples holding each other.

But in Idumea couples dancing had been around for over twenty years and was the mainstay of every elegant event. Since Edge wasn't elegant in any stretch of the imagination, couples dancing didn't fit in there either.

Mahrree began to fume again to realize she'd been misled by her mother-in-law. Not once during that entire day had she said the word "dance," and now Mahrree knew why.

She looked at her husband, suddenly feeling something they could be united in again.

"No!" they declared together.

"Perrin Shin!" his mother said loudly. "This girl—" she pointed to Jaytsy whose eyebrows furrowed in worry, "—has every right to dance at her grandmother's house the day after her birthday. It's tradition!"

"And why is following tradition a marker for something right?" Perrin asked her sharply.

Relf smiled again, this time at Mahrree. "Maybe we don't need to schedule the musicians after all? The debate might still go on."

Mahrree shook her head, but Relf winked at her.

"Give me one good reason, Perrin," Joriana said hotly, "why she shouldn't enjoy herself that night?"

Perrin sat forward, glancing at his daughter. "Gladly. I don't like the idea of my daughter in the arms of strange men all night."

Jaytsy's eyes grew wide with anticipation. Her mother's glare put a stop to that. Since when had Jaytsy been thinking about men?

"Perrin, it's just dancing," Joriana said. "Don't you remember? You went to a few and looked very handsome in your dress uniform."

"Do I have to dress up?" Peto asked.

"Of course, silly!" Jaytsy said. "That's what the suit's for. Didn't you even look at it?"

Peto was appalled. "I distinctly remember Mother saying there wouldn't be any dinners or anything. When's this dinner?"



“Says the most competitive woman in the world.”

Joriana put on an overly cheerful expression, knowing she was facing a harder sale than when she tried to get Mahrree to try on a hat. “The 47<sup>th</sup> Day of Planting, and you’ll look as handsome in that suit as your father used to look in his. And this,” she picked up her fork daintily, “young man, is the *proper* way to hold your fork on that day.”

“The 47<sup>th</sup> Day?” Peto repeated. “Isn’t that the day King Oren died?”

Joriana’s enthusiasm dimmed.

Mahrree cleared her throat. “Thank you for the history reminder, Peto,” she said hurriedly when she noticed her father-in-law watching his grandson. “Now, about this dance—”

“Yes, Peto, it is,” General Shin said shortly, and took a bite of a pheasant leg.

Peto frowned. “So this party’s happening on his deathday? Like a celebration? That’s kind of morbid.”

“Peto—” Perrin started in warning, but Relf held up his hand.

“Yes, Peto,” he said steadily. “We celebrate the day the old regime ended, and a new one began.”

Mahrree shook her head furiously at her son, and Jaytsy bit her lower lip in worry for her brother who sometimes just didn’t get the hint to shut up. Such as now, for instance.

“Yeah, but the king died and—” Something in the brittle expression of his grandfather stopped Peto, but unfortunately only for a moment as the rest of the history lesson caught up to Peto.

“Wait a minute,” he gulped as he stared at his grandfather. “*You* executed him!”

Mahrree rubbed her cheeks. “Peto, Peto . . .”

“No, Mahrree,” the High General said coolly to his now-pale grandson, “it’s all right. Yes, Peto, I organized the execution squad, and I gave the signal for them to proceed. It was the only option. Nicko Mal and I had been in negotiations for moons about this. What Mal wanted was for the people to rise up in rebellion and overthrow Oren in a bloody riot. We’d already had a few of those, but they all stopped short of invading the king’s mansion. Mal wanted the army to help incite a truly aggressive attack, one that would kill Oren and likely many of his servants, civilians, and soldiers. Then Mal would *gallantly* step in and restore order to earn the undying devotion of the people. In the end, executing

Oren was the best solution, and the only one I'd support. It was controlled and humane, and only one man lost his life. That was important to me. Every other scenario would have resulted in far more death and destruction. I celebrate *that*, son, and the fact that since that day I've never again had to organize an execution squad. I hope the world never sees another."

Peto swallowed hard and nodded. Then, because he was an exceptionally slow learner, he added, "This was his house, too. Wasn't it."

General Shin had started to take another bite of his pheasant, but paused. "Oren gave it to me himself, when his mistress—"

Mahrree cleared her throat loudly.

"Oh, get over it, Mahrree," he said impatiently. "Your children are old enough to know that men and women occasionally come up with their own arrangements. Yes Peto, that woman came to her senses and took herself and her two teenage sons and left Oren. He worried about this house being raided in their absence."

"And he also wanted your protection?" Peto said daringly.

Joriana fidgeted as Relf held the pheasant leg halfway to his mouth. "I protected that idiot for as long as I could. But I also vowed to protect the people, Peto. His senselessness came in conflict with that. It was either the world, or Oren. Rather a simple decision, really." He bit into the fowl.

Peto gulped again. "Where are those sons now?"

"No one knows," Relf said indifferently as he chewed. "One, named Sonoforen, was rumored to be trying to kill Mal many years ago, but no one's seen him for probably a dozen years or more. Likely dead. The other son, Dormin, also hasn't been heard from for many years. If you're worried that something will happen on the anniversary, you needn't be. There's nowhere in the world as safe as this mansion, I assure you."

Peto looked thoughtfully at his plate. "Well, only as safe as a place can be that makes people dress up and eat food with fancy forks and dance afterward." He looked up at his grandfather with a mischievous grin.

Relf winked back at him.

And just like that, they were fine again.

Mahrree was always a bit envious of males, and their ability to overcome a conflict in the same amount of time it takes to

“Says the most competitive woman in the world.”

belch.

That just didn't happen with every kind of relationship—

Mahrree realized that Perrin had twisted to steadily watch his mother who had completely ignored him for the past several minutes.

“Yes, *about this dance*, Mother,” Perrin intoned, “I remember dances. I also remember what young men think about when they put their arms around a young woman. And back then dresses still came up to a girl's throat.”

“This one's modest, Father,” Jaytsy promised. “Mother wouldn't let me get the pink one.”

Perrin smiled briefly at his wife who returned it.

But Mahrree noticed that Jaytsy's eyes were still glowing with the wonder of what “young men thought.” It was probably time for another with her daughter, especially if she'd been overhearing Kindiri and Lieutenant Riplak's suggestive sweet roll and cucumber sandwich discussions, with a side helping of eyebrow waggling. It was just a good thing melons weren't in season.

“Perrin,” Joriana started again, “Don't you trust your mother's judgment?”

“Mostly, yes. But I don't trust young officers or young men. I used to be one.”

Joriana waved that off. “Then don't you at least trust your daughter?”

“In the wrong situation, Mother, I wouldn't even trust myself,” he said soberly. “And I'm many years older.”

“You'll be there and Mahrree'll be there the entire time!” Joriana gestured wildly. “You can follow the poor girl around if you want, introducing yourself to every young man who looks at her. You can even wear your sword. But let the girl enjoy herself, just once!”

“Perrin,” his father spoke up. “Listen to your mother. We've been doing this for years, and nothing improper has ever happened. It'll look good if your family is there for once. Some have speculated about what you've been doing so far away and for so long. This will show the Shin family is still trustworthy.”

“Trustworthy,” Perrin repeated.

“You know what I mean,” said the general dismissively.

“No, actually, I don't. What *do* you mean?”

“General,” Mahrree said quietly, “do you want me to re-

serve a place on that debating stage for you?”

It was hard to ignore her, but Relf did. “The Administrators need to be able to count on the Shin family to perform their duties, Perrin.” Something in the general’s voice suggested additional levels of meaning.

Perrin’s shoulders twitched. “I’ve never failed to perform my duty, sir. I’ve nothing on record to hide.”

“But you do in your eyes,” the general reminded him. He shifted in his cushions for a better position, while Perrin repositioned himself uncertainly. “All I’m suggesting, son, is we’ve been in a period of relative peace. When there’s no clear enemy to fight, some go looking for one, even to make one. We say we want peace, but conflict’s always been more interesting. Don’t make yourself a target.”

“The Administrators have plenty of enemies,” Perrin said heavily. “They’re called Guarders. Why should they worry about anything else?”

General Shin looked quickly around the table. No one had been eating for some time.

“General, I asked you a question!”

He turned to his son. “Because Guarders aren’t confined to the forests, Lieutenant Colonel! Guarders are in our city and villages, just biding their time. The sooner you realize our security’s been infiltrated, the better off you are. At some point, they *will* strike again. Not just little bits of thieving here and there, but a full-out show of force. The Administrators don’t want this knowledge out, but it’s crucial that it is.” His voice trailed off to a whisper. His revelation likely didn’t have the effect he expected.

Perrin scoffed. “I’ve heard that before. The Chief of Enforcement in Edge accused Shem of being a Guarder after that first successful raid on Edge. But there was no evidence then, and still none now. And you know Zenos well enough yourself to know he’s no threat.”

Relf shook his head. “I’m not accusing the master sergeant. But . . . there’s growing suggestion of Guarder infiltration, elsewhere.”

“What kind?” Perrin demanded.

“The Administrators have reason to suspect Guarders are living among us as spies. They dress, talk, and act like everyone else, but no one knows their real identities. It seems that even our

“Says the most competitive woman in the world.”

citizens have joined their ranks.” Relf sighed. “Remember those two lieutenants that were found dead in front of the guest quarters when your mother and I were staying at your fort years ago? Perhaps they *were* more than just squabbling over a girl.”

His son was unconvinced. “Karna investigated that, and so did Idumea. Brisack even sent a report that there had been problems between them. There was no evidence of anything Guarder related.”

“But maybe others are related *to* Guarders,” the High General suggested. “Maybe those citizens know of their heritage and are continuing their work.”

Mahrree noticed Peto watching his grandfather with unusual intensity.

“It makes no sense,” Perrin scowled. “If they’re out there, and no one knows who they are, then how do *we* know?”

The general shook his head. “It’s just what some of the Administrators’ assistants *say*, Perrin, in whispers to some of my men. I don’t have hard evidence myself, just rumors that run back and forth. But rumors, as you know, quite often begin with a word of truth. If I could reveal our suspicions to the public, we might succeed in finding proof, either way!”

He sighed and rubbed his forehead.

“Perrin, you know well enough the Administrators don’t need hard evidence in order to become anxious. Some are looking only for hints and suggestions, and are eager to point their fingers. Anyone who doesn’t follow exactly what the Administrators are directing may be suspected of sympathizing with the other side. Son, they’re looking for disenchanting people just like—”

He glanced at his daughter-in-law who wore a look of dread for the past minute.

Perrin finished his sentence. “Just like me?”

The general exhaled and winced in pain as he did so. He gripped his ribs as he murmured, “No, no, no it’s not like that—”

“Well, there’s no reason to suspect me or my family!” Perrin said loudly. He looked at Mahrree, who trembled in worry.

She couldn’t help it. She remembered her letter-writing occupation of a few years ago. It was fortunate none of those letters questioning the changes in education and debating went past the junior skimmers to anyone of importance in the Administrative hierarchy, or someone could even be suspecting her.

But what if her letters *had* gone somewhere—

“There’s no evidence in our behavior,” Perrin insisted. “It’s not even as if we had any Guarder ties or family connections.”

The general glanced at his grandson—Peto’s gray eyes big and unblinking—before turning to the lieutenant colonel. He sat up as best he could among the pillows that nearly swallowed him. “Lieutenant Colonel Shin, I’m ordering you, as High General of Idumea, to do nothing that could cause you to be suspected of anything. You must do your duty—even if it means dancing, even if it means eventually moving back here and becoming a general. Is that understood, soldier?”

Mahrree’s hand covered her mouth in dread as she waited for her husband’s response to the direct order.

Jaytsy’s eyes shifted back and forth between her father and grandfather. Peto stared at his grandfather, and Joriana closed her eyes, waiting.

When the lieutenant colonel finally spoke, his voice was low and steady. “You say I must do my duty, sir. But what if my duty to the Administrators comes in direct conflict with my duty to the Creator?”

The general stared back. “The Creator knows you must follow orders. A child who has neglectful parents isn’t responsible for what he doesn’t know. The Administrators will be held accountable for whatever they order you to do.”

“But what if,” the lieutenant colonel prodded, “despite poor parenting, that child still learns what’s right and wrong? If he then deliberately chooses what’s wrong, the Creator holds *him* responsible, not his parents. I’m ultimately responsible for what I do. One should not honor one’s ‘parents’ if it means going against the Creator’s will.”

The general was ready for that. “The Creator knows who the authority on the world is, and He knows we’re bound to the authorities.”

“I disagree, sir. The authorities weren’t selected by the Creator. They selected themselves. They don’t even know who the Creator is.”

Joriana couldn’t take anymore. She opened her eyes and gripped his arm. “Perrin, please—”

But her son was unmoved. “My wife suggested earlier that we’re here to find the truth and live it.”

“Says the most competitive woman in the world.”

Mahrree gulped and regretted her words.

“And I must agree,” he continued. “It’d be far worse to go against the Creator than against the Administrators. They may have temporary power over my body, but the Creator’s displeasure with me could last a thousand years.”

“Oh, Perrin!” Joriana exclaimed. “Why are you so dramatic? Most of what the Administrators do is *fine*. There are only a few things here and there that are worrisome. Just work around those. Think about your children!”

He turned to his mother. “I am thinking about them. I’ve thought of nothing besides them.”

“Then don’t they deserve a father who’s still here for them? Who can still protect them?” she pleaded. “Even if you just act like your typically obnoxious self, with the paranoid air that’s growing around the Administrators they may decide *you’re* a threat! And then what happens to you and to your family?”

Perrin looked at his son and daughter. Both of them were terrified, more so than on the morning of the land tremor.

Mahrree hoped he wouldn’t look at her. She was weeping quietly but didn’t want him to see it.

“Perrin,” his father’s voice had a softness none of them had ever heard before.

Perrin forced himself to turn to him.

“Please, son. You can still do so much, and for many people. But you have to do it *in* this system. We need you. Just be good.”

Perrin hung his head. After a long and awful silence he said, “I’m trying, Father.”

“Trying won’t be good enough tomorrow, Perrin,” Relf warned. “In the morning when you face those Administrators—”

Mahrree’s gasp was so loud it was nearly a scream. “*What?*”

Perrin looked up and gave her feeble smile. “Forgot to tell you. I’m supposed to meet with the Administrators tomorrow morning. Not completely sure why, but I’m sure we’ll still have time to take the tour of the city Mother was planning—”

Mahrree was sure she went whiter than the plastered walls around her. Her biggest fear in the world was about to happen tomorrow morning—

She couldn’t breathe anymore. She gasped and gasped again, trying to make her lungs move—

Perrin pushed away his chair and rushed to the other side of the table. He reached her just as panicked tears trickled down her face and one of her gasps finally produced a sob.

“Now, now, none of that,” he said as he crouched next to her and pulled her into him. “Remember, the walls don’t have ears. They know nothing about the nonsense we spout. It’s just our nature. We simply like to argue. Every family does, right? This meeting—it’s only a formality, I’m sure. No, don’t cry, don’t cry. Brisack said it would be a friendly ‘How are you doing’ type of thing. They probably just want to go over the menu for next week. Usually three or four Administrators come to The Dinner.”

Mahrree whimpered at the news and slumped into his arms.

Jaytsy sighed. “They’ll be coming to the Shin Family Dinner War of 335. That should keep them entertained.”



## Chapter 10 ~ “Just smile and nod. Smile and nod.”

It was late when Perrin finally entered his bedroom to see his wife sitting in bed reading a book she'd borrowed from the study. She was sure the look on her face showed she wasn't too engaged by *Mace Tactics of the Middle Age*.

“Your father settled in for the night?”

Perrin nodded from the door. “I think he's going to struggle getting out of that bed of theirs, but he's insisting. I told Mother to come get me if he gets stuck and can't roll over.” He offered her half a smile.

She returned only a quarter of it, which really didn't amount to anything. “Can you tell me what happened tonight, at dinner?”

He leaned against the door frame. “A family, each one with opinions and tempers to match, ate a meal and had a few words. Typical, I'm sure.”

“There was nothing typical about it!” she burst out. “And as for the walls not having ears? Oh, they do!”

“You mean Kindiri and the others?” He shrugged that away. “They didn't hear anything.”

“Oh, really? Did you even *see* how pale Lieutenant Riplak was when you brought him in? For a young man so naturally brown, he was shockingly white. When you told him you needed help moving your father, I'm sure he thought he'd be moving a corpse with your long knife coming out of his chest. He was quite relieved to realize he just needed to help get him to a sofa in the gathering room so he could recline while enjoying his cake.”

Perrin frowned. “I thought Riplak seemed a bit reluctant

when I retrieved him from the servants' eating room. The others also seemed rather nervous—”

“Because he wasn't the only one worried!” Mahrree told him. “As soon as you left with your father, Kindiri, the maids, and two of the stable boys peered through the door, likely wondering how many more bodies needed to be carted out. Kindiri seemed genuinely surprised we were all upright and talking normally, but she asked me later why I'd been crying.”

“Well, your eyes were rather puffy about that administrator business.” He continued more rapidly when Mahrree reddened with rage, “But I'm sure they didn't hear what we said—”

“They heard the shouting!” she demonstrated. “And when men with blades shout, bloody things are sure to follow!”

Perrin blinked. “I'd never pull a knife or a sword on you,” he said, slightly hurt. “And my father rarely touches his long knife, and wears his sword only for show.”

“But *they* don't know that, do they?” she gestured in the direction of the kitchen. “Besides,” she said more softly, her frustration being replaced by her true worry. “That's not what I meant. What happened with *us*? We've had our squabbles, but I haven't felt so angry at you since before we were married.” She refocused on the book, fighting back tears.

Perrin sighed and walked over to sit on the bed, but couldn't find any space. “You know, you are allowed to move some of these pillows. I can't understand the purpose of them.” He scowled as he sat down. “Make the bed look cluttered, and then no one sleeps on them? Waste of cloth and feathers. Some poor old naked goose somewhere—”

“Perrin,” Mahrree interrupted more boldly, and set down the shockingly dull book. “What's going on with you here in Idumea? I feel like I hardly know you.”

He opened his mouth to make another smart diverting remark but closed it again. “I don't know. Had a talk with my father while you were out earlier. He's convinced we're supposed to move here. Of course you heard him try to make me promise in front of the whole family that I would. Sneaky old wolf.” He inspected his boots.” I guess . . . I guess I just reverted back to using you as my reflection. I've been arguing in my mind all afternoon while Peto and I wandered around that absurd arena, then I threw those arguments at you to see what you'd say.” He finally looked

up at her with apologetic eyes.

She nodded but said, “You promised you wouldn’t do that again, remember? The night after we got engaged you said you’d always be honest with me.”

He took her hand and rubbed one of her fingers with his thumb. “You’re right. I did. And, to be fair, I *was* honest tonight. A lot of those ideas were mine. It’s just . . . I feel like I have two minds sometimes. One that can find ways to rationalize and agree with the Administrators, and the other that tells me I should be doing something else and that I need to keep my distance.”

His rubbing became more forceful and Mahrree wished that he’d remember he never held her hand. She closed her other hand over his tense one. He immediately relaxed, to her finger’s relief.

“So you threw at me your ideas to see how I’d react. You know, Perrin, we could just talk about what’s bothering you. Everything doesn’t have to become a battle.”

He slowly smiled. “But battling is what I love best. Well, actually *arguing*.” He kissed her hand.

Mahrree sighed. “What happened at dinner was *not arguing*.” She resisted her usual tendency to give in to him and kiss him back. “That was a full-blown, all-out fight. Worse than the back garden sofa incident.”

He continued to study her small hand in his massive rough one. “You know, if you’d let me teach you to hold a sword, you could spar with me, and you’d find I’m the most easy-going man in the world.”

Mahrree wasn’t going to be shifted off topic. “If you’re bothered by something, talk to me about it.”

“And talking is what you love best.” He put down her hand as if suddenly bored with it.

“You already promised once, remember? Along with promising not to kill me?” She chanced a small smile. “And, Perrin, I must confess, there was a moment that I felt the desire to kill you tonight, so perhaps you better not teach me to hold a sword. I may actually use it someday.”

Perrin returned her smile. “I’ll try to do better to talk to you about issues that are bothering me,” he said dutifully.

Mahrree nodded. “Good. We can start with something easy.”

“What, tonight? Mahrree, it’s late—”

“Did you meet Cush’s grandson?”

Blandly, he said, “Yes.”

Mahrree paused. “You see, that’s not exactly *talking*. That’s just responding. Tell me . . . tell me what you thought of him.”

Perrin rolled his eyes. “That if I need my boots cleaned, he’s the man.”

“And . . . that’s what we call a commentary. Closer, but not quite what we need.”

“Mahrree, come on—”

“Please Perrin? I need something to distract me about your meeting tomorrow morning! Just . . . just talk to me about why you were in Edge with the Densals when you were eighteen. That shouldn’t be too difficult.”

“Obviously you have no concept of what is ‘difficult,’” Perrin groaned.

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Morning came both too soon and not soon enough.

Perrin had another two hours before he’d march to the Administrators’ Headquarters near the university to present himself to the Administrators in their weekly meeting. He practiced the walk before breakfast as he paced from the west wing to the east and back again.

His father, supporting himself with a crutch and bracing himself against a pillar at the base of the long staircase, watched his son attempt to wear a groove in the oak floor.

“So do you know what you’re going to say?” he asked as Perrin passed by the fourth time, merely shining up his path.

“Not until I know what they’re going to say.”

The urgent knock at the front door startled both of them.

Perrin stepped up to answer it before a bored Riplak, still stationed in the study, could leap into his first action of the day. Sulkily the lieutenant leaned against the study’s doorframe while Perrin did guard duty.

A small man in a red uniform stood at the open door with a folded sheet of paper. “Lieutenant Colonel Shin, this is for you and to be read immediately.” He bowed, turned smartly, and left.

Mahrree, who had heard the knock, came from the eating room and stood next to the general by the stairs. “Maybe they’ve

“Just smile and nod. Smile and nod.”

changed their mind,” she murmured to him. “Maybe decided to go out for a ride in the countryside or something. You know, some kind of Administrative retreat?”

Perrin opened the message, and his face lost the ability to move as he silently read.

“I’m guessing it’s not the countryside,” the general said levelly with a glance to his daughter-in-law.

Perrin didn’t look up, but cleared his throat and read out loud. “The Administrators look forward to the visit of Lieutenant Colonel Perrin Shin this morning, and respectfully request that his wife, Mahrree Shin, accompany him to be presented to the Administrators as well.”

Up until that day, Perrin thought that only in poorly written dramas at the amphitheater did women fall to the floor in a dead faint.

But Riplak finally got some exercise by sprinting to the surgeon’s office.

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“I’m sure it’s nothing. In fact, now more than ever I’m confident it’s to go over the menu for next week,” Perrin assured her uselessly as they walked through the tree canopied neighborhood past the mansions of Idumea.

Mahrree gripped his arm even tighter.

He paused. “Why don’t we go back and take Cush’s carriage. It’s all ready, and he said he wouldn’t be needing it for the next few hours. You’re still very pale.”

“No.” She pulled him along. “The walk will do me good. Get my blood flowing.

“Whatever blood you have left,” he mumbled.

She ignored him. It wasn’t that bad; it only looked bad, creating a puddle like that on the shiny floor. “You shouldn’t be worrying about me, anyway. It’s your poor father. I’m going to feel awful about that for years.”

“It’s fortunate you fell on his good leg.” He patted her hand consolingly and, since providing consolation wasn’t a frequent habit, his pat was rather firmer than it should be. Mahrree wished he’d stop trying to make her feel better.

“The surgeon said that had you hit his other leg you could

have opened that gash again.”

Mahrree sighed. “Why’d he try to catch me? He should’ve just let me fall!”

“Instinct, I guess.”

“It wasn’t *your* instinct, apparently.” She nudged him.

“I thought he had you. For an old man, he’s still—”

Mahrree scoffed. “You thought *he* had me? The *older* man has broken ribs, nearly starved to death just last week, is crippled in his leg and you thought he could catch me? I think I’ve set him back at least a week in his recovery.”

“Well, now he really can’t dance at The Dinner,” Perrin said brightly. “He was happy about that. Besides, the crutch got its revenge. You can hardly see the gash. Creative bit of cover-up my mother did on you with those hair clips. If it starts bleeding again, though, we might have a problem.”

As they walked he inspected the long cut above her ear, barely visible behind the silverwork hair clips.

“Looks like that resin the surgeon used is holding it together quite well, which is fortunate. Stitching it would’ve been rather unpleasant this morning. Still, if it starts to spurt again, I’ve got extra bandages.” He patted a pocket of his uniform jacket.

Mahrree sighed. “If there’s a problem I’ll just tell everyone what General Cush said: I had a run-in with an old wolf and I won.” She tried to chuckle, but it stuck in her throat.

“That’s my wife!” Perrin again patted her forcefully on the hand that was wrapped tightly around his arm. “Good attitude. Think commanding thoughts.”

He was cheerful. Overly, unnaturally, and unnervingly cheerful, trying to balance his wife’s panic.

It didn’t help.

“A good half-hour’s walk,” said Perrin when Mahrree remained quiet. “That’s all you need. I’ll take you through the university. The gardens are just beginning to bloom. You’ll enjoy that.”

“Of course. Thank you. You know how I appreciate gardens.”

But she took the distraction. She was about to face the Administrators—the leaders she was sure were more manipulative and conniving than anyone in the world realized, and she was about to stand before all of them to . . .

“Just smile and nod. Smile and nod.”

Likely pass out again.

She should’ve just sent Perrin to Idumea alone—

Oh, *that’s* loyal. Send her husband alone to deal with the worry of his father and to face his greatest annoyance. Yes, what a faithful, loving wife she was. She groaned in silent admonishment and firmed her grip her husband’s bulging arm.

How did he walk with such confidence? Once, years ago, she thought him a coward, but that was only briefly until she realized she was a far greater coward.

She glanced up into his dark, clear eyes that focused straight ahead. His face was unreadable, but set and determined. How could she borrow some of that resolve?

There was so much she still didn’t to know about him, apparently. Last night’s discussion of his time in Edge as an eighteen-year-old certainly made that clear. It was almost as if there was the Perrin of Edge, and another Perrin of Idumea. She found herself longing for the Perrin of Edge.

Or maybe just longing to be back home again, and not walking in the middle of the Idumea ready to face the scariest men in the world.

Soon they left the neighborhoods of overly ambitious houses and gardens, and ambled across the common green to the university. The grand buildings had been constructed with stone, but many additions to the main building in the center had been completed in block. One of the newer buildings had attempted to do something else besides a square construction, making the classroom building look like a fort.

“You know, it might be a better idea if you would build the forts out of block than out of wood,” Mahrree said. “I know how you hate block, but block wouldn’t burn like wood.”

“I considered that, too,” Perrin said. “Realizing how quickly the marketplace burned. I’ll suggest block for forts if I’m groping for ways to make myself look valuable to the Administrators.”

Mahrree’s grip tightened again.

“Just a joke, Mahrree,” he said humorlessly. “It’s all right . . . Ah!” This time his tone brightened naturally. “My favorite old tree is still here.”

He eagerly led her over to the new distraction, a large oak tree. They stopped underneath and he pointed to some of the enormous branches.

“When I first saw that oak at the amphitheater in Edge, I immediately felt at home. It reminded me of this one. Another cadet and I used to climb this tree carrying some of the small hard breads they served in the hall. Nasty little things, like something Jaytsy would bake up. We would sit up there at night waiting for the students to meet the neighborhood girls. They’d sit under the trees to kiss, thinking no one could see them. That’s when we got in some target practice.” He chuckled.

Mahrree just marveled at yet another new thing revealed.

“The real trick was to sail the breads so that they didn’t hit any other branches and lose their trajectory. We knew we were successful when we heard a thud followed by a ‘Hey!’ I tried for the most ‘opportune’ moments, if you know what I mean. I like to think I save many girls those nights, even if I hit a few. They likely needed someone to knock some sense into them.”

Mahrree stared at him. “How is it we’ve been together for sixteen years and only now I’m finding out these things about you? What’s next? Did you used to be the youngest Administrator?”

He chuckled a little nervously. “I guess the surroundings just bring back the memories. I have to admit, not all of them were bad. There are some advantages to this place. Look at that statue.”

He pulled her along up a small hillside, his voice suddenly filled with youthful excitement.

“Isn’t it amazing? Took the sculptor three years to create that horse alone. And the rider on top? Another two years. What people can carve . . . I use my knife for the wrong things.”

Duly impressed, Mahrree gaped at the larger-than-life statue of King Querul the First carved out of dark stone, perched on a horse that balanced on a wide pedestal.

“Sculptors!” she exclaimed. “I forgot they have sculptures here. I’ve never seen something so fantastic! You told me all about statues, but there’s nothing like this in Edge.”

“I know. I live there, remember?”

“We should bring the children to see this,” Mahrree breathed, moving closer to it. “I wonder that they keep a statue of *him* here, though. Doesn’t it bring up bad memories?”

“Well, that’s the point,” Perrin agreed as his wife gingerly touched the platform. Her eyes traveled all over the wondrous



creation. “The statue’s here on the Command School grounds to remind students of the excesses and indulgence of King Querul and all those that followed him, to remind that we never want to have a king again. It’s here more as a memorial to the man who carved it, though. He died just as he finished it. Slept only a couple of hours a night for years as he worked, and spent all his time trying please the king. The sculptor was a friend of Terryp’s—”

Mahrree’s eyes widened.

“—and he was inspired by the carvings Terryp found at the ruins. He was the first one to attempt sculpting stone. Obviously he had a gift for it. This was his last and greatest masterpiece.”

Mahrree spun to look at Perrin, and her head swirled dizzily. “Oh, ow,” she muttered and held her temple, but the pain wasn’t enough to quell her enthusiasm. “The statue’s one hundred fifty years old? That’s ancient!”

She stepped onto the raised dais that held the platform for the horse. Tenderly she ran her hand up the horse’s back leg. “Do you realize what I’m doing? I’m touching the statue that was carved by a man who mostly likely shook hands with Terryp.”

Anything remotely connected to her favorite historian and adventurer was a fantastic and rare treat. She strained to touch the haunches of the horse and wished she had a way to reach the rider on top. The dark stone seemed soft somehow, perhaps because it was so smooth. She caressed the leg longingly and was about to move to the next when she heard her husband clear his throat.

“Uh, Mahrree? I don’t have any hard bread to throw at you right now, but if you’d like I could leave you two alone for a moment. But please remember, you are a married woman, and in a public place. Woman, just how much blood did you lose this morning, anyway?”

She reluctantly pulled her eyes away from the sculpture to shift her gaze to her husband. He was squinting, his lips parted, and his hands on his waist in complete bafflement. She absent-mindedly patted the rump of the black horse.

“And here I thought you hated horses.”

“Sorry,” she guffawed, but kept a hand on the horse’s perfectly chiseled knee. Or ankle. She wasn’t sure. “But really think about it, Perrin; this is a piece of our past—a tangible link to Terryp and those who lived at his time. And we can touch it, and see it, and know that others were most definitely here before us!”

“Yes,” Perrin said cautiously, as if evaluating a previously undiscovered creature.

“You don’t get it, do you?” she said. “It’s *real!* This connection links us to the Creator who was here! Terryp and his friend who carved this may have known someone whose grandfather had a grandmother who was one of the first five hundred families the Creator brought to this world. Something like this makes it all real!” She gripped the leg of the horse with both hands as if she could pry it loose and take it home with her.

Perrin’s squint turned into a wince.

“It’s so easy to forget the past, where we came from, who we are. But things like this reach back almost halfway in our time and link us—”

“All right, now you’re babbling,” Perrin interrupted her. He gently pried her fingers off the statue, leaving her flummoxed as if waking her from a vivid dream. “We really should’ve used Cush’s carriage.”

Taking her by the shoulders, he pivoted her into a new direction. “The last thing you need to do in front of the Administrators is babble uncontrollably.”

“Oh,” Mahrree said simply, coming around. “I almost forgot where we’re going.”

For the briefest of moments she *was* somewhere else, in a faraway dream that was actually real, a way to go back into history and—

“How much further?” she asked, trying to bring herself reluctantly into the dark present again.

“Over this rise between the two dorms you’ll be able to see the Headquarters. Are you all right, I mean, in the head and everything?” He looked at her askance. “Because this really wouldn’t be a good time to—”

“I’m fine, really.” She patted his arm. “I’m sorry about that back there. I just really didn’t expect to see something like that statue. I guess there are all kinds of surprises I never knew about in Idumea.”

“Well, if all goes well this morning, my mother has plenty of more surprises for you in the afternoon,” he said in a mollifying tone.

“And if things don’t go well?”

Perrin was silent as they started walking up the rock steps to

“Just smile and nod. Smile and nod.”

the top of the small rise. “I really don’t know, honestly. But I feel things will be fine. Don’t you?”

Mahrree nodded. “And last night I said people who act solely on their feelings are thoughtless. But that’s all I have to go on right now, and I feel calm. Maybe it’s the blood loss.” She chuckled as they crested the hill, where she stopped and gasped.

“Oh, my.” She rooted herself to the ground to take in the view.

She’d expected the Administrative Headquarters to appear as dreary and dull as the schools in Edge: gray block walls, the death of all imagination. But what lay before her was astonishing.

The building itself was enormous, only a few minutes’ walk down the small hill, three full levels high, extending on either side of the main doorways, almost like the Shin home—probably because they were both designed by King Oren—but enlarged exponentially. Great columns, eleven on either side of the doorways, were carved out of white stone and helped support the triangular roof which peaked and extended over the front of the building.

The rocks used in the construction of the walls themselves were unusual shades of red and orange, set in precise patterns. Only from the distance of the hillside could the design be fully appreciated; the whole of the walls was a warm orange, with a swirling maze of deeper reds like curling tendrils that led the eye from one end of the building to the other. It was if an enormous and lush burgundy vine had gently grown over the pumpkin colored building.

The peak of the roof held a large triangle of white stone, its surface carved in a similarly swirling pattern. Each level had a row of tall windows edged in white carved rock to repeat the stone of the pillars. A long cobblestone drive led up to the great front doors and the dozen broad white steps.

Swarms of people went up and down the steps and through the massive double oak doors. Carriages and coaches disgorged their travelers before the white stairs, and vehicles traveling the opposite direction sucked them back up again, giving the impression of streams of ants arriving and leaving a grand pumpkin festival.

“It’s beautiful!” Mahrree whispered, unable to walk any further.

“Hm, I suppose,” Perrin said casually.

“Really? That’s all you can say?”

“Well, I remember watching them build it when I was at the university. King Oren started it but ran out of support to finish it. When the Administrators came to power they completed it as their headquarters. I guess the mystique of the place has worn off on me over the years. Still, there isn’t anything in Edge to compare with it, now is there?”

“Absolutely not!” Mahrree said. The building was so warm, so beautiful—how could it hold anything fearsome?

“Are you about ready, because . . .” Perrin glanced at the sun.

“Yes! Of course,” said Mahrree, eager to get a closer look.

She forgot why they were going to the building as they made their way down the hill and across the busy drive where they dodged horses and carriages. Trees lined the road and the grasses underneath them were cut in a surprisingly uniform manner, leading them naturally to the steps of the Headquarters.

At the top of the stairs stood a man in a deep red jacket with tails, a white shirt with ruffles at the throat, and black trousers. His dark-brown skin was gently wrinkled with age, and while he wasn’t unpleasant looking, Mahrree still encountered a new level of dread.

Now she remembered why they were there.

The man eyed the Shins as they began to climb the steps, and he positioned himself to be at the top of their progress. Everyone else respectfully skirted around him.

“Lieutenant Colonel Shin, Mrs. Shin I presume?” He held his hand out to shake Perrin’s as they neared.

Mahrree swallowed hard as her husband easily answered him. “Yes, sir. I hope we’re not late.”

“Of course not. Perfectly on time. I just wanted to make sure you didn’t get lost along your way. I’m Administrator Giyak.” He afforded Mahrree a bit of a smile. “Ma’am. Would you two please follow me?”

Mahrree was suddenly gripped with fear. It came upon her without warning, and she wondered if she was the only one who felt it. She looked up at Perrin for reassurance, but he was in full army mode. He looked straight ahead and pulled Mahrree along toward the large front doors that were held open by two porters.

Inside the doors was a great hall with polished stone floor-

“Just smile and nod. Smile and nod.”

ing. White with gray streaks and swirling lines, it reflected the light that poured into the windows. The effect was dazzling and dizzying.

Mahrree quickly looked around her, feeling her head swoon again with amazement, trepidation, and earlier concussion.

All along the great hall to her right and left were tall doors spaced evenly apart. Dozens of people walked briskly from one great door to another, illuminated by the tall windows opposite of them. She realized that when the sun hit just right, each large wooden door would be shadowed by one of the pillars outside.

Over some of the doors nearest her she saw the titles painted in what looked like gold. Administrator of Transportation. Administrator of Education. Administrator of Agriculture. Administrator of Commerce. Administrator of Family Life. Interspersed between those doors were others with just the names of the Administrators and no titles. Twelve men were over specific concerns in the government, while the other ten were Administrators in general, filling seats in committees and keeping an eye on the other twelve.

And somewhere was Chairman Mal’s office.

Mahrree frequently imagined scenarios in her head of how things should happen, and they never occurred as she planned. Usually things turned out better, or duller, or just plain anticlimactic.

Then there were rare days like this, which turned out far worse than she ever could’ve imagined. She really needed to stop trying to predict the future. Somehow the future always found out about her guesses and did all in its power to thwart her. No scenario she’d imagined on the long coach ride to Idumea ever came up with finding herself on the way to the Conference Room of the Administrators.

She stared at a large stone staircase that rose in the middle of the hallway, again like the Shins’ home, leading to unknown offices upstairs. She surmised her letter readers sat at the very top of the third level in an attic-like room, dank and hot and cramped, where the junior letter skimmers sweated over yet another copy of another letter to another hopeful writer. Had Mahrree not been so worried about what was coming, she might have felt some sympathy for them.

Perrin pulled her down the hall to the right toward two sets

of double doors. Above them read the words 'Main Conference Room' in gold.

Administrator Giyak said nothing as he snaked through the crowds of people, glancing back occasionally to make sure his guests were keeping up. The doors, twice as tall as any man, opened automatically as he approached, and only once they were past a large group of men in dark coats did Mahrree see two men in red uniforms, similar to what the messengers wore, holding open the doors.

She took a deep breath and looked again at her husband. He seemed to notice nothing as he followed the Administrator through the doors. They found themselves in a large room lined with sofas and chairs, woven in the same pattern as the orange and red stonework mosaic outside.

Giyak turned and said to Mahrree, "You'll wait here, please. I'll return for you in a moment." His face was kind, but his tone insistent as he gestured to a large orange and red-tendrilled sofa.

A wide desk sat by the next set of doors, and a man in a dark red jacket but no ruffles nodded to the Administrator. "I have it," he said. "Mrs. Mahrree Shin, correct?" Another younger man sitting next to him wrote carefully in a thick ledger.

Mahrree looked nervously at them and tried to smile. The first man nodded politely to her. Perrin released her arm, nodded to her officially, then pointed to the sofa. Mahrree swallowed hard and sat on the surprisingly firm and uncomfortable cushion.

Another porter opened the second set of doors, obscuring Mahrree's view. He announced, "The Administrator of Security with Lieutenant Colonel Perrin Shin." With that the two men stepped through the door into the unseen room, and the porter shut the door behind him.

Mahrree felt something ugly and painful grow in her stomach. Administrator of Security?

*Our security has been infiltrated.* That's what her father-in-law said last night, and now those words were big and blobby in her mind.

But we've done nothing wrong, she thought defensively.

All right, she had to admit to the part of her brain that had mastered the admonishing one-arched eyebrow, we've bent the rules a little on how I teach the students, and Perrin allowed debates for as long as he could.

“Just smile and nod. Smile and nod.”

She rummaged through her mind trying to uncover anything else she'd conveniently forgotten, like filthy and torn socks shoved under the dresser.

She'd written letters, but not for a few years. And there were the debates they held at home with the children. And their heated dinner discussions, such as last night. And then there was her husband's disloyal grumblings to her, and her complaints to him about the state of the world.

That was all. Maybe.

As she considered the pile, she realized there was a lot of dirty laundry she'd ignored over the years.

She strained to hear anything that could be happening behind those massive double doors, and wondered if the men behind the desk were armed guards, waiting for their moment. She didn't dare look at them again, just in case they were watching her for the slightest hint that she was a security threat.

Our security has been threatened—

She wished she had told Perrin she loved him before he went through them. What if it was the last time she saw him—

*Stop it.*

The words sounded like her father.

*Just stop it, Mahrree. Now you're being ridiculous. Consider that the Administer of Security was sent to make sure you arrived securely? Stop letting your imagination run away on you. Since when do you behave so childishly? You're a grown woman, a wife, and a mother. Now act the part.*

Her father's words didn't do much to calm her worry, but instead added a layer of guilt for being so silly; a tender cosmic slap upside the head she knew she needed.

She rolled her eyes at herself, shook her head a little, and offered a silent prayer.

Dear Creator, please, *please* let this go well. We haven't done anything really wrong but talk, have we?

For fifteen minutes she sat there, feeling the long cut on her head stinging, the ugly blob in her belly overtaking her intestines, and worrying that she would lose consciousness again—

That might be a good idea, she realized. Pass out on the sofa. Get the sympathy of the Administrators.

She ran through a few scenarios of how to knock herself

out—all of them more painful than she wanted to really attempt—and was just beginning to wonder how long she'd have to hold her breath when the heavy doors swung open with an unintended bang.

Mahrree jumped a little as Perrin stepped through and turned immediately to her. He was smiling.

“It’s good, it’s all good,” he whispered as he pulled her to her feet. “Just smile and nod. Smile and nod.”

Administrator Giyak stood at the door with a small smile on his face too.

Riding on a cautious wave of relief, Mahrree allowed Perrin to lead her through the large doors. She stopped when she found herself facing an enormous and strangely shaped table.

Several oaks must have been used to create the shape. It was like a large raindrop, pushed flat at the top and bottom. At the top peak, directly across from Mahrree, was a man older than General Shin. Slender with white hair that seemed easily ruffled, he had more ruffles on his shirt than Mahrree could’ve imagined would fit there. His elbows were on the table and his hands were clasped in front him, waiting.

Men in red jackets and ruffled shirts sat on either side of him around the table as it gently curved away to the large open section where Mahrree stood. Each man could view the others, but it was clear who was the Chairman of the Administrators. Light streamed in from the tall windows to Mahrree’s left, the back side of Headquarters, bathing the shiny table and the Administrators in sunlight.

Mahrree’s gaze traveled briefly across each man, and she remembered she’d taught her students all of their suspiciously similar biographies. But discerning one ruffled senior-aged pot belly from another? If they didn’t have little pieces of polished wood with their names in gold in front of them, she wondered if they could tell each other apart. Even though their skins were various shades of dirt, ranging from pale gravel to deep brown, they all had a sameness about them that was hard to pin down. It was as if they all knew something more than anyone else, and it showed on their hardened faces that, for the moment, were trying to appear cordial.

She felt all twenty-three pairs of eyes examining her back. In none of her daydreams—or day-nightmares—had she antici-



“Just smile and nod. Smile and nod.”

pated anything quite like this. Perrin positioned himself right behind her, perhaps to catch her if she swooned again.

Chairman Nicko Mal, as declared by the wooden sign in front of him which was a bit larger than anyone else’s, cleared his throat to draw her attention back to him. “Mrs. Mahrree Shin, I understand this is your first trip to Idumea? How are you enjoying your visit so far?”

Mahrree didn’t realize she would have to speak. Perrin had just said smile and nod. She opened her mouth dumbly and suddenly felt a sharp poke in her back from Perrin.

“Ah, wonderful,” she said quickly. “Many things I’ve never seen before. This building is quite amazing, for example—” She felt another sharp poke telling her it was enough, and she pressed her lips shut.

The Chairman nodded courteously. “I’m glad to hear our old friend General Shin is recuperating. Although I understand Relf had a bit of a spill this morning?”

Mahrree’s eyes widened at his unexpected knowledge. “Yes, sir. Seems he lost his balance on his crutch,” she lied to the Chairman of the Administrators. “He’s in good spirits, though.”

She wasn’t. She had just *lied* to the *Chairman* of the Administrators!

Chairman Mal only smiled thinly. “Good, good. I see he found a way to avoid dancing next week. Clever man.”

Mahrree didn’t know if that required a response or not. When Perrin didn’t jab her, she obediently smiled and nodded.

“Mrs. Shin, you’re probably wondering why we’ve requested to see you this morning.”

“Yes sir?” She nearly choked on the words.

The Chairman looked at the Administrator of Security and nodded once. The Administrator had remained next to the lieutenant colonel and now turned to Mahrree with an official smile.

“It has been relayed to us that when the land tremor hit Edge, many people were in a panic, disoriented, and unsure of what to do. While Lieutenant Colonel Shin went to the fort to organize the rescue and recovery efforts, you organized your own little army of sorts, giving commands to neighborhoods, beginning searches for survivors, and creating maps of the damage. For your willingness to take control of the situation, enabling your husband to better complete his duty to Edge, the Administrators

wish to present you with this Certificate of Appreciation.”

He finished his rambling speech by holding out a thick piece of parchment with writing in black and gold.

Mahrree was stunned motionless. Perrin had to jab her three times before she composed herself enough to take it from his hands.

“Thank you,” she murmured, staring at the certificate.

“As Administer of Security it’s my job to make sure the homes and land of the citizens of Idumea and the world are secured and protected in time of crisis or calamity. The recent land tremor and quaking has shown many ways in which the citizens are unprepared and disorganized, and it is my desire and intent to develop and implement preparedness programs throughout the world to improve and help the situation.”

Mahrree stared at him, picking out his important words and discarding the rest. She was struck by the thought that this man might be useful . . .

“We intend to borrow some of the village and neighborhood organizational strategies and procedures you created, devised, used, and implemented in order to facilitate, improve, and increase the reaction and response time in the event or occurrence of another disaster and/or emergency.”

Having followed all of his extra words without stumbling, Mahrree felt a surge of confidence. “If you’d like, Administrator, I could write up all that we did in Edge and have it delivered to you,” she blurted out. Then, realizing that she was only to smile and nod, she added lamely, “If it would help.”

Perrin poked her back, a bit belatedly, but with a great deal of warning packed into the tip of his finger.

To her surprise, Giyak broke away from the official smile and tried on a real one. “Yes, yes actually I’d appreciate that. Excellent idea.”

“I have some other ideas as well,” Mahrree plowed on, ignoring the incessant jabbing in her back. She *had* to say the words—they were burning so hot in her chest she’d begin smoking if she didn’t. When, ever, would she have such an opportunity again? “You see, by the fourth day we still had people at our home in the morning, begging us to tell them what to do.”

“Really?” asked another administrator who scowled severely. “Where were the soldiers?” He glared at Perrin.

“Just smile and nod. Smile and nod.”

Mahrree answered for him, taking a step closer to the table to give her back a rest from the pokes. “Far too busy, sir. Much of the commerce section of Edge burned to the ground the first day, but the lieutenant colonel and his men successfully prevented it from spreading to the homes. I’m sure you’d agree a fire would’ve been a far greater disaster.”

Several of the Administrators nodded.

Mahrree noticed that one of them watched her earnestly, and he caught her gaze and held it. A small smile grew on his face as he nodded additional encouragement. He raised his eyebrows and parted his lips slightly as if to prod her to continue. The glare of sunshine bounced off his nameplate, but Mahrree could make out ‘Family Life.’

Emboldened by the support, she continued, despite the less-than-subtle throat clearing of her husband behind her. If he needed a drink of water, he should leave to get one.

“After the fires, every soldier was on detail to remove rubble and assist citizens. With all due respect, I haven’t seen nearly the level of destruction here as we experienced in Edge,” Mahrree explained. “Every house was affected. We even left ours damaged and exposed to the elements to come to Idumea. Each soldier has been working double shifts to attend to everyone’s needs. The soldiers are now rebuilding houses with the citizens as quickly as possible.”

“Yes, we’ve heard a bit of that plan too,” Giyak told her. “We wanted to hear it all from the colonel, here. That’s why we invited him . . . and you. We’re very impressed.” When he was out of his official mode, he spoke more succinctly.

Mahrree nodded and breathed comfortably, despite hearing Perrin take a small step closer to her to get back into poking position.

“Thank you, Administrator. But I didn’t get to my point that I wanted to make.” She took another judicious step forward out of stabbing range and bumped the table in front of her. Her chest sizzled with unspoken words.

“What concerned me about the citizens, and I’m sure would concern each of you as well, is that no one seemed to know *what* to do. No one could discover for themselves how to evaluate damage, or assess what needed to be done first. No one dared make a decision. Everyone just wanted the soldiers to come res-

cue them or tell them what to do.”

“Do you see that as a problem, Mrs. Shin?” asked another Administrator whose name Mahrree couldn’t make out because the name plate was at the wrong angle. She couldn’t tell if his tone was accusatory or concerned.

“Only when all of the soldiers are busy helping others, sir. Edge loves the fort and appreciates the presence of the soldiers. But there are only so many of them to go around. What I think needs to happen, Administrator,” she turned back to Giyak, “is that people need to be taught how to help themselves in a crisis.”

“Well that’s what we’re hoping to accomplish, Mrs. Shin,” he assured her. “We are putting together a step-by-step plan that will help the citizens see exactly what to do in every situation.”

Mahrree nodded slowly. “Sounds like it has great potential,” she said. “But I wonder—”

She felt her husband suddenly at her side, followed by the most severe stab yet, up under her ribs, making her breath catch in her throat.

Effective, she thought, but not enough, Perrin. She kept her face as placid as possible, because there was still more that had to be said. “I wonder, sir, how can you account for every single scenario? Can you create enough different plans to account for every kind of problem citizens may encounter?”

“Most likely not,” Giyak admitted.

“So then, sir, instead of creating plans for each scenario, why not teach the people to think for themselves? Give them some guidelines, yes, but also allow forums for people to discuss problems and share their ideas?”

The Administrator looked at her for a moment. “A forum, you say. In every village perhaps? I must consider that.”

Mahrree beamed, feeling the intense rush that accompanies the realization that people in power are actually listening. “Please do, sir. It’d be similar to what we used to have, at after-congregation meals, when people talked with each other instead of watching some silly show at the amphitheater. Because after all, I can’t imagine you would want an entire populace that relies on the Administrators and the forts to make every decision for them.”

And . . . just that quickly, her confidence vanished as twenty-three pairs of eyes glared at her.

“Just smile and nod. Smile and nod.”

Perrin didn't even need to stab her. She'd gone too far, she knew it. She'd been dancing merrily and safely, then suddenly ran headlong over a cliff.

There was still sun shining in the room, but the warmth of it was gone. A cold darkness had come instead, and the light left the Administrator of Security's eyes. His smile remained, but frozen in place. “Yes, indeed. That would be a problem.”

Someone coughed, and across the room a chair scritchd the stone floor as it was repositioned. And then there was only silence.

No, Mahrree realized with growing horror. That's not a *problem*. That's their *solution*: a population that can't think for themselves but blindly follows their leaders. Because when people stop thinking, they become passive.

She remembered the day of the land tremor when her neighbors gathered around her like lost toddlers, because they were. The Administrators had positioned themselves as Parents of the World, never wanting their Children to move on to lives of their own. The Children wanted someone to make their decisions, to alleviate them of all responsibility, and it was the Administrators who greedily took everything.

She'd hit it directly on the head, and didn't even realize she was swinging. What she'd suspected for so many years was now verified in the presence of the very men who implemented it: people who don't debate don't think.

And when they don't think, they don't question their leaders except to ask, “What do you want me to do next?”

She heard Perrin's breathing right behind her, and thought she heard him hiss, “Mahrree!”

*Smile, smile!*

It was her father, nudging her. Mahrree formed a large smile and tried to think of the most innocent and motherly thoughts she could, hoping they'd reflect on her face. Kittens. Fresh baked bread. Kisses on the forehead. Laughing babies.

*SMILE!*

It must have worked, because the frozen appearance of Administrator Giyak began to melt, his eyes brightened again, and his smile became genuine. “Mrs. Shin, I look forward to your information. When do you think you may have it ready?”

Mahrree took the reprieve offered her as the room slowly—

warily—warmed up again. “Would tomorrow be satisfactory?”

“Yes, yes, of course! My goodness. That is prompt. I don’t think we’ll have a plan for a few more seasons, you understand, it having to go through committees then sub-committees then be approved by all the Administrators—”

He stopped abruptly. A twitching near his eye suggested he’d just received a poke in the back, but Perrin was nowhere within stabbing distance. But another administrator was.

The Administrator of Security recovered quickly. “Your information will undoubtedly help. And I thank you again for coming.” He extended his hand to her. “You’ve done great things for Edge, you and your fine husband. Congratulations again, Colonel Shin.”

Just keep smiling, she thought as she shook his hand. Keep smiling.

A gentle throat clearing from the head of the table turned her back to face Chairman Mal. His position had not changed at all during the discussion; his hands still remained clasped in front of him. “Thank you for coming, Mrs. Shin. I hope you’ll have the opportunity to tour all of Idumea. I suspect your in-laws hope your presence here will be permanent. Perhaps we should see what we could do to help facilitate that.”

Despite all that had just transpired, Mahrree couldn’t stop herself. “We’re quite happy in Edge, Mr. Chairman. Please don’t go to any trouble on our account.”

The Chairman’s thin smile returned. “It’d be no trouble at all, Mrs. Shin. We like to keep our family close to us. Especially such *interesting* ones.” He nodded once to dismiss them.

Mahrree had never been so grateful to exit a room. She turned around and felt Perrin’s hand in the small of her back, gently pushing her, but unnecessarily. The doors swung open for them, and as they reached the waiting room Mahrree expelled a big breath.

“Not yet,” Perrin snarled in her ear. “Say nothing. Just get out.”

He continued to push her through the waiting room to the crowded corridor, nudging her through the throngs of people that barely moved away in time. When they reached the large main doors he instead continued to direct her to the opposite hall.

With growing dread she asked him, “Where are we going?”

“Just smile and nod. Smile and nod.”

He came to her side and gripped her arm tightly. “There’s one more office you need to see.” The growl in his voice startled her.

The crowds were substantially thinner here on this side of the building, and several paces before the last door of the great hallway no one milled about, or even stood, as if an invisible shield kept away all intelligent life from approaching too closely. And if someone did near it, it’d whisper, *Turn around now and run.*

Mahrree imagined she heard the warning, but her husband obviously didn’t. Perrin stopped abruptly and turned his wife to face the final door. The gold words above it proclaimed, Administrator of Loyalty.

“*That*, Mrs. Shin,” his voice was cold and angry and quiet, “is the next door you’ll walk through if you don’t learn to control that tongue of yours!”

Tears of frustration and anger filled her eyes. “Nothing happened!” she whispered fiercely back. “I just gave them some ideas, and, and . . .”

He spun her to face him, and he looked around briefly to see if anyone was watching. If they were, they did so only out of the corners of their eyes, which was the only way anyone ever looked toward Gadiman’s door.

Perrin yanked his wife to a corner and pushed her right into it. The back of her head banged the stone wall, but he didn’t seem to notice her wincing.

He stooped down to look her straight in the eyes. “You just stood in front of all the Administrators and Chairman Mal and revealed to them you can see that they are trying to *control* the world. You really think they’re just going to let that go?”

Mahrree ignored her new headache and murmured, “I didn’t say that.”

“Not in so many words, but yes, you did!” he snapped. “What’s wrong with you? Smile and nod. That’s what I told you. Didn’t you even feel me poking you? You’re lucky I put my long knife in my boot instead of my waistband today!”

Mahrree stared into her husband’s eyes that looked like black stone. She wouldn’t back down. Not today. “I said what needed to be said. Don’t I need to do my duty, no matter the consequences? I had the whole of the government in front of me. All

I suggested was for them to help people respond better in a crisis situation. If they read more into it than that, that's not my fault. I did nothing wrong.”

She ran the entire discussion in the main conference room through her mind. It *was* fine; she was sure of it. The words flowed easily as if she was prompted, and many of the Administrators were smiling and nodding to her, especially the one that was bald, had very warm eyes, and may have been Doctor Brisack.

There was just a lull in the conversation, that was all. Lulls are always uncomfortable.

Perrin's jaw was working on something. He stood straight again and looked at the cut stone wall next to him, as if ready to interrogate it. He glanced behind him to the corridor, where a dozen people many paces away suddenly began to move as if they'd just remembered they had somewhere important to go.

Perrin turned back to his wife. “Let's get out of here. We need to . . . talk.”

He gripped her again, digging his fingers into the space between the muscles of her upper arm. She gulped as he steered her through the crowd, and noticed most people jumped out of his way before they even reached them. She didn't dare look at his face to see what everyone else saw to make them scatter, but a few people tossed her glances of sympathy.

Out the doors, down the steps, and through the grassy fields they marched in heated silence, then up over to the campus and to a large stand of trees.

Perrin finally released her in the small clearing in the middle of them, then looked around him and above to make sure no one was near.

Mahrree sat worriedly on a stump and waited for him to slow his pacing around her.

“I can't think here,” he muttered as he passed in front of her.

She was about to suggest they go somewhere else, but realized he wasn't talking to her.

He walked in a circle around her stump, scanning the area as he did so. “I can't focus, I can't see clearly. I can't separate the two. I feel like I'm suffocating.”

Mahrree twisted to watch him walk and mutter. He looked down, around, at her, toward the Headquarters building, and down



“Just smile and nod. Smile and nod.”

again. He reminded her of a restless bobcat a neighbor had once caught in his garden and caged to release to the forest. It was so agitated they fed it mead until it was drunk, just to be able to pick up the cage without it thrashing wildly about. Mahrree pressed her lips together and, for the first time in her life, wondered where she could buy some mead.

She fingered the fancy parchment in her hands, aware that she was crinkling the edges of the gold-gilded and black-scripted acknowledgement. She didn't need to be awarded some meaningless scrap. She took care of Edge because Edge was her home, and it was the right thing to do. It didn't matter if the parchment wrinkled in her nervous hands. She already knew exactly where it was going once they got home: on the same shelf as Perrin's Officer of the Year awards and his numerous commendations from the Administrators. She could slip this in between them where it, too, would never again see the light of day.

She'd never reveal it to her mother, either. Hycymum would devise a way to encase it in wood and glass and insist on having it displayed on their mantelpiece. Then she'd also insist that their home wasn't grand enough for such a piece of parchment, but that the Edge of Idumea Estates had a few very large homes available that could accommodate it.

As Mahrree watched her husband circle and mumble, she was tempted to tear the parchment in two and shove it under a rock. Maybe the parchment, or her, or both of them were contributing to his mild insanity.

“I can't continue like this. I can't decide who to be,” he continued mumbling. “I've got to get out of here, but I can't go anywhere. Just work around, just work around. Can still do good here, just work around . . .”

Mahrree sat in silence. This was hardly the time to point out that ‘talking’ involved two people exchanging information. She wasn't sure if she preferred this madman murmuring around her to their shouting matches. As she listened to him muttering, she wisely abstained from commenting. *See?* she thought, I can keep quiet when needed.

He stopped unexpectedly and stared just beyond her. His mind was working on something that didn't reach his mouth. A flurry of ideas seemed to pass across his face as his eyes shifted erratically. The shifting slowed, the flurry seemed to die down,

and he released a deep breath.

Finally he dropped to his knees and stared dully at her hands on her lap, holding the parchment. “You were right. You were absolutely right. If anyone heard more than what you said, it would’ve been Gadiman. And no one likes to pay much attention to him anyway.” He slumped to a sitting position.

Mahrree reached out and touched his shoulder experimentally.

He startled her by grabbing her hand, kissing it, and looking into her eyes. “I know I’ve said this before, but—”

Mahrree smiled and said it with him. “I really hate Idumea.”

He laughed softly before sobering. “I’m so sorry. I said nothing to assist you back there. Then again, you didn’t really give me an opening.”

Mahrree looked down guiltily. “I think I was a little too excited by the power in that room. I felt it and grabbed it and started babbling just like you feared I would.”

“But you didn’t babble,” he assured her. “You did very well. Most people feel the weighty influence of those men and lose their nerve. Honestly, I thought you would too, but you didn’t.” A smile came across his face. “You were quite articulate, even with me jabbing you. Once I got over the shock of what you were saying, I thought to myself, That’s my wife! *My wife*,” He kissed her hand again.

Mahrree grinned proudly, but her smile soon faded. “Perrin, did I *really* just accuse all of the Administrators of being no better than the kings?”

To her surprise, Perrin’s face became lighter and he grinned. “Yes, my darling wife, I think you really did! Not in those exact words, to be sure, but still.” He was smiling broadly now. “I can’t take you anywhere, can I?”

Mahrree covered her face with her hands, letting the parchment drop to the ground. “Oh, no . . . what have I done?”

“As I said before, I don’t think they *really* heard it.” He pulled her hands from her face. “And if they did, they’ll think nothing of it. You’re just a simple wife from a little village. *You know what I mean*—don’t give me that look. You just stabbed in the dark and hit something. They’ll think it’s ironic or funny and forget about it by midday meal. You really are something else, you know that? What that something else is, I’ve yet to figure

out.”

That made her smile and even chuckle. He was her husband again—wholly, completely hers.

“I’ve noticed something about the way we work,” she said. “When you rant and rave, that’s when I’m stunned to silence.” She made a circling motion around herself to remind him of his behavior a few minutes ago, and Perrin shrugged apologetically. “And when I can’t seem to shut my mouth, that’s when you shut yours.”

“If I don’t say anything it’s because I’m surprised that *you* are,” he said. “Besides, one of us has to keep a cool head about them.”

“You keep a cool head?” Mahrree scoffed, and then reconsidered. “Actually, you do, quite often. Except in that corridor down there. You hit the back of my head! Don’t you think it’s been through enough today already?”

He stood quickly, bent over her, and kissed the back of her head. “I’m sorry,” he said as he kneeled down in front of her again. “Better?”

Mahrree scrunched her nose. “That’s the best you can do?”

“Of course not.” He grinned. “Besides, I always wanted to do this here. I think I was jealous of all those students years ago.”

He rose up on his knees, leaned in to her . . . paused and surveyed the trees above them . . . and, convinced they were alone, he kissed her long enough for someone to run to the mess hall and retrieve the hard bread.

They walked back to the mansion a while later, talking and laughing easily. Perrin had the parchment folded in his jacket pocket and out of sight. In some ways it was almost possible to like Idumea, Mahrree decided. They’d faced their biggest fear and walked out of there commended. No one would remember her words, and she was perfectly fine with that.

She was still the anonymous wife of Perrin Shin, and she’d never have to see any of those men again, except for a few maybe at The Dinner. But they’d be more interested in talking to the High General than to her, and then they could go back home to Edge and live happily ever after.

“I almost forgot,” Perrin broke into her thoughts, “when we go out this afternoon with my mother I need pick up some new uniforms.”

“Why? What’s wrong with this one?”

“Well, they changed the color to a deeper blue, you see, and since I need some new insignias on the jacket anyway, I might as well just get the whole package.”

“Wait a minute . . . the Administrator said ‘Congratulations Colonel Shin’, didn’t he?” She squeezed his arm.

“Still has to be approved, you know,” he smiled almost bashfully. “But I’ve never known an Administrative directive being overturned by the army.”

“And who is to approve the promotion?” Mahrree smiled back, already knowing.

“The High General and his Advising General. I have a feeling that’s why Cush was here this morning, to officially sign the papers.”

“Time for the brass buttons now, right? You realize that with this promotion you’re one step closer to the next ranking.”

He sighed. “I could be a colonel for many years still. No one’s promoted to general in less than two years.”

“Not even Relf’s son?”

Perrin grumbled.

“You realize now you really do have to go to that dinner, Colonel.”

“I’m praying for another land tremor,” he murmured as he looked sideways at her. Abruptly he stopped walking and focused his gaze just beyond her.

“I nearly forgot,” he whispered. “How could I forget?”

Mahrree looked around, perplexed. “Forget what, Perrin?”

He nodded down a road she hadn’t noticed. “Feel up for taking a short detour?”

Mahrree turned to what direction he was facing and gasped. “What in the world is that?”

“Take one guess.”

She shook her head. “If your parents live in the second largest mansion in the world, then that must be the largest!”

It filled the entire road, ending it several hundred paces down from them. She hadn’t noticed it on their way to the Administrative Headquarters because of her preoccupation, but now she couldn’t image how they missed it. They passed a few exceptionally large houses, nearly as grand as the Shins and formerly the homes of the kings’ family, advisors—and in one case, a favored

mistress, as Mahrree remembered—that lined the road leading to the mansion. But as Perrin led Mahrree down one side of the road, she could barely take in the other houses he told her now belonged to some of the Administrators. All she could see was *the* mansion.

Mansion wasn't a big enough word. It was crafted out of white stone so precisely cut and fitted that the first stone cutters certainly got plenty of experience trimming thousands of rocks. Larger than the Shins' home, it stood three stories high, and was more than two times deeper than the Shins,' Perrin told her. There were only a few narrow windows facing the road, however, which Mahrree thought peculiar. She also could see just the front of the building as they approached the tall iron gates locked in front of it. The rest of the building was obscured by mature trees and thick shrubs.

“Beautiful, but cold,” Mahrree muttered to her husband. “Can't really see in or out, can you?”

“That's the point,” Perrin told her.

They stopped in front of the gates, still a few hundred paces away from the house. The four soldiers manning the gates, two inside and two out, stared past them as if they were simply curious squirrels.

“Can't get any closer without an invitation,” Perrin whispered to Mahrree. “But this wasn't what I wanted to show you. Come with me.”

He gently pulled her away from the gates, and Mahrree could feel the eyes of the guards following them, because even squirrels may be a threat.

Perrin followed the high stone wall that created the perimeter of the compound, enclosing a massive area. The barrier turned a corner, they followed it, and soon they were in the relative privacy of the dense bushes that hugged the wall. Perrin glanced around to make sure no one was watching.

“Well?” Mahrree asked.

“Do you realize what this is?” He patted the stacked and mortared rocks.

“A wall,” she answered lamely, looking up to see the top of it about twelve feet high.

“But do you remember what this *kept in*?”

“Kept in . . .?” Then she mimicked her husband five minutes

earlier. "I nearly forgot! How could I forget?" She spun to look at the barrier and sighed. "Querul's servants!"

"Slaves," Perrin whispered.

Mahrree nodded. "Those thirty-three servants, kept behind this stone wall, for three generations! Oh, Perrin—I haven't thought of them for years."

"Nor have I," he confessed. "One of the greatest travesties of the reign of kings—that they kept their servants locked behind these walls and ignorant of the world around them—and I didn't remember until just now."

"I think the world wants us to forget," Mahrree said. "There were only a few of us that knew, too. My father heard about it from the man who helped teach them how to function in the world again. You knew it because your grandfather told you about his liberating them."

"Never forget," Perrin sighed sadly. "That's what Pere told me. 'Perrin, never forget them, how they were imprisoned by those who claimed to protect them.' I'm so sorry, Grandfather. I haven't even told my children about them."

"We'll remedy that," Mahrree assured him. "As soon as we have some quiet moments. Pere's probably the one who turned you to see this again."

Perrin nodded. "I used to be obsessed with this wall," he told her as he ran his hand along it. The stone here wasn't chiseled into perfect squares, but were ordinary rocks mortared together. While some seemed to be cut castoffs from the construction of the mansion, most were just round rocks the size of melons, and likely gathered from the rivers.

"After my grandfather had told me about the liberated slaves," Perrin continued, placing his hands along different rocks as if looking for holds, "I came here to see this wall that kept them in. I was about twelve and shorter then, and it actually looked large and intimidating. But when I came to Command School, I walked by the wall again. Mahrree, look at this—the rock bulges out in many places. It's the same on the other side."

Mahrree experimentally put her boot on a lower rock. "You could climb this if you found just the right bulges to support yourself."

"Exactly!" he said with agitated excitement. "My grandfather scaled this himself, just to show the servants. And you've

seen his portrait: he wasn't exactly a thin and limber man. Look, it's really not that high. I could probably toss you right to the top of the wall.”

Mahrree stared up at the height. “Only *you* could, though,” she chuckled lightly, until a darker thought struck her. “Toss me up where I could sit, look over the wall, and be the perfect target for an assassin's arrow.”

Perrin frowned. “What?”

“That's probably what they thought,” she explained. “Undoubtedly they came to the wall at some time during those many years. Someone must have noticed it was quiet outside—no raging battles, no starving children, no women screaming because of horrible atrocities happening just outside the only safe place in the world. But something *else* kept them in.”

“Fear,” he sighed. “The first three Queruls had them so convinced the outside was pure evil, they willingly stayed in. What they didn't realize was that it was the evil that trapped them there. You're probably right. They believed the compound was surrounded by the enemy, ready to kill whoever came out or tried to escape.”

“So sad,” she murmured. “To be so fearful that you never question—” She stopped, as a new realization came to her. “That's why you went into the forest, isn't it?”

He turned his gaze from the wall and looked at her with what he likely hoped was quizzical innocence.

“When you were a captain. First you took in Karna looking for Guardians, then you went in alone again to find the fourteen Guardians sent after Jaytsy and me. You were looking for reasons to go over the wall!”

He smiled guiltily. “I was. My grandfather told me that sometimes there's only one man out of the whole world who can accomplish something. He was the only one with the right authority to free the servants. They believed only him that there was nothing dangerous on the other side. So I always had it stuck in my head that maybe I'd be the one to enter the forests and confront the Guardians. I don't think you know about my first time trying to do so. It was before we were together. Karna and Wiles—remember Wiles?—they dragged me away from the forest. I was there for all of five minutes. But yes; I always wondered if I'd be brave enough to escape from the ‘compound.’”

“Oh, you were!” she said proudly. “No man’s ever been as daring as you.”

“Except for the men who already live in the forest,” he pointed out ruefully.

“The ones your father think now live here, instead,” she reminded him. “Perrin, I don’t think anyone has ever lived there permanently,” she whispered as if anyone could overhear them. “What if the Guarders have only done what you did? Run in for a time, cause their trouble, then run away to . . . somewhere else?”

He sighed. “So where’s that ‘somewhere else,’ Mahrree?”

She swallowed, having no ideas.

He ran his hand along the rocks again, fingering the small ledges that protruded. “How often does fear hold us back?” he wondered aloud. “How often do we come face to face with the truth, the reality we never suspected, but turn and run away from it instead? Would we even know how close we came?”

Mahrree gulped again. His words stung her so directly that she wondered if he might not have known about her own adventure into the forest more than twelve years ago. And the shame of that moment—facing the truth and running away from it—still panged her at the oddest times, like right now.

His eyes traveled down the rock wall and over to her. She looked into them. There was no accusation there; just innocent wondering.

She shook her head slowly. “They were so close. All they had to do was climb this wall, and then they could have seen for themselves.”

He stared at a particularly smooth stone. “All *we* have to do is go to the end of the forest—”

“That’s not all!” she said, alarmed at his idea. “Then there’s that massive boulder field, and the mountains themselves. And then where?”

He looked back at her again. “Think about Terryp,” he whispered, glancing around as if uttering a most secret and abominable name. “Mahrree, he didn’t go north. He went west, remember? Querul sent him and his soldiers west. They had to cross only the desert and they found other land. They went *over the wall*.”

The look of hope and longing in his eyes was so intense she wanted desperately to join him. But why was he suddenly talking



like this?

“What’s your point, Perrin?”

The glow in his eyes faded. He looked down at the ground and kicked at some gravel. “It’s just that . . . there are lots of walls, Mahrree. And on the other side is probably . . . nothing.”

“Oh, you don’t mean that,” she whispered. “You know as well as I do Terry found something that so amazed him that he went nearly crazy with the desire to record it all. Ruins, Perrin! Evidence that others lived in the world before we did. But then Querul told everyone the land was poisoned.”

“And you believe that as firmly as I do.” He looked into her eyes with such yearning that she was startled.

“Oh, Perrin,” she whispered, troubled to be the one knocking down whatever scheme was growing in him, “there’s not even a known route, or a speculated one. All of his writings and maps were destroyed in that fire that burned all the family lines and histories more than 130 years ago. Perrin,” she gripped his arm as if to hold him back, “there’s just nothing we can do.”

“You’re right.” He smiled dimly, thoroughly unconvinced. “I know. I’m sorry.” He exhaled loudly. “I don’t know why, but sometimes the desire to just *jump the wall* grips me so ferociously that I just want to, to . . .”

“Where do you want to go?” she prodded. She’d never heard him say such things.

He shook his head. “Just don’t listen to me, Mahrree. I feel such an agitation in Idumea that makes me want to escape my own skin.” In frustration he smacked his hand against the stone wall and cringed in pain.

Mahrree took his palm, already turning red, and kissed it. Idumea may have been getting to him, but he was fighting it back. Not in exactly the most effective manner, she acknowledged, when one’s weapon is a bare hand and the opponent is a century old stone wall. But at least the effort was admirable.

He smiled miserably at her.

“Before you knock down Chairman Mal’s compound wall,” she went on tiptoe to kiss his lips, “perhaps we should start heading back to your parents. I’m sure they have some rocks you can break your hand on.”

## Chapter II ~ “You messed up again, didn’t you?”

Gadiman believed he was a patient man, but sitting in the outer office of the Chairman was wearing on him.

He bounced his leg vigorously and stared at the Chairman’s assistant who refused to look up and risk catching the Administrator of Loyalty’s gaze. He’d told him twice already that Chairman Mal would call for him when he was ready.

Gadiman looked down at the empty folder again, the contents still in the Chairman’s office, and focused on the orange dot that labeled Mahrree Peto Shin as “Beyond Watched, Not Yet Traitorous.” He swore under his breath that he allowed the Chairman to read through the documents without him present. These were *his* projects, and the idea of someone else holding them was disturbing, like allowing another man to take his wife home.

At least, that’s what he eventually decided happened to her. Most annoying.

He had to take his dinners in the tavern since then. Most inconvenient.

But watching how Colonel Shin stood mutely behind his yammering wife, Gadiman once again saw the wisdom of no longer being bound to a woman, even if it meant he had to hire out for someone to do the washing up.

When the office door was opened by a young aid, Gadiman leaped to his feet and barged through the door.

Nicko Mal looked up from his desk. “And what makes you think I was calling for you?”

“You messed up again, didn’t you?”

“Who else would you want?” Gadiman plopped down in a chair without an invitation.

The Chairman sat back in his chair and lifted a stack of papers from his desk. “Quite a thick file for such a small woman, wouldn’t you say?”

“She started it!” Gadiman said.

“And so your concern today is . . .”

“Did you *hear* her this morning? Accusing us of the same atrocities of the kings?”

The Chairman shook his head. “I didn’t hear that, and neither did you. You took a few liberties with your summation, Gadiman. Rather sloppy for a former law assessor, by the way.”

Gadiman scoffed at that. “What do you intend to do about her?”

The Chairman raised his eyebrows. “We gave her a certificate. Do you have any other suggestions?”

“And whose idea was that meaningless parchment?” Gadiman demanded.

Mal clasped his hands in front of him. “Brisack’s. He wanted a pretense for bringing her here.”

“That’s not why I gave you the report! It wasn’t to congratulate her—it was to prove to you how she’s undermining her husband’s authority!” the weasel spat. “She took over! She issued orders! She—”

“Provided a needed service to her village when no one else would step up and do so,” Mal intoned. “One man’s vixen is another man’s hero, Gadiman.”

Gadiman spluttered. “He, he . . . that doctor has strange ideas about heroic behavior, Chairman!”

Mal simply shrugged. “I haven’t made up my mind about her yet. She was quite unlike anything I expected. For some reason I thought she’d be a domineering brute of a woman. Like Per-rin, in female form. But instead, in walked a petite, attractive woman I suppose some would say, who spoke without hesitation—”

“She’s dangerous!” Gadiman huffed. “Didn’t you see how she dominated the conversation? Colonel Shin was completely impotent.”

“Colonel Shin had already expressed himself very well,” Chairman Mal said patiently. “It was his wife’s turn, and the

questions were pointed at her.”

“Except for mine,” Gadiman reminded him. “I asked my question to the colonel about where the soldiers were, and she butted in.”

“And I thought she defended her husband and his work adequately. She’s obviously fond of him. I see no other crime than that.”

“Fond? Fond!”

The Chairman leaned forward. “Does that word bother you, Gadiman?”

He ignored that. “She’s questioned our decisions, repeatedly,” he gestured at the letters in the Chairman’s hand.

“She has, I agree. But her last letter was dated several years ago. Perhaps she’s had a change of heart.”

“Or maybe just a change of tactic! Did you see Karna’s report about her disarming the entire fort? No wonder the village ‘loves’ the soldiers! And what about her allegation that the instruction system is a holdover from the last corrupt kings?”

Mal nodded. “We’ve already been through that, long ago. She was the reason we changed the entire education system of the world. Well, one of the reasons,” he admitted. “She was the only one who read the entire document and questioned us about the changes. She passed that test, which was why we continued to watch her. And yes, she was right—it *is* a holdover. Full school has controlled what the world learns and believes, allowing us to raise a new generation that’s profoundly loyal to us and, as she pointed out this morning, relies entirely on us to tell them what to do.”

Mal sat back and smiled smugly.

“Nice to get such unsolicited and honest reports,” he said. “Even the adults are falling in line, not daring to make a move without someone telling them in which direction. We were wise to expand the kings’ educational methods.” Then, with a penetrating glare, he added, “Even raving madmen get a few things right sometimes.”

Gadiman missed the insinuation. “Well then . . . the Shin family as generals in Idumea is also a holdover! She suggests we get rid of kingly traditions, why don’t we begin with the Shin family?”

“Because the Shin family has served each government very

“You messed up again, didn’t you?”

well.” Mal droned. “Show me one incident where a High General of Idumea didn’t fulfill his duty. I don’t like Relf; you know that. But be it to the king or to the Administrators, the Shins have been unswerving. Relf was most accommodating in helping our transition to power, and Perrin’s recruiting numbers are the highest in the world. Nearly all the innovations in the army came from him. So how do you punish loyalty, Administer of Loyalty?”

“*She* is not a Shin!” Gadiman seethed. “Only by marriage. We have no evidence of her loyalty, and she was terribly forward today.”

Chairman Mal waved much of that away. “Oh, I don’t know about that. I thought she was merely a confident woman. Relf has mentioned a few times that she’s a bit of a hotpot herself. Honestly, I’m amazed their marriage has lasted this long without breaking into violence.” The Chairman actually chuckled. “Or maybe it has! Perrin was quite a confrontational young man at the university. Once, during one of my lectures—”

“Is this going to take long?” Gadiman interrupted. “Because I fail to see how your sentimentality is pertinent here. I care only about her potential.”

“Gadiman, Gadiman,” the Chairman shook his head. “If you understand *people* better, you understand their *actions* better. Human nature is fascinating. Of all the experiments on animal behavior I’ve conducted, none were more revealing than those conducted on humans. If only they knew about it,” he added wistfully, with a suggestion that the conversation was about to take another meandering detour.

Gadiman had noticed that the older Mal became, the more reflective he was. Maybe it was a result of age—the need to wax melancholy and reminisce about events no one cares about. But still listeners smile politely until the speaker forgets his direction and blathers on until he stumbles upon a new one.

Gadiman never quite caught on to the art of smiling politely. Maybe because it involved smiling, and politeness.

“The greatest experiment in the world,” Mal continued, “is to observe how individuals react in different situations. Because you have yet to grasp that concept, I’ve yet to include you in my research.”

Mal sat back with a thoughtful smile on his face that suggested he had an idea, that it would likely be uncomfortable for

someone, and that someone wasn't about to be Nicko Mal.

"You really need to leave that office of yours more often," Mal decided as Gadiman fidgeted. "I have an idea—go to The Dinner at the Shins next week. Watch these people. Then you'll have a better perspective on what's really going on."

"All I need is in that file!" He shook his open hand, desperate to get the pages placed back in them. "And I demand an answer about this woman!"

The Chairman sighed and held out his free hand for the folder. Reluctantly Gadiman gave it to him, and the Chairman returned the pages.

"Until I see action on her part," Mal said quietly, holding on to the file, "and not just words or ideas that you think intimates treachery, there's nothing to be done by you. We have no laws governing how a person thinks—"

"Not yet!"

"And how would you enforce such a law? How can you legislate thought?" He shook his head and handed the file to Gadiman who snatched it greedily.

Not having an answer for Mal, Gadiman instead said, "I have some men already trained. I started again a few years ago, in anticipation of *this*," and he shook the folder about Mahrree Shin as if it were the woman herself.

"Yes, yes I know," Mal sighed. "I also have a few highly placed men that I've been grooming—"

"But *mine* are ready to act, at a moment's notice—"

Mal pinched the bridge of his nose. "You had others ready to act as well, many years ago. And the only ones to die in that situation were the ones *you* trained, strangely."

Gadiman squirmed angrily in his chair.

"However . . ." the Chairman continued with a completely different tone which meant—finally—business, "I do see potential in her as well. After all these years of silence, I thought perhaps she'd seen the error of her ways. But she's only been simmering and intensifying. She may have just misspoken, but each time I gave her that benefit of the doubt, she reared up and proved me wrong. Rereading those four letters of hers, I realized that what sounded innocent was actually quite pointed."

*At last he's seeing it*, Gadiman thought cheerfully—that was the correct term, right? Cheerfully?—as he attempted a grin in

“You messed up again, didn’t you?”

pleasure.

“She did the same thing today; she’s not as docile as she appears,” Mal continued. “Some will see only the simple wife of the colonel, but I’ve spent my life analyzing people: she has the potential to be the most dangerous woman in the world.

“That’s why we’re going to bring our colonel home to Idumea, very soon,” Mal declared as Gadiman’s yellow teeth were exposed to more light than they’d ever seen. “If she’s kept closer, we can monitor the situation better. And yes, you have my permission to watch.”

The Chairman held up a warning finger to tone down the nearly rabid expression of the Administrator of Loyalty.

“*Only watch.* It’s not time to do anything else right now. Until I see action on her part, there’s nothing more to be done, *according to the laws of Idumea.* Is that understood, Administrator Gadiman?”

Gadiman stood up with his file clutched firmly in his hands. He’d heard what he wanted. “Yes, Chairman!”

---

“Oh, I’m sorry. Did I wake you?” Shem asked as he saw Poe standing at the door of the Shins’ bedroom, rubbing his eyes. He’d been dozing each morning on the Shins’ sofa since they’d left, acting as the “sleeping guard.”

“No, Zenos,” Poe assured him, leaning against the door frame. “I’m usually up an hour before midday meal anyway. What’re you doing?”

Shem was holding up a tall timber and marking off a section with a sharpened piece of charcoal. “Getting the height correct.”

“But this room was never that tall.”

“I know. Perrin frequently bumped his head,” Shem garbled as he held the charcoal between his teeth to shift the wood. “But when I’m done, he won’t.”

“Need a hand?”

Shem grinned, dropping the charcoal into his hand. “Yes, please. Hold that end. The pitch won’t be as steep, but still enough for the snows to slide off.”

Poe, holding up a piece of framing, shook his head. “Never seen construction quite like this.”

Shem marked another section. "And you've seen a lot of construction, haven't you? This is the way all houses are built in the south. I helped with quite a few. We'll make this the best bedroom Edge has ever seen."

Poe smiled. "Whatever you say, Zenos. I can give you about two hours before I'm on duty again."

"Perfect. But you know," Shem paused, "if there's anything else you'd like to do, I'm fine here. Maybe . . . check in on your parents?"

"Nothing better to do than to help the Shins," he said quietly.

Shem nodded and made a few more marks. He laid down the timber on the frame of the large bed—the mattress had been brought to Mrs. Peto to see if she could get it clean—and he took up a saw. "See that piece there? You can cut that one for me. Extra saw behind you."

It never once occurred to Poe that Shem wouldn't need a second saw unless he expected additional help. Half an hour later the timbers were joined in a framework that still had Poe scratching his head.

"I don't get it, there will be gaps—"

"Planking," Shem anticipated his question. "On both sides, outside and in. Space between will act as a buffer. Keep this room warmer in the Raining Season than what was here before."

Poe shrugged. "If you say so."

"It's the same technique Shin used on the children's bedrooms. Trust me."

"I do," Poe muttered with a great deal more confidence implied than merely about one's opinion in wall building.

Shem winked at him. "Thanks."

As they positioned the framing, creating a large back wall with a wide cutout for a window, Shem asked in the tight tones of someone trying to be casual while handling a sleeping skunk, "So what does your mother think about you joining the army? I remember years ago you telling me she didn't appreciate soldiers."

"She saw me working in the village yesterday, wearing the jacket," said Poe indifferently. "She shook her head and walked on."

"I'm sorry," Shem whispered. "And your father?"

"Dunno. Doesn't matter."



“You messed up again, didn’t you?”

Shem sighed. “I don’t believe that, and neither do you. Give them some time. Maybe they’ll come around.”

“I don’t know why they would,” Poe said as distractedly as one could be about throwing a sleeping skunk out of a window. “They haven’t cared for years. Why start now?”

“Ah, Poe, I really don’t know what to say to that except that *I* care, if that matters at all. I think you look great in the jacket. I even told the lieutenant colonel that.”

Poe smiled softly. “Thanks, Zenos. I put it on for him,” he whispered.

Shem paused. “What do you mean?”

“Wanted to repay him, somehow.”

Shem nodded and hammered in a nail. “For giving you a ride on your first day back?”

Poe swallowed and shook his head. He let go of the framing Shem had tacked into place. “Will be a big window,” he said, changing the subject.

“Yes, it will,” Shem grinned. “Rigoff found the fort has an extra large thin pane of glass. We figured the commander should have a clear view to the back alley, since that’s always the direction the threats arrive.”

“Was there really an extra pane of glass?” Poe raised an eyebrow.

“There *will* be, when Grandpy orders one from Sands next moon,” Shem said. “He promised he’d take care of everything.”

Poe grinned. “Grandpy’s not as fearsome as he tries to appear, right?”

“Right. But don’t tell him I told you that. He has a reputation to keep up, you know.”

The men chuckled and continued their work.

“You’ll like living at the fort,” Shem assured him as he took measurements for the planking. “Grandpy’s just like a real grandfather. An ornery, scowling one, but a grandfather nonetheless. Perrin—he’s kind of like everyone’s father. But don’t tell him that unless you want to see him turn red.”

Poe chuckled.

“Brillen Karna, he’s like a trusted uncle: solid, devoted, never straying. Me, I kind of like to think I’m an uncle, too. Rigoff, he’s our youngest brother come to join the family. That’s what it’s like, Poe—a big family out on an extended camping trip.

Really, there's nothing closer to home than the fort."

"Then it will be the only home I know," Poe sighed.

Shem gave him a brief one-armed hug. "We're always happy to have another nephew, Poe. But you—you're more like a little brother, finally old enough to join the ranks."

"Thanks," Poe whispered. "I've always thought of Lieutenant Colonel Shin as my uncle. If I had one."

Sensing a story behind that, Shem asked, "Why?"

Poe looked down at a pile of sawdust and started to kick it around. "He was the only one to ever regularly visit me," he finally mumbled.

Shem thought about that for a moment. "Visit you?"

Poe nodded. "When I was incarcerated," he whispered. Feeling guilty about the mess with the sawdust, he began to nudge it back into a pile with his boot.

"Ah," Shem said quietly, watching the developing anthill of sawdust just as intently as Poe did. "He told me he checked on you occasionally."

"Not occasionally, Zenos. Every day."

"Really?" said Shem, surprised.

Poe nodded without looking up. Making a proper sawdust mountain required his full attention. "My parents never came by. But he did. First time, I was in for two weeks. I didn't even respond to him when he came by. I was so mad at him. Thought it was his fault I was in there. He'd stay for maybe five minutes, chatting to the wall. But he always came back. Second time, I was in for six weeks. Answered him back a few times. Third time, I was in the center cell. No windows, very little light. Nine weeks."

There was little sawdust left to pile, but still Poe gently nudged stray little bits to the mound.

Shem just stood silently listening.

"Every day he came," Poe eventually continued. "Usually brought a piece of cake or bacon or something. The last time, I was in a full season. And every day he came, again. Always brought me something to eat. When it got cold, he brought sweaters, blankets—things I wasn't supposed to have, but he'd just give the guards a threatening look and hand them to me anyway. Sometimes we'd talk for half an hour, just about nothing. Every day. You came by sometimes, Zenos, but he never missed a day."

Poe finally looked up at Shem, his eyes dry but bloodshot.

“You messed up again, didn’t you?”

“How do I repay every day, Zenos?”

Shem’s eyes hadn’t been dry for several minutes. He sniffed and quickly wiped at the wetness. “I had no idea, Poe. He never told me.”

Poe started to kick at the careful sawdust pile, but stopped just short of connecting with it. “I left Edge right after they released me. I didn’t want to mess up here again. I couldn’t bear for him to have to come visit me again in incarceration. That place stinks, you know. I thought going somewhere else would help me change.”

“You messed up again, didn’t you?” Shem asked gently.

Poe barely nodded, his gaze focused on the floor. “So much easier to steal. Decided, when I was alone in that cell in Mountseen, I’d find a way to make things right again. Not sure where to start, but I figured he could help me.”

Shem couldn’t help himself. He hugged Poe again, who almost returned the awkward gesture.

“You made an excellent decision, for once, Private Hili! We’ll give you something better to do. You want to repay Perrin Shin? Be the best soldier you can be. The most obedient, the most willing, the hardest worker, and the one ready to do anything for him. Can you do that, Private?”

Poe looked up with the faintest of hope in his eyes, and stood at attention. “Yes, sir.”

“Excellent! So, since I’m in charge of your training at the fort, once things get back to normal again, you better tell me exactly what happened when you left Edge. Just in case we get some complaints, we can take care of it.”

Poe blinked innocently. “What do you mean?”

“No one gets caught every single time, Poe,” Shem said in a low voice. “You got away with a few things, right?”

After a long moment, Poe nodded.

“Are you serious about making things right, Private Hili?”

Poe hesitated, but nodded again.

“Well then, we need to catalogue what you’ve done, then find ways to rectify it. It can be done anonymously.”

Poe exhaled, and secretly Shem worried that this might be a bigger project than he anticipated.

“Don’t worry, Poe—I’ll help you. You won’t be taken to incarceration, either. I can guarantee that. We’ll fix things together.

That's what big brothers are for."

"Thanks, Zenos," he whispered.

---

That afternoon Mahrree finally got to see the enormous colored pools of Idumea. The only way the Shin family gained access to the largest pools was by using the High General's open carriage to take in more fully the sights of Idumea.

"Benefits of high-ranking army life," Joriana reminded them. "Access to everywhere, even if the general is at home resting from a rough morning."

Perrin's presence—and the brass buttons on his new colonel's jacket that Joriana had already purchased in anticipation—also helped get them through the locked iron gates monitored by private guards. As they drove through the most exclusive communities with elaborate and large homes, Mahrree and her children could only gape.

"Not quite as big as the mansion district," Joriana sniffed almost haughtily as the carriage slowly traveled along a wide drive that fully encircled one massive hot pool, blue and steaming. "They do *try*, though. Newer houses just don't quite have the same character."

Mahrree opened her mouth to point out that was exactly what they've been trying to tell her whenever she pressured them to move from their little *old* house, but Colonel Shin was already practicing his new brass button glare, and Mahrree decided she had probably already said a bit too much that day anyway.

Jaytsy and Peto were just glad they got to go to the pools instead of seeing some "old statue" their mother went on and on about during midday meal.

The pools were more fantastic than Mahrree imagined. Some were several hundred paces across, and the water that welled up in them came from depths immeasurable. The greens, blues, and even oranges were radiant and most tempting to leap into, if the water hadn't been near boiling temperatures. The crust around the edges had been known to break away at times, and few people had lost their lives, as well as a few stray animals.

Since the tremor many were more active. A few were even

“You messed up again, didn’t you?”

bubbling steadily and sending sprays of water into the air. In one neighborhood a guard was posted by the Administrator of Science at a particularly active pool to record its changes. Two evenings before it had sent a spray so high a young woman passing it was severely burned.

“So Mother Shin, explain to me *why* people want to live here?” Mahrree asked after they learned about the injured girl. They were walking around another pool, but several paces away from it, and Mahrree nudged her children to observe the hot colored water from an even safer distance.

“Mahrree, see the beauty of them!” her mother-in-law held out her hands. “Look at those colors.”

“Which you can hardly see because of all the steam.”

“The steam is helpful. Notice how most of the houses are positioned to be hit by the steam when the wind blows? In the Raining Season these pools and their steam warm the whole neighborhood. If you had places like this in Edge, you wouldn’t have nearly so much snow on the ground. It’d all be melted.”

“Hmm,” Mahrree considered. “I have to admit, that’s a tempting thought. And when the wind blows just right, you actually can see the colors. Nor do they smell as bad as I imagined they would.”

“Depends on the time of year,” Mrs. Shin told her. “And even then, you get used to the smell. I’ve been told the smellier the water, the healthier it is.”

Peto made a face. “Smelly healthy water? Are you sure?”

“No, son,” Mahrree said sadly. “Someone brought this water to Edge to try to cure my father when he was dying.”

Jaytsy shook her head. “I’ve smelled the water after Peto’s bathed. There’s nothing healthy about that.”

“Different smell, Jayts,” Perrin assured her. “More sulfur, just like the smaller hot springs in Edge and Moorland. But I’ve never heard of anyone being healthier here than anywhere else, Mother.”

His mother sighed. “You’re always so cynical, Perrin.”

By the time they finished their tour Mahrree had to admit that while the pools could be deadly, they were most beautiful. Although the idea of them being ‘healthy’ was debated loudly and at length by Mrs. Shin and her son as they reentered the carriage.

From the pools they traveled to the center of Idumea and the

business district. Here were the buildings Peto thought should have been named hill-makers because of their size. All were built from block, but in unique designs and patterns that almost made up for the dull shapes of the pieces. These had held up surprisingly well during the land tremor, and Perrin wondered aloud why Idumea had been begging for assistance.

That's when Joriana had the driver take them to the old garrison.

Perrin hadn't visited either garrison, new or old, since he'd come back. Even though they were only about two miles from the Shin home in the opposite direction of the Administrators' Headquarters, Perrin had confided to Mahrree he was in no hurry to be garrisoned again.

"Why are there two garrisons?" Jaytsy asked as they left the city center.

"The old one was too small," Perrin told her. "The army kept growing under my father, and instead of adding on to the old buildings, some of which were crumbling, they decided to cut down the last orchard in Idumea," he said with obvious disappointment, "and build a larger, stronger garrison."

"There was an orchard *in* the city?" Peto said, astonished.

Before Perrin could harp on the tragedy of chopping down the trees, Joriana sent him a withering look. "The orchard was older than the reign of kings, Peto," she said. "The trees had stopped producing and needed to come down anyway! It was logical to build the new garrison next to the old one, so that the objective of fighting Guardians was uninterrupted."

Perrin folded his arms and brooded, having no response for that. Eventually he said, "They didn't have to use block for the new garrison, though."

"Well, it's a good thing they did!" his mother exclaimed. "I know you think it's dull, as if *that's* important, but when you see what happened to the stone structures, you may change your mind. They were going to tear the old buildings down in Weeding Season, but now they don't have to."

When they arrived at the old section, it was to see a massive pile of rubble that made Perrin stand up in surprise. "Stop!" he shouted at the driver, and he leaped out of the carriage as it lurched to a halt.

Mahrree looked at her children quizzically, then helped her-

“You messed up again, didn’t you?”

self out of the carriage to follow him. Perrin had stopped in his jog and gestured helplessly to the destruction in front of him. The footman helped Joriana out of the carriage, and she walked almost timidly with her grandchildren to join her son.

When he felt Mahrree next to him, Perrin said in hushed tones, “That was our old home, right there. This whole line of rubble,” he waved his hand, “were the officers’ homes in Idumea. It looks like the soldiers and ox carts have pushed all the rubble together, though.”

Joriana and her grandchildren caught up to him. “Now you understand. They’ve been piling the rubble to move it easier. Some of us went through the empty houses right after the tremor, looking for things, looking for . . . your father,” she said shakily.

Perrin put a bracing arm around her.

“Most of it was just storage, fortunately,” she continued. “Imagine if people had still been living here! There were a few layabouts, but I think they expelled them some moons ago.”

Perrin said nothing but stared.

“I’m really tired of seeing rubble,” Jaytsy said miserably. Her mother put her arm around her.

“There’s just one more stop we need to make though, Jaytsy,” her grandmother assured her. “Well, at least, I want to see it, but I didn’t want to go without Perrin.”

He turned to look at her. “Where they found Father?”

Joriana nodded at him.

“Of course,” said Perrin.

“It was dark when they finally pulled him out,” Joriana said as they walked back to the carriage. “I was lying down in the surgeon’s coach, so worried, so drained . . . No one thought he was still alive, but I was praying, oh, how I was praying!”

A short ride later around the housing district, which was now a make-shift quarry, they came to the old administrative building. Or what would have been it.

“How big did it used to be?” Peto asked in awe.

“Three levels, with at least twenty offices on each level, and the cellar basement,” Perrin said, shaking his head slowly at the mountain of devastation. “It was the biggest building in Idumea for many years, and it’ll take seasons to remove it all.”

Joriana was already out of the carriage, walking determinedly to the enormous pile of rubble, so the rest of the family caught

up to her. They picked their way cautiously through the large blocks of stone and miscellaneous debris. The women frequently lifted their skirts while Perrin and Peto took their hands and helped them over the more unstable sections.

Mixed together were smashed bookshelves, crates, chairs, papers and indefinable clutter. A team of soldiers sifted through the rubble nearby, looking for anything worth salvaging before the rest of the soldiers used the mule teams to drag the larger pieces away.

Peto seemed surprisingly interested. "What was in here?"

"Mostly storage, again," his grandmother told him as she gingerly squeezed between two splintered desks. "But a few people still kept offices. With the army growing so fast, the new garrison is already too small. Some of the lesser departments kept their staff here, at the bottom level. But no one had workers here so early in the morning, especially on Holy Day. Only Relf." She shook her head. "He and his misplaced papers."

Jaytsy and Joriana made their way to an area where they didn't have to hold their skirts up so high, but Peto crouched and cautiously pulled ripped pages out from under rock and wood.

His parents watched him brush the dust off a page, read the words, put it down in disappointment, and slide out another.

"Peto, are you looking for something?" his father asked.

"Just curious," Peto answered casually as he pulled out another piece of parchment. "I've never seen so many documents in one place. Seems like you brass button types are obsessed with how many blankets the men go through." He smiled as he held up an old inventory list.

Perrin smiled cynically back at him, not at all satisfied with his answer. "This isn't where they found your grandfather, if you're interested."

Peto immediately looked up.

"The storage room where he kept his files is down there about twenty paces. You can see where they moved the rubble to reach him."

Joriana and Jaytsy were already on their way to the spot. Peto stood up and picked and jumped his way through the rubble to beat them there. Mahrree and Perrin looked at each other questioningly and followed their son.

Two soldiers were where Relf had been retrieved, salvaging



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large pieces of carved wood. One, a sergeant, left the excavation effort and led Joriana to a small opening in the rock.

“Down there, ma’am. It’s really quite remarkable we noticed him. You can’t even see how he could have fit in there. Hey! Where you going, boy?”

That’s what Mahrree was wondering as she stopped in shock. Peto was lowering himself down into a crevice near the soldier, and before Mahrree could cry out, he slipped between two large stones and vanished from view.

“Peto, NO!” cried four Shins at the same time.

Mahrree rushed to the edge of the crevice to see Peto look up at her innocently, the sunlight reaching the top his head.

“I can squeeze, see?”

“But it’s not stable!” the sergeant exclaimed.

“No, it’s not!” Perrin seconded as he squatted at the opening. “Peto, out of there now!”

“I just wanted to see if I could find what Grandfather left here. He seemed a little upset yesterday that he didn’t get the files put away properly.”

His voice sounded muffled in the enormous piles of debris, and Mahrree chewed her lower lip, scanning for ways to reach her foolish son. But even as slight as she was, she couldn’t see a reasonable way into the mess.

“I thought that maybe—” Peto bent to peer further into the dusty, jagged gloom, “—if I found some of what he was looking for, he might feel better about things.”

“Peto, that’s very noble, but also very stupid,” Joriana told him, wringing her hands. “Relf’s obsessed with keeping his files orderly. Something like this will be good for him. Make him realize life goes on without perfect paperwork!”

“Peto, you’re making me very nervous,” Mahrree said as he took a step in a small opening under shadowy broken rock. He tried to shift aside what looked like a splintered bookshelf, but too much wreckage rested on it. Instead he inched around it.

“Peto, just let it go,” Mahrree pleaded. “Whatever it is, your grandfather wouldn’t want you to risk your life for a piece of paper!”

Peto paused and looked up at her between the cracks of crisscrossing timbers. “Are you really sure about that?”

In disbelief, Mahrree looked at Perrin.

Perrin transferred the incredulous look to his son. “Of course we’re sure! Peto, OUT NOW!”

Usually that tone made his son shrink with immediate obedience. It certainly made the soldier flinch as he lay down before the crevice and extended his arm into it to try to touch Peto, but he was several paces away. Perrin crouched next to the sergeant and put a protective hand on his back.

Peto looked up at his father then back into the deep rubble again. “I think I can see something—”

“Peto, just *stop!*” Jaytsy shouted.

A sound of shifting rock began at the far end of what would have been the back of the storage room.

“Peto!” cried Mahrree as the scraping noise grew louder.

A section of timbers caved in with a deafening crash and a plume of dust rose just a few paces away from Peto, but he was already scrambling back to the crevice. As a small hill of debris shifted into the collapse, Peto grabbed the soldier’s outstretched hand. Perrin reached down to grab his other arm, and together they pulled. Peto kicked up to the surface just as several large pieces of rock shifted and gave way, compressing the crevice into a mere slit.

Mahrree gripped her chest in relief as the dust began to clear, Joriana fanned herself, and Jaytsy put a supportive arm around her grandmother.

Perrin, however, punched his son angrily on the shoulder before pulling him into a firm hug. “Stupid, son. Don’t ever, ever do something like that again.”

The sergeant stood up and dusted off his jacket. Perrin slapped him gratefully on the back.

The soldier nodded to him. “Whatever files the general was going for, boy,” the sergeant said a little breathlessly, “are destined to be entombed. No paper is worth that.”

Peto actually looked disappointed as he pulled out of his father’s grip and turned to the pile of rock and wood. “I guess we already know enough,” he said vaguely. “Just had to try.” He looked at the sergeant and nodded.

“Well, I’ve seen enough,” Joriana said, patting her chest. Mahrree and Jaytsy nodded vigorously in agreement.

Joriana squeezed the arm of the soldier in gratitude and marched quickly to the carriage. Mahrree and Jaytsy each took a

“You messed up again, didn’t you?”

side of Peto and escorted him back, just in case he had any additional less-than-brilliant ideas.

Perrin turned to the soldier. “I’m sorry about that, Sergeant. I don’t know what got into him. But I’ll never forget your assistance. You’ve just earned yourself a seat at The Administrative Celebration Dinner at the High General’s Mansion next week.”

“Really, sir?” the sergeant said excitedly.

Mahrree, Jaytsy, and Peto chuckled to each other as they headed for the carriage.

“Absolutely,” they heard Perrin say. “You can even be in charge for the evening.”

Joriana heard that, too. She spun around and bellowed, “PERRIN!”

He cringed and turned back to the sergeant. “Woman has ears like a bat. It was worth a try. Still, come by for The Dinner and bring a friend. My personal invitation. Tell them that at the door.”

“Yes, sir!”

A few quiet minutes later—Joriana glaring at her son, and Perrin looking everywhere but at her—the carriage went around a bend and out toward the large gates of the garrison. The driver stopped the impatient horses, waiting for a gap in the steady stream of wagons passing before they could continue on to the road.

Peto, bored already by the delay and surprisingly unperturbed by his near brush with death, looked around. He stopped suddenly, twisting to see behind them.

“Grandmother, what is that?”

Joriana, facing him in the carriage, already had a clear view of what captured his attention. She groaned and shuddered. “With so much happening this week, the rubbish removers haven’t been able to do their jobs. Look at that pile of waste and filth! Disgusting.”

Mahrree, Perrin, and Jaytsy twisted to see what Peto had pointed out. A sloppy structure of debris, cloth, paper, and even what may have been food was heaped in a mass about thirty paces away.

“That’s not what I meant, Grandmother,” Peto said in a quieter voice. “I meant that man.”

None of them had noticed him yet; his dress and filth blend-

ed in with the mound of refuse. He was gently tugging at something in the precarious pile, not realizing he had an audience. His age was undetectable under his dirt. He could have been eighteen or sixty-eight. He might have been tall, but his gaunt body was hunched over. His hair, maybe dark, was tousled and unkempt.

Peto swallowed hard. "He's looking for food or clothes, isn't he?"

Joriana shuddered again. "Turn around Peto. Never mind him. He was probably one of the layabouts they evicted from the old houses that are now rubble. But people that are like him, they want to live that way."

Jaytsy turned sharply to her grandmother. "They *want* to live that way?"

Joriana sighed loudly. "That's not exactly what I meant."

Mahrree and Perrin looked at her for an explanation.

"What I meant was . . ." Under the scrutiny of her family, she tried again. "People like that—there are a lot of them in Idumea. We seem to attract them from the other villages. They don't have jobs or families, no ambition, no desire to help themselves. They eat from our trash and live in crates down by the river. Well, some of them probably lived in the abandoned garrison up until last week, and I think they uncovered a corpse or two—"

Her family stared in dismay when she casually waved that little detail away.

"Really, they're *fine*. This is what they do."

Peto turned again to look at the man. He had stopped tugging at the pile and was examining something in his hands. Perhaps feeling the stare of the thirteen-year-old, he slowly looked up and met Peto's gaze.

Peto gulped again as the vacant eyes looked past him, and he turned back around. The carriage was leaving the garrison.

"That's not right," Peto whispered. "Someone should do something for them."

"Well," Joriana sighed, "the Administrators believe that—"

"The Administrators!" Peto scoffed exactly like his father.

Perrin beamed with pride.

"Why should the Administrators do something, Grandmother? Why should the government step in and take over in every little thing?"

Now Mahrree beamed at their son.

“You messed up again, didn’t you?”

“The first words of The Writings are, ‘We are all family,’” Peto reminded everyone. “Even people who haven’t read it in years should remember that first line! So he *does* have family, Grandmother: all of us. There are dozens of shops near here. Why doesn’t one of them give him an out-of-fashion coat? Another one a meat pie? It wouldn’t hurt them at all. Even over at the garrison, they were throwing blankets and pillows into that pile that’s going to be dumped by the river. Why not give them to people like him instead of just throwing it away? Why aren’t *we* doing something?” He looked around himself for something he could offer, but the horses were already in a fast trot down the road away from the garrison.

Joriana stared at him. “I honestly don’t know, Peto. But I promise I’ll speak to your grandfather about it. When he’s better, I’m sure he’ll see what he can do. What *we* can do,” she clarified.

Peto nodded in satisfaction and looked out at the road again.

But Mahrree noticed his grandmother continued to stare at him as if she’d never heard such words in her entire life, and it seemed to bother Joriana.

## Chapter 12 ~ “In an emergency, you need to preserve the hierarchy to prevent anarchy.”

Just before dinner, Mahrree made her way to the study where the general was resting and trying to recover from his setback that morning. As she neared the open door, planning to ask him what she could bring him for dinner, she saw Relf in earnest conversation with Peto. She stopped well before the door to let them finish, and watched.

Relf was holding Peto’s arm and speaking to him in hushed tones. Peto nodded and rubbed his running nose on his sleeve.

Then Relf astounded Mahrree. He pulled Peto close and hugged him, albeit gingerly.

Mahrree stepped out of the view of the open doorway so as not to be noticed. Of all the devastation that had occurred from the land tremor, so many miracles happened, too. The High General of Idumea hugging his grandson—that *had* to count as one.

After what she hoped was a long enough moment, Mahrree made a coughing noise and approached the doorway. Peto was sitting by his grandfather’s bed, smiling.

“Dinner, young man! And you too, old man.”

As Peto ran for the eating room, Relf raised an eyebrow at Mahrree. “Old man?”

“Perrin referred to you that way this morning. Thought you should know,” she teased. She felt astonishingly at ease around him lately. She concluded that spoon-feeding someone who used to terrify you, and even wiping his chin because he can’t, tends to temper things.

“In an emergency, you need to preserve the hierarchy to prevent anarchy.”

“He was right,” the High General said analytically, “Idumea *has* made you irrationally brave.”

Mahrree chuckled and sat on the chair next to his bed. “No, Perrin said—”

But Relf shook his head. “That assessment was *not* from my son.”

“Then who said that?”

Relf looked nonchalantly at his fingernails. “Oh, just an administrator. Or two. Or three.”

Mahrree swallowed so hard she was sure Relf heard it.

He looked up at her, a wily grin forming on his face. He’d become quite at ease around her as well. “Had a briefing from the Command Board this afternoon. Three of the board members are Administrators.”

“Which ones?” She couldn’t hide the panic in her voice.

Relf’s grin widened. “Not Gadiman—don’t worry. Just board-sitting ones. But they expressed their interest in coming to The Dinner, so I’ll be *sure* to introduce you to each one.”

High General Shin had a truly devious soul, Mahrree thought as she whimpered and held her head.

Relf laughed a deep, gut-kicking laugh, until his ribs kicked him back, and he held his chest as he gasped in laughter and pain.

Mahrree chuckled impolitely at his discomfort. “Serves you right, old man.”

Once Relf was able to regain some composure, he pointed at her. “This city’s changing you. Or awakening you. Or something.”

Mahrree shook her head. “It’s just that you’ve never been around me for so long. This is how I always am. You’re usually at the fort by the time I get going.”

“I wished I’d known earlier how entertaining you could be,” he winked at her.

She scoffed good-naturedly. “Well I’m not here to entertain you.”

“You entertained the Administrators this morning,” he chuckled. “And I think we’ll have a record turnout of them for The Dinner this year, hoping for more.”

“Well I’m certainly not here for *their* entertainment either!” she declared. “I came to help you get better!”

“And you are!” He tried not to chuckle again, but held his

side just in case. He slumped back against his pillows and said more gently, "You are. More than you can ever imagine. All four of you."

Recognizing his changed demeanor, she said quietly, "If only it didn't have to be in Idumea, General."

"You don't have to call me that," he said so softly Mahrree almost wasn't sure he said the words. "I have a name, you know."

"I . . . I've always called you—"

"Don't," he said quietly. "Any woman—any person—who can stand in front of the Administrators and Mal and speak her mind better call me Relf."

Mahrree grinned. "That may take some time."

"Just don't take too long. I'm an *old man*, you know."

She chuckled. "I'm sorry again about this morning. Do you think our collision set you back a great deal?"

He beckoned her to come closer. "Just between you and me, Mahrree, I *may* have played up our little incident. Last night Joriana said she thought I might be well enough to dance once or twice next week."

He shrugged at her dropped jaw.

"I was planning to 'fall' later today anyway. You merely provided me a more realistic scenario."

It was several seconds before Mahrree could say anything, and when she did it was, "You are the most devious man I've ever met!"

He sat back and said gravely, "Thank you."

Mahrree couldn't help but laugh, which made her head throb.

Relf winced as she pressed her fingers near the cut. "And I *was* trying to catch you, but my reflexes are a bit slow as of late. Getting itchy, is it?"

"Now that you mention it," she rubbed her fingers around the resin.

He nodded. "You better make it an early evening. You've had a long day and you're a little pale yourself."

"I'm going to bed after dinner. What do you want to eat tonight? The surgeon said you should stay in bed—"

She noticed his smirk.

"You *don't* need to stay in bed, do you?"

He held up his hands. "Joriana wants to make sure I'm fully



“In an emergency, you need to preserve the hierarchy to prevent anarchy.”

rested up, and—” He hesitated. “We probably don’t need another Shin Family War Dinner tonight, do we?” He actually seemed apologetic.

“We’re all good again. Perrin and I talked last night.”

The High General raised his eyebrows. “Talked? At a certain volume, noise travels quite well through the Grand Hall.”

Mahrree shrugged. “All right, I did yell a little *at first*, but then we fixed things.”

“I know you did,” he said. “I can see it in the way you two look at each other. Very good,” he added uncomfortably.

She decided he needed a new topic, and fast. “So did Peto tell you what happened this afternoon at the old garrison?”

Relf rolled his eyes. “Yes. I told him thanks for trying to get me paper, but I have plenty in my desk.”

“I’ve never seen him do something so rash. He’s really quite a cautious boy.”

“And I told him to stay that way, if he wants to live to be a grandfather himself. No, he’s a good boy, Mahrree.”

“You realize,” she said hesitantly, “that he still doesn’t want to be a soldier. I know there’s the tradition, but right now he’s—”

“I know, and that’s all right,” Relf said. “He needs to make his own decisions. I won’t pressure him.”

Mahrree nodded, and feeling the opportunity was right, decided to push it. She put her hand on top of his. “I’m glad you feel that way about your grandson. Now General—Relf—could you feel that way about your son?”

He laid his head back on the pillows and closed his eyes. “Mahrree, you don’t know what you’re asking. Perrin’s different. Perrin has a destiny.”

“We all have a destiny,” Mahrree said. “The Creator has a plan for each of us, but sometimes we ignore it because we want our own will even more.”

He opened his eyes and regarded her with a level of thoughtfulness she’d never seen in him before. “I’ve been reading about that in *The Writings* lately. Hogal would be proud of me,” he added with a small smile. “Sometimes we don’t even understand the plan until the plan’s at its end. Faith, Mahrree, right? That’s what we go on until we see the solution. Well, I have faith in my son’s destiny. The Creator has a plan for him.”

Mahrree would marvel at this discussion later, when she’d

whisper it to Hogal and hope he was in her part of Paradise to hear that Relf Shin was voluntarily reading *The Writings*. She could already hear Hogal Densal's cheerful chuckle, *I knew that boy would come around some day!*

She leaned forward and said, "But do you know what that plan is, Relf?"

"Yes," he said plainly.

Mahrree was startled by that. "Well then, can you tell me what it is?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Mahrree," he pulled his hand from under hers and placed it on top. He grasped her fingers firmly, and she fought wincing as she realized where Perrin had learned to grip a woman's hand like the hilt of a sword. "Just take care of my son. Promise me. He's a special man—"

"You told me something like the first time I met you. And you're right—"

Relf shook his head. "It's much more than you think. He can do great things he can't even imagine right now. But he must, *must* stay in the army. Promise me you'll help him."

It wasn't the High General of Idumea ordering her; it was a father asking for her help. She remembered the first time she saw High General Shin and how intimidated she'd been. She could hardly string more than a couple of sentences together in his presence. Over the years she began to know him a little better, but it wasn't until this trip that she saw him as something much more than just the General.

She closed her other hand on top of his. "I'll do all I can to support him," she promised.

He clenched his teeth. "There's that avoidance tactic again. Why is it I can never get a straight answer from either of you?"

"Because you ask such hard things!" Mahrree grinned at him. "But I do promise."

His face softened. "One more thing, if you will?"

"I will, if you make it an easier request."

He chuckled. "Make sure he does his duty at The Dinner."

"Ooh." She sighed. "This is going to be a disappointing week for you, isn't it?"

“In an emergency, you need to preserve the hierarchy to prevent anarchy.”

---

Two men sat in the dark office of an unlit building.

“Wasn’t she remarkable?”

Chairman Mal opened his mouth to answer, but Brisack answered himself. He’d been waiting all day to speak to Nicko. Several times in the halls Brisack beamed at him with the excitement of a boy on his birthday, knowing that later there’d be pie and presents and maybe even a pony, and could he have it now? Twice that afternoon the good doctor had stood in the waiting room of Mal’s office, checking his schedule to see if there was an opening, but both times Nicko sent him a warning squint, reminding him that such matters are never discussed except in a certain room and at a certain time, such as now—

“I mean, I expected a certain level of poise, but she was completely unflappable! From my vantage point, Shin was stabbing her so hard in the back she’ll undoubtedly have a series of bruises there, but still she rallied on!”

Mal took a breath, but was again cut off before he could begin.

“I mean, I, I, I was completely stunned. She’s in her forties? Looked barely thirty, didn’t she? The only giveaway to her age were a few gray hairs, and she certainly doesn’t look like someone who’s been ravaged by two expectings, does she? Over the years I’ve imagined what she may have looked like—just for a point of reference, mind you—but I wasn’t expecting someone so dainty, so charming—But her eyes . . . oh they weren’t dainty, were they? Like fires raging in them!”

Mal didn’t even try to interject his thoughts. He just sat back with his hands clasped on his lap while the good doctor plowed on with a faraway look in his eyes.

“Not that we have many citizens who stand before us, but I’ve rarely seen such composure in officers! She knew exactly what she wanted to say, and nothing was going to stop her. Remarkable. What an interesting woman.”

Mal waited a moment before attempting to speak. “So . . . are you about finished with your gushing about Mahrree Shin?”

Brisack blushed. “I’m, I’m sorry. Didn’t realize I was—”

“Gushing, yes. A man of your age, stature, and *married status*, gushing about some villager from the north.”

Dr. Brisack swallowed.

“So,” Mal began, “quite a performance put on by the Shins this morning, was what I was going to say.”

Brisack nodded, but remained silent.

“From some of my sources, Colonel Shin wasn’t as pleased with his wife’s presentation as you were, my good doctor. He forced her down to Gadiman’s office, pushed her up against the wall, and said something threatening to her before marching her out of the building. They said the look on his face was positively murderous.”

Brisack swallowed again. “He wouldn’t hurt her, I’m sure of it. He was probably just as surprised by her as I was. That’s all. I’m sure he’s over it.”

“Bears don’t easily calm down, Doctor.”

“He’s not a bear,” Brisack said. “He’s a man.”

“Men are worse, Doctor.”

“Not him,” Brisack said solidly. “I looked him in the eyes. Not him.” But something suggested he was now worried about the possibility.

Mal smiled thinly. “Gadiman was in earlier. Brought me her letters to review again. I get the impression we’ve been underestimating her. She hasn’t gone silent like so many of her fellow detractors have over the years. Instead, she’s been ripening like cheese, becoming stronger and sharper with age. She has great potential, this one. Great potential to do us great harm, if she doesn’t feel any fear of retribution or consequences.”

Brisack shook his head. “All she said today was teach the people how to take care of themselves. Even the Administrator of Education said he could think of a few ways to implement strategies to teach people how to look at a situation, put it in one of several categories, then see what kind of possibilities exist to—”

Mal sighed loudly to stop the dull drivel. “That’s not thinking. That’s plugging numbers into a formula. And that’s not what Mrs. Shin was saying. I know you heard it, too. She hasn’t come around, and she has the ear of the future High General of the world? You experiment with concoctions—do you realize what a volatile mix that could create?”

Brisack blinked. “So you’ve already decided about the High Generalship? But there have been promises made. I thought you were going to—”

“In an emergency, you need to preserve the hierarchy to prevent anarchy.”

“We need to keep a closer eye on her. And it’s going to happen here.”

“What about the Quiet Man? What about your plans for him to—”

Mal shook his head. “I still haven’t found a way to get in contact with him. We may have to conclude he’s gone as well. Fourteen years was too long for any man. No, Colonel Shin will be receiving yet another promotion, one that he cannot refuse.”

Brisack rubbed his chin. “I really don’t think that’s going to work. Shin doesn’t want to be here. And if his wife—”

“—finds herself enjoying Idumea,” Mal smiled, “she just may be the key to getting them both here.”

Brisack shrugged. “Perhaps. I don’t see how we can influence that though.”

“There are ways. The Dinner will show us how. Brilliant stroke of luck to still have that this year, with them in attendance. Let Mrs. Shin see what Idumea has to offer, what her husband means to the city, then you can gauge her responses and go from there.”

“Wait, *me*?” Brisack made a face.

“You’re going, Doctor. You and your wife. Tradition, you know. I realize you don’t enjoy these things, but it *is* your turn this year. Go to observe her. And Gadiman.”

Brisack barked a laugh. “Gadiman? He’s going?”

“I ordered him to. You can give me a report on how both of them behave that night. Many decisions about their futures will be made based on what you see.”

Brisack nodded once. “Then I’ll be sure to be most thorough, Nicko.”

“I’m expecting you to bring back something tasty, Doctor.”

“Of course. Full reports on all of them.”

“Actually, I was thinking along the lines of cake, my good doctor. Bring me back a slice.”

---

The Duty of The Dinner lessons began the next morning. With only seven days left to prepare, Mahrree was feeling even more Edgy as she sat at the breakfast table with the family.

But her mother-in-law wasn’t worried. “Delegation, dear.

That's how I handle the pressure—I simply don't. I shift it to others, spread it around. I organize and assign and check on others to make sure they do *their* duty. I learned that from the army. Otherwise, how could I feed and entertain over three hundred people in this house?"

"So you won't need me after all?" Perrin asked hopefully as he took another bite of breakfast.

His mother glared at him. "You're part of the delegation, Perrin, and no one in Idumea wants to disappoint Joriana Shin. Besides, with the news that all is well in Edge, you can focus on your efforts here."

Perrin grunted quietly. "Not *completely* well."

Mahrree smiled encouragingly at him, but he didn't return it.

The messenger had arrived last night after dinner with news from Major Karna. He reported that reconstruction was going well, no more dead had been uncovered, and no one else was missing. The first of the peas and lettuces were beginning to sprout, even in the old catapult fields. Food stores were being rationed and the fort was allocating all available grain to the villagers.

That last sentence had bothered Perrin the most. By his calculations, there were still a couple of weeks where there might not be enough food. He had sent back another message that the grain be given out in as small as amounts as possible, just to make sure it would last.

Mahrree looked down at her eggs, ham, toast and beans, and felt guilty that they were eating so well while Edge wasn't.

Perrin sighed at his plate, likely thinking the same thing. He stood up and picked up his cap.

"Where are you off to?" his mother demanded. "I have the dance instructor coming."

Perrin stopped. "What?"

"You need to learn the new dances! Mahrree and Jaytsy, too. Peto's still too young—"

"Ah, that's too bad," Peto said with a broad grin which his father envied.

Mahrree gulped, wondering if she could claim she was too young as well.

"No, Mother," Perrin said firmly. "I'm going to the garrison,

“In an emergency, you need to preserve the hierarchy to prevent anarchy.”

remember? Discussing response times and recovery methods are far more important than learning how to dance,” he said with a slight shudder. “Besides, Father will be exhausted after his morning at the garrison, and I’ll need to put him on the carriage to come back home.”

Joriana shook her head. “But you have to prove you’re civilized! Not one of those wild men from the north—”

“But I *am* a wild man from the north,” he grinned.

“You know what I mean!” his mother snapped.

“I’ll find another way to show my civility, all right?” he promised. “Who do you have coming anyway?”

“Kuman. The cook’s older brother? He’s been teaching people to dance for over ten years now.”

Perrin shook his head. “I’m supposed to learn civility from the cook’s brother? What else does he do?”

Her gaze turned crisp. “He’s a dressmaker, too.”

Perrin burst out laughing. “A dressmaker?”

“Yes! And his wife has the loveliest clothes you’ve ever seen. He’s a clever man. Used to make suits, but realized women go through dresses much more quickly, so he changed his business. Then he realized these women wear his dresses to dances, so he became a dance instructor to further his name.”

“I almost want to meet this man. Certainly opportunistic and resourceful, I must admit. But,” he continued in feigned grief, “the safety of Edge is more important. The Administrator of Security will be expecting me in about an hour, and I have all of Mahrree’s notes to deliver.”

Joriana scowled. “Oh, that’s so convenient, isn’t it, Perrin?”

Perrin came over to kiss his mother on the forehead. “Doing my duty? Absolutely!”

He leaned over and kissed his wife briefly on the lips, paused, then dove in for a proper goodbye. At least that part of Perrin was still recognizable in Idumea, Mahrree thought as she thoroughly enjoyed his extended kiss.

Peto groaned. “There’s your civilization, Grandmother. He does this to me all the time. And Uncle Shem isn’t even here. Look at them, all slobbery and—ugh, I’m still trying to eat here, parents!”

Mahrree giggled and Perrin smirked in their kiss. Just to annoy their son, they turned it into a noisy smooch.

“Ah, Peto,” Jaytsy sighed dreamily. “They’re just being cute. Get used to it, because someday soon it’ll be me and some man.”

Perrin and Mahrree both choked and spluttered, effectively ending the moment.

“What did you just say, young lady?” Mahrree turned to her daughter.

“Well, not *today*,” she squirmed. “Just someday—”

Perrin turned to Mahrree. “Don’t let her out of the house unattended.”

“And you make sure all the guards posted here are old and ugly,” she replied.

Jaytsy rolled her eyes. “You two are so impossible! I can’t talk to you about anything.”

Mahrree winced in apology. “That’s exactly what I used to say to your Grandmother Peto.”

Joriana clapped her hands. “Well then, let’s get started with the master checklist until our dance instructor comes. We’re going to learn how to host a great party, my dears!”

Mahrree grimaced again. “And that’s what my mother would say to me,” she mumbled to herself. Perrin was right—Idumea was most disorienting.

Perrin heard her. He grinned as he put on his cap. While his mother got up to retrieve a stack of papers, he mouthed to Mahrree, *Remember, I hate Idumea.*

The next hour was spent with pages of preparations spread out across the massive dining table. It was enough to make Mahrree’s head ache, but as she massaged her scalp she claimed that the throbbing was from banging it yesterday, so as not to offend her eager mother-in-law.

“I’ve kept notes on every dinner since the first,” Joriana said proudly. “And I think it was after that first dinner that Perrin convinced Relf to assign him to the new fort in Edge. He was already gone by the time we had the second one. He’d heard no one danced in Edge.” She shook her head. “I must admit, he really did seem to hate that first dance we hosted. He was anxious all evening. For someone so natural with a sword in his hands, you think he wouldn’t be so awkward with a woman in his arms.”

She turned pink and looked horrified at Mahrree, as if suddenly remembering who she was. “Oh! I didn’t mean . . . I, uh . . .



“In an emergency, you need to preserve the hierarchy to prevent anarchy.”

what I *meant* was . . .”

Mahrree chuckled. “It’s all right. I’m rather relieved he was uncomfortable with other women. I’m the only one who should ever be in his arms. If you want to keep him happy about all of this, don’t push him to dance. He’ll find another way to be civil, I’m sure.”

Joriana reluctantly nodded her head. “Yes, I’m afraid that may be true. Ah, here it is—last year’s stack of notes. The best Dinner yet! Now, I delegated all of this out last season, but usually I start checking on people a few weeks before the big day. Oh dear, do we have some catching up to do. We’ll visit each place and introduce you, since this may be your duty someday.” She elbowed Mahrree excitedly, and Mahrree bit her tongue prudently. “First we’ll begin with the bakeries. I use two, one for the breads, and one for the cakes . . .”

Joriana Shin made fun of her husband’s file-keeping, but had she been a general, she would’ve needed far more than just one large cellar room to keep track of her details. Of course, Mahrree didn’t say that out loud.

But she was glad by the time the instructor arrived to give her a chance to take a breath. Later they had at least ten stops to make—maybe more, she lost track—to assure all the foods, decorations, tables, chairs, and groomers for the temporary stables were in place. She was grateful for the break to watch Jaytsy learn to dance.

Kuman arrived with his own accompanist, a portly man with a small guitar and a propensity for nodding with an overly-happy grin. Mahrree thought it was good Perrin wasn’t there. He would have felt the need to fix his mouth.

Kuman was slender-built, just slightly taller than Mahrree, with curly brown hair cropped short, and a playful expression. When he saw Joriana he bowed deeply.

“What an honor it is to be in your home again, madam,” he said in an overly formal tone that made Joriana almost giggle and Mahrree almost gag. “I’ll have your gown ready by tomorrow afternoon, if you wish to come by for a fitting?”

“That’ll be perfect, Kuman. By the way, I’d like you to meet Mahrree, my *daughter-in-law*.” There was such obvious eyebrow raising and winking between Kuman, his accompanist, and Joriana that Mahrree stiffened in anticipation, but didn’t know

what kind of ambush to expect.

Kuman nodded to the portly man who, in a flash, whipped out a cord with markings on it and flung it to Kuman.

Joriana had already stepped behind Mahrree and, strangely, began to tickle her around her throat.

“Mother Shin!” Mahrree squirmed and unwillingly laughed. “What is the meaning of—”

It was to get her elbows up, she discovered a moment later, so that Joriana could take the cord from Kuman, quickly wrap it around Mahrree’s bust, and call out a number to Kuman who wrote it down in a little notebook his friend handed him.

“Waist!” Joriana called out, and she slid the cord down around Mahrree’s middle.

“What in the world’s going on here?” Mahrree demanded, trying to catch her mother-in-law’s unnaturally fast hands.

She shouted out another number which Kuman wrote, and flipped the cord vertically. “Length!”

“Oh, this is ridiculous,” Mahrree folded her arms and pouted. “This is because I wouldn’t choose a dress, isn’t it?”

“Less than a week, madam!” said Kuman fretfully as he eyed one of her shoulders, then the next, and wrote down the number on the cord Joriana handed back to him. “My seamstress and I will be up all night as it is with last minute alterations, and now I need to create *another* gown? You do have lovely shoulders, though. Have you considered—”

“Keeping them covered, thank you,” Mahrree said curtly. She turned to Joriana who was looking through some samples of cloth in a bag Kuman had brought with him. “Mother Shin, why can’t I just wear the green dress you bought me—”

Kuman blinked at her. “A *dress*? For The Dinner?” He sent a hopeless look to Joriana.

Joriana rolled her eyes. “It’s her first Dinner. And the dress is linen.”

Kuman sneered, as did his guitarist, and together they tsk-tsked Mahrree.

She rubbed her forehead like her husband did, and began to realize where he picked up the habit.

“This one, Kuman,” Joriana waved a swatch. “I think this would be best for the assistant host of The Dinner.”

Kuman smiled as he wrote. “Ah, Smoldering Slumber—

“In an emergency, you need to preserve the hierarchy to prevent anarchy.”

excellent choice. One of my favorite colors.”

Before Mahrree could tell exactly what color it was, Joriana thrust it into the bag again and nodded to her gown-maker. “She likes things simple, so ankle-length, position D bodice, medium to thick clusters—”

And now they were speaking in code, Mahrree thought glumly.

“—mid-elbows, liberated turtle neckline—”

Kuman’s head popped up from his notebook. “Turtle! On a gown?”

Mahrree stared at Joriana too.

Joriana sighed despondently. “My son will insist—what can I do?” For Mahrree, she drew a line just below her throat, which made Mahrree smile. Turtles obviously didn’t have cleavage.

“And with a coverlet,” Joriana said to Kuman “for a bit of variety.”

Kuman nodded as if the mysterious coverlet was a particularly inspired addition.

“Do you have any cro-shayed available?” Joriana asked Kuman who clapped the notebook shut.

Mahrree knew most of the words, but was lost as to their meanings. Idumea was becoming more annoying by the minute.

“My wife finished up one last night that would lie nicely with the Smoldering Slumber.”

Mahrree began to wonder if gowns were supposed to sound a bit indiscreet . . . and sleepy.

“But how about her shoulders?” Kuman tilted his head and eyed Mahrree’s shoulders again with a look she couldn’t define, but one that made her intensely uncomfortable. “Perhaps a bit of cut-work?”

Now this sounded painful.

Again Joriana sighed. “My son likes them covered. To keep all of us out of trouble, keep her covered. And speaking of Perrin, he snuck off to the garrison instead of staying here to learn dance!”

Kuman shook his head sadly. “To have such misplaced priorities . . . Ah, well. But how fares the High General?”

Joriana beamed. “Doing much better. He’s hardly in the study anymore, and can spend the night in his bedroom. He’s even at the garrison for few hours today. But,” she said with a

shrug, “he won’t be dancing either. Well, I still have two women for you to work with,” she beckoned the men to follow her out to the Grand Hall. “Let me call my granddaughter, Jaytsy—”

But Jaytsy was already waiting by the grand staircase, bobbing eagerly. Peto sat on the balcony wanting to avoid any introductions but hoping to see the action he could make fun of later.

“Actually,” Mahrree interrupted, “I think you best just spend your time with Jaytsy. If Perrin’s not going to dance, I hardly think he’ll be comfortable with me dancing with anyone else.”

“Ah, Mother, what will you do all evening?” Jaytsy asked.

“Watch you!” Mahrree said. “And every young man who comes to The Dinner.”

Kuman bowed to Mahrree. “Very well, the young lady it is.”

Jaytsy proved to be a quick study. So fast, in fact, that Kuman was dancing elaborate steps with her by the time the hour was over. At least one Shin would be socially acceptable, Mahrree thought.

Before Kuman left he went to visit with his sister Kindiri in the kitchen. As he went out the back door, he called to Mahrree, “Should you change your mind, ma’am, I’ll be happy to come back for you and the colonel. Perhaps the colonel will have a change of heart, a new understanding of his true duty?”

Mahrree chuckled a bit tensely. She wasn’t sure if the man was sarcastic or truly misdirected. “I think he’ll be wearing one of your gowns before that happens, but thank you anyway.”

“And your gown will be ready before the big day.” Kuman smiled politely and nodded his goodbye. “For the Shins, I handle everything myself.”

Strangely, that statement didn’t strike Mahrree as reassuring.

But other things worried her that afternoon, especially as she looked at the extensive list they were about to tackle that afternoon. Mahrree couldn’t help but wonder: where was the food coming from for The Dinner?

Many items on the menu were easy enough to get this time of year: veal, lamb, and pheasant. But others were items normally seen only at harvest time: grapes, apples, and squashes. And the fruits and vegetables weren’t just the dried ones—one of the menu items called for pumpkin baked stew.

And for three hundred people?

“In an emergency, you need to preserve the hierarchy to prevent anarchy.”

Mahrree didn't work up her courage to ask until she and Joriana were preparing to walk to the first bakery.

“Where does it all come from?” Joriana repeated her question as she put on her wrap. “The garrison, of course. You have a reserve at the fort, right?”

“Yes, but not of apples! Those are gone by late Raining Season. We're down to only wheat now.”

They left the kitchen through the middle back door, Joriana slamming it repeatedly since it never seemed to latch properly. Mahrree smirked to herself; it was good to see that even the world's second largest mansion had its little quirks.

“We have the most extensive reserve anywhere,” Joriana told her as they walked. “The Administrators saw to it. There's even a large cooling area in a cellar that preserves fruits and berries from one year until the next. They pack it with ice and sawdust during the Raining Season and it keeps cool throughout Weeding.”

“That's . . . that's remarkable,” Mahrree said. “But that seems a bit much, doesn't it? What's the purpose?”

“The purpose?” Joriana exclaimed. “To prove that even in times of need, the Administrators can provide! That's one of the reasons why The Dinner is held early in Planting Season when stores are usually low. It's not just to commemorate the date King Oren was deposed, but also to celebrate that we still have so much, when with the kings we used to have so little.”

Mahrree thought for a moment. “How much grain is there?”

“A full two years' reserve for one thousand people. Plus other essentials, like molasses, dried meats and fruits, and so on,” Mrs. Shin said proudly.

“That's impressive,” Mahrree said, her mind figuring. “But not near enough for all of Idumea.”

“It's not for Idumea,” Joriana said, nodding to a few women passing them. “It's for the Administrators, their families, and the highest levels of the army.”

“Only for the leadership?” Mahrree felt a knot in her stomach again. Those seemed to come with regularity here.

“Of course. And those in the households, naturally.”

“Why no one else?”

““In an emergency, you need to preserve the hierarchy to prevent anarchy,” she recited. “Giyak, the Administrator of Secu-

rity, came up with that little motto.”

Mahrree felt the knot tighten. “And because it rhymes, it must have merit,” she murmured. “So the leadership survives while the populace starves?”

Joriana furrowed her brow. “It’s not *that* harsh, Mahrree.”

“Could that reserve ever be used for someone else?” Mahrree wondered. “Suppose a tragedy hit somewhere else, and part of the reserve was needed—”

“I know where you are going with this: all the way to Edge, aren’t you?”

“Mother Shin, we have five thousand people who may need help just for a week or two. That would be only a fraction of the reserves. Would the garrison let that go?”

That Joriana didn’t immediately answer disappointed Mahrree. She thought the solution was obvious.

“You see,” her mother-in-law began after a hesitation, “it’s not intended for *regular* people. Certainly you and Perrin and the children could take something back, and enough for the soldiers, but it’s not for everyone, understand?”

“No, actually, I don’t.”

She sighed. “It’s for necessary people.”

Mahrree bristled at that. “Who decides who is ‘necessary’?”

“The Administrators have.”

“Is Kindiri necessary?”

“As part of our household, yes.”

“What about her brother Kuman and his wife?” Mahrree pressed.

Joriana thought for a moment. “I’m sure some surplus could be sent quietly their way, as it could be sent to your mother.”

“What about their neighbors?” Mahrree pushed. “If a mere cook and a dressmaker and an old woman are ‘necessary,’ why aren’t their neighbors necessary? Who’s to judge who deserves life and who deserves death? Are the Administrators the Creator now as well?”

Joriana let out an exasperated breath.

Mahrree held hers. She’d done it again, gone too far.

“Mahrree,” her mother-in-law said in a strained voice, “I love you as if you were my own daughter. In fact, I don’t know how I could love you more. But so help me, you are the most vexing woman that ever was! Has anyone ever told you that?”

“In an emergency, you need to preserve the hierarchy to prevent anarchy.”

Mahrree winced. “Yes. Quite often. My own mother, for starters,” she said apologetically. “I blame it on my father, though. He always pushed me to ask the tough questions and find the hard answers.”

“Well when I get to the other side, I’m going to find him and have a little chat!” Joriana said sharply.

Mahrree couldn’t respond, too delighted by the idea of tall, elegant Mrs. Shin marching up to her small, slender father. She’d have her hands on her hips in anger, he’d have a finger on his lips in patient contemplation, and when she finished letting him have it, he would say something like, “So what do you think about the color of the sky here in Paradise? And did you know no arguing is allowed?”

Joriana nudged her with her elbow, and Mahrree looked to the side to see Joriana’s pained eyes.

“I’m sorry, Mahrree. I didn’t mean to bring up sad memories.”

Mahrree threw her head back and laughed. “Quite the opposite, Mother Shin! I was just thinking how much he’ll aggravate you. I’m not really sure that’s allowed up there, though, so it should be quite a meeting.”

Mrs. Shin chuckled with relief as they turned a corner down to the bakery. After a moment she said, “I’m sure there’s something that can be done for Edge. When Perrin comes home from the garrison we’ll ask him to check on the reserves tomorrow. Perhaps something could be spared, just to make things a little easier for everyone.”

“Will the Administrators allow it?”

“I really don’t know. I hope so. The garrison holds it, but the Administrators put it there. I think the one to make the final decision is Relf. It’s just one of those things, you know? The things that we just have to work around? Really, though, life is far better now than when we had the kings. From year to year you never knew what impulsive decision they’d make next. You didn’t feel it as much in Edge, but Idumea was a very unpredictable place. At least with the Administrators when there’s a change, it takes place so slowly we can prepare for it. Relf helped put that in their Resolutions, you know. He told Nicko Mal that he’d support the overthrow as long as the new government put in some kind of check on its decisions. Decrees pass only after weeks of

discussions in committees and with the approval of the majority of Administrators. That was Relf's insistence, and why there's an odd number of members," Mrs. Shin explained, "and why Nicko Mal has the power to decide a tied vote if someone is absent or abstaining," she finished, obviously pleased with her husband's accomplishments.

"I hadn't realized he influenced so much in developing the government," Mahrree said. "There's nothing written in the history texts about Relf Shin's assistance in creating the government."

"Because the Administrators didn't want to seem as if they were influenced by anyone else but their own ideals," said Joriana, a bit put off by the slight so many years ago. "But everyone knows that without the full support of the army—without *Relf*," she clarified proudly, "the overthrow never would've happened. At least, not peacefully. The Administrators owe a great deal of gratitude to the Shin family. Perhaps that will help us have some influence over them again?" She stopped walking, and Mahrree saw they stood in front of the first bakery on their list.

Debt of gratitude to the Shin family? Mahrree pondered that. Most people forget a debt within minutes—never mind decades—because that way they'll never feel the need to repay it.

But influence? Oh, the Shin family definitely had influence. But enough?

Pushing aside those troubling thoughts, Mahrree smiled at her mother-in-law's expectant face and addressed another more manageable worry. "So this is where you ordered the cakes, is it?"



## Chapter 13 ~ “As if there are different kinds of people in the world.”

“My, she’s certainly a thorough woman, isn’t she?”

Perrin chuckled tightly. “Yes, Administrator Giyak. When Mahrree gets started on something, there’s really no stopping her.” Then he held his breath. If there would be any fallout from what she’d said yesterday morning, it would likely come now.

The Administrator of Security sifted through the detailed pages of what had occurred in Edge, and Mahrree’s recommendations for the future. “So I see,” he muttered, smiling faintly at the words. “Probably fortunate for the world she can’t be elected a magistrate. She’d redo the entire village.”

Perrin forced another chuckle. “She’s said the same thing herself. Good thing, eh?”

The Administrator glanced up at him with an expression that said, *We’ll just let yesterday slide.*

Perrin nodded once back.

“So,” Giyak looked at the other three officers seated at the table with Perrin, then at the Administrator of Family Life who sat across from them, watching Perrin intently. “We’re here to discuss the reaction of the villages and forts to the recent crisis, and to catalogue what has so far proven successful, and the ways we need to improve—”

Perrin put his hand under the table and made a rolling motion, hoping it would subliminally encourage the Administrator of Security to get to his point. In the corner sat a young officer madly trying to record every unnecessary word. Perrin regarded poor

Lieutenant Nelt with sympathy.

“—and we’ll start with Colonel Shin, whose village, it seems, was one of the hardest hit. We have the details of the clean up efforts,” he waved Mahrree’s pages, “but what I’m wondering is, how is Edge planning to pay for all the rebuilding?”

Perrin exhaled. “Sir, that’s what I’m wondering too. For now, everyone is helping, but that’s because they’re numb. Once that numbness wears off, it will turn to pain. And no one seems to think that pain is part of the human condition; they seem to think they should be compensated for it.”

“Interesting observation, Colonel,” Dr. Brisack smiled warmly. “You’re absolutely right. The glow of generosity will fade, and then?”

“Well, the labor’s free, so to speak,” Perrin said. “It’s mostly the soldiers doing the work, culling lumber from the river banks and edges of the forest. I can compensate them for their double shifts later by giving them extra days off and relaxing on drills. But the sawmill will want to be paid. So will others who have been generous with livestock they’ve given to be butchered. I worry that the glow’s already died, Doctor. Now, there have been a few families completely wiped out by the tremor. We can auction off what remains of their possessions, then use that money to help compensate, but that likely won’t be enough . . .”

He trailed off, unsure of what else to say. It’d been pressing on him for days, how to help those who had lost everything. Some of the shop owners not only lost all their goods, but their gold and silver. Most had their metals hidden in their stores, and it melted in the heat of the blazes, slipping irretrievably into cracks of stone. The memory of Mr. and Mrs. Snobgrass, sobbing at the charred remains of their shoppe—even the extra *p* and *e* reduced to ash like their adornments—tore at him.

Perrin looked at his hands as if there might be a solution there he hadn’t noticed. “What are you doing in Idumea?”

“Well,” Giyak began proudly, “we have a surplus, as we have always had, in reserve for such a situation. Major?”

The major sitting next to Perrin produced several pieces of parchment. “Full listings of homes that were damaged or destroyed, along with the estimates to repair or replace them.”

The Administrator of Security took the pages and turned to the last one, looking at the final total. “Just as we expected. You

“As if there are different kinds of people in the world.”

see, Colonel Shin, the Administrators will pay for the repairs of all these homes.”

Perrin’s jaw dropped. “You . . . you will what?”

Dr. Brisack grinned. “Fantastic, isn’t it? That’s what this Administration has done for the world, Colonel Shin: *we provide*.”

Perrin shook his head in astonishment. “That’s . . . that’s really quite amazing. And what do you expect back?”

Giyak scoffed. “Nothing, Colonel! This is why we’re here: to take care of every little thing, as your wife so accurately accused us of yesterday. Could the kings ever have done something like this? Of course not! But *we’re* here for the people.”

“And you want nothing back? Well, except for what you already take in ever-increasing taxes and fees,” Perrin muttered to himself. He swallowed when he realized the Administrators were staring at him.

“All we want, dear Colonel,” Giyak said distinctly, “is devotion. Loyalty. Allegiance. Is that too much to ask?”

Oh, it could be, Perrin thought bitterly, depending on what the Administrators are loyal *to*.

He realized he hadn’t answered yet when the lieutenant colonel sitting on the other side of him coughed quietly.

“Loyalty,” Perrin began, desperately searching for a response that would please them yet allow him to remain true to himself, “is always a noble characteristic,” he finished vaguely.

Giyak nodded, seemingly satisfied by the answer. But Dr. Brisack watched Perrin with a faint smile.

Giyak dropped the pages in front of Perrin. “Take a look at what we can do for Idumea, Colonel. And perhaps we can do the same for Edge.”

Perrin missed the suggestion as he thumbed through the pages. He looked at the first, then at the fourth, then back to the first again. “Sir, I don’t understand . . . here’s the estimate for rebuilding a two bedroom home in the north near Pools, and another estimate for a similarly sized home in eastern Idumea. The home in the north is budgeted for nearly twice as much as the other house. Why?”

Giyak looked at the major for an explanation.

“Zebra Eztates vs. Dripping Stream.”

“Ah,” Giyak nodded. “Of course. Colonel, the quality of

houses in Zebra Eztates is markedly different than Dripping Stream. Those that live in Zebra Eztates—”

“Wait a minute,” Perrin interrupted. “Don’t both families deserve the same quality of construction? Look at this—most of Dripping Stream was devastated. Why is that?”

“Poorer construction,” the major told him. “Older homes. The place has been rundown for quite some time. It’s convenient so much was destroyed. Been wanting to clear that area out for a while,” he sniffed.

“So the houses you’ll replace will be *again* of inferior construction?” Perrin asked, genuinely bewildered.

Dr. Brisack leaned forward on the table, and Perrin felt as if he were being analyzed.

“They don’t mind,” the major promised him. “They’re used to simpler things. But those in Zebra Eztates, they’re used to better, so they need better.”

“Everyone deserves a sturdy house, Major!” Perrin declared. Brisack smiled indistinctly.

Giyak scoffed. “There’s simply not enough funds to build everyone a mansion, Colonel!”

“I don’t live in a mansion in Edge, Administrator,” Perrin said steadily. “I live a fifty-year-old home with three odd additions to it, two made solely by me. It’d probably qualify as a Dripping Stream home—”

“I see,” Giyak cut him off. “Colonel, if this is about building you a better home, that’s what your new colonel’s bonus is for—”

“It is NOT about me!” a frustrated Perrin bellowed, slamming his hand on the table and stunning every man there. “It’s about treating everyone fairly! Dripping Stream deserves the same as Zebra Eztates, and if you can’t afford that, then rebuild Zebra Eztates the same as Dripping Stream. And change the name while you’re at it. Ridiculous spelling of Eztates!”

Brisack burst out laughing, but stopped when he realized he was the only one. He winked at the colonel.

Perrin looked apprehensively back at him.

Giyak exhaled. “Colonel, I appreciate your sense of fairness. Very few men have that anymore. That’s what makes you an excellent commander, I’m sure. But politics is different. More delicate. Those that live in Zebra Eztates are, are . . . more achieved. More deserving of their station in life. They worked harder, are

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smarter . . . I don't know. Perhaps the good doctor could explain to us the differences in achievement in one's life.”

Brisack smiled. “Not really. Still working it out myself. I'm quite interested to hear your philosophies, Giyak. Please, continue.”

Perrin recognized the sarcasm and winked back at the doctor.

Brisack beamed.

Giyak sighed again. “You see, those who Nature have favored . . . Nature has favored. That's all there is to it. We, as a political entity, must also recognize that Nature has chosen some for success rather than others. That so much of Dripping Stream collapsed, and so many residents there died, merely validates the fact that Nature did not choose those people.”

“Why, that's very convenient, isn't it?” said Perrin sardonically.

“Yes. Yes, it is,” Giyak agreed, only vaguely aware he was missing something.

“I don't believe that's *exactly* what the colonel was saying,” Brisack said with a knowing squint at Perrin. “I think he's disagreeing with you, Giyak.”

The Administrator of Security scoffed again. “So what you're advocating, Colonel, is that we lower the standards on the Eztates to raise those at the Stream? That would not bode well for the politics of the area.”

“How so? And why should politics be a concern?” Perrin demanded.

Giyak sighed as if dealing with a most annoying teenager.

Brisack just continued to smile.

“Dripping Stream is *used* to their condition,” Giyak tried valiantly. “They're thrilled we stepping in to help them reconstruct. Their houses will be the envy of people like them.”

“*People like them?*” Perrin asked, his skin itching at the phrase. “People like them. As if there are different kinds of people in the world—”

“There are!” Giyak insisted. “Ask the doctor.”

Brisack shrugged. “Please, Giyak, continue. This is quite fascinating. Much I'll have to consider.”

When Giyak shot Brisack an angry glance, Perrin held up his hands. “Sirs, I'm sorry, I'm sorry. Really, I'm not trying to be

difficult. I just don't understand. In my mind, everyone deserves a mansion. Except maybe for my son. He thinks the Grand Hallway is for punting his new kickball. My mother was most displeased by that."

The officers chuckled and Giyak smiled obligingly. Brisack grinned.

"I just worry about a society that deems one person more worthy than another. I believe in the Creator, and I believe He created us all equal. To see us deferring to some and neglecting—I'm sorry, not 'neglecting,' but *marginalizing* others in order to favor another?"

"They pay more taxes, Colonel," Giyak told him. "They deserve more assistance."

Perrin rubbed his forehead. "They've already been 'rewarded' with more by their status. Is it truly fair or right that a builder of a school makes three times as much as an eggman? Don't children need food as much as they need education? Or why should I as a colonel make more than my major? We work the same hours, at the same fort, doing each other's job most of the time—I don't deserve more than Brillen simply because I now have brass buttons on my uniform—"

A thought came so clearly to him that he was momentarily startled it had never occurred to him before.

"My major," he started slowly, talking to the table, "needs more than I do. Or rather, he has a young woman with sickly parents who need more than we do. My pay will go up a level with the promotion, but I don't need extra slips of silver—"

"What did he say?" Giyak asked Brisack. "Who in the world doesn't need more slips of silver?"

"—why should I take the extra?" Perrin continued to muse out loud, forgetting anyone else was in the room. "I earn more than enough, we don't even need Mahrree's earnings, in a few years our children will be on their own, yet Brillen—if he has more silver—will be able to change the lives of three more people. If extra silver's to be given, it should be given to him with the greater need—"

Brisack leaned forward, fascinated, as he watched the colonel thinking out loud.

"And my master sergeant—Shem makes even less, but *he's* the one taking the recruits out on all night maneuvers, not me. He

“As if there are different kinds of people in the world.”

deserves extra pay for his extra headaches. But who gets the credit for the highest retention of soldiers in the world? Me. How's that fair? Why are we perpetuating this? I don't get it.”

Giyak turned to Dr. Brisack. “Do you understand what he's talking about? Because I don't. I really don't.”

Brisack grinned fully. “I don't either, but he's marvelous to listen to. Don't you agree?”

Giyak twisted to look at Perrin who was still lost in thought.

The Creator had declared in *The Writings* that each person was responsible for his brothers and sisters, Perrin considered. So really, whose responsibility was it to provide equity in the world?

Not the government's.

It was *his*.

“I was warned about you, Colonel, and I didn't believe it. But now?”

That brought Perrin out of his reverie. Besides, he'd already made the decision. Mahrree would agree completely.

Perrin looked up into the perplexed face of Giyak. “Uh, I'm sorry. I just was a little . . . May I ask who warned you?”

“Chairman Nicko Mal,” Giyak said steadily.

Brisack chuckled.

Perrin tried to smile. “I am sorry, sir. I thought I'd improved over the years, but I think my proximity to my old university has triggered my adolescent need to challenge everything anyone tells me. If my wife were here right now, she'd give me a well-deserved lecture. And you've met Mahrree—no one can lecture quite like her.”

Perrin kept the smile on his face hoping it would work. Not his scary smile, his real one, or at least a close proximity to it, because nothing in him at that moment felt jovial.

He was miles away in thinking from these men, and it was doing nothing good for the name of Shin. It would be his father that suffered from that, not him. And the last thing his father needed right now was more aggravation, caused by his son.

Giyak couldn't remain flustered. A smile grew on his face, and Brisack chuckled louder. The two officers sitting next to Perrin smiled—as deferring officers were known to smile—not really understanding why they were, but doing so to avoid being ordered, or questioned.

In the corner, Lieutenant Nelt continued to scribble, and for

a worrying moment Perrin wondered just how much of his ramblings the young man had recorded.

“I believe our Colonel Shin has a unique way of looking at the world,” Dr. Brisack decided. “And it would do well for the world to perhaps hear a bit more of those views. Tell me, Colonel: why is it that you’ve stayed all these years in the north?”

Perrin shrugged. “I guess I’ve just grown accustomed to the mountains. They tend to grow on you, you know? So much land, in such an odd formation . . . I could stare at them for hours just pondering things.”

Giyak shook his head slowly. “Truly, Colonel, you’re the most peculiar man I’ve ever met. No one in the world likes the mountains. They’re an aberration of Nature, a deformity it has yet to rid itself of. And yet you seem to enjoy them?”

Brisack’s hands were clasped, his fingers steepled in front of him, eagerly awaiting Perrin’s response.

“I suppose I do. One man’s deformity is another man’s delight?”

“Odd,” was all Giyak could say. “Getting back to the issue of paying for rebuilding in Edge—”

But Perrin wasn’t listening. He was too engrossed in remembering what his son had recently said when they saw the filthy man picking through the trash heaps. Why *did* the world assume the Administrators should solve all the problems? If we are all family, as The Writings proclaimed, then shouldn’t that family take care of their own?

“Paying for rebuilding Edge will be covered,” Perrin said suddenly, surprising even himself.

Giyak shook his head, realizing he had missed something. “You just said, you didn’t think it would be. There’s not enough land to auction off—”

“Those requiring compensation will be compensated, Administrator,” Perrin said confidently. “Idumea need not raid its coffers for the citizens of Edge.”

“It’s not raiding coffers,” Brisack assured him. “We want to do this for our citizens, for the families of the world. We want to demonstrate that we will take care of them.”

“To ensure loyalty?” Perrin queried. “Because Doctor, giving a little to those in need engenders a sense of gratitude and loyalty; giving too much, however, creates a sense of entitlement.



“As if there are different kinds of people in the world.”

And after that attitude has been placed, you have a spoiled child who throws a fit whenever he’s not given every last thing he wants. He’s no longer devoted to his benefactors, but he’ll quickly follow whoever promises to give him more.”

Brisack thought about that. “I don’t think so—”

“Oh, but I *know* so, Doctor. I saw it all the time with the thieving youths of Edge. They came from the most wealthy families. Their parents gave them everything, and they repaid that by following the next person in line who would give them just a little bit more: the Guardians. They didn’t need it. They just wanted it.

“But there’s a way to avoid that, Doctor, Giyak,” Perrin continued. “Provide enough to keep the villagers going, and allow them to keep their pride. They need to be able to say, ‘We persevered on our own, with a little assistance.’ All we need, sirs, is a bit of food for the next few weeks to help with our remaining stores. Just until the early harvest comes in. We have resources for building, and I promise you the costs will be taken care of, but if you provide food—just enough to get us by, then Edgers will be everlastingly loyal to you, with their pride intact.”

Giyak sneered slightly. “Where do you expect us to get this food?”

“The garrison reserves,” Perrin said easily. “I know there’s enough. My mother’s dinner isn’t using it all.” He smiled at the men.

They didn’t return it yet.

He cleared his throat. “All we would need would be about 10 wagon loads—the extra long wagons the garrison uses for supply shipments—full of grain. We can survive on bread for a few weeks until the first peas and lettuces are ready, and new livestock is born. It would be only a small fraction of the reserves; no one would miss it. And, if you’re concerned that they would, Edge will pay you back. At the end of the season, we’ll send back the same amount of grain that we took. The best way to secure loyalty is to feel a sense of duty to your benefactors. We could never repay the gold you’re offering. Edge does quite a bit in bartering. But give us the grain, let us replace it again, and I promise you that Edge will be forever loyal.”

He knew it’d work. His chest burned with the energy of the idea, so much so that it took all his strength to not leap out of his seat in excitement. This wasn’t his idea; it was the Creator’s. He

was sure of it.

“No,” Brisack said simply. “I don’t think it will work.”

Perrin’s face screwed into a picture of dismay.

“I mean, Colonel, I personally think it stands a chance of success,” Brisack explained, “but I doubt those who need to release the stores will agree. Not only do you need my authorization and Giyak’s, but you also need the Administrators of Taxation, Commerce, and Farming to agree. And your father, of course, since he’s the holder of the key to it. Now, I’m sure the Administrator of Security will give his approval—”

Giyak still stood with his furrowed brows, running the proposal over in his mind.

“—but you won’t easily get Taxation. No one easily gets Taxation,” Brisack chuckled mirthlessly. “However, the funds for rebuilding Edge lie in a separate coffer, one that I alone control. One that I will willingly give you—”

Perrin’s chest tightened. “Doctor, I appreciate the offer, but it won’t work. You can’t buy the loyalty of the village.”

“Buy?” Brisack blinked in surprise. “You see this as a bribe?”

Perrin shrugged. “What else is it?”

“Charity!”

“No,” Perrin shook his head. “Charity is something else. It comes from a deep sense of love, and asks for nothing back. Charity’s greater than love, even. Love is a feeling, but charity demands sacrifice, acting on that feeling. Forgive me, but I don’t think you truly love Edge, because you don’t know them well enough. What you’re offering is a bribe to retain their loyalty. But like an ill-tempered dog, this will come back to bite you. It takes away their dignity, and one of the few things Edgers have a great deal of, in their own odd ways, is dignity. Let them keep that. Feed them, let them repay you, and see if I’m not right.”

Giyak scoffed and turned to the doctor. “Are you just going to let him—”

Brisack held up a hand to silence him. “While I am a doctor and the Administrator of Family Life, there’s something I am above that: a scientist, and one who enjoys an experiment with teeth. Perrin Shin, I will accept your ‘speculation’ that Edge will become more loyal if we provide only food reserves. But I speculate against you.”

“As if there are different kinds of people in the world.”

Perrin’s belly sank to his feet. “Sir?”

“Here’s my proposal: you return to Edge in about two weeks, correct?”

“Yes, sir.”

“I want you to evaluate Edge during the week after that. Task some of your soldiers to ask those in need what they want: food or gold. Then, after that week, send me a report as to the results. I expect complete honesty from you, Colonel. Let the people decide what they want and need.”

Perrin sighed. He couldn’t imagine why people would want shiny metals when they needed warm bread, but then again there were some less-than-logical villagers. “What if the results are split?”

Brisack shrugged. “Perhaps we’ll send relief that accommodates both. By then it will have been a few weeks, I will have had that much time to work on the Administrator of Taxation, and he may be willing then to release the stores.”

Perrin exhaled in frustration, but Brisack cut him off before he could protest.

“It’s the only way I’ll agree to this, Colonel. I’m a very fair man, Shin,” the doctor told him, his blue eyes staring deeply into Perrin’s nearly black ones. “You have no idea how fair. The preservation of life is critical to me. In the past I’ve gone to great lengths to ensure that some people had a fighting chance.”

For some reason the old scar across Perrin’s back, received from flushing out more than a dozen Guards in the forest intent on killing his expecting wife and daughter fourteen years ago, itched.

“Unlike Moorland, Edge will survive,” Brisack assured him, with his voice strangely not containing any reassurance, “but on my terms. I’m allowing you the possibility of altering those terms. At any rate, relief will come to Edge in four to five weeks. What kind of relief will be up to them, not you. Is that understood, Colonel Shin?”

There were times Perrin realized there could be no other answer than the one demanded. It was those times that let him live to be forty-three years old.

“Yes, sir,” he agreed dully. But he still had a plan.

An hour later the meeting finally adjourned, and as the Administrators and officers tidied up their pages, Perrin made his

way over to the lieutenant completing the minutes of the meeting.

“So,” said Perrin, trying to sound casual, “some soldiers earn their positions because they run the fastest, while others are placed because they can scrawl the fastest.”

The lieutenant chuckled and held up a finger as he finished writing his last sentence.

Perrin frowned. “Did you just record that as well? Wasn’t even a good line.”

The lieutenant looked up at him and smiled. “No, sir. Just a note to myself about who wanted copies of the minutes.”

Perrin nodded slowly, noticed the other men leaving the room, waved a final goodbye, and turned back to the lieutenant. “Nelt, is it? I know your father Colonel Nelt. He was a couple of years ahead of me in Command School.”

“Yes, sir,” Nelt said, standing up and gathering his notes. “He’s mentioned you a few times. Pleased to meet you, sir.”

Perrin looked at the pages hungrily. “May I uh, may I see all that you wrote down?”

Nelt held the papers a bit closer to his chest. “Everyone who was in attendance will be able to inspect the minutes and give his final say before they are distributed, sir.”

“Yes, yes, yes,” said Perrin a bit hurriedly. “I was only wondering if I might . . . if I might check one or two items?” It was his ramblings that worried him, realizing that his musings about Brillen and Shem and how pay is decided—ideas that he thought were mostly in his head—had actually come out of his mouth. Depending upon what this young officer, whose dark brown hands were gripping the pages even more possessively, wrote, Perrin may come off looking . . . well, not very supportive of the Administrators.

“Sir?”

Perrin’s gaze traveled up from the pages to meet the deep brown eyes of Nelt.

“Trust me, sir? I do an excellent job. That’s why I was chosen as scribe.”

“Yes,” Perrin said slowly. “That’s what worries me. Just how excellent a job do you do?”

Nelt chanced a small smile. “I write down what was *intended* to be heard, sir. After all, with so much discussion, it’s frequently difficult for me to record every last word,” he said mean-

“As if there are different kinds of people in the world.”

ingly. “So instead I record the spirit of the conversation, if not every letter. Don’t worry sir, I do an excellent job,” he repeated. “You will be pleased.”

Perrin’s shoulders relaxed. “Well then, I suppose I’ll have to be satisfied with that.”

Nelt smiled. “My father often remarked how unusual you were, in a good way.”

That made Perrin chuckle. “You’re coming to The Dinner, aren’t you?”

Nelt grinned. “Yes, sir! Wouldn’t miss it for the world. Last year my wife was feeling too ill, so we had to miss it—”

Perrin’s eyebrows rose. “You’re married? Good for you! Too many soldiers today think that’s not important anymore, but I promise you there’s nothing better than finding a wonderful woman.”

Nelt’s brown cheeks flushed. “She is, sir. And so is our son. That’s why we missed last year. The idea of food and dancing kept making her . . . um, throw up,” he said uncomfortably.

Perrin chuckled. “Understand. My wife had a rather unpleasant time of expecting herself. And to be honest, the idea of the food and dancing still makes me a bit sick to my stomach as well.” But the wheels of planning were turning in Perrin’s mind. “So your son must be very young?”

“Yes. And my wife’s a bit worried about leaving our baby with a tender the night of The Dinner, since he’s barely six moons old—”

“Then don’t leave him, Lieutenant,” Perrin said. “Bring him! The Dinner is for families, after all. And a baby’s the most entertaining part of a family, I always thought.”

Nelt blinked rapidly at that. “Bring the baby?”

Perrin grinned. “And I’m making that an order, Lieutenant.”

---

On the way out of the garrison, Perrin stopped at the rubbish heap where Peto had seen the filthy man.

But the heap—and the man—were both gone.

Perrin tucked the full gold slip back into his pocket. There were still more rubbish heaps in Idumea.



“How was your meeting this afternoon with the Administrators?” Mahrree asked him as they readied for bed that night.

He groaned.

She chuckled.

“How was your afternoon with my mother?” he asked her.

She groaned.

He chuckled.

They slipped into the silk sheets next to each other, trying not to slide out of the slick bed.

“So, Jaytsy learned to dance today,” Mahrree began. “I have to confess, it didn’t look as bad as I imagined. I sort of started to think about it . . .”

Perrin sighed loudly. “Yes?”

She rolled onto her side to face him. “Would it really be so bad if we . . . I mean, you and I . . . um, danced?”

To her surprise he chuckled. “You sounded as nervous as a first-year private at his first dance.”

Mahrree punched his shoulder.

“But no, my darling wife, I guess dancing really isn’t that bad. It just strikes me as an odd development. Men and women who normally wouldn’t converse with each other more than twenty seconds suddenly holding hands and moving in time together for five minutes? What do you look at? What do you say in such intimate positions? An odd thing, really—”

She snuggled into him. “I don’t know. Some of those slower dances could be rather interesting,” she hinted.

He pulled her closer. “I agree. But there’s something I think you don’t understand about dances. If *we* dance together, we are then obligated to dance with others as well.”

She stiffened. “Really?”

“Oh yes. Any man that asks you, you must oblige him unless you are ill or exhausted, or it’s considered an insult to the Shin family name, which we simply can’t abide,” he said with a haughty sniff. “And consider—you may even be asked to dance by an Administrator or two.”

She recoiled as her husband chuckled again.

“And there’s something else,” he said more soberly. “I

“As if there are different kinds of people in the world.”

would be expected to ask other women to dance.”

Already Mahrree was gritting her teeth and clenching a fist at the idea. “Would a certain Versula Cush Thorne be there?”

Now Perrin went rigid, and Mahrree knew she *had* to find out more about her.

“Colonel Thorne is the commander of the garrison,” Perrin said in a dead tone. “He’s more socially and politically connected than even my parents. And since this is the first major event of the year, he’ll be there. And so will his wife,” he grumbled.

“Was she at the first one you attended, where you *did* dance? Your mother told me you did a few times.”

“I don’t remember,” he said hurriedly. “Mrs. Thorne was already married, and I was more interested in the dessert tables. Mother would know that. As for actually dancing, I think Mother’s getting a bit fanciful in her memory as she ages.”

“Well then, as hosts of the evening trying to assist your ailing father and your fanciful mother, I suppose it’s best that we both sit out dancing this year and tend to the party itself.”

“What an excellent idea,” he declared. “Funny I didn’t think of that myself, not dancing at all.”

Mahrree giggled, then said, “Perrin, did you know there’s a huge reserve of food at the garrison?”

“I do. That was part of the discussion at the garrison today. I want to take part of it back to Edge.”

“Yes!” Mahrree squealed, and kissed him happily. “That’s exactly what I was thinking.”

“But it’s not what the Administrators are thinking,” he warned her, and explained what happened.

She sighed, deflated. “But you’re right. Give too much, people stop taking care of themselves. Just like thinking. Give them all the answers, especially the wrong ones, then don’t allow them to think about possibilities or debate those answers, and people stop questioning, thinking, fixing, innovating—”

“I got it, I got it.” He kissed her to stop her rambling.

“You said you have a plan for compensating those who will want to be repaid for their supplies and help. How?”

He swallowed. “Mahrree, how much would you say is in our cellar.”

She swallowed back. “You mean, hidden behind the jugs?”

“Yes.”

She hesitated only a second to calculate it. “Much more than we need. Especially since we don’t want to buy a house in the Edge of Idumea Estates. You want it to supplement what the auctions bring in, don’t you?”

“If those wanting compensation see there’s only a certain amount to go around,” Perrin mused, “they’ll lower their wants to match the supply. But if they think there’s an inexhaustible amount from Idumea, they’ll become greedier than Peto when he’s missed midday meal. If they become too accustomed to taking from the Administrators, they’ll never do anything for themselves again. What kind of existence is that?”

“They’re nothing more than children themselves, then,” Mahrree said.

“So you’re all right with this? I mean, it’s half your silver.”

“No, it’s not. Not half my silver, nor half my marriage. It’s ours—all of it. There are no lines between what’s yours and what’s mine. I’m all yours, and you, Mr. Shin, are all mine.”

He chuckled quietly. “Have I told you lately how your mind is so much like mine?”

“You don’t have to. I already thought it.”

“I know what you’re thinking right now, Mrs. Shin: How do I get out of The Dinner?”

“Hmm. Very good! What’s the solution?”

“I’m sorry, my darling wife, I don’t have one. I suppose I’m only allowed one genius solution per day. I’ve discovered a way to help Edge, but I can’t help you.”

---

Two men sat in a darkened room of an unlit building.

Nicko Mal whistled under his breath. “I warned you about him, didn’t I?”

Dr. Brisack sighed. “That you did. I hate to admit it, but I always thought you were exaggerating the aggravating nature of the man. But today?”

Mal chuckled. “Do tell. I read the draft of the minutes Nelt took, and they appeared innocuous enough—”

“Someone needs to retrain that lieutenant!” Brisack declared. “He has very selective hearing. While he captured the spir-



“As if there are different kinds of people in the world.”

it of the meeting, he let escape the most incriminating moments. I saw Perrin chatting with him after the meeting, and Nelt told me he was only asking if he was coming to The Dinner. But I’m sure Perrin persuaded him to clean things up a bit. Our discussion was far, far messier, I assure you!”

“I *do* so enjoy seeing you humbled, my good Doctor,” Mal said. “So, do you think he’s right? About the villagers becoming too greedy and demanding too much without feeling loyal?”

Brisack shrugged. “I really don’t know. He compared them to spoiled children, but since neither you nor I ever had children, I don’t know if his comparison is valid.”

“Remind me again how you became Administrator of *Family Life*?”

Brisack scoffed. “Because no one else would take it. Because I do know a few things about families. This is merely another question for us to test.”

Mal shrugged diffidently. “So will you keep your end of the deal?”

“Of course. I don’t go back on my word. In fact, I’ll be sending a few assistants to make sure his survey is conducted according to my specifications.”

Mal clasped his hands in front of him. “Oh, good. What *kind* of assistants?”

“Haven’t decided,” Brisack said. “I don’t know any of our men well enough yet. We just barely regained contact, and I’m not sure that they can—”

“There are a few we’ve never lost touch with, my good doctor. We could use one or two.”

“Perhaps.” Brisack paused before saying, “How does Perrin come up with such ideas? It’s as if he sees the world sideways, somehow, from angles and perspectives no one else has ever considered. What makes a man function like that?”

Mal smiled. “It’s most fortuitous that we’ve started the experiments again, isn’t it? The trials and analysis of Perrin Shin are about to begin.”

“Yes. Yes, it is,” Brisack nodded. “And his wife.”

“Now, are we studying them to see how to encourage this kind of thinking, or how to destroy it?”

Brisack swallowed, knowing the correct answer but unwilling to state it. “There’s something that he said,” he mentioned,

dreading to utter it. "About the Creator."

Mal chuckled coldly. "Yes, I think Relf is a bit of a secret Writings Wretch himself. It's rare to find any of them left among the so-called intelligent, but I suppose there's one or two—"

"*It's what Perrin said,*" Brisack said more firmly. "He distinctly believes the Creator made all people equal."

Mal glared. "I told you *years ago* that Shin believes in a Creator. And you dismissed that *years ago*, and you were correct to do so, I reluctantly concede. The beliefs in the Creator are dying, along with their old rectors. There's only one congregation left in Idumea, and no one younger than sixty attends. You're outdated in your concern—"

"Yes, but there's real potential—"

Mal rolled his eyes. "Potential? The Creator is their . . . their manifestation of Nature. Since so few still believe, I hardly see how this so-called Creator that brings imaginary comfort is a threat to us. If he were real, he would have shown himself by now. He'd be head of the Administrators, instead of me!" Mal worked himself deeper into his large cushioned chair as if to plant himself there.

"But it could be a threat," Brisack said in a low voice. "The belief in a creator. Remember what Shin said about loyalty?"

Mal squinted, a splinter of his mocking demeanor falling away to see his companion so concerned. "Something about feeling loyalty to those who gave you something."

"The best way to secure loyalty is to feel a *sense of duty* to your benefactors." Brisack recited. "I memorized the words because they struck me so oddly. And now I know why. His loyalty isn't necessarily to us, Nicko; his sense of duty is to his Creator."

Mal scoffed, but only half-heartedly. "So what? If he believes in his imaginary friend—"

"Nicko, I've talked to boys who burned down barns because their 'imaginary friends' told them to," the doctor said levelly. "I've treated girls with knife slashes on their arms because their 'imaginary friends' told them they were worthless."

"Those are examples of children—"

"—proving that I *do* know something about family life! Thoughts that begin in childhood frequently continue into adulthood. Don't underestimate the power of what the mind believes. What if Perrin believes his Creator wants him to do something

“As if there are different kinds of people in the world.”

contrary to what we decree? If his sense of duty lies elsewhere?”

Mal scoffed again, out of habit. “Oh, *really*, Doctor. What would he possibly dare to do?” He chuckled in a manner that struck Doctor Brisack as unnatural and uncharacteristically worried.

“Right now? I fear nothing might be beyond the daring of Perrin Shin.”

## Chapter 14 ~ “The enlisted men are teaching the brassy a thing or two.”

The Shin family stepped out of the mansion’s coach in Pools and stared at the long building before them. Or rather, they stared at the long line of people waiting to get *into* that building.

Perrin let out a low whistle as the coach drove off to the livery stables nearby. “They said Gizzada was successful, but this?” He gestured feebly, and his family nodded in astonishment.

It wasn’t the first thing Mahrree marveled at that evening. After two dreadful days of Dinner preparation, Joriana surprised them with the suggestion that it was time for the family to be Seen. And the best place to be Seen was at Gizzada’s restaurant in Pools.

“Seen . . . doing what, eating?” Perrin had asked, confused. He was initially pleased with the idea of visiting his former staff sergeant’s place, until he saw just how excited his mother was about it.

“Gizzada’s is the talk of the whole city! And of Pools! And Orchards, and anywhere within thirty miles! Only the best and brightest can afford to go there.”

“Well, that excludes us,” Peto sounded disappointed. “One look at us, and they’ll—”

“Oh, no,” Joriana said firmly, “you’ll get in. You’ll dress up in that shirt I bought you today, young man. Jaytsy and your mother in their new best dresses, Perrin in his uniform, all of you in our coach—you’ll be Seen.”

“The enlisted men are teaching the brassy a thing or two.”

“I’m rather surprised,” Mahrree had said, “that Gizzada’s sandwiches are so popular. I mean yes, there’s nothing in the world quite like them, but—”

“Sandwiches? Gizzada doesn’t do *sandwiches*, Mahrree,” Joriana hooted. “He does quizeen. Rather like some of what your mother tries, but . . . bigger. You’ll see. It’s amazing! And here,” she slipped something into Perrin’s hand.

His eyes bulged. “A full gold slip?”

“It’s a bit pricey, but well worth it. Dinner’s on me. Go now. Enjoy!”

With shared looks of confusion, they went. An hour’s drive later they arrived on a busy road in Pools, and wondered if the same tubby man they knew in Edge years ago really was attached to such a place as this. This was nothing like the Inn at Edge, where Hycymum and another girl whipped up meals and desserts for travelers or villagers in the mood for something different.

First, the Inn at Edge didn’t have trees and flowers and vines all over the building, as if a controlled explosion of Nature had been aimed directly at it.

Nor did the Inn at Edge have tables and chairs *outside* the building where guests in silks and fine woolens and wraps of fur sat to wait for an opening inside. In fact, nothing in Edge had chairs and tables quite like these. Apparently some blacksmiths decided horse shoes weren’t interesting enough, and instead twisted iron into curious shapes that bordered on works of art that people then rudely sat upon or leaned against. Fires in large round pots were artfully placed around the area to warm those feeling the evening chill, and to illuminate the vegetation that adorned the simple yet grand stone and planked structure.

Above the wide doorway was a painted board with the word *Gizzada’s* wrought in more black twisted iron, and illuminated by black torches on either side. Standing before the door was a rather burly man dressed in a crisp white tunic and black trousers. He stood almost as if at attention, and stiffly opened the door as guests went in and out. He opened it now for an older man also similarly dressed who held a small board and announced in a sufficiently bored tone, “Lansing, party of four. James, party of two.”

Six people immediately rose and strode eagerly but elegantly to the opened doors, where a third man led them away.

Peto scowled. "Eating with any of them would not be a party, I'm sure."

"This is crazy," Perrin murmured, and headed for the still-open door, his family behind him. "Excuse me," he said to the older man, "Exactly how long a wait for dinner?"

Several people in earshot sniggered at the Shins, and someone said derisively, "Locals."

Another voice near a fire said, "Careful—brass buttons," and Mahrree glanced over to see several people taking in her husband's jacket. Suddenly, he and his "party" were worthy to stand among them. The whisper of "brass buttons" filtered down none-too-subtly among the hungry hopefuls, while Perrin's ears went red.

"Oh, brother," Jaytsy murmured in disgust.

"You said it, sister," Peto murmured back.

Mahrree pursed her lips to keep from smiling, but Perrin was still waiting for an answer.

The man at the door looked him up and down. "Colonel, is it? You look vaguely familiar. You're not the younger Shin, are you?"

Perrin sighed loudly as another murmur of "*Could be the younger Shin,*" traveled along the fancy-dressed waiting.

"Does it matter?" Perrin asked.

"It does if you want to eat in an hour, or in three," the man shrugged.

"An hour?" Peto wailed softly. Mahrree elbowed him.

Perrin glanced at the line of Idumea's elite and saw all of them watching him back. "Look," he said quietly to the man at the door, "I'm an old friend of Gizzada's, and we only wanted to say hi—"

"*Mr. Sheff* Gizzada has many friends," the older man intoned, and he held out his hand.

Perrin frowned at it. "Something wrong with your hand—Oh, wait. Now I remember." He fumbled around in his trousers' pocket.

"Sheff?" Peto murmured to Jaytsy. "That's his first name? I thought it was Zadda."

"Seriously?" Jaytsy whispered back. "You think his parents named him Zadda Gizzada? Zadda was the name *we* gave him when we were little. You've got to be the dumbest—Ow!"

“The enlisted men are teaching the brassy a thing or two.”

Mahrree’s boot heel came down on her daughter’s toes as Perrin fished out a slip of silver and dropped it into the man’s hand.

“Wait, you have to *bribe* people to—Ow!” Peto’s question was abruptly stopped, again by Mahrree’s boot, which was getting quite the workout on her children’s feet.

The man at the door looked down at the silver on his palm. “Not *much* of a friend of Mr. Sheff’s, I see.”

Perrin’s mouth dropped open and Mahrree was about to protest when a booming voice from behind the man surprised them all.

“My Little Ones! Are not so little! I heard you came to Idumea, but I can’t believe you’re here!”

Through the door burst an enormously round man the color of rich brown soil, with flushed dark red cheeks and a massive grin. His arms were held out wide as he plowed unceremoniously over his employees stationed at the door.

“It’s the Shins!” Gizzada bellowed, and he caught Perrin and Mahrree in a huge hug. “And that just can NOT be my little Jaytsy and Peto!”

Perrin and Mahrree would have laughed if Gizzada hadn’t been squeezing the breath out of them. But Jaytsy and Peto howled at the former soldier who always had a treat, or four or five, in his pocket for the commander’s children.

“Zadda!” they cried as he finally released a winded and chuckling Perrin and Mahrree, and embraced both children next.

Mahrree couldn’t help but gaze down the line of waiting wealthy. Each fancy-dressed man and woman wore the look of stunned envy and, for the first time since she came to the city, she felt as if she belonged there.

“Oh, my,” Gizzada chuckled as he finally let the children go. He eyed Jaytsy and glanced nervously at Perrin. “I’m sorry—I probably shouldn’t have done that, seeing as how you’re such a . . . my goodness, such a young *woman*.” He shook his head in amazement at Jaytsy.

Mahrree cleared her throat and gave a look to her husband. Even his former staff sergeant could see what their daughter had become, so should Perrin.

“And Peto! Well, I guess you’ll get there too, son,” Gizzada slapped his skinny back. “But Colonel Shin! I heard about that

promotion! And Mrs. Shin—so glad you're here!" His grin was dazzling. "Come in! Come in!"

To the astonishment of everyone else standing in line—and the two employees at the door—Gizzada ushered in the Shin family ahead of everyone else.

Except for Peto, who turned to the startled men. "My father *told* you we were friends of Gizzada. Next time, you should probably listen. He's not wearing that sword just for show, you know."

"Peto!" Perrin barked, but the damage was done, the men were pale, and Peto snickered in triumph as he followed his family and Gizzada into the restaurant.

"Gizzada, I can't believe what you've created here!" Mahrree gasped in astonishment at what now redefined "fancy" in her mind. Tables were covered in linen cloths, and the plates were made of white fired clay she later learned was called porcelain. Even the forks, knives, and spoons were hammered with elaborate designs on the handles. Silk cloths with intricately woven designs covered the walls, and set in tall arrangements on each table were more flowers and vines which, Mahrree noticed later, were also bafflingly made of silk. Candles in fantastically detailed holders illuminated the tables, each occupied by more wearers of fine wool and dead furs, chatting happily and eating daintily. Somewhere a few people were playing flutes and guitars as accompaniment, which Mahrree thought the oddest thing to listen to while one was trying to eat and talk. Weaving in and out of the tables were men in pristine white tunics and black trousers carrying trays of food so carefully laid out that each was a miniature work of art that would last only a moment before it was consumed.

"Truly astounding, Staff Sergeant," Perrin said as he eyed the water fountain bubbling in the middle of the restaurant. "I'm completely overwhelmed."

Gizzada smiled and cleared his throat. "But that's not what you *really* think, Colonel." Gizzada cocked his head toward a door across the crowded room. "Follow me."

Through the tables they wove, people frequently catching Gizzada's arm to compliment "Sheff!" on one thing or another, and cheerfully he took their thanks but picked up his pace. He opened a finely carved door and the Shins filed into a private



“The enlisted men are teaching the brassy a thing or two.”

room with a long table, vases of fresh blossoms, and forks that looked to be made of gold. Gizzada closed the door behind them.

“Private party of senior officers will be here soon,” he gestured lazily at the table, “but we have a few minutes until they come in. So, will the High General recover?” he asked Perrin.

“Seems he will, even if he couldn’t finish that fantastic sandwich you sent over earlier today. That’s what got us all hungry.”

Gizzada grinned. “I was hoping he’d enjoy that.”

“So you still know how to make them?” Peto asked. “Because what I saw out there—Gizzada, on those plates was barely enough to feed a rabbit.”

“Peto!” Mahrree snapped at his rudeness.

“No, he’s right,” Gizzada nodded. “That food’s ridiculous. Tiny portions in silly presentations—that’s what the elite of Idumea like, Peto, as ridiculous as it is. But,” and he leaned in closer, “feeding them allows me to feed others, and properly.”

“What do you mean?” Peto said.

“Tell me what you want, and I’ll get it.” He turned to Perrin and Mahrree. “Do you want what Idumeans call high culture, or do you want something that will put some muscle on that skinny boy?”

“Muscle!” Perrin declared. “Please!”

Gizzada put a finger to his lips and said, “Then follow me to the best kept secret in Pools and Idumea.” He opened the door and the Shins followed him out of the room and toward the kitchens.

And that was another shock, to pass so many stoves and ovens and boiling pots and open flames and work tables and men and women frequently shouting “Sheff!” and rushing to set up plates and almost crashing into the four strangers that nearly tripped in their hurry to follow “Sheff!” to another door which . . .  
. . . ended in a small storage room.

“Very secretive,” Peto said. “I can see why you don’t want anyone knowing where you store the potatoes.”

Gizzada chuckled and said, “No, my still Little One—” he grinned as Peto scowled at the earned insult, “—*this* is the secret.” He cracked open another door that, a moment before looked like a planked wall. “Take a peek, Colonel, and tell me if this is more to your liking.”

Perrin peered in. “Now that’s more like it!”

Mahrree peeked under his arm to see a much different view. Instead of fancy cloth and wrought iron chairs, there were long wooden tables with log benches. Instead of fabric draping the walls, there were high clear windows that let in the fading sunlight. Instead of a water fountain in the middle room, there was a large fire pit with benches all around where people could chat and warm themselves.

Mahrree chuckled.

Counters on two sides of the room had tall stools crowded along them, and a board on the wall listed the simple menu: Meat of the Day, Dessert of the Day, Gizzada sandwich, small or large. The prices were also quite reasonable: a small sandwich was only a quarter slip of silver, and the large was half a slip.

And, just like the restaurant in the front, this place was packed with customers. But none of them were dressed in anything finer than layers of worn cotton, patched woolens, or army jackets. In fact, half of the room seemed to wear the uniform, and the loudness of their laughter also signaled to Mahrree these weren't officers, but enlisted men temporarily freed from the hovering of their superiors.

"Uh, they can be a bit rough," Gizzada said hesitantly as he closed the door again. "Especially with a little ale in them," he muttered.

"What's ale?" Perrin asked.

Gizzada waved that away. "Something I started brewing up last year. Nothing you'd like. But I'll have a word with Margo before I take you in there. She'll keep them proper. Well, Edge-level proper, if you know what I mean."

Mahrree winked. "I teach teenage boys, Gizzada, and the children are in full school. I think we can handle them."

Gizzada and Perrin shared a knowing look.

"Cute, isn't it," Perrin said to his former staff sergeant, "how she thinks she knows enlisted men?"

"Come to think of it, I'll threaten the men myself," Gizzada patted Perrin on the shoulder. "But first—we have a slight problem, with this." He fingered a brass button and raised his dark eyebrows. "You see, I have a dress code, and brass buttons belong in the front, not here in the back. Makes the men nervous, you know. Not that any brass has ever tried to come back here before, but I do have standards to maintain."

“The enlisted men are teaching the brassy a thing or two.”

The Shins chuckled. “Understood,” Perrin said. “The last thing I want to do is cause you to lose any patrons. What do you want me to do about this ugly thing?”

“Take it off,” Gizzada said easily.

“Eat without my jacket?”

“Eat without messing it up, yes. I remember you losing control of my large sandwiches, sir. Spilling it all over that jacket? Tsk-tsk. What would your mother say?”

The Shins laughed, and Perrin was already halfway to undressing.

“Don’t worry,” Gizzada said, “we have lots of army men remove the jacket here. You won’t be the first or only white undershirt in the room. Gives men a sense of release. No jacket, no ranking. Hope that doesn’t offend you—”

“Not one bit,” Perrin assured him.

“If only I had a white fur coat stitched with butterflies to lend you.” Gizzada slipped out the door into the secret back room. A chorus of “Sarge!” came through the door as his guests greeted their favorite ex-soldier.

“How many names does the man have?” Peto wondered.

“I feel like we’re doing something naughty,” Jaytsy giggled. “Sneaking into the back.”

Mahrree nodded. “I know. What would your grandparents think? We’ll be Seen, but in the wrong half of the restaurant.”

From behind the closed door they heard a deep woman’s voice holler, “All right, now—Mr. Gizzada has friends from the north here. Sharpen up, you—yes, you lot over there, now. Women and children coming in. Oy! I said, sharpen up! Women and children! No more of that mouth or I’ll tell your wife the truth of why you were late last week.”

Gizzada slipped back in, a little embarrassed. “I guess Margo’s got things in hand after all. If you’d like to follow me, sir?”

“Only if you call me Perrin. You’re not my soldier anymore.”

Gizzada winked. “And only if you all call me Zadda. I rather missed hearing that.”

“Give me your jacket,” Mahrree whispered to her husband. She rolled it up so that it was merely a blue bundle tucked under her arm, and she followed the rest of her family into the back room.

The multiple conversations—far louder and more raucous than anything in the front end—paused to evaluate the newcomers, then resumed noisily as Gizzada gestured to a woman large and beefy enough that she could have been Perrin’s sister.

“Margo will take your order and see to it that everything remains . . . fine. Now, I have to attend to some business up front, but I’ll be back later to check on you. And Peto—I’m expecting you to order a large sandwich, and I also expect you to finish it before your father.”

Peto beamed. “You’ve got it, Zadda!”

Gizzada turned to leave, but stopped and smiled warmly at the family. “So good to see you all again! Margo, I’ll be making their orders myself.” And with that, he hustled out the door.

“Well,” Margo said in a shockingly deep voice, “what have we here?”

Mahrree was about to explain who they were when she realized the brutish woman wasn’t looking at her, or even her children, but directly at her husband. Or rather, her husband’s muscled and defined torso, which stretched the white undershirt to its limits.

Mahrree made a mental note to see if any shops in Idumea made baggier undershirts.

“Some friends looking to eat, eh?” Margo said as she eyed the colonel. “Looks like you’ve done quite a bit of eating already, my dear man—”

Peto and Jaytsy chortled loudly behind their hands, while Mahrree slowly began to fume. It wasn’t the enlisted men and their inappropriateness they needed to worry about; it was Margo.

Perrin cleared his throat loudly, and the woman looked up into his eyes. She released a little whimper, and Mahrree wasn’t sure if she was about to swoon or challenge him to an arm wrestle.

“Yes, thank you,” Perrin said loudly, and put his arm around Mahrree. “*My wife*, children and I would each like a Gizzada sandwich. Two small, two large. If it’s not too much trouble.”

Margo’s eyes traveled down to Mahrree, who put on a big smile and fluttered her eyelashes, hoping Margo would realize that Perrin preferred petite women whose meaty biceps didn’t rival his.

“The enlisted men are teaching the brassy a thing or two.”

Margo’s upper lip curled into a subtle snarl, and she snapped out of whatever daydream she’d fallen into. “Two large and two small. Coming up. Find yourself a seat anywhere.” She waved vaguely, and at the door that lead to the kitchen she hollered, “Two large, two small—Gizzada special.” She turned back to the family. “Means he makes it. Mead? Ale?”

“Water, please,” Perrin said amiably. “Pools has the greatest water in the world, after all.”

“To make ale with,” Margo mumbled as she headed to one of the counters to retrieve their drinks.

Mahrree gestured to a table with free space at the end. “How about there?” she suggested. And, without any assistance from any men in black and white outfits, the family managed to sit down all by themselves, Perrin and Peto on one side of the well-worn wood table, Mahrree and Jaytsy across from them

Laughter from behind Perrin erupted so loudly that Peto wiggled his ears. “Yow! The joke wasn’t even funny. All I heard was, ‘And then she said, That’s not a melon.’ I don’t get it.”

But Perrin was rubbing his forehead vigorously and his ears were bright red. Mahrree was quite sure that, without even knowing the first part of the story, he *did* get it by the end.

He leaned back, cleared his throat loudly, and said to the men behind him, “Women and children, or do I need to get Margo over here to remind you?”

“Sorry, friend,” a man called over to him.

Without turning around, Perrin raised his hand in a conciliatory manner. “Thank you.” To his family he opened his mouth, looked at his daughter and son, then shut it again. Eventually he said, “Just don’t listen too closely. They’ll forget again in about five minutes that we’re here, and, well, while it *sounds* like they’re talking about vegetables and fruit . . . they really aren’t.”

Mahrree suppressed an uncomfortable smile and nodded, but Jaytsy said, “So what are they really talking about, then?”

Now it was Mahrree’s turn to rub her head while her husband stared worriedly at his daughter. “You’ve heard Riplak and Kindiri talking about . . . sweet rolls, right?” Perrin ventured cautiously.

Jaytsy blinked in innocence and nodded. So did Peto.

Perrin swallowed hard and looked at his wife.

Mahrree smiled at him. “Go on. You’re doing just fine.” Then, because she so enjoyed his extreme discomfort, she added, “So they’re not really talking about sweet rolls either?”

Perrin sighed and turned back to his teenagers. “When Riplak says ‘sweet roll,’ and does that thing with his eyebrows, he’s actually . . .”

His children looked at him earnestly, sitting at the edge of their benches.

Mahrree shook her head at her husband and snorted.

“You could offer some assistance here,” he murmured at her.

“Sorry,” she batted her eyelashes. “I simply don’t know that much about soldiers and such, remember?”

Perrin glared at her, then turned back to the questioning faces of his teenagers. “Let’s just say the men talk about food when they’re *hungry*.”

Peto and Jaytsy looked at each other dubiously.

Jaytsy turned back to Perrin. “Uh-huh. I *am* nearly fifteen, Father. I know that they’re talking about other things.” But something in her expression suggested that she wasn’t entirely sure what those other things were yet, either.

Peto merely shrugged. “Yeah, but I don’t find any of that interesting.”

Perrin rubbed his face with both hands, not daring to ask exactly what Peto thought “that” was. “Our food should be here by now, shouldn’t it?” He looked at the door anxiously, while Mahrree giggled. She’d have another little talk with Jaytsy later, but Peto—he was all Perrin’s to deal with.

Another door, connecting to the alley behind the building, banged open and several men in blue jackets poured in. Mahrree hadn’t noticed the door before, but it seemed to be the main access to the back restaurant. She wondered if Gizzada could even fit through the narrow opening, which probably looked like nothing interesting from the outside, and sure not to draw the attention of anyone in an officer’s uniform.

“Margo!” one of the men called. “Brought some brassies for some scrubbed up dinner, but they’ll be waiting for hours. The boys here and I are starving, so we’ll want it all tonight. Meat of the day first, love.”

“The enlisted men are teaching the brassy a thing or two.”

As the six men filed happily in, and good-naturedly shoved some acquaintances further down the table behind Perrin to make room for themselves, Peto leaned over to his father.

“Bunch of brassies? Are they talking about—”

“Officers,” Perrin said quietly to his family. “Senior officers, to be specific. Brass buttons. That’s why mine are hidden under the table by your mother.”

Jaytsy leaned forward. “They don’t seem to be too happy about ‘brassies’.”

Perrin bobbed his head back and forth. “They’re not. Some of the officers treat the enlisted men more like servants than soldiers. These sergeants—they’re sergeants, right?”

Mahrree glanced at their insignias and nodded. “Three are sergeants,” she whispered back, “Two of them staff, another a master, then two corporals, and a private.”

“But it’s the sergeants making the most noise. That’s because they’ve been in the army long enough to develop an opinion, and to earn the right to express it,” Perrin told them quietly. Then he smiled. “My father would love this place. He always suspected the enlisted men gathered to gossip about the officers, but he never knew where or what they said. I almost feel like a spy. I bet Gizzada hears all kinds of things back here.”

The kitchen door opened and in came a young woman with four enormous sandwiches, two twice as big as the others. “Order for . . .” Her face screwed up in confusion. “Be Discreet—”

Perrin immediately stood up. “That’s for us,” he said, taking the platter of food before she could announce the name.

Her eyes grew big as she stared at the colonel, but a narrowing of his eyes told her that she needn’t say anything else. She nodded before she hurried back to the kitchen.

Mahrree exhaled as Perrin sat. “That was close. She nearly exposed our spy ring.”

“What’s wrong with people knowing our name?” Jaytsy asked as she nervously eyed the massive sandwich consisting of three kinds of breads, four kinds of meats, two kinds of cheeses, two kinds of sauces, and every vegetable that can be sliced thinly and stacked between everything else. “And does this look bigger than it used to?”

“First, the name of Shin is associated primarily with one person—my father,” Perrin said softly, “so we really don’t need

that kind of attention. Second, oh yes—this is even bigger than I remember. Peto, if you can finish that, I'll buy you a horse with my pay increase."

"Very funny, Father," Peto sneered. "The last thing I want is a horse, and you know it. But maybe he's added horse meat to this."

Mahrree just shook her head at what sat in front of her, daring her to even find a way to bite it. "I don't even know where to start." She smashed it experimentally, flattening it to be narrow enough to fit into her mouth. "Ah, but I've missed Gizzada!"

For the next ten minutes the Shin family did nothing but chew and sigh in pure satisfaction, until the weight of the food in their bellies, and the amount of what still remained on their plates, caused Mahrree and Jaytsy to admit defeat and take a rest.

Perrin and Peto, however, watched each other's bites to time who could down their food the fastest, but Mahrree fretted privately that the winner of the contest would be which male didn't heave it all up later again.

The table of enlisted men behind Perrin had also gone quiet as they dove into some kind of meat concoction with gravy and curls of something on top, and only as they started sucking on the bones did they began to talk loudly about brassies again.

"I'll tell you," a staff sergeant began to his audience of still chewing men, "get the wrong kind of brassy in charge, and nothing gets done unless the sergeants step up and take over."

"Hear, hear!" another sergeant garbled with a mouthful. Two more men pounded the table in agreement.

"Take the brassy I brung here tonight. Colonel Snyder just sits in his office giving commands then walks around with his hands behind his back as if he owns the place, while the rest of us run around doing the training, the orders, the everything! I'm telling you, brassies wouldn't last a minute without all of us making them look good."

Mahrree looked over to Perrin to gauge his response. He was licking his fingers as some sauce dribbled out of his sandwich, and Mahrree realized, by the drippings on his white shirt, that Gizzada's recommendation for him to remove his jacket was most timely. Perrin caught her eye and winked at her.

She raised her eyebrows toward the conversation behind him, and he merely shrugged in agreement.



“The enlisted men are teaching the brassy a thing or two.”

“Snyd,” he mouthed and sneered. Not one of his favorite brassies, either.

Mahrree smiled.

“Still, he’s better than my brassy,” another sergeant spoke up. He downed his mug of mead, wiped his mouth on his sleeve, and belched loudly. “Beggin’ your pardon, ma’am,” he nodded toward Mahrree, who nodded politely back. “But my brassy,” said the sergeant during another belch he didn’t seem to notice leaking out, “he’s that Thorne, and I’m telling you—he’s a mean one.”

Mahrree again watched Perrin, who just subtly nodded and took another big bite, from which escaped a slice of something that landed smartly on his lap.

Several of the men grumbled in agreement about Thorne this and Thorne that.

“Gotta boy, too. Soon to be graduating. Pity the commander who gets stuck with that brat.”

“Hey, every commander deserves that brat.”

A few more men seconded the declaration, and Perrin chuckled quietly as he licked his fingers again. So he wasn’t the only one not overly impressed with Lieutenant Thorne.

“At least Thorne promotes people,” the first staff sergeant complained. “I’ve been trying to get Snyd’s attention for years, but he doesn’t see anything past his own buttons.”

Mahrree wondered how Perrin would react to the accusation of a commander not promoting his men.

To her surprise, Perrin picked up a cloth and wiped off his fingers. He sent a wink to Mahrree, then leaned back to the table behind him. Without turning around, he addressed the sergeant.

“Got an idea for you,” Perrin said. “I worked with Snyd some years back. He likes to hear about people suffering.”

The sergeant scowled at the back of Perrin’s head. “That sounds about right, but how do I make that work for me?”

Perrin turned part way to see the man. “Have to get it back to the colonel that men are complaining about you. That maybe you’re working them too hard, or something. Private,” Perrin gestured with his sandwich at a young man seated next to the staff sergeant, “you work under that man?”

The private nodded. “Staff Sergeant’s the best, sir!” he barked loyally.

“Good dog,” Perrin said, “but that’s not what Snyder needs to hear. You’re acting as footman tonight for his carriage, right?”

The private nodded eagerly. Privates weren’t allowed to anything more interesting than that, anyway.

“When you’re helping Snyder out of the carriage, let something slip about the sergeant’s treatment of you tonight. Say that he, I don’t know—made you scrub the mud off the wheels because you were disrespectful, or that he made you braid the horses’ mane, then had you take it all out again because he didn’t like the effect. But you’ve got to say it in the right way.” Perrin turned more fully to the table that sat in rapt attention to this unknown insider’s suggestions. “Sound like you’re whining, it’ll hurt you, but say it in genuinely pained admiration, Snyder will remember it.”

“Tell him what to say, friend,” another soldier encouraged.

Perrin put on a thoughtful expression. “Snyder, sir,” he said in a passable imitation of the young private that made him turn red and the other soldiers snicker, “thank you for assigning me to this duty tonight. Staff Sergeant—” Perrin pointed to the man for his name.

“Oblong.”

Perrin blinked at that before he continued, “Staff Sergeant Oblong was most instructive tonight on the merits of keeping one’s carriage wheels spotless, and the finer points of horses’ mane presentation.”

Half the men were already laughing, while the other half shushed them to hear the rest.

“Sir, while I *so* appreciate this opportunity, may I instead respectfully request some other kind of duty in the future, such as . . . cleaning out the latrines?” Perrin finished in an innocent smile which made all of the men burst out laughing.

“That just might work!” Oblong said. “Snyder would always assign the private to me as punishment—”

The private grinned, because even eighteen-year-olds know that spending the evening eating was an unbeatable assignment.

“—and Snyder will think me a most slugging son of a sow, and give me a promotion!”

Perrin winced at the man’s rough language, but Mahrree just looked down at the table and shook her head slightly. He didn’t need to ruin the moment by reminding the men that women and children were present.

“The enlisted men are teaching the brassy a thing or two.”

“Glad to be of help,” Perrin said, and turned back to the second half of his sandwich.

“When did you work for Snyder?” a soldier asked him.

Without turning around, Perrin waved his hand. “About seven or eight years ago. When he was first installed as commander at Pools.”

Mahrree finished the rest of it in her head. *And I trained him in how to be a commander, but I promise I didn’t teach him how to be a narrow-sighted old goat.*

“Where are you serving now?” another man asked.

Mahrree cleared her throat. “I’m sorry, but I don’t think you realize my husband’s in the middle of a very important contest. You see, our son thinks he can finish his Large Gizzada before his father, and unfortunately he seems to be winning at the moment.”

The soldiers nodded and grinned.

“Gotta respect a man who brings his son here for a meal,” Oblong said. “Teach the boy what real eating is.”

Mahrree smiled sweetly at Oblong and kicked Jaytsy under the table, who was trying to control her giggling.

The discussion at the other table turned back to their brassies. “So Snyder and Thorne are here eating together?” asked the private.

“Do so every moon or so,” a master sergeant said. “Suspect they’re feeling each other out. Both are eying the mansion of the High General. He retires in two years, you know. Good thing he survived that tremor, eh? But soon some younger man’s gotta take the spot. Cush is just too old.”

Mahrree noticed Perrin had stopped chewing his sandwich, and had frozen in position.

“Nah, they might put Cush in for a time. But I think Thorne will get it in the end.”

Perrin’s eyes shifted to Mahrree, and she noticed a level of alarm in them. Naturally, *he* didn’t want the position, but maybe this was the first time it occurred to him that someone else—someone he thought less worthy—would take it instead.

“I don’t know,” mused another sergeant. “While Thorne’s the commander of the garrison, Snyder’s been commanding his own fort for longer. I think that might edge him out as High General.”

Perrin’s jaw clenched, and Mahrree mouthed to him, *It has to be someone.*

“There are others,” another man offered. “What about that younger Shin? Isn’t he somewhere up in the north?”

At that, even Peto paused his non-stop gulping and listened to the talk behind him.

“Gizzada even worked with that Shin,” another man reminded them. “Said he was the most decent officer he’s ever known. Said he did the dangerous work in the forest, wouldn’t let anyone else do it.”

Perrin stared at his sandwich, but a corner of his mouth went up.

“Yeah, but he’s been quiet for a while. Probably turned into one of those daft people who actually likes the mountains,” another man said.

Peto sneered and started to turn around to the table, until Perrin elbowed him.

“He’s only a lieutenant colonel, anyway,” pointed out another voice.

“No, he’s not. Not anymore,” said one of Thorne’s men. “They just promoted him to colonel. Thorne wasn’t too happy about that.”

“I heard that too. I also heard he finally left the mountains and came down to see his father when he heard he’d been buried.”

“It’s about time. Shin never comes to Idumea. How are you supposed to be a commander for the army if you never come back to the army’s headquarters? Check in with your father? I bet he’s gone a bit local.”

Mahrree squinted at her husband, looking for the meaning of that.

Perrin just shook his head slightly.

“No, no—Gizzada said he wasn’t a stupid northerner at all.”

Now Mahrree pursed her lips and thought of a variety of ways to disprove the phrase ‘a bit local.’

“Best officer he knew,” a soldier continued. “Shin just liked the small village.”

“But he’s down here now, right?”

“Yeah, and he even brought his wife and children—a son and a daughter, I think . . . *Oh, slag.*”

“What is it?”

“Oh, slagging slag . . . shut up!”

“What? Why?”

“The enlisted men are teaching the brassy a thing or two.”

“Just shut up! SHUT UP!”

None of the Shins had moved a muscle in the last minute, too engrossed in the conversation behind them that now fell silent.

Except for Peto who whispered, “Women and children, women and children . . . that Margo’s not doing her job. I distinctly heard the ‘s’ words—”

“You mean,” Perrin hissed at him, “*shut up?*”

Mahrree dared to take her eyes off her husband and look instead at the soldiers behind him.

Every last one of them was staring at the back of his head, and the color was draining out of their faces.

“Slagging son of a sow . . .” murmured another man.

All around them conversations and laughter continued, except at the table full of enlisted men.

Perrin set his sandwich down and caught his wife’s gaze. He mouthed to her, *Don’t move.*

Mahrree noticed some movement behind him, and tried to subtly redirect his gaze, but he just studied her as if working out what do to next.

“Uh, Father—” Jaytsy started, and Perrin shifted his gaze to her. He widened his eyes in warning.

“But, Father—”

“Jayts!” he snarled. “Just don’t say—”

He noticed she was no longer looking at him, but at something above him. Slowly his eyes traveled up to see five men standing at the end of the table, each at stiff attention with his hand in salute.

Perrin puffed out his cheeks and released his breath. He craned his neck to look behind him and saw another dozen men in anxious formation.

“Colonel Shin!” announced Staff Sergeant Oblong. “What an honor it is to have you in our presence!”

“And sorry for the reference about the slagging son of a sow,” another soldier behind him muttered urgently. “Not intended at you, sir.”

“Oh, for crying out loud,” Perrin mumbled. He reluctantly got to his feet, his hands in the air as a kind of surrender. “I’m not about to salute you back, you know, because I was told that when the jacket came off, so did the ranking. My jacket’s currently balled up and I’m here as a hungry man looking for a meal better

than what those ridiculous brassies are waiting for out there, so if you'd all just take your seats again, I'd really appreciate it. And now I'm behind in this eating contest with my son, so unless you stop all this saluting nonsense, I may get a bit annoyed."

*Turn on the charm*, Mahrree tried to send him the message. Use that smile—the good one, not the scary one. Come on, you remember how—ah, very good. Almost convincing.

Each of the enlisted men slowly put their hands down, watching each other to make sure they did it at roughly the same time.

"And yes," Perrin said, trying for a broader grin, "I *am* completely daft, stupid, whatever, because I love the mountains, and hate everything about Idumea . . . except for this sandwich which, I have to admit, is starting to get the better of me." He pounded his chest with his fist as if to dislodge something. "Exactly where do you put it all?"

The soldiers grinned and visibly relaxed, some even sitting back down.

"Please, sir," Sergeant Oblong said, still a bit shaky, "we didn't mean any disrespect, we just—"

"Spoke the truth," Perrin said, patting him on the shoulder. "I didn't hear a word that I didn't agree with. And if you can't speak freely here, where can you speak? I'm only sorry I made any of you uncomfortable. That wasn't my intention. My intention was to eat a great meal. And, incidentally, my best friend is also my master sergeant."

Oblong smiled. "Gizzada was right about you."

"And I'm right about Snyder," Perrin said to deflect the compliment. "You and the private should practice what he'll say so that you both give the same story."

"Sir, I hope this isn't too forward, but can I buy you a mug of ale?"

Perrin frowned. "I'm not sure that's entirely appropriate, but here's an idea; how about I buy everyone at your table a round, provided you answer me one simple question."

Oblong was already grinning and several of his friends were nudging each other about the round of ale coming from a brassy. "We'd be honored, sir! What's the question?"

"What's ale?"

“The enlisted men are teaching the brassy a thing or two.”

Oblong grinned and went for the biggest show of bravery he could. “This brassy *is* stupid! Never heard of ale? I think we need to give him a bit of an enlisted man education.”

A while later Gizzada returned to the back room and stared at the scene before him.

Mahrree and the children, occasionally chortling, remained at the table where they were afforded an excellent view of Perrin sitting near the fire pit surrounded by enlisted men singing.

Well, Perrin wasn't singing, Mahrree chuckled to herself. That wasn't his style. But he *was* swaying with the men on either side of him, because their momentum didn't offer him any other alternative. In his hand was a large mug, the contents of which he kept evaluating with each experimental sip. Jaytsy and Peto laughed every time he scowled at the drink.

Gizzada hurried over to them. “What in the world's going on here?”

Peto sniffed. “The enlisted men are teaching the brassy a thing or two.”

“How'd they find out he's a brass—I mean, how'd they find out he's an officer?”

“Don't worry, Zadda,” Mahrree patted his arm. “It just kind of happened. No harm done.”

“We'll see about that,” said Gizzada with some concern. “What's he drinking?”

“Your latest creation,” Mahrree said. “Ale?”

Gizzada grimaced. He handed a sheet of parchment to Mahrree and said, “That's for your mother. I'll be right back.” As the large man tried to wriggle his way through the press of enlisted men to reach the lone brassy on the other side of the fire pit, Mahrree perused the page in her hands.

“*That's* the menu?” Jaytsy said, sufficiently astonished.

“Look at those prices. Is that really a quarter slip of *gold*? That's ten full slips of silver!” Peto whispered in awe. “For ‘Ess Kar Goe in Gar-Leek Gizzada.’ What is that?”

“I have no idea,” Mahrree said. “But won't your Grandmother Peto love to figure that out?”

Over at the fire pit, Gizzada was pulling Perrin out of the crush of men who protested that Sarge was taking away their new buddy.

“Up, up—this brassy’s got a reputation to maintain, boys. And several of you are driving home colonels in about an hour,” Gizzada reminded them. “How many rounds have you had?” He glared at Margo who shrugged lazily.

“Maybe two. Shin was buying,” and she held up the full gold slip which Mahrree knew could have paid for everyone’s meal that night in the back restaurant. “Said I could keep what’s left.”

“No more!” Gizzada said firmly to the woman, who merely went back to spitting in a mug and wiping it clean.

Mahrree bit her lip as her husband walked back, a little wobbly.

He stared into his mug. “Zadda, I think something’s wrong with this. It just doesn’t . . . taste like barley.” Perrin sat at the table and plopped the mug in front of Peto, who sniffed it. “As if you were trying to make bread, messed up the amount of ingredients, forgot about it for a while—”

Gizzada shrugged. “Well, yes, not too far off there, actually. Gets a bit busy when we’re experimenting.”

“—until it developed this smell and *still* you decided to swallow it down?”

Gizzada bobbed his head back and forth. “You’d be amazed by what I’ve decided to swallow down. It’s how I know what’s edible and . . . what needs a bit more tweaking.”

“And you think *this* doesn’t need more tweaking?”

“The enlisted men seem to enjoy it,” Gizzada chuckled at Perrin’s furrowed eyebrows.

Peto peered into the mug and scowled. “Looks and smells more like something you should leak out rather than drink in.” He gestured to his father’s drooling mouth, which he was wiping awkwardly with his arm.

“It’s a rather acquired taste,” Gizzada admitted, sliding the mug out of Peto’s reach.

“Zadda, what exactly is ale?” Mahrree asked.

He looked into the mug. “How much did he have?”

“That was his only one.”

Gizzada’s shoulders relaxed. “Only half gone. Good. Ale’s bit like mead—”

“Mead!” Perrin exclaimed. “I don’t drink mead!”



“The enlisted men are teaching the brassy a thing or two.”

“—but stronger. I know, sir; you don’t drink. That’s why I’ve rescued you. And also why such a small amount has had a rather pronounced effect on you,” Gizzada noted, as if evaluating a questionable dish and second-guessing the addition of the pig’s snout.

“Oh, dear,” Mahrree stifled a giggle. “For how long will it affect him?”

“He’ll be fine by morning. Bit of a headache, perhaps, but . . . I’m so sorry. I had no idea things would . . .” He gestured to the fire pit where Oblong was now singing a weepy solo comparing his long-lost girlfriend to a variety of produce items. “Maybe I let this batch brew just a tad too long. Oblong!” he shouted. “Women and children!”

Peto turned to his sister. “All right—I give up. What do turnips have to do with women?”

She shrugged back. “Still trying to figure out how an ear of corn is like his love.”

“So!” Mahrree said loudly over the crooning of Oblong, and held up the menu. “For my mother?”

Gizzada beamed, while Perrin placed his forehead carefully on the table and moaned quietly about too much cheese.

“She *is* well, right?” Gizzada asked as he sat next to Mahrree.

“Fine, fine—not even much damage to her home.”

Gizzada nodded in relief. “Always the lovely lady. Well, she and I had many discussions about food at the Inn, and one day we speculated that if you made just the right kind of sauce, and came up with an elaborate enough name, you could convince people eat just about anything.”

“Like gar-leek ess-kar-go?” Jaytsy asked.

“Miss Jaytsy, at this moment I have two very fine colonel brassies dining on that right now, as well as three Administrators, and it’s nothing more than a garlic and leek sauce covering . . . snails!”

The Shins burst out laughing, except for Perrin who patted the back of his own head comfortingly as he drooled on the table.

“Tell Mrs. Peto we were right,” Gizzada grinned. “I want her to have the evidence. This here—” he pointed out another item written in a flowing handwriting, “nothing more than goose

livers. And this—fried frogs and onions. Right here—squirrels. And this item—simple river crawdads.”

“Those ugly things? Like big water roaches?” Jaytsy exclaimed. “People eat them?”

“The elite of Idumea,” Gizzada clarified, “who don’t know these litter the rivers and can be scooped up by ten-year-olds and brought to me by the bucketful for a generous two full slips of silver, then boiled and sauced and plated in ten minutes—the elite think they’re enjoying a delicacy no one else in the world can afford. So they happily pay five times more for one ‘lobster bisk’ than I pay for a whole bucket of them.”

“So that’s how you do all of this,” Perrin mumbled into the table. “Feed all of these people giant sandwiches that—ugh—fill an entire family for just half a slip of silver, because the brassies up front pay a full weeks’ wages for—urrrp, excuse me—for snails you likely picked out of your own garden and *what in the world have you put in this ale?!?*”

His family chuckled as Gizzada nodded. “He’s coming out of it already. The bigger the man, the quicker he revives. By the time you leave, no one will be the wiser that he was gulping—”

“Sipping,” Mahrree reminded.

Gizzada nodded. “—*sipping* an enlisted man’s drink. But yes, that’s a bit of what I do. I see myself as bringing some balance to the world. The world may not be fair, but my little corner of it is. Everyone at my restaurant eats well, according to what they think ‘well’ means.”

Perrin pulled his head up from off the table and wiped his chin. “Zadda,” he said as he propped his head on his hand, “don’t take this the wrong way, but I don’t remember you being so . . . insightful. How did you get so clever?”

“By sitting here, listening to the people—the real people of Pools and Idumea, not those snobby folks with servants . . . uh, forgive me, but—”

“Like my grandparents,” Jaytsy said matter-of-factly. “Don’t worry—we know what you mean,” she spoke for her family.

Gizzada smiled appreciatively and patted her hand. “I come back here a few times each day and just listen. You can learn a lot about people and how they see the world, especially when you remember you don’t know more than they do.”

“The enlisted men are teaching the brassy a thing or two.”

Perrin gave him half a smile. “Good advice.”

“I always thought so. I learned that from you, sir, back in Edge,” the former staff sergeant said respectfully. “You always listened to me, to all of us, no matter our rank or how long we’d served. May not have agreed with us, but you listened.”

Perrin looked down at the table, a bit embarrassed. “And had you warned me about ale, I would have listened too,” he grumbled. “I appreciate that you do all this, Zadda,” he gestured hazily to the room. “Even if you don’t have to.”

“Again, something I learned from you. There are things we may not want to do, but must do. That’s what you told me, remember?”

Perrin rubbed his eyes. “Zadda, right now I’m struggling to remember my age,” he sighed. “What are you talking about?”

“The day you handed me a stack of silver slips and told me to find you white clothing so you could sneak around in a snowy forest looking for twelve Guarders that turned out to be fourteen,” Gizzada said quietly.

Perrin nodded slowly and massaged his forehead.

“And I said to you, ‘Are you sure this is the best idea? I can’t imagine why you want to do this.’ And then you said, ‘I’m not doing it because I want to, but because it needs to be done. *Someone* has to do it. Might as well be me.’”

“I wished I remembered that conversation,” Perrin mumbled.

“You don’t have to. I remembered it for both of us,” Gizzada told him. “It took a few years to sink into my fat brain, but I’ve realized that I don’t need a commander or an administrator to tell me what I should do. I can choose to do things on my own. I used to be a ten-year-old trying to find a way to help my mother pay her taxes. Wasn’t her fault her husband died, or that my grandparents couldn’t help us. She did the best she could, but the king didn’t think it was enough. I wished then I had some man giving me full slips of silver for playing with crawdads in the river for an hour. And now, I can, and I do.”

Perrin held up an unsteady finger to make a point, but was instead distracted by its wobbling around.

“Remarkable,” Gizzada whispered to Mahrree. “He holds his ale worse than a toddler.”

“You’ve given ale to a toddler?!”

“No! Well, not *intentionally*. Little boy’s mother was in here selling baskets, you know, and the child discovered a neglected mug—”

“Hush,” Peto shushed them in mock soberness, “it’s trying to speak.”

“The point,” Perrin stared at his pointing finger. He gave it a worthy snap and gave up. “The point is . . . Gizzada, you’ve done good things here. And now, I’m going to take a little nap.”

---

An hour later the Shin family readied to head back to Idumea. As a more stable and alert Perrin buttoned up his jacket, several of the enlisted men stood to salute him. The colonel just rolled his eyes at them.

When the Shins’ driver came in, he feigned shock passably well that such a place existed—even though the Large Gizzada he’d ordered earlier was waiting for him. A waiter came from the kitchen with the word that the colonels up front were also finishing and would be ready to leave in ten minutes.

Gizzada embraced the Shins goodbye and showed them the best way to sneak through the alley and to the livery stables without being noticed by anyone of importance.

“That man is the silverest brassy I ever met,” Oblong declared as the door shut behind the Shin family.

“Hear, hear!” many soldiers called in agreement.

Oblong nudged Gizzada. “Sarge, he’d be a great High General, wouldn’t he?”

Gizzada smiled. “Not only would he be, he *will* be. It’s not something he wants to do, but it’s something he realizes he should do. Don’t worry about Snyder or Thorne in the mansion,” Gizzada said to the closed door. “In about two years, I’ll be delivering a few Large Gizzadas to the mansion at least once a week, compliments of the owner. World’s going to be a better place, men . . .”

---

“Now *that* was an experience,” Mahrree chuckled as the coach lurched forward.

“The enlisted men are teaching the brassy a thing or two.”

Perrin dropped his cap on the seat next to him, grabbed his head and moaned. His children giggled.

“I thought you were feeling better,” Mahrree said as she massaged his neck.

“No, no, no . . . that stuff’s worse than mead. I drank mead a couple of times back in Command School, and the same thing always happened—sicker than an expecting woman.”

Mahrree frantically wrenched open the window on his side of the coach, while his children burst out laughing.

“Too loud,” he murmured pitifully. “Please don’t.”

“Yes, please don’t,” Mahrree said to him. “And if you have to, aim it out the window.”

“Don’t anybody tell my parents what happened when we get back,” he mumbled. “They’re probably asleep already, but I don’t want them knowing.”

Jaytsy turned to her brother. “Did you have any idea we had such a rebellious father? He’s been drinking, and now he wants us to sneak him in past his parents?”

Mahrree snorted as their children laughed. “I’m sorry, Perrin, but really—it’s rather funny.”

“Another reason why I hate Idumea,” he grumped as he flopped on the bench. His family’s continued laughter didn’t help.

After a few minutes Jaytsy said slowly, “Father?”

“Hmmf?” he mumbled from his prone position where Mahrree was now massaging his head.

“Are Colonel Snyder and Colonel Thorne rich?”

Peto sat up a bit at that.

“Hm. Suppose so, if they can pay that much to eat things I crunch under my boots.”

Peto and Jaytsy exchanged glances in the dark coach, and Mahrree knew what the next question would be.

“So, is Colonel Shin now rich, too?”

“Of course we are!” Mahrree declared. “We’ve been rich for many years, with a comfortable home, good friends and family, and each other.”

“Isn’t that cute, Peto,” Jaytsy said in the same tone her father had used earlier, “how she still thinks we’re only five and four years old?”

“What does it matter how much he earns?” Mahrree said. “We have all we need.”

Perrin waved aimlessly. "What your mother said."

"So we *are* rich," Peto nodded in approval. "Now we'll have to take the coach everywhere in Edge."

"No . . . no . . . no," Perrin droned slowly and forced himself into a semi-sitting position. "Pay is based on years of service, ranking, and size of fort. The garrison and the fort at Pools are both much larger than Edge, which is the second smallest fort."

"So Jayts," Peto explained, "Father's the second *least* rich colonel in the world."

"Ah, but Moorland doesn't have a colonel," Jaytsy reminded him. "So he is *the* least rich colonel in the world."

"Ah, well done Colonel Shin," Peto said smugly, and he and his sister chuckled.

But Perrin wasn't amused. "And since Moorland is dying as a village, there's not even a major there either anymore," he reminded them sternly.

His children quieted and looked down.

Mahrree wasn't unsympathetic. It was easy to forget that others were losing their homes while they were living in a mansion. She'd been guilty of forgetting about home herself.

To try to swing the conversation around again, she said, "Oh, your father's not getting that much of a pay increase."

"Uhh . . ." Perrin said slowly.

"Need the window?"

"No . . . it's that . . . the pay increase."

Mahrree frowned at him. "We already discussed it. And," she added more quietly, "what you'll be doing with it."

"Yes, but it's a *little* larger than you may think, and . . . it also comes with a bonus."

"How much?"

Perrin shifted uncomfortably. "Enough to buy a new house. Apparently brass buttons need bigger houses."

"As if what you live in reflects who you really are?" Mahrree scoffed.

"I'm not in the mood to argue with you, or agree with you, wife," Perrin moaned. He took up her hand and put it on his temple again so she'd massage it.

"Just agree with me, then." Mahrree kissed his cheek.

"Usually do." He closed his eyes.

“The enlisted men are teaching the brassy a thing or two.”

Jaytsy and Peto exchanged anxious looks. “Do we have to?” Jaytsy said. “Move, I mean? I know our house is rather small but it’s the only home I’ve ever known.”

“I don’t want to move either,” Peto announced.

Mahrree smiled at them. “Nor do we. Right?”

Perrin grunted. “No one in Edge expects us to move. And the gold’s already going another direction,” he added cryptically.

“What’s that mean?” Peto wondered.

“It means, your Father and I already discussed that it could go to someone who could use it more than us,” Mahrree explained. “Although I wasn’t aware of that bonus.”

“Been working out how to deal with it,” he mumbled. “Think I have it figured out.”

“Where’s it going?” Jaytsy asked.

“Where all my future pay is going: to people who need it more. It’s not as if my duties are changing, or my hours increasing, but your mother and I know of someone who knows of someone—” He paused to work out if that was the correct thing to say, “So we’re going to just slip it over there.”

To Mahrree’s pleasure, Jaytsy grinned. “I like that! Someone’s going to get a welcome surprise, and we don’t have to move.”

“Like that man in the rubbish pile at the garrison?” Peto said.

Perrin opened his eyes. “What, son?”

“The gold—is it going to that man we saw trying to get a blanket out of the rubbish pile?” A quality in the tone of Peto’s voice suggested he already knew the answer was no.

“I have looked for him,” Perrin said quietly. “But I haven’t seen him again. I’ll keep trying, though, each time I have to go to the garrison. There are a few things I’d like to give him, but no—the pay increase isn’t going to him, but it’s a nice idea.”

Peto nodded slowly. “I’ll just imagine that someone did that for him already. That’s why you can’t find him again.”

Mahrree blinked back tears. The boy could be so obnoxious, then abruptly so compassionate. It was if it was his secret, and he accidentally revealed his softer nature.

“Someone will take care of him, I’m sure,” Jaytsy said with hollow confidence, and she patted her brother comfortingly on the leg.

Mahrree sniffled. It was times like this she thought she could envision her children as adults, and the kind of people they could become astonished her—

“Listen Jaytsy—Mother’s sniffing. It sounds like she’s about to sing about *her* long-lost love,” said Peto earnestly.

And just like that, they were snickering teenagers again.

“Let’s talk about something different, such as . . .” Mahrree faltered, because there was only one other thing that overwhelmed her mind lately, and since she couldn’t come up with anything else, she finally said, “what your grandparents expect of us in a few days at The Dinner.”

Perrin lunged for the window and lost half a Large Gizzada on the road to Idumea.

It was about ten minutes after that—after the coachman assured Colonel Shin that they could get the outside of the coach all cleaned again, no problem, sir—that Jaytsy said, “Why does the garrison have so many men? It’s not like Idumea ever gets attacked.”

“And they’ll claim that’s why,” Perrin said, lying back down again and resting his head on Mahrree’s lap. At least he was finally sounding more alert, she thought. “So many soldiers keep the place safe.”

“But it’s the villages on the edges of the world that need protection, isn’t it?” Jaytsy insisted.

“And *that*, my daughter,” Perrin said, “is why you’d never make a good officer or Administrator. You’re thinking logically, not politically. The only thing logic and politics share are a few letters. Idumea’s so messed up,” he mumbled as he repositioned Mahrree’s hand to rub his forehead. “A city where a fifteen-year-old girl is more reasonable than dozens of adult men—”

“Hey, she’s right,” Peto said, startled. And not to be outdone by his sister who smiled smugly, he added, “It’s all of the northern villages that get hit the most, then the ones in the west.”

“Doesn’t Trades have a sizable fort?” Mahrree asked. “In the southwest.”

Perrin grunted. “Largest outside of the garrison. Fifteen hundred men,” he said to the gasps of his family. “And you know why? The gold and silver mine. Five hundred soldiers are on duty, round the clock, guarding the roads in and out, stationed around the perimeter, and inspecting every worker. The mine is where the



“The enlisted men are teaching the brassy a thing or two.”

wealth is, so that’s where the soldiers are. Any time there’s even a hint of a presence in the forest twenty miles away, the garrison sends down another one or two thousand men just to keep the mine protected.”

“How often have they been raided?” Mahrree asked.

“Since the beginning when Guarders made their presence known again? I think only two or three times, and only once was successful, back when Jaytsy was still a baby.”

“Wait a minute!” Jaytsy exclaimed loudly, and Perrin flinched and rubbed his temples until Mahrree’s fingers could get over there for him. “We’ve been hit dozens of times! By thieves! And Moorland—didn’t you say they lost a small herd of cows not long ago? We should have the majority of the soldiers in the north!”

Perrin sighed. “Moorland got hit several times a year,” he intoned sadly. “Their major requested more soldiers, my father tried to convince the Command Board they were needed, and always the three Administrators shot it down. Cush is also on that Board, but he quit trying to even bring it up.”

“But why?” Now Peto was angry.

“Politics, Peto. Moorland is small, far away, and no one important has ever come from there. That’s why no one in Idumea cares it’s been wiped out by the land tremor. They’re not rich, so their taxes were minimal. They’re strange people who actually like the mountains, are happy with simply raising cattle and crops, and don’t even have an arena. They don’t benefit the Administrators at all, so they see no reason to send protection or assistance.”

“But that’s . . .” Jaytsy spluttered.

Mahrree nodded sadly. “Politics. The Administrators care only about two kinds of people: those who bring them wealth and power, and those who threaten to take it away. Moorland does neither. Same with Edge.”

“Your mother’s right,” Perrin told his children. “Trades is the source of all wealth. Moorland provides nothing but some wheat and corn—which is far more valuable in an emergency than shiny metals, anyway. The Administrator of Taxation stores the grain until the next harvest, at which point they simply throw it away to make room for the new.”

“What?” Peto exclaimed. “They could give that away instead of throwing it away! Like to those homeless people, by the river.”

“There’s a lot Idumea could do better, son,” Perrin grumbled.

“I hate Idumea,” Jaytsy murmured.

Perrin grinned, and Mahrree patted his cheek.

“Why didn’t Moorland complain?” Peto wondered. “Look at everything here, and compare it what they have there, and—”

“Ah, but that’s the thing, Peto,” Perrin pointed out, struggling to sit up again. “How many people do you know—besides soldiers—that ever travel to another village?”

His children pondered that for a moment.

“Mr. Hegek came from somewhere else,” Jaytsy offered. “And sometimes students leave to go to a university. But after that?”

“And why don’t people travel?” Perrin pressed.

“Because they think it’s too hard, too far,” said Peto in disappointment. “Something bad will happen, and then when you get to someplace else, like Coast, everything is different than what you know—”

“It’s a terrifying hassle,” Jaytsy summed up.

“Exactly,” Perrin told them. “So no one travels, anywhere. And if they do, it’s because of an emergency, or they think they’re dying and should see something first. The travel is usually tied to something unpleasant, so the whole trip becomes unpleasant.”

“Then people complain,” Mahrree said, “and talk about how strange and hard it all was, and so naturally no one ever wants to go or do anything. It’s easier to stay at home. And, you have to admit—our trip down here was anything but fun and relaxing.”

Everyone grunted in agreement to that.

“But I’d still do it over again,” Peto said in a small voice.

“Me too,” Jaytsy chimed in. “It was hard, but I’m kind of proud of us. Actually,” she wrinkled her nose in thought, “it wasn’t all that bad. You can get used to it, like Grandmother and Grandfather have. Why, look at us now, going to Pools just for dinner and driving all the way back again! It’s almost as far as to Mountseen, but people rarely make that drive unless they have to.”

“The enlisted men are teaching the brassy a thing or two.”

Peto sat up taller. “So people don’t travel because they’re convinced it’s just too hard. That’s dumb!”

Perrin chuckled sadly. “No, that’s just human nature. We believe the wrong things, and can’t think of alternatives. Like those in Moorland. I doubt any of them ever came to Idumea. In their minds, the city is the same as their little village, just . . . spread out more. Even their major had lingering fears from his time in Command School, so he likely never talked to anyone about the city. People from Moorland never imagine anything as grand as you’ve seen, so they didn’t think they could demand anything more of it. If they knew just how much Idumea possessed, I’m sure they’d insist on more soldiers and better defenses. As it is, they just grew used to their condition and saw no sense in fighting the inevitable.”

“Grew used to their condition,” Mahrree murmured. “No sense in fighting . . .”

That’s exactly what happened with the servants of the kings. That’s why they sat there for so long behind the rock wall, never insisting on anything better, never imagining anything more . . .

Until High General Pere Shin put an end to the injustice by heaving himself over—

“Perrin,” she said quietly, “we still have a ways before we get to the mansion . . . I think now would be a good time to tell the children about a certain group of servants, and a particular ancestor of theirs who did something for them.”

Perrin smiled in the dark. “I think you’re right.”

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“Are you better *now*?” Mahrree asked Perrin as he crawled into bed with her. He’d spent the last half hour in the washing room next door, and she’d been wincing for him the entire time.

“Yes, finally. I think.”

“Still, I’m just going to stay over on this side for the night, if you don’t mind.”

“See why I didn’t bring you mead that first night I came over to talk to you? I have a feeling you wouldn’t have agreed to marry me if I were throwing up in your washing room.”

“Yet another thing I never knew about you—mead makes you sick. And yet another reason why you hate Idumea—it’s giving away all of your secrets.”

He just groaned.

She chuckled. “So, you said you had a plan for that house bonus?”

“Going to give some of it to Brillen. By the way, when I was over at the garrison earlier, I was going through some paperwork and realized that way back when Brillen was first assigned to Edge, they figured his pay rate wrong. For the past sixteen years, he’s been underpaid. Of course, when I pointed that out, they were most embarrassed, and knew they should immediately rectify the situation. I told them I could carry that large amount of pay back with me, and bring their apologies personally as well.”

“What a perfect coincidence!” Mahrree exclaimed. “You can add your pay to what they’re sending, plus your bonus—”

Her husband’s chuckling stopped her.

“What?”

“I was hoping that all sounded believable. I guess I practiced it well enough.”

“Wait—you just made that all up?”

“Even with my ale-ing mind. I’ll even tell him he shouldn’t mention it to them, because some of the higher-ups don’t know about the error, and the lower-downs would get even in more trouble. Best just accept the situation and also realize they’ll be sending a little extra each moon into his pay to make up for the inconvenience.”

Mahrree nodded in the dark. “Clever man.” After another pause she said, “They took it so well tonight, didn’t they?”

Perrin didn’t even have to ask what she was talking about. “They did,” his voice swelled with pride. “I spotted both of them in the study, staring at the portrait of their great-grandfather. I always thought he was painted a bit sterner than he really was, but in the candlelight he looks gentler, more like the man I knew. I think they saw that part of him tonight. He was a great High General.”

“Just like your father,” Mahrree whispered.

“Yes,” Perrin’s voice sounded like he was smiling. “He’s thwarted at every turn, but at least he keeps trying to do the right thing.”

“The enlisted men are teaching the brassy a thing or two.”

“Just like you. You, too, would make a great High General.”

“Mahrree, I thought you wanted me to feel better.”

## Chapter 15 ~ “You get yourself ready. I will deal with my son.”

The next several days passed in a blur, Mahrree realized on Jaytsy’s 15<sup>th</sup> Birthday, which they had celebrated the day before. Gizzada had sent over a few large birthday sandwiches yesterday and, either because he had a bit of a nasty streak in him or he really thought Relf would enjoy it, the food was accompanied by a large jug of ale.

Relf had sniffed it and scowled. “Heard about this stuff, but not too sure about it. Perrin?”

He was already leaning back in his chair when his father handed the jug over to him.

“Ever tried it?”

“You know I don’t drink anything stronger than water or new juice,” Perrin said curtly, and sent a withering look to his son whose mouth was open with some ready response he realized just then should likely remain in his head if he ever hoped to see fourteen.

“Well, some have asked if we’ll be serving it at The Dinner. I suppose we could order a few jugs—”

“And keep it in the stables,” Perrin had suggested.

As Mahrree watched the dozen young cadets from Command School tramping delicately around the house that morning, she cringed in sympathy. She clutched her personal pages of notes and listened as Joriana ordered the young men about as if they were her personal servants which, for the day, they were.

“Yes, *all* those long rugs along the Grand Hall must be rolled up. How else will everyone dance? Into the back cottage

“You get yourself ready. I will deal with my son.”

with them. Roll them tighter, cadet, or they’ll be too big. You over there—see those sprigs of blossoms in the crate? You’re on blossom detail. Into the vases in the back gathering room with them, and *artfully*, soldier. That’s a candlestick, cadet—not a long knife! Hold that more respectfully. And you will be rubbing those fingerprints off, correct? The rest of you: all this furniture—out! All those chairs waiting outside—in!”

Mahrree rubbed her temple—a soothing technique she mastered on her husband a few nights before—and smiled gratefully at a sulking soldier who carried a large crate of snipped yellow blossoms past her. It was almost over.

Tomorrow night, then never again. Maybe.

For the past several days Mahrree had been introduced to every key official, shop owner, caterer, and musician. Judging by her mother-in-law’s enthusiasm, she began to wonder if Joriana hadn’t also ordered the land tremor as well, just to have the opportunity to train her daughter-in-law.

Each night she compared notes with Perrin and found he’d been meeting with every officer, Administrator, and Idumean official. The High General had insisted on returning to the garrison for full days of work, but naturally needed his son’s accompaniment in every meeting and briefing. Perrin, too, began to suspect he was being groomed for a takeover.

At least Jaytsy and Peto had been enjoying themselves, Mahrree considered as she glanced around before remembering they were nowhere in sight.

For the past few days Peto had been spending his mornings in the back garden with the new ball his grandfather gave him, kicking it between two tall trees, and he filled his afternoons watching the professional kickball practices at the arena, accompanied by two corporals who served as more-than-willing guards.

Jaytsy had enjoyed her time with one of the maid’s nieces who was happy to show her every last shop within a two mile radius of the general’s mansion, escorted, of course, by two older and rather homely sergeants hand-picked by her father.

But today Jaytsy was out with Kindiri visiting all the caterers with reminders of what time they should deliver their creations to the mansion tomorrow and, Mahrree hoped, *not* hearing how certain foods reminded Kindiri of Lieutenant Riplak. Peto was helping soldiers unload chairs from wagons brought in to seat

the more than three hundred guests expected to arrive.

Mahrree broke out in a cold sweat when she thought about so many Idumeans. She was Edgy, and as each day passed she felt she understood this place even less.

The last straw was when Kuman's gown arrived that morning. Mahrree took one look at the Smoldering Something with turtle necklines on bodices and intentional wrinkles and who knew what else—and realized she could never bring it back to Edge. No one would know what to do with her in it, Mahrree most especially.

"Mahrree! Candlestick placement!" Joriana clapped her hands officiously and pointed to the hapless soldiers trying to understand the proper way to hold candlesticks. Maybe it meant using only three fingers, with pinkies extended in miniature salutes.

"Yes, Mother Shin! Of course. This way, men."

Later that afternoon, with chairs and tables set up, and blossoms arranged and rearranged with alternating candlesticks to coordinate with differing heights, colors, and scents, Perrin and his weary father stumbled into the wide back doors of the gathering room and made their way to the Grand Hall. Perrin's mouth dropped open at the dramatic changes, but Relf just chuckled.

"And you wondered if I should've stayed at home and rested instead."

"You are tomorrow," Joriana told him as she gave him a peck on the cheek. "You need to rest up. And you," she pointed at her son, "will not leave these grounds. I will not risk you suddenly becoming lost, Perrin Shin!"

Perrin pursed his lips as if plan number one had just been quashed.

"It's a big house," he murmured to Mahrree as his mother helped his father to a soft chair. "There are many places where I know she'll never think to look."

"So why didn't you tell me about any of them?" she demanded.

"Cut off her right hand right before The Dinner? Are you kidding? No one wants to disappoint Joriana Shin."

"You just remember that, Colonel!"

But by midday meal the next day, Mahrree began to wear just as tight an expression as her mother-in-law. The food was arriving, and in fantastic amounts and displays. Hycymum



“You get yourself ready. I will deal with my son.”

would've been astounded at the creations, a few of them from Gizzada's. The mansion looked near to perfect on the inside, and outside the servant-soldiers were busy on the surprisingly warm breezy day sweeping, pulling a few early weeds, and setting up temporary stables for extra horses and carriages, while also keeping an eye out for one missing colonel.

Mahrree fumed that somehow he'd managed to give her the slip. She thought marriages meant couples were united in everything, and it wasn't even *her* mother he was avoiding. It was his own, one that frequently passed Mahrree with directions, instructions, and snippy inquiries as to where her “horrible” son had run off to.

Two hours before the guests were to arrive, she finally found him. Peto had tipped her off, and then ran off to take his bath as if knowing Mahrree would start yelling because Peto had known for hours where his father had been hiding. The only way to redeem himself was to bathe voluntarily.

“Oh, very clever, Perrin!” Mahrree growled as she recognized his hulking shape wielding a pitchfork and spreading hay. She stepped carefully into the stables to avoid anything warm and squishy.

He looked up sheepishly, and the several other groomsmen hired for the evening stared. It was obvious they didn't know that the man laboring by their side for the afternoon in dusty old clothes was also the host.

“Just lending a hand, Mahrree,” he said innocently, his big dark eyes almost sincere. “That's what my mother told me to do—help out.”

Mahrree clenched her teeth. “She's been looking for you all afternoon!”

“But she never comes to the stables,” he smiled not so guilelessly.

She put her hands on her hips and glared.

He stood up straight and gulped.

“Your bath has been drawn and is waiting,” she said in a steady but cold tone. “Unless you want your mother to come out here, dunk you in a watering trough and bathe you herself, I recommend you get in and get ready now!”

He glanced apologetically at the groomsmen and handed one of them his pitchfork. “Sorry, boys. But um—”

“Unnerstand, Colonel,” one of them drawled. “When the jenny brays, best be on yer way.”

Perrin snorted.

“When the jenny—?” Mahrree began, but Perrin took her by the elbow and led her out.

“They have a variety of interesting metaphors. That was the tamest I’ve heard all afternoon. There’s a reason my mother stays away from the stables.”

“Your dress uniform is in our bedroom,” she told him. “A new jacket and everything, so you best be in it very soon.”

“Yes ma’am!”

But he wasn’t. An hour before the guests were to arrive, Joriana sent Mahrree to her bedroom to get ready.

“He hasn’t shown up since bathing,” she told her daughter-in-law. “Even Peto was more cooperative!”

“Mother Shin, I’ll go find him first—”

“Oh, no you won’t,” Joriana said in a tone that could slice stone. “You get yourself ready. I will deal with my son.”

Mahrree swallowed. It didn’t help that Joriana had her hand on a carving knife.

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Perrin felt the wave of it coming, the unnatural stilling of the air, the sudden dreadful calm. Even the pressure of the atmosphere took on a different mood, as if Nature itself was crying out, “Duck!”

But he was trapped.

He knew it wasn’t the best hiding place, but he’d run out of options since the mansion was now swarming with hired hands.

“What in the world are you doing?” Joriana’s voice suddenly stabbed him like an icicle. “In the second larder?”

“Mother! Just checking on . . . supplies,” he said smooth as butter. “Counting jars, for you. Forty-eight, forty-nine . . . oh, I don’t think that’s right. I best start again. One, two—”

“You’re not dressed,” she seethed.

He quickly looked down at himself. “Phew! For a minute there I thought I had forgotten to put on my clothing again. Then again, had I been less dressed, I’m sure half a dozen of those ca-

“You get yourself ready. I will deal with my son.”

terers out there would have made more than a peep—”

“*You know what I mean,*” she snarled, and outside a stray cat arched its back and hissed before running for cover. “You promised you’d be civilized tonight, right? But you haven’t learned a single dance step! There’s still time, you know. I can call for Kuman immediately.”

“I promise I’ll find a way to prove I am not a wild man,” he said, since he had no way of escaping except for climbing over his mother. “That’s all you can hope for. Now, teach me how to use a fork.”

Joriana was not amused. “PERRIN! When are you going to get ready?”

“As soon as I make sure everyone else is,” he promised. “But maybe you should tell me again: which is the spoon and which is the knife?”

When his mother snatched up a butcher knife near one of the ten dressed pheasants and threatened to show him how to use it, he ran down the Grand Hall like a disobedient boy to Peto’s room.

He knocked on the door and opened it. “Need help, son?”

Peto squinted at him. “Haven’t needed help dressing myself for over ten years now, but how thoughtful of you to check on me, Father.” He was finishing buttoning the row of shining brass buttons that went all the way up to his throat. “So if this were in blue, it’d be a dress uniform?”

Perrin smiled grimly. “Same wool, too. Your grandmother’s subtle attempt to demonstrate how handsome you look in ‘uniform.’ She did the same thing to me when I was your age.”

Peto evaluated himself in the long mirror. “I like the kick-ball uniforms better. You should be getting dressed, Father. I have a feeling Grandmother won’t approve of those stable clothes for The Dinner.”

“It’s getting bad,” Perrin muttered. “Now you’re even nagging me.”

“And I don’t have to dance.” Peto batted his eyelashes.

Perrin sighed. “I guess I better check on Jaytsy, then. She may be wanting a man’s opinion.” He cringed at his words.

“Oh, she’s ready. She’s been floating up and down the Grand Hall staircase for the past ten minutes. Didn’t you see her? In that yellow she looks like a giant mutated hornet. Even got her

hair all . . .” With his hands he gestured some bizarre arrangement over his head and shuddered.

“That bad?” Perrin winced.

“Yes! Some cousins of somebody’s have been doing her up all Idumea-ically. Rather hysterically, I think.”

Perrin grinned. “Good. No one will want to dance with her then.”

He stepped out of Peto’s room just in time to see the hornet fly by.

But she wasn’t a hornet. She was much more a fantastic butterfly, having taken on human form. Even with her dark brown hair all piled up and hand-motiony, she was exquisite.

Unfortunately.

She stopped and twirled in front of her father, the full yellow skirt rising in a flutter of roundness. “Well? How do I look?”

Perrin swallowed. He finally had to admit she was beautiful. And a young woman.

“Very nice, Jaytsy,” he sighed. He’d be busy that night following around her admirers.

“Ha!” she shouted at her brother’s door. “Told you! And if you make any more comments about my being a hornet, I’ll sting you good and hard.”

Perrin relaxed, because if any of her would-be admirers heard her with her brother, there’d be no problems whatsoever.

From behind Peto’s door came a buzzing sound, followed by the loud smack of a hand slapping the wood door. “Eww—hornet guts.”

“You two just keep that up,” Perrin grinned, “and we’ll be run out of Idumea before dessert.”

Jaytsy put her hands on her very dainty waist, the skirt flaring out below and down to her knees, and the figure-hugging silk rising up and over her shoulders. Perrin wondered again when her body turned so womanly, and why the silk couldn’t go any higher to encase her entire throat. While there was no cleavage, he felt there was still too much flesh of his daughter displayed for the roving eyes of young soldiers.

“Shouldn’t you be getting ready, Colonel Shin?” Her mature tone woke him out of his private musings as to where he could find her a thick shawl. “You just missed Grandmother. She’s looking for you, and she’s got a vein bulging in her forehead.”

“You get yourself ready. I will deal with my son.”

“Really?”

“She’s kind of scary right now.”

“I believe you.”

Jaytsy pointed authoritatively to his bedroom door. He shrugged obediently, only because his daughter’s stance had taken on the demanding quality of her grandmother, and whether out of duty or genuine fear, Perrin had been conditioned as a small boy to recognize that pose as the fifth and final warning.

Reluctantly he made his way down to his bedroom, purposefully ignoring the details that had gone into making the Grand Hall even grander, and knocked once at his bedroom door as a warning.

“That better be you, Perrin!” Mahrree called.

He opened the door slowly, peered in, and raised his eyebrows.

“I know, I know,” Mahrree said hurriedly, brushing down the full gown that fit his ‘coverage’ specifications—over her shoulders, down her arms to the elbows, and with no cleavage in sight.

He smiled in approval. Some views were his alone.

“Yes, it is silk,” she confessed with some embarrassment. “It is gray—not my favorite color. Smokey something or the other with something sleepy. Your mother chose it, Kuman made it . . . I would have been happy in something more like cotton, but—”

“But nothing.” Perrin smiled broader as he closed the door and walked over to her, his eyes traveling up and down. She was more stunning than his daughter could ever hope to be. Her hair pinned up emphasized her smooth neck and her perfect shape, which the gray silk hugged down to her waist where it flared out just like Jaytsy’s dress, but almost to the floor.

“You wear it beautifully. I couldn’t imagine how you could look more wonderful for tonight.” He winked at her, and the worried tension released from her face.

“You really think so?” she breathed.

“Absolutely,” he assured her. “My wife covered in gray bug vomit. What I’ve always dreamed of.” He tried to keep a straight face, but he couldn’t hide his smile.

Mahrree turned pink. “I rather expected you to say something like, ‘Just wear what you wore down here,’ but this is actually more comfortable than I imagined. I mean, even though it’s

so form fitting—”

“Yes, it is,” he said, running his hands over her form in appreciation.

“Perrin!” she chided, and slapped his hand away.

But she’d have to hit him a lot harder than that to be effective. “What’s this called?”

“The bodice,” she said, torn between fighting him and enjoying him.

“Bod-iss,” he said slowly with a wicked grin.

“Don’t say it like that! Someone might hear you! This mansion is packed with strangers.”

“I’m just learning the ways of Idumea. But what I meant was, what’s the little knotted string over the bod-iss?”

She squirmed when she saw the look growing in his eyes, but she couldn’t help but smile. “It’s called lace. Cro-shayed. Kind of like knitting, but thinner and with a hooked needle.”

Perrin shook his head as he pretended to inspect it closely. “What kind of torturous insanity requires a person to sit and make tiny knots in a string, with a needle of all things, just to cover something else with it? I bet if I unhooked this part, right here—”

“PERRIN! We’re running out of time—”

“Oh, there’s always time.” He raised his eyebrows in smoldering suggestion as his large fingers fumbled with the first tiny clasp designed for nothing larger than raccoon hands. “We can easily *argue* about just how much—”

She smacked his hand hard enough that he instinctively drew it back from the impossible clasp that would have taken him an hour to undo. Maybe that was why they were made so tiny.

“Your mother said she’d be by again in five minutes to check on you, and that was about four minutes ago!”

“Hmm,” he mused. “That would be cutting things a little close—”

“She’s very irritated with you,” Mahrree warned. “She fully expected you to change after you bathed, but obviously you didn’t.” She fingered the collar of the worn work shirt. “Perrin, it’s time.”

He winked at her and started to pull his ratty shirttails out of his stained trousers. “Knew you’d realize we have time—”

“For YOU TO GET READY!”

He hesitated and shrank a little under her volume.

“You get yourself ready. I will deal with my son.”

“Perrin, please!” She gestured to his dress uniform lying on the bed, the medals polished and the dark wool brushed. “You’re doing it again, being *not* the husband I remember. Right now Idumea has reverted you back to a man less than half your age.”

He had one or two good comebacks for that, about how he was always as robust as a man less than half his age, but instead sensibly elected to keep his mouth shut because . . .

. . . because the worst moment for any officer was to recognize when he was defeated.

He sighed and sat next to the uniform, laid out and patiently waiting. It was another brand new jacket, courtesy of his mother, woven of the highest quality dark blue wool. Some poor servant or despised junior officer had been tasked to transfer all of his medals from his old dress uniform to his new one, and even shined them up brighter than he’d ever seen them.

But it was the garish buttons that really stood out. Their golden hue sparkled brighter than the dull silver buttons of the lower ranks. Perrin had never before realized what an ugly alloy brass was.

“I’m really dreading this night, Mahrree,” he confessed quietly as he fingered the shiny surface of the top button, unintentionally making it more lustrous. “If we make a good impression, we’re doomed to return. If we do poorly, my parents deal with the consequences.”

“How about we just do our best, and let the Creator decide the path for us?” Mahrree suggested gently. “Maybe His plan for us involves tonight somehow, and this trip.”

“Now you’re sounding like my father,” he mumbled.

Mahrree released a loud exhale that held more frustration than relief. “And now you’re starting to irritate me. Perrin Shin, get dressed and do your duty! Let’s just get this over with! I’ll be back in five minutes, and if you aren’t ready, I’m sending your mother in here to dress you!”

Perrin leaped to his feet, saluted, and grinned in terror.

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Mahrree paused as she stepped out of her bedroom where her husband was obediently changing, and took in the Grand Hall. Decorated in vines and flowers that dripped artfully from the bal-

cony above, the main floor of the Hall was lined in chairs and side tables littered with spring blossoms and elaborate candlesticks soon to be lit. In less than an hour here would be the elite of Idumea—soldier and citizen—dancing and mingling in front of her bedroom door.

And also down the Hall, and up the stairs, and likely on the balcony, and probably into the study, where Relf's sick bed had been recently removed, and into the large gathering room and the massive eating room . . .

She began to feel claustrophobic in Idumea's second largest mansion.

Fortunately the three long tables for The Dinner had been set up parallel to each other on the other side of the house in the west wing, where she warily made her way now.

As she neared the fo-yay, she noticed a sofa from the gathering room had been placed strategically against a corner. Sitting there stoically was an older man in his dark blue uniform that was covered in more metal than made up his sword, watching every point of the mansion, from the front door to the staircase to both wings and even out to the stone terrace in the back garden.

High General Shin leaned against his crutch as he watched the small army of servants, caterers, and soldiers hurriedly set the tables with more dishes and silverware than Mahrree had ever seen together in one place. He squinted analytically when he saw Mahrree, but his eyes were twinkling. In his deep rocky voice he growled, "Ready to meet your doom tonight, Mrs. Shin?"

She assumed his formal tone was a hint, considering the number of strangers working just in front of him. It was odd to be so formal in one's own home.

Mahrree chuckled nervously. "You're not helping things, High General."

He patted the sofa. "We're not allowed to help, if that's what you're hoping to do. We're allowed, however, to supervise."

"Ah," she said as she sat next to him. "So I'm at a complete loss, then."

Relf leaned over to her. "Where is he?" he said in a slightly anxious tone.

"Getting dressed. Finally."

"Maybe you should have stayed in your room and supervised him?"



“You get yourself ready. I will deal with my son.”

“Uh,” she paused to find the best way to say it, “considering his state of mind, my presence would have been a hindrance.”

Relf chuckled quietly. “Understood. Well, you do look . . . very nice,” he said, trying to sound as if he frequently gave women compliments. He firmed his grip on his crutch, concerned that he’d unintentionally crossed some line.

“So do you,” Mahrree felt was necessary to add, and also found herself in unfamiliar territory. But she knew how to get somewhere else quickly. “You hardly seem to have nearly died last week.”

“Thank you for that,” he said impassively as he watched the bustle of activity in front of him. “And you hardly seem to be about to pass out again.”

“And I thank you for that,” she said formally.

He smiled ever so faintly. “But I have to admit, I am a bit worried about . . . There she is.”

Mahrree sighed with him.

Down the wide staircase and past a maid who was removing invisible bits of dust from the fretwork floated the yellow butterfly. Jaytsy’s nearly black eyes were glowing with anticipation, her cheeks were rosy, her dark brown hair was piled remarkably on her head with curled dangles framing her face, and her every movement was dainty yet vibrant—

“Has he seen her yet?” Relf whispered to Mahrree as Jaytsy giggled at a private who shyly handed her a blossom he’d stolen from a centerpiece.

“I don’t know,” she whispered back.

“It’s different, isn’t it,” Relf started uncertainly. “When the female is yours?” He glared at the private whose gaze followed Jaytsy, now fairly dancing between two tables oohing at this and that, then patting a caterer in approval as the older woman placed a platter of something green and orange on the table.

When the private failed to realize he was being eyed by the highest commander, Relf cleared his throat with alarming volume. The private did a little jump—as did the dozen or so others in the Grand Hall—and immediately the hapless soldier turned to the High General. Seeing the threatening look in his hardened eyes, the soldier quickly went back to fussing with silverware, even though he was on chair detail. Jaytsy flitted obliviously to the gathering room.

“Well done,” Mahrree whispered to Relf. “Can you do that all night?”

“I’m sure Perrin will. I’ll just serve as back-up. She really is quite . . .” He held up his hands in positions that made him immediately uncomfortable.

“Agreed,” Mahrree chuckled. “She’s very much a Shin. Perrin’s slowly catching on just how stunning she is.”

“There’s a great deal of her mother in her as well.” Relf gently elbowed her.

“Well,” Mahrree shrugged in embarrassment.

“Where’s Peto?” Relf asked, keeping a sharp eye on the private who kept glancing nervously back at him. He finally remembered he was to be lining up chairs, and struggled with exactly how one did that.

“Dressed, as of some time ago. Hiding in his bedroom though.”

“That’s probably for the best,” Relf nodded. “Joriana wants him by her side so she can supervise him.”

“The poor boy!”

A controlled but loud shout from the area of the kitchen made Relf and Mahrree wince. Apparently the head of the hired hands Joriana had employed wasn’t happy. “This was NOT how it was done last year! Mrs. Shin!”

From the eating hall, where platters of lamb were placed to be trotted out to the tables later, Joriana—in a flurry of deep purple silk and grumbling none too elegantly—bustled to the kitchen to set a few things straight.

Mahrree pursed her lips in sympathy, even though she didn’t know who to feel sorry for.

Relf verbalized her response. “Poor all of us.”

As they chuckled together Relf bounced his fist lightly off her skirt. “About tonight, don’t worry so much about Administrators watching you. Just do the old smile-and-nod—and by the way, that means *not* saying words—”

She shot him a playful glare.

“—and if someone does ask you a pointed question or tries to get you to say something you’d rather not, remember that you’re a host this evening, and offer to get them a plate of food. That always throws them.”

Mahrree exhaled. “Good idea. I’ll remember that.”

“You get yourself ready. I will deal with my son.”

“Besides, I’m pretty sure they’ll all be watching me instead. Several of them aren’t too happy I’m recovering,” he told her in a low voice. “And I know of a few colonels who were likely hoping this mansion would have been vacated by now, and that tonight a new High General would have been announced instead of in two years. They’re all coming to see just how spry I look tonight.”

Mahrree gave him a quick once over. Then she evaluated him again, more closely.

He was different than in years past. He was still solid and massive and imposing, but there was a gentleness around his black eyes that she’d never noticed before. Maybe because it wasn’t there before. His hair, a mixture of black, gray, and a few new white hairs, had been trimmed neatly the day before, and the color was coming back to his still somewhat gaunt face. His perpetual scowl and squint were missing, replaced by an expression of earnestness. Altogether, Mahrree realized, he was quite a striking man.

“You look remarkably well,” she assured him. He’d instinctively sat a little taller, she noticed, during her inspection. “All things considered. But you forgot your sword.”

“I left it off on purpose,” he confided. “It’s rather heavy. Can’t effectively put off the illusion of strength and resilience when my sword’s tipping me over.”

Mahrree chuckled quietly with him and bounced her own fist on his leg. She’d always been nervous around High General Shin, but she quite enjoyed the company of Relf.

“Everything fine out here?” a shrill voice stopped their chuckling. Joriana stood before them with her hands on her hips, seemingly insulted that the two of them appeared so relaxed when such an event was about to occur.

“Yes, dear,” Relf said promptly. “The Hall’s shaping up nicely, everyone’s working diligently, and we even seem to be a bit ahead of schedule. And you look very nice tonight.”

Joriana blinked, a bit startled. Apparently she wasn’t accustomed to receiving compliments from Relf either.

“Why, thank you.” She looked around and wrung her hands, unsure of what to do next since he’d thrown her off her trajectory.

Relf cocked his head toward the east wing. “Perrin?”

“Yes!” she exclaimed, and marched loudly down the Grand Hall. “You BETTER be dressed!”

To Mahrree's questioning look, Relf said, "She enjoys the drama. If things are going too smoothly, she gets nervous. She needs something to fight against to keep her going. That's why she's been such an excellent match for me. She keeps me going. They never would have found me after the tremor if it hadn't been for her persistence."

The High General cleared his throat to expel the emotion that was rising there, and Mahrree, pretending to not notice the shininess in his eyes, turned instead to watch the lowering of the chandeliers.

A moment later from down the Hall they both heard the exclamation of, "Mother! Do you mind?"

"You know, Perrin, some officers actually practice getting dressed *quickly*? Oh, do get over yourself. I changed that bottom more times than I care to remember—"

As the bedroom door in the east wing slammed shut, Relf and Mahrree snorted so loudly it echoed in the Great Hall, despite the decorations and tablecloths to muffle the sound.

Or maybe their snorts of laughter were echoed by the dozen servants and soldiers still setting up, pretending not to hear the exchange between mother and son.

"Oh, my ribs, my ribs," Relf wailed quietly and slouched back on the sofa, still chuckling.

"Poor Mother Shin," Mahrree giggled. "I don't think I've ever seen her in such a state!"

"Granted, she's rather more anxious this year than in years past," Relf admitted after he caught his breath again. "But that's because the most important visitors she's ever had are coming this year."

"Oh, dear," Mahrree clenched her hands nervously. "Who?"

"Her son and her daughter-in-law," he said quietly.

Mahrree stopped fidgeting.

"Told me the other night that she wanted everything to be perfect. Of all the dignitaries and elite of Idumea, she most desperately wants to impress you, Mahrree. Because if you're impressed, you'll influence Perrin. She feels it's time for her children to come home."

Mahrree swallowed hard and watched with Relf the lighting of the candles in the chandelier.

## Chapter 16 ~ “Those kind don’t belong here.”

Gadiman surveyed the scene in front of him and scowled.

Hundreds of guests were stuffed into the mansion, with many spilling out onto the terraces to enjoy the surprisingly warm evening. Officers, wives, Administrators, citizens, teenagers, a few small children, and even several enlisted men wearing eager and uncomfortable expressions lined the walls of the Grand Hall, talking and laughing and . . . *mingling*, the word might be.

Dozens of couples were in the middle of the Hall, twirling to bouncy little melodies played by the ten musicians who sounded to Gadiman like the raucous birds that rudely woke him every morning. The Chairman had ordered Gadiman to come, and he conveniently missed The Dinner portion. Small talk was not one of his strengths. Nor did it seem it would be necessary right now either, since several people took a large step away from him as he entered the open front doors.

Watch people. That’s what the Chairman said to do. And don’t wear the red coat.

He always ‘watched’ people. He had crates full of files to prove it.

But Mal had said there was a different kind of watching. Gadiman looked around the crowded mansion for a corner to lurk in. He praised himself again for choosing to wear the long black coat which blended with the shadows cast by the hundreds of candles burning along the walls, and from the chandeliers hanging over the dance area.

He noticed an empty corner opposite of the front doors and

walked straight toward it. Several dancing couples tripped and dodged away to avoid colliding with the unexpected presence of the Administrator of Loyalty as he marched through the dance floor, but he didn't pay them any attention. He positioned himself against the corner, feeling safe that no one could be behind him.

And then he watched.

Five minutes later he wondered if it was enough. It really was quite tiresome and he wasn't getting anything out of it.

But then he recognized Mrs. Mahrree Shin talking with a girl that looked like a puff of yellow smoke. He focused on the girl's dark eyes: they were exactly like Colonel Shin's. She must have been their daughter.

Mrs. Shin, who had wedged herself between side tables loaded with leftovers and desserts, was dressed in a gray silk gown with a skirt that was uselessly twice as full as the woman was wide. She smiled as she handed her flushed daughter a glass of water.

A young officer in his dress uniform stood waiting, presumably for his turn to dance with the girl, but his face was partially obscured by other guests. The Shins' daughter handed the glass back to her mother, smiled at the young officer, and took his arm.

As they turned to the dance floor, Gadiman stood taller when he recognized the sandy-haired boy who looked a great deal like his mother: Lieutenant Lemuel Thorne, Cush's grandson. Gadiman spotted Colonel Qayin Thorne over by another corner and quickly made his way to him.

"Do you see what's going on out there?" Gadiman interrupted the colonel's discussion with a visiting major.

"Administrator Gadiman," Colonel Thorne said coolly, "may I introduce you to . . . . Hmm, looks like he left. How surprising."

"Out there!" Gadiman pointed. "Your son?"

Thorne looked out at the dancers and a partial smile came across his face. "Yes, he's dancing with Miss Shin."

"Do you think that's wise?" Gadiman hissed.

"Most definitely. I instructed him to find her, in fact."

"Why?"

Thorne turned his glare full on to Gadiman. With his heavy brow and prominent nose, Thorne always reminded Gadiman of an angry eagle. Gadiman had tried a few times to replicate the ex-

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pression in a mirror, but he always came off as constipated rather than intimidating.

“Because, Gadiman,” Thorne sharpened his gaze into piercing, “consider: the granddaughter of the High General of Idumea with the grandson of his Advising General. Cush told me himself that the Shin boy wants nothing to do with the army. If Colonel Shin ever becomes a general, he will have no heir to continue the tradition. But, if he has a ready son-in-law . . .”

Gadiman nodded. “Ah, I see. After Perrin Shin is High General, then your son would be the first High General Thorne.”

Thorne’s low gurgling noise made Gadiman take a hesitant step backward.

“No,” Thorne said between clenched teeth, “I will be the first High General Thorne! I would have been promoted to general by this evening had a certain old man been left to rot in his cellar storage room. Cush would have been named High General for the next four years until he retires, and I would have been made his Advisor. But, as it is, I’ll have to bide my time a bit longer, and make sure my son secures the line for yet another generation of generals.”

Gadiman nodded. He could appreciate that kind of long-term planning. But, “I thought Mal wanted to bring Shin to Idumea?”

“Oh, he will,” Thorne said with a smile that tried to be genuine but was too smug. “Snyd was hoping for a move, but the garrison needs a new colonel in charge of requisitions and other mundane things, so Shin can have the pleasure of serving under me for a few years.”

Something in the way Thorne said “pleasure” made Gadiman’s skin crawl, and he decided that was another Thorne tactic he could try to practice.

“It will also give him some experience being *my* Advisor when I’m High General.”

Gadiman considered that. “But won’t having him here make future research plans . . . complicated?”

“A natural assumption,” Thorne intoned, “coming from someone who is easily confused. But for me, it will create a scenario that will provide years of fascinating entertainment. Mal and Brisack aren’t the only ones who can straddle the fence to use both sides. Besides, my legs are much longer. The world hasn’t

seen anything yet.”

Gadiman blinked, sensing he'd been insulted somewhere in there, but was too intrigued by what Thorne was intimating to mention it.

“And with Shin's daughter as my daughter-in-law,” Thorne continued, “well, considering how securely she has her father under her influence, she could be quite valuable. After she's been tamed, that is. Did you see them at dinner?”

“No, I missed that, fortunately.” Gadiman watched the two young people dancing in and out among other couples. Lieutenant Thorne was far more poised on horseback, but somehow his stiff movements drew a giggle from the Shin girl.

“Well,” Thorne bristled, “she was most forward and overly confident. Even though she was at the table behind me, she disrupted my explanation as to the particulars of increasing security at the Trades gold mine.”

Gadiman's nose wrinkled. “How so?”

“No one could hear my conclusion over the laughter from the Shin table!”

“Laughter?”

“It gets worse,” Thorne grouched. “Those seated around me at Cush's table wanted to know the source of the amusement, as did those at General Shin's table. So the High General invited his granddaughter to stand up and retell her story for everyone!”

Gadiman, used to eating alone at the same inn each night, tried to discern if this was normal behavior or not. “So, she . . .”

“Got up!” Thorne exclaimed. “Went to the head of her grandfather's table, and told everyone in very lively terms how something called ‘The Strongest Soldier Race’ was run last year. Apparently up in Edge they've turned the running training into something of a contest between Colonel Shin and an enlisted man.”

Gadiman, who understood about officers and enlisted men's places, cringed in revulsion.

“Not only that,” Thorne continued, “Major Karna is the one who sets up the race each year. And Cush was just speculating that it was time to give Karna his own command!”

Gadiman sniffed in disappointment, which seemed appropriate.

“So it seems,” Thorne droned on as he watched his son



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dancing with the presumptuous teenager at the other end of the room, “Karna sets up challenges for each stretch of the race. One stretch required Shin to deliver a chicken.”

“Why?”

“Part of the challenge,” Thorne scoffed. “Had to deliver it for someone’s dinner.”

Gadiman shook his head. “He could have easily said he ate it. It was delivered, and was someone’s dinner—his!” He beamed at his own idea.

“It was a *live* chicken!” Thorne said loudly in Gadiman’s ear.

“Ah,” said Gadiman flatly.

Then, “Wait, that’s ridiculous.”

Then, after yet another moment, he ventured, “He *ran* with a *live* chicken? What, tucked under his arm? Do chickens enjoy that?”

“Apparently not,” Thorne sighed. “Part of the amusement of the story. It seems that chickens have strong pecking and clawing instincts when someone sprints them away from their coops. The other supposedly humorous part of the story came when Miss Shin described the enlisted man’s challenge—a man she called initially ‘Uncle Shem.’ He was to navigate his way through a pasture filled with several dozen she-goats—”

“Simple enough,” Gadiman said, growing bored with the conversation.

“—into which half a dozen lonely billy goats had been released only moments before? It seems that while the colonel was dealing with a combative chicken, *Uncle Shem* was being mistaken for an attractive female by the largest billy goat.”

Gadiman tried to imagine the scene. “I don’t get it.”

“No,” Thorne exhaled loudly. “You wouldn’t.”

“Wait a minute,” Gadiman turned to the colonel. “What’s an Uncle Shem?”

“Took you long enough to ask. He’s your gift for the evening,” Thorne said, his eyes still focused on his son and his dancing partner. “Although I don’t see why you deserve it.”

Gadiman saw the pieces in front of him, but struggled to put it all together.

Thorne noticed. “You really should’ve been at The Dinner. That’s when you would’ve picked up on that tasty morsel I just

gave you. The colonel had to remind his daughter—rather too kindly, I thought—of how the man should be referred to in such a public setting. ‘Uncle Shem’ is a master sergeant, and a favorite of the Shin family. Shem Zenos has been like their uncle since the children were very small. He used to be their baby tender.” Thorne gave him a deliberate look that dared him to not be so dense as to not figure it out.

Gadiman’s eyes grew large. “Baby tender? Wasn’t the baby tender once suspected to be—”

“You, my dear Administrator, are as slow, and obvious, and useful as mudslide coming down the Idumean River. Do watch yourself,” Thorne breathed. “It’s your sloppiness that held you back in the past. Don’t let it be your downfall now that things are growing interesting again.”

Gadiman squirmed. He knew Colonel Thorne knew things, but he didn’t know if Qayin knew whose idea the failed attempt on High General and Mrs. Shin’s life was many years ago. He fidgeted more at the assumption that he was “sloppy.” The failure was not his fault! It was someone else’s. It was . . .

“Name was Shem Zenos, you said?”

“Do you know it?”

“I will.”

Thorne’s son and the Shin girl twirled past them.

Thorne smiled encouragingly to the couple, and then his smile slid into a sneer. “She even acted out the tale,” he recalled. “It seems that all Shins enjoy audiences. And her father just grinned at her, as if she was something remarkable. Almost as insufferably as he looked at his wife.” He cleared his throat in disapproval. “A man can’t think properly when under such influences.”

Gadiman nodded in agreement. The lieutenant and the girl stepped past them again in a wide circle. “And still you approve of this?”

“My father’s a most excellent horse breeder,” Thorne said. “He always told me one can’t be too particular about what kind of package the bloodlines come in. Perhaps the coloring is off, or the height isn’t quite what you’re looking for, but if it contains the right blood, don’t discount it. It can still produce a remarkable offspring.”

Gadiman shrugged, not entirely following Thorne’s mean-

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ing as he eyed the Shin girl. “How old is she, twelve?”

Thorne chuckled mirthlessly. “No, just turned fifteen.”

“Girls get married at that age?”

“Usually a little older. I married Mrs. Thorne when she was seventeen.”

“So he has a couple of years to . . .” Gadiman wasn’t sure of the word. It had something to do with the law or—

“Court her, yes,” Thorne grumbled the pointless phrase. “Even though he’s seven years older than her, I don’t see that as a hindrance. I’m almost six years older than my wife. Still, he should go to Edge while Shin’s there. He met Shin a few days ago and seemed to respect him enough.”

“Where’s Colonel Shin, anyway?” Gadiman asked, looking at the crowd.

“Not dancing. He’s over there, by the doors to the terrace. The man looking utterly wretched with the fake smile on his face?” Thorne snickered. “This isn’t his kind of thing. He suffered through dinner well enough, but as soon as the tables were removed, you would’ve thought they’d killed his favorite horse and served it for dessert. For the opening dance, he ducked out to the back terrace and left my in-laws to begin the music.” Thorne sniffed. “He returned with two corporals and two girls, and pushed them to the dance floor. Said he understood it was his job to ‘get the party started.’ That’s not behavior fitting for a future general.”

“Agreed,” Gadiman said, pretending he understood the appalling breach in protocol Colonel Shin had committed by not beginning the dance himself with his wife since his father couldn’t.

Gadiman spotted the colonel on the other side of the Hall standing stiffly a few feet away from anyone else. He seemed to be trying to find his daughter, while unconsciously patting the new brass buttons on his uniform. Gadiman couldn’t tell if he was making sure they were still there or trying to cover them up.

“Two corporals you say? Here?”

Thorne exhaled in disgust. “He invited more than a dozen enlisted men. From the corporal who got them through the traffic when they arrived, to the sergeant who led the search for his father. And when Snyder showed up with Sergeant Oblong, Shin sent out an entire platter of food for him and his private.” Thorne shook his head. “Those kind don’t belong here.”

But then he chuckled coldly and folded his arms. “I think the only thing that would make Shin more wretched was if someone tried to get him to dance. I don’t know where his wife vanished to. She seemed to avoid the floor just as quickly. Versula was intending to coerce Shin into asking her to dance, but she’s busy with somebody’s child somewhere.” Thorne sounded disappointed. “To think, some people even brought their young children. Yes, it’s for the families, but seriously—look at Colonel Nelt’s son over there, the lieutenant? See him trying to figure out why his wife can’t calm down that baby?” Colonel Thorne shook his head.

But Gadiman’s eye was caught by Colonel Shin’s movement. He was heading straight for Lieutenant Nelt and his wife who were sitting at a small table near a wall. Gadiman nudged Thorne, but the colonel was already watching.

Colonel Shin walked up to the young couple, smiling broadly. They were so involved with trying to calm down their squalling baby that they didn’t notice his presence until he put a hand on the lieutenant’s shoulder and said something to him.

The lieutenant looked at his wife in surprise, and she looked back at him, stunned. Her dark complexion flushed even deeper, while her husband’s brown skin seemed to pale to almost as light as Shin himself.

Asked them to leave, Gadiman thought to himself. Finally the colonel wields some power—

But to his astonishment—and judging by the gasp from Colonel Thorne, to his surprise as well—Colonel Shin lifted the baby from his mother’s arms. Then he did something that made half of the officers in the room open their mouths in dismay: he rubbed noses with the infant.

The tiny child stopped crying and stared at the strange large man holding him.

Colonel Shin nodded to the lieutenant. Reluctantly the young officer stood and took his wife by the hand. She went to protest to the colonel, but he just smiled and waved her off, then turned the baby so he wouldn’t see his parents walk to the dance floor of the Grand Hall.

Colonel Shin carried the baby, still staring transfixed at him, over to a set of unoccupied chairs in a quiet corner by the open doorway to the terrace.

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Nearly all of the eyes in the Grand Hall stared at him and conversations quieted. Several other people from adjoining rooms opened for the evening came to see what was causing the silent commotion. Even a few of the couples dancing strained their necks for a glimpse.

Colonel Shin was oblivious to it all. He sat with the baby on his lap and watched as he bat clumsily at the colonel’s medals. Shin removed the largest, shiniest medal, secured the pin in the back, and handed it to the little boy.

Gadiman and Thorne stood speechlessly. Finally Thorne choked out, “The Medal of Valor! He was the youngest recipient, and now that baby’s drooling on the Medal of Valor!”

General Aldwyn Cush came up behind the two men and put his arms on both of their shoulders. With a laugh he said, “I think Colonel Shin is looking forward to becoming a grandfather, wouldn’t you say?” He squeezed his son-in-law’s shoulder meaningfully. “I think we can help him out. Don’t you, Qayin?”

Mrs. Versula Thorne sidled up to them and took her husband’s arm. “Goodness, Qayin, look at Perrin. That baby is drooling all over—”

“The Medal of Valor!” Thorne said again, this time with contempt.

Mrs. Thorne shook her head. “What do they *do* up there in Edge?” she said in silky tones. “Soldiers taking care of babies?”

“Well, if what Miss Jaytsy said at The Dinner is to be believed,” Cush said, “Uncle Shem?”

Mrs. Thorne nodded once. “Yes, I caught that too. A master sergeant baby tender. You would think Perrin’s son would be more eager to join the army with an upbringing like that.”

The four of them, along with most of the guests in the Grand Hall and on the staircase who weren’t dancing, watched as the colonel beckoned to his son. He spoke to him for a moment, then the small teenage boy nodded and went to the food tables against the opposite wall.

He took a plate and eyed the contents of the leftovers table thoughtfully, taking items from different trays. His mother, still keeping watch, pointed out a few suggestions which her son added to the plate. The song ended and the lieutenant and his wife hurried back over to the colonel who was completely absorbed in holding their little boy and squeezing his chubby brown cheeks.

Their baby, still content with gumming the medal, didn't notice their arrival. The colonel gestured for them to go back to the dance floor.

The Nelts looked at each other hesitantly then went to the floor, casting backward glances at their son on the colonel's lap.

Mrs. Cush joined her husband, daughter, son-in-law, and Gadiman. "Why, isn't that charming!" she gushed when she saw Colonel Shin smiling down at the baby now leaning against his chest. "So that must've been his plan. Joriana said he refused to learn to dance and insisted he'd find another way to prove he was civilized."

General Cush chuckled, but Colonel Thorne gave her a disagreeing look. Versula Thorne simply raised a precisely plucked eyebrow.

But Gadiman sneered. This behavior was most unexpected, and most undignified. He'd heard of people in the north "going local," and now he had a perfect example in front of him. This was a mental condition Dr. Brisack should've been watching, not Gadiman.

The Shins' son had now returned and his father was pointing to various foods, shaking his head at some and nodding to others. From a distance it seemed as if they decided to give the baby a hard cracker. The baby grabbed it eagerly, then alternated between gumming the medal and chewing on the cracker. Colonel Shin grinned at the baby and finally raised his head to see the looks of amazement of his guests. His grin hardened as he eyed the crowd.

Everyone immediately turned back to their conversations, stealing only occasional glances of the colonel and the baby. It wasn't difficult to imagine what they were talking about.

But Gadiman continued to watch Colonel Shin. Relf Shin wanted him to become the High General of Idumea? How could a decorated nursemaid hope to achieve High General?

Gadiman noticed Mrs. Shin approach her husband and hold out her hands to take the baby.

"Finally!" Thorne muttered. "Enough of that behavior."

But Colonel Shin shook his head and gestured to his wife to come closer. She bent down and he whispered something in her ear that was amusing enough that she laughed and he winked at her. She kissed him on the head and left.

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“Unbelievable!” Thorne hissed to Gadiman. “How long is he going to make a fool of himself?”

A colonel from another village hesitantly approached Shin. He looked up from the baby, smiled, and patted the chair next to him. The colonel sat cautiously and Shin said something to him that made the colonel chuckle. He put a shielding hand over the medals on his uniform and shook his head.

Gadiman leaned against the wall to watch the colonels talk. The Thornes and Cushes were now engaged in a conversation with the Administrator of Science, giving Gadiman time to focus on Colonel Shin.

Shin seemed to keep one eye on his visitor and the other on the baby, occasionally running his hand over the child’s fuzzy black hair. After a few minutes the visiting colonel patted Shin on the back and left him. Doctor Brisack was waiting for the empty chair and approached.

At last, Gadiman thought to himself. Evaluate the instability of the man, and let me go home to a quiet evening—

But the inane doctor was all smiles, and Gadiman slouched against the stucco wall, discouraged because his night wasn’t about to get any shorter.

Shin nodded to the chair next to him and the Administrator of Family Life happily sat to chat. For two more songs, Colonel Shin hosted guests in that manner while entertaining the baby.

Gadiman failed to see what he should be picking up from this, except that the young couple had a free baby tender.

Most of the guests in the room had become accustomed to the scene playing out in the corner, but when the baby began to wail while the colonel spoke to an elderly widow, every eye looked at the colonel while trying to appear not to do so. He seemed concerned as he stood the baby on his lap. The infant’s chubby legs couldn’t yet fully support him, but the colonel looked into his hollering mouth. The musicians were playing an exceptionally loud melody, so that the baby’s parents didn’t hear the cries.

The colonel sat the baby back down on his lap, then did something that made even the most battle-hardened soldiers cringe—he deliberately put his thumb in the baby’s mouth and rubbed his lower gum. The baby grabbed his hand and chomped down, but the colonel only winced a smile and nodded.

Gadiman was completely at a loss for an explanation. “Disgusting!”

The elderly woman patted the colonel on the arm with an approving smile and shuffled off. The baby leaned against Colonel Shin as he stood up, now with his knuckle in the baby’s mouth. The musicians began a slower song, and the colonel repositioned the baby and began to rock.

Gadiman’s eyebrows furrowed in confusion. He became even more perplexed when Joriana Shin came to speak to the colonel and started swaying in time with her son, without a baby in her arms. She left to have a word with the ensemble’s conductor who nodded toward the colonel.

More people approached Colonel Shin with a brief comment or a lengthy discussion. He frequently paused in his conversations to reposition the baby or his finger. By the end of the second soothing piece, which the musicians seemed to play specifically for the colonel, the baby was asleep.

The young lieutenant and his wife came up to the colonel, flabbergasted. The mother held out her arms but the colonel shook his head, held the baby closer, and gave her a threatening look. She beamed at him, took her husband’s willing arm, and headed back out to the dance floor.

Gadiman didn’t understand any of it. But now he knew the Shin family was odder than he could have imagined.

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For the next two hours Colonel Shin, Baby Tender of The Dinner, entertained his guests over the sleeping infant cradled in his brawny arms.

Mahrree looked over at him frequently and grinned. He always loved babies. As handsome as he was wielding his sword, she always thought he looked even better snuggling a child.

By the time the tired musicians ended for the evening, Lieutenant and Mrs. Nelt, looking exhausted themselves, finally relieved the colonel. Mahrree watched from a non-interfering distance as Perrin gingerly placed their sleeping son in his mother’s arms and stroked the curly black hair on his head.

“Once he cuts that tooth, he’ll be a different baby. Until the



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next one starts to emerge. But he’s a good little boy. Enjoy him. Babies tend to grow up.”

The baby’s mother tiptoed to kiss the colonel on the cheek. Perrin smiled at her, a bit bashfully, which Mahrree thought was completely adorable.

“Sometimes it just takes an experienced set of arms,” he told Mrs. Nelt. “Years ago in the village green an elderly grandfather took a few minutes to calm down our infant son for us. I’ve never forgotten him and always wanted to repay that service. Now remember, Lieutenant,” Perrin said in a playfully stern tone to the young husband, “take her out of the house every few weeks. You both need the time alone. And since I’ll be leaving soon, I’m afraid you’ll have to find a new baby tender.”

The lieutenant chuckled. “Or maybe just get transferred to Edge?”

“Not a bad idea! I could use a tactful scribe to keep me out of trouble.” He winked as he saluted the young family away.

Mahrree finally found her moment to join her husband now that most of the guests were leaving. It was the first time she dared approach him.

During the dance he’d been flanked by officers and Administrators who so intimidated Mahrree that she kept to the food tables, signaling occasionally to the servants to fill them again. They really didn’t need her directions, but she needed something to do where no one of importance would expect anything significant of her.

She also kept a close eye on her daughter who danced at least five times with Lieutenant Thorne. Watching Jaytsy was supposed to have been her father’s task, but it seemed everyone in Idumea wanted a few moments with Perrin Shin.

Mahrree had been completely unprepared for that. She’d expected the two of them would huddle in a corner all evening and make impolite comments about the clothing they saw. She thought she’d only have to endure The Dinner alone, seated a little ways down the table from him.

But that was only the beginning of Colonel Shin, Most Popular Man at The Dinner. At the head of the three dinner tables sat the most powerful men of the evening: General Shin at one, General Cush at another, and Perrin uncomfortably at the third, smiling tightly at the guests who looked to him to begin the eating and

conversation.

To her surprise, Mahrree had been seated next to the Administrator of Science who thought nothing much of a little woman from Edge, and engaged in only the briefest of conversations with her.

Not that she didn't try to be polite to the man who had decided on several occasions that it was too dangerous to send expeditions to Terry's ruins. She was quite cordial when she asked if he'd be sending anyone north to research the devastation of the land tremors.

Hutchins merely curled a lip and said, "Enough destruction here to investigate."

When she told him Deceit had been smoking, and hinted that may be strong evidence that perhaps the volcano was connected to the tremors, his scowl became more pronounced and he said, "So have suggested others with more knowledge."

Then, after great consideration as to the potential harm of the question, and concluding that Hutchins wouldn't be able to do much with it, she suggested, "Terry, in his travels many years ago to the eastern ruins, found carvings describing what happens when a volcano erupts. Perhaps it may be a good idea to send a team in search of those etchings that told the history of Deceit?"

Hutchins only stared at her as if she were a pile of rocks that was growing duller by the minute—or maybe a pile of rocks would have been more intriguing to him—and eventually said, "Pass the butter, Mrs. Shin."

And that was the extent of Mahrree's dinner conversation.

Across the table Jaytsy fared better, seated between two older women, and far away from any handsome young men. Mahrree was sure Perrin had something to do with that.

Peto was next to his grandmother at the table headed by General Shin, who managed the night without pillows propping him up. A few times Mahrree was able to glimpse Peto between the heads of other guests, and saw his grandmother elbowing him to eat slower and less noisily.

The meal seemed to take all night, but it was likely only an hour. At least she could watch her husband since few conversations were sent her way. He soon relaxed in his position and was easily addressing everyone within the sound of his voice. There was decidedly more laughter from their table than from the other

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two, especially when Perrin engaged in good-natured arguments with Jaytsy, which delighted everyone around.

Jaytsy really was quite radiant that night, Mahrree was reluctant to admit as she watched her daughter who seemed much older than barely fifteen. There was something in her eyes, exactly like her father’s. How they could be so dark but sparkle so bright, Mahrree would never understand. She was far more poised than Mahrree expected, and Mahrree wished she had some of that confidence herself. When Jaytsy got up, at her grandfather’s insistence, to explain to everyone about the Strongest Soldier Race, Mahrree was in awe. Jaytsy commanded the room—and their laughter—with the kind of ease Mahrree used to pretend for herself. If only debating were still allowed, Jaytsy would have been astonishing on the platform in front of the village, just as her father had been.

So for most of The Dinner Mahrree sat in silence, trying bits of food here and there, and not really tasting any of the fantastic dishes set before her. The fact that she was seated next to an actual Administrator made her perspire, but she soon realize Relf was right; none of the Administrators were really interested in her, but in evaluating the health of High General Shin. Administrator Hutchins kept leaning toward Mahrree so as to have a better view of Relf. At one point Mahrree found herself staring at the man’s balding head instead of the roasted lamb on her plate, and privately mused how similar the two appeared.

Fortunately High General Shin was as robust as ever, eating well and talking loudly. Joriana beamed at her husband, relieved and triumphant that another Dinner was moving along remarkably well. Mahrree was happy for them both, but frequently checked the sand clock on the mantle over the fireplace to see just how much longer this was going to take.

A few times Perrin caught her eye during dinner as if plotting a way to get her to speak, but she’d barely shake her head and beg him with her eyes to not say anything to her. So he’d direct his conversations elsewhere while Mahrree just watched him and marveled.

Everyone seemed to enjoy lingering at the tables and eating from the trays of extraordinary dishes that were replaced with precise regularity by the staff Joriana had hired. Twenty servers hovered near each table ready to take platters emptying with food

only to replace them with something even more delectable.

Mahrree wished she could've joined them. She would've preferred to wash the mountains of dishes and chat with the workers rather than smile stiffly at people who regarded her with expressions that said, *You really don't belong here, dear.*

She didn't belong in the kitchen, either. She'd tried, though.

When everyone got up from the tables and wandered outside to enjoy the warm evening, a small corps of soldiers marched in and moved the chairs to the sides of the hallway while servants swifted away the dishes and linens. That's when Mahrree picked up a platter and carried it to the kitchen, fully intending to find an apron to make herself useful.

"Oh, no you don't, ma'am!" an older woman her mother's age chided. "You're a host. The host takes care of her guests, not the dishes."

"You don't understand—my mother-in-law is the host. I'm just . . . helping," which was her original excuse for coming to Idumea.

"Well, I don't want you!" the woman declared. "See that list? For the past eighteen years I've been perfecting it. Each of the seventy-three servants hired for this evening has a specific job on that list, and will be paid for those jobs. You take any of their work, they won't be pleased with you. And neither will Mrs. Joriana Shin. Because no one—"

Mahrree repeated it with her. "—wants to disappoint Joriana Shin. I know," she sighed. The woman took her firmly by the shoulders, spun her, and sent her out the door.

Already the soldiers had removed the borrowed tables to wagons waiting to convey them back to the garrison. The Great Hall was transformed almost instantly, and opened for dancing as the guests drifted back in to the sounds of the musicians tuning their instruments.

So Mahrree stood next to the two mansion tables pushed to the side of the Hall, as if it were her duty to occupy that space and oversee the consumption of the leftovers and desserts waiting on them.

From there she watched her husband pace nervously for the first three songs, smiling tensely, and nodding here and there. While a small part of her wanted to try whirling around the floor in his arms, she knew he'd then be obliged to hold *other* women

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in his arms, and that thought made her fists clench. She hoped that wedging herself between the tables signaled she wasn’t a part of the dancing either. The last thing she wanted was the arm of an administrator around her.

A few times during those first songs Perrin snagged equally nervous enlisted men and paired them up with shyly waiting young women. But the rest of the time he desperately looked for ways to be needed elsewhere so that he wouldn’t be obligated to ask anyone to dance.

Then he stole that baby, and everything changed.

“Does everyone in the world know Perrin Shin?” she murmured to herself when she realized there was a line of a dozen people waiting to talk to him. And for each person who came up to him, a light of recognition flashed in his eyes, and he greeted yet another person he knew long ago.

It was unsettling to realize he had a life she knew nothing about. Already there had been so many secrets revealed about his past, and now she felt a bit guilty for underestimating his importance all these years. Apparently he was much more than *merely* the commander of the fort in the next-to-smallest village in the world, as he always reminded her. His influence and changes to the army over the years had benefitted the entire world, and it seemed everyone wanted to shake the hand—or at least pat the back since the hands were occupied—of the officer who had improved the world’s ability to deal with its most persistent enemy. Maybe it was because everyone also saw him as the future High General of the world.

Mahrree’s mouth went dry whenever that thought strayed into her mind. She was a very ill fit for such a man. But she knew that, at some point in the evening, she’d have to stand next to him. Until then, no one paid her any attention. Halfway through the dancing she noticed that a silver tray of tiny tarts from Gizzada’s matched her dress. So, hoping to feel a connection to him and his back restaurant, she held it up for guests. Not one person looked her in the eyes as they took the tarts. She was little more than another piece of furniture, which was just fine by her.

But now that the dancing was over and guests were slowly leaving, Mahrree edged her way over to her husband. His eyes glowed with that familiar spark, because he had no idea how inadequate she was for him, and she loved him all the more for that.

She smiled broadly at him. “I see your plan failed. Holding a baby didn’t keep everyone away! But at least the wives think you’re civilized.”

He didn’t get a chance to answer, because Mahrree noticed more people were approaching to speak to Colonel Shin, and when she recognized a few of them, she steeled herself in preparation.

Coming with General Cush and his wife was Colonel Qayin Thorne and a tall, beautiful woman who, Mahrree noticed, had been eyeing Perrin all evening. Then again, everyone had been eyeing Perrin all evening.

But her, just a bit more so.

Behind them was another approaching couple, but Mahrree didn’t pay too much attention because the willowy blonde was headed straight for Perrin. Mahrree took a small step closer to her husband as the stunning woman stopped right in front of him.

He blinked at her without recognition, then his eyes grew large. “Versula!”

She smiled coyly and dragged her long sleek finger across the faded scar on his forehead. “I see you still have a way to remember me.”

“Every time I see my reflection,” Perrin chuckled with his teeth clenched.

“I think about that often,” Versula Thorne said as if speaking in code. “And wonder.”

Mahrree squinted ever so subtly. Versula Cush Thorne also regarded Mahrree as just a piece of furniture, but this time that bothered her.

Colonel Thorne, standing next to his wife, nodded curtly to Perrin. “Colonel,” was all he said in greeting. He ignored Mahrree, who apparently wasn’t a threat.

Perrin nodded back. “Colonel Thorne.” He reached out and pulled Mahrree close to his side. “Colonel, Mrs. Thorne—may I present my wife, Mahrree.”

Mahrree looked up into the perfectly carved face of Mrs. Thorne and felt Edgier than she had all night.

Versula Thorne, who finally acknowledged Mahrree with a slight smile, was even more exquisitely Idumeaic than Joriana. Her dress of light blue silk clearly had not heard of Perrin’s coverage specifications. Tightly wrapped around her girlish torso and

“Those kind don’t belong here.”

no higher, the dress left her creamy shoulders and arms completely exposed, along with a generous dose of cleavage. Most of the women at The Dinner seemed to be firm believers in cleavage, Mahrree couldn’t help but notice. Versula’s blond hair was similarly wrapped, as if the entire of her had been put together by a highly concentrated tornado.

Mahrree felt wholly out of place in the small crowd of people that now clustered around them.

Mrs. Thorne was the definition of sophistication, and her husband, with his sharply defined features and penetrating stare solely focused on Perrin, was as imposing as General Shin used to be to her.

Cush, with his substantial girth, could have been two men, especially with the authority with which everyone regarded him, and his wife had nearly caught up to him in size and influence.

Mahrree was used to the power that accompanied her in-laws, but she began to feel as if she were suffocating. Who was she compared to this group of important people? And there were even more to meet, standing behind them, and not a table with food nearby for her to use as a shield.

Mahrree sucked down her feelings of inadequacy and smiled at Mrs. Thorne. “It’s wonderful to meet you! I’ve heard a few stories since I’ve been here.”

“I’m sure you have,” Mrs. Thorne said pleasantly enough, her voice even smoother than her gown. She bobbed her head toward Perrin, “but not from him. You have a very charming daughter. She’s turned a few heads this evening.”

Perrin glanced over to the leftover food tables and saw Jaysy still talking with two young officers and two sons of officers, each several years older than her. She laughed at something, and the young men smiled in approval.

Perrin did not. He made a move to step away, but Mahrree caught his arm.

“She’s fine,” Mahrree whispered.

Perrin took a deep breath and looked at Versula with an expression Mahrree couldn’t interpret.

“Don’t *worry*, Perrin,” she simpered. “My Lemuel’s armed. He knows how to take care of a young woman.”

Perrin looked again at the little group and saw one of the young officers was Lemuel Thorne. Mahrree noticed Perrin’s boot

licker didn't seem as amused as the other three young men, but sat nearby on a chair by the table picking at the remains of a pheasant while studying Jaytsy.

Versula Thorne pulled Perrin's attention away from them by saying, in a tone as rich as cream, "Quite a show you put on with that baby."

Perrin turned back to her again, startled as if at first not understanding what she said. "Oh, oh, *that*. I was just looking for a friendly face, someone who wouldn't expect me to dazzle them with anything witty." He smiled at Mahrree. Then he pulled her even closer to him.

Mahrree hid a smirk. She suspected there were a few more stories she needed to hear. Versula Cush Thorne still made him nervous, and she didn't have a stick in either hand.

"Well, Perrin, with any luck, you can be holding another baby in just a couple of years." Mrs. Thorne smiled, watching closely for his response.

Perrin's face was the very definition of bewilderment.

"Your daughter? She could give you your own grandchild in a couple of years."

"Jaytsy?" Perrin said so loudly that, across the Great Hall, she stopped talking and looked over at him. She tilted her head as if asking what he wanted, and he waved her off.

Mrs. Thorne laughed in a manner that suggested she'd practiced it to be just the right pitch, length, and tremor. "Yes, of course! Goodness, Perrin, scare the poor thing."

"We were nearly twice her age when she was born," Perrin said, squeezing Mahrree's shoulders and jostling her a bit in his earnestness.

Mahrree chuckled stiffly. "I don't think we're ready for her to do anything so, so *grown up*. Sometimes I think *we're* not really grown up yet!"

Perrin nodded at that.

"There's nothing wrong with having your child early and getting on with life," Versula said. "I haven't missed out on anything. Just because Perrin was exceptionally slow to get around to parenthood doesn't mean your children will be."

Perrin and Mahrree looked at each other, the thought never having occurred to them before.

"Come now," said Mrs. Cush, her several chins jiggling.



“Those kind don’t belong here.”

“Look at them over there. You come back to Idumea and that sweet little thing will have her pick of husbands! And I can think of a *perfect pick* already,” she giggled.

“Now, Mother,” Versula said reprovingly, “it’s not our place to interfere. To suggest and give ideas, yes, but full-out interference? No!” The women laughed together in a practiced chorus, but Mahrree just put on a polite smile.

Perrin let out a small groan only his wife heard and released his hold on her. “If you’ll excuse me ladies, gentlemen, I’ve yet to meet a few people tonight.”

He strode to the food table as the Cush women giggled in unison. The four young men quickly got to their feet and faced the colonel. Annoyed, Jaytsy put her hands on her hips.

General Cush chuckled. “Mahrree, think you should go rescue those poor boys? If anyone can handle young men, I understand it’s you.”

Mahrree shook her head. “This is a father’s domain, General. Perrin has it well in hand.”

They were out of earshot, but Perrin seemed to be introducing himself. As he shook the hand of one boy, his left hand caught another by the shoulder as the young man tried to make a less-than-subtle exit. Jaytsy was insulted, embarrassed, and furious.

Lemuel Thorne had jumped from his chair and stood at attention, and the other young officer, still in the clutches of the colonel, realized too late that he should’ve done the same thing.

Colonel Thorne stepped away from his wife and in-laws to watch his son. He nodded slightly to Lemuel and his son returned it. Perrin was too busy trying to meet the third boy while holding on to the other two to notice the Thornes’ silent communication. But Mahrree saw it and wondered what the message may have been.

She was aware of the other couple nearing as she watched her husband, but didn’t think much of them until she heard, “Mrs. Shin, I’m Doctor Brisack, Administrator of Family Life.”

Every muscle in Mahrree’s body tensed.

“I spent a most entertaining afternoon with your husband last week, and of course saw you when we presented you with that certificate, but I haven’t yet had the pleasure of formally meeting you.”

Mahrree forced her attention away from her husband’s show

and turned, with her Dinner smile in place.

She knew who this was: the doctor who perfected The Drink. The man who improved the means to deny her and thousands of other women a dozen children.

She analyzed him, expecting to see a monster, but his pale blue eyes were gentle, and the wrinkles around them reminded her of Hogal Densal. Something in his expression twinkled with a genuinely pleasant demeanor.

“And this is my wife,” he added as an afterthought, not bothering to mention her name. “Mrs. Shin, we were wondering, why did General Cush call you an authority on young men?”

His wife had a sweet smile on her wrinkling face. “I’m having difficulty picturing it, I must admit.”

They weren’t what Mahrree expected at all. They could have been Hogal and Tabbitt Densal’s friends in another time and place. “I’m not a real authority, sir. But I teach some of the troubled teenage boys in Edge,” she explained. “It seems I’m responsible for them during the day, and the colonel is responsible for them in the evening and night. We have a bit of a theft problem.”

The Administrator nodded sadly. “As do we.”

His wife elbowed him. “Maybe the Shins could help write up your new parenting guide, after the emergency guide is completed.”

Administrator Brisack nodded again, thoughtfully. “Well, I’ve only asked doctors for their input, but the Shins might have some interesting tips.”

“A guide?” Mahrree asked.

“We seem to have a whole new generation of parents who know nothing of parenting,” Doctor Brisack said, his voice full of concern. “Since we have only one or two children—”

*Whose fault is that?* Mahrree thought bitterly. She was getting better as saying these things in her head and trapping them there. She couldn’t remember one potentially libelous thing she had said all night, and she wasn’t about to start now that it was ending.

Strangely, she began to feel calmer. This man didn’t invent The Drink. He just made it safer and less painful. He wasn’t the mastermind behind the idea. But still, he contributed—

Mahrree heard him continue.

“—then don’t see grandchildren for another twenty to thirty

“Those kind don’t belong here.”

years, we older generations don’t seem to remember any wisdom to pass down from our parenting days.”

“The lieutenant’s wife—the mother of that baby Perrin held this evening—she didn’t seem to know anything about cutting teeth,” Mahrree told him. “I learned that from the mothers who came to visit me right after I had my babies. And I learned everything else on Holy Days after the meetings. We shared midday meals, and everyone sat around and talked about parenting successes and disasters.” Her voice faded as she felt a sudden sting of homesickness. Tonight Edge seemed a thousand miles away, and a hundred years ago, and she yearned to be there again right now.

The Administrator nodded at her with only partial understanding. “Whatever method you have in Edge for communicating how to parent, we no longer have in Idumea.”

“And not so much in Edge anymore, either,” Mahrree said, surprised at how tears were springing to her eyes. She fought them down.

“That’s why we need a guide,” Doctor Brisack said. “I’ve been—”

Giggles from Mrs. Thorne and the Cushes drew their attention. They were fully involved in watching Perrin sit down the boys to give them an impromptu speech. None of them looked too happy about it, but none were about to walk out on the colonel.

Jaytsy had stormed off to appeal to her grandmother, who was gently pushing her aside to speak to another woman. General Shin sat on the sofa in conversation with an older man by the front door, glancing periodically over at his son with a wry smile. Colonel Thorne continued to observe Lemuel’s every movement, most likely to give his son a review later.

Perrin was now making large gesturing movements. One looked suspiciously like a vicious cutting motion which made all four young men flinch in unison. Mrs. Thorne and the Cushes tried to suppress laughter as each of the wide-eyed young men quickly shook their heads at whatever Colonel Shin had just told them, and their mouths all said, “No, sir!”

Brisack chuckled. “Now he’s surprising me at every turn,” he muttered under his breath. In a louder voice, he said to Mahrree, “I realize you’re very busy, but perhaps it’s not such a bad idea. If you and the colonel remember any of that great advice you learned, could you write it up and send it to me some time?”

We're seasons away from anything ready for distributing, but—"

"We'd be happy to help, Dr. Brisack," Mahrree told him, wondering what was 'surprising' the doctor about her husband. "Curious, though, that you'd assume that doctors are the best authorities on child rearing. Their perceptions would likely be only medical, maybe developmental, but certainly not emotional. Unless you live day in and day out with a child, you simply wouldn't know. I'd assume the best way to learn how to handle a two-year-old is to ask the parents of a three-year-old."

Mrs. Brisack nudged her husband in the ribs, likely because she'd suggested the same thing.

But if her husband noticed, he didn't indicate it. Instead, he looked at Mahrree with an earnestness that she could only have labeled as adoration, although that was ridiculous. Why would an old Administrator regard her in such an inappropriate way?

Unsettled by Brisack's odd reaction, she continued on, unthinkingly. "I must admit I'm sad that such information no longer comes from families and congregations, but has to come instead from the government."

She should've recognized right then that what she said was potentially libelous, but her mind had been in another direction and not in step with her words. And she'd been doing so well that evening, too . . .

"And what's wrong with the government giving direction on families?" a loud voice rose up behind Mahrree.

She held her chest as she turned around. A tall man with slicked dark hair, weasel-like eyes and a face in a fixed scowl stared hard at her.

Administrator Brisack sighed. "I heard you were expected to be here tonight, but I hadn't seen you anywhere. The Chairman will be pleased to hear you made it after all. Mrs. Shin, may I present Mr. Gadiman."

Mahrree, taken aback by the man's sudden appearance, didn't fully hear his name as she dutifully went to take his hand. Perrin, returning from his lecture, must have seen her expression when Doctor Brisack finished the introduction.

"—Administrator of Loyalty."

She heard *that* part. The polite smile Mahrree had practiced all night now froze in terror on her face.

Administrator of Loyalty.

“Those kind don’t belong here.”

The most formidable man in the world, standing right in front of her, and grasping her fingers.

Gadiman separated his lips in an awkward snarl that was probably intended to be a smile.

In just a fraction of a second Colonel Shin stepped between Gadiman and Mahrree, and somehow managed to slip his hand into Gadiman’s instead.

“We haven’t been formally introduced. I’m Colonel Perrin Shin, and I’m happy you were able to make it tonight.” It was fortunate that he’d practiced that line over three hundred times, because now it actually sounded natural.

Mahrree found herself staring thankfully at the back of her husband and wondered if anyone would notice her slinking away. She took a step back right into Mrs. Brisack.

Startled, she spun around to hear, “As my husband was saying, Mrs. Shin, the idea would be to distribute this information as soon as babies are delivered, to help the new parents know what to anticipate in the future.”

Mahrree stared at the woman for a moment, trying to regain her composure. She was vaguely aware that Perrin was talking to Gadiman about something trivial as a diversion. As the words from Mrs. Brisack settled on her brain, Mahrree nodded and something came out of her mouth that she hoped later made sense.

“Yes, yes, good idea. Maybe even before the babies are born, to give parents something to read in those dull weeks before the baby comes. There’s little time for reading afterward. Perhaps the midwives could give some information too, for what to expect in birthing.”

Administrator Brisack smiled. “Already interviewing some. I’m even considering having government-certified midwives, as we do with teachers, to make sure all are giving the same information.”

Mahrree’s mind was still on the man behind her, whose presence made her forehead bead with sweat. “As long as it’s the very best information, that should be a good idea,” she said hesitantly.

A swift movement to the side of her caused her to jump. “And what do you mean by *that*, Mrs. Shin? *The very best information?*” Gadiman asked severely.

Mahrree's eyes widened and she suddenly understood what a worm feels like when it stares up at a bird. For some reason she'd always thought a man like Gadiman in the position he held would be subtle, maybe even terrifyingly calm. But he was a starving gull, squawking and demanding.

Instinctively she was struck with the desire to kick it away, but instead she said sweetly, "I mean nothing at all, sir. I have every confidence in the good doctor that he'll do an excellent job." *Keep the rest of the words in your head*, she chanted to herself. Keep the rest of the words in your head.

Gadiman's mouth twitched, as if he was waiting for something more. Perrin moved behind his wife and put a protective hand on her shoulder. She waited to feel his finger in her back.

"Is that all you have to say?" Gadiman probed.

Perrin squeezed his wife's shoulder, but she needed no guidance tonight, especially since she remembered her father-in-law's advice.

"Yes Administrator, I believe that's about all I have to say. I'm rather tired from talking all night! But did you get anything to eat, Mr. Gadiman? There are still quite a few selections on the table over there. May I help you get a plate?"

Gadiman's jaw shifted. "No, thank you. I've had enough. It was—" He visibly struggled to find a suitable word. "*—nice* to meet you this evening. Good night." He stepped away toward the front doors, nodded brusquely to the High General, and left.

When Mahrree finally breathed out, it was louder than she intended.

"Do you know much about dogs, Mrs. Shin?" Doctor Brisack asked her, pulling her eyes away from the door.

She'd completely forgotten that another Administrator was standing next to her, but there was nothing threatening in his expression. Quite the contrary; he seemed to be as relieved as she was that Gadiman was gone.

"Unfortunately, yes," she said, surprised at the change of topic.

Brisack smiled kindly at her. "Some dogs are all bark and snarl, and you put up with it because, well, there *has* to be a dog somewhere," he said meaningfully.

Mahrree smiled. Brisack was certainly worth more than a slip of silver. She likely misread his earlier expression.

“Those kind don’t belong here.”

“You don’t like dogs, Administrator?” Perrin asked.

Doctor Brisack winced. “Not since my wife had this little snippy thing—”

“She was a wonderful animal!” Mrs. Brisack interrupted. “She just hated you!”

Mahrree, grateful for the lighter moment, laughed at the good-natured sneer Doctor Brisack sent his wife. “I’m a cat person myself,” she said, “but my husband isn’t.”

The Administrator cringed. “Oh, the only thing worse than a dog is a *cat*! Most temperamental, unpredictable animals in the world. Now, the kind of animal to have around is a fish. Preferably one you pull out of the river and fry along the bank.”

Everyone laughed, and Mahrree marveled that she was actually enjoying the company of an Administrator.

“You’d enjoy the fishing in Edge, Brisack,” Perrin told him. “By the beginning of the Harvest Season, you can feed an entire family for two days on just one fish. The warm waters from the forest grow them to the size of an average dog.”

“Spoken like someone who’s spent time in the rivers, I see,” Dr. Brisack chuckled.

“Come up some time,” Perrin said, “and I’ll show you my son and mine’s favorite spot.”

Brisack smiled at the invitation. “I’ve been meaning to get up there. Several of us doctors who used to work with the university are doing experiments with the products from the mud volcanoes. While many are lethal, some combinations are proving to have greater medical uses than we ever realized. I wanted to get some new specimens in large amounts, especially sulfur, and no area is more active than the forests near Edge. Except for now maybe Moorland,” he added thoughtfully. “Might as well bring my fishing pole, too!”

A quick whistle from the front door turned Perrin around, and his father motioned for him to join him. Standing next to his sofa was a thick-set man that appeared to be made of one continuous muscle.

“Excuse me, please, Doctor and Mrs. Brisack,” Perrin said to his guests. “It seems there’s someone else I haven’t met yet.”

“Looks like the director of the kickball league,” Doctor Brisack told Mahrree as his wife drifted away to croon at an older woman she obviously was friends with. “Everyone wants to meet

your husband, it seems.”

“I suppose so.” Mahrree was about to make her excuses to the Administrator when he gently took her arm.

“I wanted a moment with you, Mrs. Shin,” he said in hushed tones. “I couldn’t help notice that tonight you were . . . rather much quieter than last week.”

She chuckled a bit uncertainly. “Oh, I just had nothing to—”

“During dinner,” he interrupted, firming his grip on her, “you hardly said two words, and while I agree that the Administrator of Science is less interesting than the soil he collects, I would have expected you may have had something to say to *him*.”

Mahrree blinked. “I, uh . . . You weren’t even at my table, Doctor Brisack.”

“But I had a clear view of you from mine.” He looked deep into her eyes, searching for something. “I’m just concerned,” he said quietly, “that perhaps you were told to keep quiet tonight.”

She was mystified. “By who?”

“By someone who wasn’t too pleased with your performance in front of the Administrators the other morning. By someone who was jabbing your back so excessively that you likely bruised.”

Mahrree’s mouth fell open in surprise. “How did you know about that?”

“My life’s sole aim is to analyze the human condition, Mrs. Shin. I’m fascinated by pain, and watch for it in everyone I meet.” In a worried whisper he added, “Has he hurt you? Threatened you?”

Mahrree’s shoulders sagged as she understood. “Doctor Brisack, no! My husband is the most wonderful man I could ever have hoped for.”

Brisack wasn’t convinced. “Is he really, or has he conditioned you to believe that he is?”

Mahrree watched her husband at the front door. He respectfully nodded to the kickball director and then, noticing one of his young audience members trying to sneak out the door behind him, abruptly turned to grab his hand and pump it more enthusiastically than necessary.

Jaytsy put her hands on her hips again, and the young man sent only a fleeting glance at her before he rushed out the door.

Mahrree noticed that Brisack was watching Perrin too, as if



analyzing him.

Suddenly Mahrree had an idea, something that could fix much of what she did last week. “Doctor Brisack, I realize you know nothing about my husband—”

He grunted at that as if nothing could be further from the truth.

“—but while he may appear to be a bear of a man, he’s truly gentle and loving. You saw him with that baby tonight. That wasn’t an act, Doctor; that’s how he genuinely is. Compassionate, and also very concerned with the human condition, in his own way. I’m reluctant to confess something so intimate, but I want to allay your concern: he quite adores me, and I him. What happened last week in front of the Administrators—that was more of a . . . a misunderstanding than anything else. We were both rather nervous to be there, as you can imagine, and since he was standing behind me, he didn’t hear clearly what I was saying. He *misheard* some things, and worried that some Administrators would *mishear* as well.” She looked into Doctor Brisack’s inquisitive gaze. “He just wanted to make sure I represented everything appropriately.”

“But I heard he escorted you out rather hastily,” Brisack tried one more time.

“He did,” Mahrree acknowledged, “but then we talked and I explained to him all that he misunderstood. Did you also hear that we walked home happily arm-in-arm?” she said in a teasing tone that turned accusatory. She wasn’t used to having so much of her personal life exposed. “Or did your ‘extra eyes’ leave us alone once they saw us hiding in the trees on the campus and kissing like lovesick college students?”

Brisack blinked rapidly, taken aback. “Uh . . . I don’t exactly employ spies, Mrs. Shin,” he stammered. “I just wanted to make sure you’re all right.”

She smiled at him in a mollifying manner. “I’m fine. And so is my husband. He’s a very passionate man, Doctor Brisack, and never does anything half-hearted. He’s wholly devoted to me and to Edge. In fact, I don’t think the villagers will ever realize just how much he loves them.”

Brisack swallowed and nodded, surprised by Mahrree’s adamancy. “Of course, of course,” he said, then added, “He’s also married to a very passionate woman.”

“Works nicely, we think,” she said and, hoping to put an end to the conversation that was growing increasingly uncomfortable, she used Relf’s tried and true diversionary tactic. “Would you like to take something home with you? As you can see, we have plenty of food left over—”

Sensing their discussion was over, Brisack smiled thinly. “Actually, I was asked to bring back a slice of cake for Nicko Mal, which has already been set aside for me, but thank you anyway, Mrs. Shin.” His eyes darted to the side and noticed his wife approaching, as well as Perrin returning from saying goodbye to the kickball director. In a whisper Brisack said, “I see our lesser halves returning to us.”

“What was that?” Mahrree asked, sure she didn’t hear him correctly. But Brisack had already put on a new, albeit pained, smile on his face for his wife.

“Well Mrs. Shin,” Mrs. Brisack said pleasantly, “sorry to have left you, but I haven’t seen my friend there since she moved to Orchards, and I simply had to compliment her on the shoulder bag. Exquisite! It was to live for! So many jewels! Hint, hint,” she elbowed her husband again. “Did you see it, Mrs. Shin?”

Something in Doctor Brisack’s smile turned brittle.

Mahrree smiled pleasantly. “I’m sorry, I didn’t. I supposed I don’t have much of an eye for such things.”

“Ah, well,” said Mrs. Brisack, patting her arm. “We’ll train you yet in what to notice. Lovely evening, dear. Wonderful to meet you, but it’s late and we must be going home.” To her husband she said, “Have you Nicko’s cake?”

Doctor Brisack sighed and answered dully, “Waiting by the door.”

Perrin, who had returned, shook Administrator Brisack’s hand. “Thank you for coming, and I mean it about that fishing trip.”

Some distant light sparked on again in Brisack’s eyes. “I think I’d like that. Thank you both for a most entertaining evening.” He fixed his gaze so earnestly on Mahrree that she felt her insides squirm. But then he was off, pulled away by his wife as if he was an indolent school boy and she was his long-suffering teacher.

Perrin put his arm around Mahrree again as the Brisacks made their way to the line of those waiting to say goodbye to Relf

“Those kind don’t belong here.”

and Joriana, including the Cushes and Thornes who were in discussion with the Shins.

Finally alone with her husband, Mahrree said. “Brisack seems to be a decent man. Although,” she added slowly, “he seemed a bit odd at times, as if he was doing more than just having a conversation, but also carrying on some kind of analysis which kept getting in the way. I felt like I was being evaluated.”

Perrin shrugged. “Probably. I heard he has studies and research going on all the time. Now,” he turned to her, “you need to think carefully. Did you say anything, *anything at all* to anyone that might get back to Gadiman? I have no idea how long he was here or why.”

“I don’t either!” Mahrree said in a panicky tone, remembering the scowling man’s face. She thought for a moment. “I did speak for a minute to the Administer of Science during dinner, and suggest that he send a group to the west to investigate the etchings about Mt. Deceit.” She cringed. Now that she thought about it, that was a rather forward thing to say.

“And?” Perrin nudged her.

“All he did was stare for a moment, then asked me to pass him the butter dish.”

Perrin smiled partway. “Figures. What else? What did you say to Brisack when Gadiman was there?”

“Just that we would help with ideas for their parenting guide,” she remembered. “And that I teach teenage boys. I think Gadiman may have heard all of that.”

Perrin considered. “No, I think you were safe there as well. He seemed rather disappointed there was nothing else said, so I think you passed the test, Mrs. Shin. We can let you out in public! Now, I hate to ask this, but have you seen Peto lately?”

“He found a few boys and went outside with his new kickball. I really don’t want to know the condition of his suit, but he seemed happy enough. Why?”

Perrin nodded toward the door. “That was the director of kickball in Idumea my father wanted me to meet—Mr. Flamafoul.”

“I’m beginning to smell something foul,” she murmured.

“Apparently our son has ‘natural ball handling skills,’” Perrin said.

Mahrree frowned. “But they don’t *handle* a ball in that

game. They *footle* it.”

Perrin sighed. “He spent the last hour in the back garden with Peto, tutoring him.” He looked significantly at Mahrree.

She returned the look. “Why was he even here, may I ask? Could it be that your father invited him?”

Perrin growled quietly under his breath. “Flamafoul told me boys can start playing for the professional teams at age eighteen.”

“When they should be starting at the university,” Mahrree pointed out.

“But many boys start training with the junior league here earlier, around age *sixteen*,” he emphasized. “Their families even move to Idumea to be closer to the trainers.”

Now Mahrree growled. “And not too coincidentally, in two years our son will be sixteen.”

“And should we happen to move here,” Perrin said in annoyed undertones, “Flamafoul would be most interested in seeing our son participate. Wants our whole family to be his guest in his reserved box at the arena next week for the opening matches. He wants to introduce Peto to the team.”

“This is all your father’s doing, isn’t it?” Mahrree hissed. “He’s getting Peto to come here so you’ll have to follow. Ooh, and just this evening I was thinking how much I’ve grown to like Relf Shin!”

Perrin chuckled mirthlessly. “They’ve been in Idumea too long. Underhandedness is rather a way of life here.”

Mahrree caught Relf’s eye in the distance, and the High General had the decency to look a tad uncomfortable under her glare that said, *I’m on to you, old man*.

“And I’m afraid Jaysy’s already been won over to Idumea,” Mahrree murmured.

“Nah, she’s not,” Perrin flimsily waved that away. “Nothing here to interest her . . .” His voice dropped off as he saw the Thornes take their turn to say good night to the Shins.

Jaysy stood next to her grandmother, beaming. Lemuel took her hand and kissed it good night.

Perrin grumbled.

Mahrree grumbled back.

Versula waved a subtle farewell to them—more so to Perrin than Mahrree, she suspected—and Qayin Thorne tipped his cap which he had just put on to go out into the night. Perrin and

“Those kind don’t belong here.”

Mahrree plastered on their Dinner smiles and waved back.

Lemuel was saying something quietly to Jaytsy which required her to lean in very close to him. Whatever he whispered into her ear made her blush. She covered her mouth and giggled as he bowed slightly before following his parents out the door.

Mahrree exhaled and felt her husband bristle next to her. “I have to admit, I’m not too keen about a match between those two right now,” she said in a low voice. “I just don’t like the parents interfering that way. My mother tried to get me involved with so many different men—”

Perrin looked at her askance. “Really? Who?”

“Oh, I don’t remember anymore. The point is, she’s just too young. I’ll see if I can find out from Jaytsy what she thinks of him. Maybe I’m worrying about nothing. But I still think something like this needs to be her choice, not the choice of her future in-laws.”

Perrin went positively rigid next to Mahrree. “In-laws,” he sneered.

She patted his arm. “Perrin, I know you’ve said this before, and even though it was an interesting evening, and I met some intriguing people, and the food was delicious, and the musicians exceptionally talented, and this dress feels amazing, and you look fantastic as usual, and our daughter had the time of her life as did, apparently, our son—it’s just that when I saw Jaytsy in the arms of all those young men, and now whispering with Lieutenant Lemuel Thorne, what I really want to say is—”

“You hate Idumea?” he guessed.

“Yes!”

“That’s my wife!” he said, hugging her.

When the last of the guests finally left, General Shin, looking pale and exhausted even though he’d been sitting on the sofa for the last several hours, said to his son, “I think you made an impression tonight, even if it was only with the women. I overheard many wives say to their husbands, ‘Why didn’t you ever hold the baby?’ There may be some men less than happy with you.”

“The only thing that matters,” Perrin said to his father, “is if *you* are less than happy with me.”

“Of course not, son,” Relf smiled. “Once again, you’ve exceeded my expectations. Now, had I known I could have held a

## The Mansions of Idumea

baby to get out of dancing for all of these years, I would have done it, too. Someone would have had to show me which way was up, though.”

“Now, High General,” Mahrree said sharply, her arms folded but her eyes throwing daggers, “what was this about a certain kickball director? Evaluating my son? For playing in Idumea?”

Joriana sent Mahrree a look that claimed, *I wasn't part of this*, while her husband solidly held Mahrree's gaze.

Relf cleared his throat and said, “I'm a bit peckish, Mahrree. Would you mind getting me a plate of something to snack on? There's still quite a bit on the tables over there . . .”

## Chapter 17 ~ “What we need is someone who has a special talent.”

Shem sat at the large forward command desk checking the list left for him by Grandpy Neeks. With a piece of charcoal he put a mark next to the last name at the bottom of the list and smiled.

“You got them all, Sergeant,” he declared. “Everyone’s reserves, along with the fort’s, are safely gathered in at the second schoolhouse. Good work.”

The staff sergeant standing in front of the desk nodded and smiled. “Thank you, sir. It was a bit of a race toward the end there, but before dark fell we got the last of it in. And we have a dozen soldiers guarding it, just as Karna ordered. Edge’s food supply is secure.”

Master Sergeant Zenos sat back and sighed. “I can’t tell you how relieved I am. Major Karna and I have been worried—”

“Everyone’s been worried, sir,” the sergeant confided. “I thought the villagers would be reluctant, but with those pesky teenagers sneaking around—”

Shem nodded. “At least now we have one of *them* on our side.”

The sergeant grinned. “Private Hili has been most helpful, sir. Major Karna never would have rounded up that last group without Hili leading us to their hiding spots in the marshes.”

“Glad to see the soldiers are recognizing the value of Private Hili now,” Zenos said.

“Indeed. I never doubted him,” the sergeant proclaimed, and Zenos grinned. The staff sergeant was one of the few who be-

lieved Poe was sincere in his desire to help the fort, while dozens of other soldiers who had the pleasure of chasing him down and throwing him into incarceration a couple of years ago watched him dubiously. But not anymore.

Now everyone in the fort trusted him too, especially since he informed them that he spied fifteen men he knew from Moorland sneaking over to Edge. They were intent on finding Edge's food reserves, Hili learned from an old acquaintance who didn't realize Poe had recently switched sides. Shem had sent out his newest recruit in his old clothes to find out what was happening in the marshes. Poe came back with the news that apparently no one wanted gold and silver anymore, but the price of a bag of sugar or a jug of mead in Quake and Mountseen was now equal to that of a small house.

"Never realized food would become so valuable," the sergeant said, reading Shem's mind. "But now that it's all under guard everyone will sleep better tonight. Well, at least those that aren't on the night shift like us."

Shem chuckled with the sergeant, feeling for the first time in weeks a little bit of weight lifted from his shoulders. He opened his mouth to respond, but a voice coming up the stairs and exclaiming loudly stopped him.

"So to add insult on top of injury—or maybe it's just another injury on top of injury," Major Karna complained as he reached the top of the stairs, "it's now snowing!" He took off his cap covered with a white layer, and dropped it on the desk in disgust. Bits of snow fell off and melted in wet clumps on the wood. "As if Nature hasn't handed us enough troubles, it decides to see what else it can throw at us!"

"I don't believe it," Shem breathed as he balled up the snow from the top of the cap.

"All the years I've been in Edge, I never remember a snowfall this late." Karna put his hands on his waist and looked around the office for who might be responsible for the storm. A corporal in the corner copying reports to be sent to Idumea cowered in innocence.

"And certainly nothing so wet and heavy," Shem mused as he looked at the ball of snow rapidly melting in his hand.

"You finished the Shins' roof, right?" Karna asked.

Shem, still examining the snow, nodded. "Poe and I moved



“What we need is someone who has a special talent.”

their mattress back in yesterday, and not a moment too soon. This snow—it’s very heavy.”

“Oh, that’s not good,” the sergeant murmured.

“Why?” Karna asked urgently. “What does it mean?”

Shem swallowed. “Snow isn’t necessarily bad,” he started. “As long as it doesn’t freeze tonight.”

Karna rubbed his stubbly chin. “Freeze? Would that kill the pea plants?” He came from a family of wagon makers, not farmers.

“Maybe not,” Shem said, “but the bigger concern is, it could destroy all the blossoms that are just starting to bloom on the fruit trees.”

“No blossoms, no fruit later,” clarified the sergeant, whose family owned orchards.

Karna sat down hard on a chair. “Is there anything we can do?”

Shem shook his head as he wiped his wet hand on his trousers. He stood up, walked to the large windows that gave them unobstructed views of the forest and Edge, and pressed his face close to the window to see out into the dark night. It had the faint glow that usually accompanied a snowstorm. “We pray.”

“I leave the praying to you and Perrin,” Karna sighed. “You know that, Shem.”

“Now’s as good as time as any to begin, Brillen.”

---

“Perrin, I’ve been thinking . . .” Mahrree started.

“Why?” he mumbled into his pillow.

“Because the mansion is finally quiet again—”

“I meant, why do you start thinking when I’m ready to go to sleep? It’s so late it’s well on its way to tomorrow. In the morning we have to finish cleaning up, then—”

“This will take only a minute.”

“Nothing with you ever takes only a minute,” he murmured.

“What did you say?”

“Just . . . talk already.”

“All right, I told you a couple of hours ago that I didn’t appreciate my mother trying to set me up with men. But I think I would have disliked it even more if she tried to discourage a po-

tential relationship.”

“Your minute’s about up.”

“She danced with him five times.”

“Who?” Perrin mumbled.

“Jaytsy. With Lemuel Thorne.”

Perrin groaned.

“Had my mother actively campaigned *against* someone, that might have driven me straight to his arms.” She paused.

“I’m listening,” he encouraged.

In triumph, Mahrree smiled to their dark bedroom. “Before we leave for Edge, I think we should invite the Cushes and Thornes over for dinner one night. Your families have been friends for so many years, after all. Let’s see if there’s anything between Jaytsy and that lieutenant. And Versula Thorne seems a nice enough woman,” she added, almost nastily.

His moan was long and low and loud.

She expected that. There was something about Versula—it was obvious—something more than just a crush gone wrong at age eleven. Perrin had always been very quiet about his teenage years, and Mahrree suspected that was because he hadn’t exactly spent them alone.

Not that Mahrree felt any threat from Mrs. Thorne, or worried that Perrin had any lingering feelings for her—the way he gripped her shoulder and pulled her close suggested he was desperate to keep her by his side.

But when a woman purposely—sensuously, almost—drags her finger across a scar she left long ago, and says things like, “I often think about that, *and wonder*,” a phrase that sounds like something meant to be known by only two people, it’s a pretty good indication she’s hoping *he* thinks and wonders, too.

And now Mahrree was wondering as well.

When he finally stopped moaning, Perrin said, “Mahrree, Mahrree, Mahrree . . . why now? Do we really have to do this now?”

“Why?” She tried hard to quiet her giggle, but she enjoyed his uneasy squirming. “Was there ever something *more* between you and Versula Thorne? Something you haven’t told me about yet, that maybe I should know before she comes over for dinner and *watches* you again? And *wonders*?”

He moaned longer than any other man in the world ever had.

“What we need is someone who has a special talent.”

They weren't about to get to sleep anytime soon.

---

In the middle of the night, the fort at Edge was in a panic.

“I can't think of anything else to do, Shem!” Karna said, nearly frantic, as they stood in the falling snow and stared at the disaster.

Shem shook his head slowly, trying to keep his own alarm in check. “Neither can I, Brillen. He has to be told, by someone who can relay the message best. But not by one of them. He hates the Administrative messengers.”

“But time and speed are critical right now!” Grandpy Neeks insisted, uncharacteristically wringing his hands. “Using them—as much as I distrust them—is the only option.”

Lieutenant Rigoff nodded and looked at the older men for direction.

“Not necessarily. What we need—” Shem sighed as a plan unfolded in his mind. It was the very best option . . .

. . . and the very worst thing he could think of doing. “What we need is someone who has a special talent.”

“What kind of talent?” Karna demanded.

“Someone good at *stealing* things.”

“Stealing things?!”

“Like perhaps horses,” Shem intoned wretchedly. “From the messenger service . . .”

---

Fifteen minutes later Shem Zenos and Brillen Karna faced a worried Qualipoe Hili in the stables. When he saw the bleak looks on the men's faces, he dismounted from his horse and saluted as smartly as he could.

“Sirs? You needed to see me?”

Major Karna looked sidelong at Master Sergeant Zenos, who studied the new private.

“Sit down, Poe,” Shem gestured to a bale of hay.

Poe's eyes flitted anxiously to Karna.

The major nodded for him to take a seat, so he did, nervous-

ly rubbing his palms on his trousers.

“Poe, what I’m about to ask, I *ask*—not order,” Shem said carefully. “If you turn me down, I understand completely, and there will be no repercussions whatsoever.”

“But if you choose to volunteer,” Karna told him, “*we* will take all the responsibility—”

“No, Karna—just me,” Shem interrupted. “You’re an officer. If you’re involved, and things go wrong, it’ll be much worse for you than for me.”

“No, Zenos,” Karna turned to him, “that’s not how—”

“What about Miss Robbing?” Zenos cut him off.

Karna swallowed.

“Would she really consider marriage to a man who just lost his commission?”

“Sirs, please,” Poe fidgeted. “What’s all of this about?”

The two men looked back at Poe, and he thought their expressions were surprisingly sympathetic.

“This will seal it,” Zenos said, suddenly unbuttoning his jacket. “Proves it was my idea. Don’t even bother, Brillen,” he said to the major who started to unbutton his own jacket. “No one would ever believe he’s an officer.”

“But they’d believe he’s a master sergeant?”

Poe grew impatient. “Sirs! What’s going on?”

Shem wrenched off his jacket in victory and held it out to Poe Hili. “A temporary promotion, so to speak. And,” he continued in a low tone, “a request of immense importance and of utmost secrecy.”

Poe looked at Major Karna for verification, and he nodded soberly.

“What is it, sirs?”

“Poe,” Shem began hesitantly, as if afraid to bring it up. “I know you’ve successfully stolen horses in the past. What we need to know is, just *how* successful were you?”

---

The next morning Mahrree woke up sore, exhausted, and surprisingly cold. She and Perrin had been up very late last night; first cleaning up what had to be put away before bed, then Perrin

“What we need is someone who has a special talent.”

confessing that yes, there had been a relationship off and on with a certain general's daughter when he was younger, but it was over a long time ago and he doubted there was anything left of it.

Now the morning had come far too early.

She shuddered to think that it was the clean-up day. Granted servant-soldiers would do most of the work, but she'd be expected to take notes on everything to remember “For next year,” as she had repeatedly heard from her mother-in-law.

She shivered under the blankets, wondered why for a moment, and snuggled closer to her husband. The room seemed lighter than it should be for this hour, and she peered open her eyes to see a strange brightness out the window.

She opened her eyes fully, sat up for a better look, and gasped.

It hit her then that *not once* since they'd come to Idumea had she ever looked to check the color of the sky.

She always did in Edge. Sometimes it was to remind herself of the reality of its color, and to prove to herself, once again, that despite the fact that everyone in the world had been conditioned to believe the sky was blue no matter what, it really wasn't. She wouldn't ignore the fantastic colors of the sunrise and sunset or the intensity of the star-filled sky with the two moons that slowly traversed it. But she also checked the sky each day to see when a storm might be approaching, analyzing the shapes of the clouds that drifted in from the north and east.

This storm had caught her completely unawares, and that realization tightened her chest.

Were there signs? Yes, yesterday had been unseasonably warm, with a northeasterly breeze—

She closed her eyes and groaned. Had she looked to the sky, just once, she would've noticed the signs. But she was like everyone else in Idumea, rushing around here and there, constantly inspecting this and that, but never looking up.

It was as if there was a drum in the heart of the city, pounding the same rhythm over and over again in a quietly hypnotic way: diSTRACtion, diSTRACtion, diSTRACtion. And she had fallen under its effect in record time.

“My darling wife, what have you done with the blankets?” Perrin mumbled. “It's cold in here.”

“It's cold because . . . because it's snowing!” Mahrree said,

not believing the words that came out of her mouth.

“What?”

“Get up and look for yourself!” She wanted confirmation that all of this wasn’t a just a weird dream.

“It doesn’t snow this late in the year around here,” Perrin murmured into his pillow. “Besides, last night was so warm and breezy—”

“Like before a snowstorm?” Mahrree gestured to the window.

With an exhausted groan, Perrin pushed himself up to prove her wrong. Instead, his mouth fell open. “If I didn’t see it with my own eyes, I wouldn’t believe it! Good thing The Dinner wasn’t today, instead of yesterday,” he said with a relieved smile.

Then it vanished.

“Oh no. Mahrree, whatever kind of weather we have in Idumea tends to be much worse in the north.”

Edge had been the furthest thing from her mind, she realized with a new pang of guilt. Now it was right in front of her.

“The plantings!” she breathed. “Edge’s crops! The fruit blossoms! Oh, Perrin, if everything freezes now—”

He didn’t feel the need to put it mildly. “Disaster.”

They scrambled out of bed and rushed to the window for a clearer view. At least three inches of heavy wet snow had fallen, and more was coming down. The trees, with their new leaves, caught and held the snow expertly, weighing down the branches. Many smaller ones had already snapped and the garden was littered with broken limbs.

Stunned, Perrin and Mahrree sat on the bed and stared.

“It might not freeze,” said Perrin, trying the new approach of optimism. “It might just stay warm enough, and the snow will be a good source of water.”

Mahrree closed her eyes. “How much do you think Edge will get, if we have so much already here?”

Perrin shook his head. “All we can do is wait and see. And pray.”

“The fort will tell us, right? How bad it gets?”

“They better. In the meantime, I’m going to the garrison to see about those reserves. Dr. Brisack’s little experiment is just going to have to wait for another calamity. We’re not going to be needing gold—we need food!”

“What we need is someone who has a special talent.”

“What are you going to do?” she asked as he started to put on his regular uniform, placed precisely on a chair next to the bed where it was always waiting.

“Go through the approved channels, as much as possible. I’ll work up some solid numbers first. We’re going to need several Administrators’ approval to release the reserves, but I can’t imagine how anyone would say no considering the mess that we may be facing.”

“How much?” Mahrree asked, pulling her knees up to her chest and shivering.

“I think we’ll need 12 wagonfuls. Less than 10% of their reserves,” he said as he finished buttoning his jacket. “And I’m going to get it.”

“Any excuse to get out of the mansion this morning.”

“Yep!”

---

Later that morning Mahrree stood at the window in the vast eating room dully sorting forks. Some belonged to the mansion, some to Mrs. Cush, and some to the garrison. She saw only half of what she was doing, because most of the time she watched out the thin clear glass for the snow to stop. She couldn’t help but remember Perrin’s assessment: Edge usually got twice as much as Idumea.

Maybe, for once, that wouldn’t be the case—

“That Peto—for someone so scrawny, he’s actually a good worker,” Joriana commented as she bustled into the room with a small crate of clean knives, next to be sorted. “He loaded nearly as many chairs as the soldiers. I told him he could ride to the garrison and help unload them. Thought he might like seeing the place. Someone will bring him back by midday meal. I can always trust the soldiers.”

“That’s fine,” Mahrree said absently. She stared down at a fork to identify its markings, but really didn’t see it.

Joriana put a motherly arm around her. “I’m worried too,” she confided. “This is a very odd storm. But Mahrree, there’s nothing you could’ve done about it even if you were in Edge. And when you go back at the end of next week, we can pack the carriage full of all kinds of supplies.”

“Thank you, Mother Shin,” Mahrree said dimly. “I guess I feel guilty. Here I am, enjoying myself, while at home—”

But Joriana spun her around so fast that Mahrree lost the fork somewhere under the table. “You’re enjoying yourself?” Joriana squealed.

“Well yes, of course I am—” But again Mahrree couldn’t complete her sentence because she found her face muffled into her mother-in-law’s shoulder. Joriana squeezed her so hard she nearly burst the seams on Mahrree’s dress—the fourth one Joriana had bought her.

“Oh, I *so* wanted you to have a good time! Perrin was quite the crowd pleaser last night, wasn’t he? Oh, but you—you were so quiet, and I was worried, but I was watching you and saw that you were smiling occasionally, and I just wanted everything to be perfect,” she said in a rush. She finally released Mahrree who tried not to gasp for breath too obviously.

“It was . . . it was perfect, Mother Shin. I don’t know how you brought everything together, or how it could have been more . . . perfect.”

Joriana clasped her hands and beamed. “Idumea’s not so bad, now is it? You *must* come back next year, and I’ll give you more say in what goes on. We could try something else besides dancing, you know. And then, in two years—”

Mahrree held up her hand to stop the gush that she feared would overwhelm her. “Let’s not talk about in two years, please, all right?”

Joriana sighed and nodded. “I know. You’re right. One year at a time.” Then, in a conspiring giggle, she said, “You *will* be back next year, won’t you?”

“Shouldn’t you be asking that of your son?”

Joriana winked at her. “I know where the real influence is. My son’s been so completely smitten with you from the beginning. From that first letter he sent home where he wrote, ‘I’ve met an interesting woman,’ I knew you had him firmly under your control.”

From the hall leading to the kitchen they heard Kindiri’s voice say softly, “Ahh . . . that is so sweet!”

Joriana raised an admonishing eyebrow at her eavesdropping cook, who scampered quickly away.

But Mahrree’s mouth hung open in surprise. “Really? I



“What we need is someone who has a special talent.”

wished I’d known I had him firmly under control.”

The women chuckled.

“Please, Mahrree,” Joriana gripped her arm and spoke so quietly that the maids in the other hall couldn’t listen in either. “Perrin could do such great things here; things that could influence the entire world.”

“I know,” Mahrree had to admit. “I didn’t realize until last night just how much influence he actually has.”

“Please help him realize his duty lies here, in Idumea. It’s not about mansions, or dinners, or looking handsome in brass buttons—which he did, didn’t he? I may have to have a word with Mrs. Cush about her daughter eyeing my son again—”

Mahrree rolled her hand at Joriana encouragingly.

“Oh, right, right—as I was saying, it’s not about any of that showy stuff. It’s about someone as smart and thoughtful and devoted as him doing the best work he can where the whole world can benefit. Surely you can see that Edge is just too small a stage for a man of his stature.”

That was the exact sentiment she felt last night, but didn’t dare put into words. Because once you put it into words, you’ve defined it, and then you have to *do* something with it.

Reluctantly, she nodded to Joriana.

“Thank you!” she squealed and hugged her again. “We both have time to work on him—together. Now, the spoons,” she plowed cheerily along, since the world was going her way again. “Where are the spoons? I was sure I had . . . left them in the kitchen!” She bustled away.

Mahrree retrieved the fork from under the table, wiped it on a clean cloth, and dropped it unceremoniously on the Cush pile in front of her. Then she moved it to the garrison pile and shoved away a nagging thought that was far too selfish for her to indulge right now, especially since greater worries might be coming to her from the north. But still the little thought niggled at her.

Edge wasn’t the *only* thing too small for such man as him.

---

Perrin was debating with himself again. His usually quick gait had slowed considerably, giving him time to think during the soggy two mile walk from the garrison back to the mansion.

“There’s a difference between breaking the law and doing something wrong,” he mused as he kicked the slush on the ground. “Not all laws are good, logical, or even correct. Right?”

No one countered him, so he continued to mumble to himself.

“The law that we couldn’t teach our children at home—that was made so that the Administrators could keep their control over the next generation. It was in the best interest of themselves.”

Saying the words out loud helped soften the pounding of his heart.

“No debating. Again, for control. If no one knows how to question the Administrators, then they continue doing whatever they want.”

His chest burned with confirmation.

“Limiting women to birthing only two children. Not only is that a damaging law, it’s contrary to the Creator’s will.”

He nodded, feeling braver for saying the words, even though they were only muttered.

“Likewise, there are acts which are contrary to the will of the Creator which are not against the law. There’s no law against unmarried persons engaging in behavior that the Creator says should be expressed only in marriage. The laws of the world know nothing of the Creator. They’re arbitrary, indulgent, and frequently conflict with His will.”

He continued to trudge. “The Creator’s laws are different—higher.”

A minute later he whispered, “So to who do I owe my allegiance? To the Administrators or to the Creator?”

Perrin sighed heavily and stopped under a tree that creaked ominously above his head as the weight of the snow bent its boughs.

“The answer’s clear,” he announced quietly. “But that doesn’t make it any easier.”

He continued to saunter, lost in thought and not noticing those who passed him, or saluted, or rode by in coaches or horses, or even paused to watch the colonel so fully absorbed in his own private musings that he didn’t notice when he stepped right in front of a wagonload of timbers that had to stop suddenly to avoid running him over.

“I always liked building,” he said to himself, not hearing the

“What we need is someone who has a special talent.”

angry shouts behind him from the wagon driver. “And there’s plenty to rebuild in Edge right now. I also like the idea of a herd of cattle nearby. Maybe I just like the idea that there’s always a steak waiting outside. Have to find a way to keep them from running from me, though. Shem could teach me a few things. Maybe cattle would like Peto . . . or Father.”

His pace picked up again once he reached the mansion district. He knew what he had to do, and nothing was going to stop him. Not Administrators’ provisions, not unnecessary delays—nothing.

“We’ll just live with the consequences,” he decided. “It’s the Creator’s opinion of me that’s important; nothing else. I’ll do His will, and in turn He will—” Perrin hesitated. “I guess He’ll find me something else to do. Mahrree will agree. It was a good run. Father’s getting on in years, too, and . . .”

He looked up at the sky—the first time he’d done so since they came to Idumea—and evaluated its colors. The snow had stopped and the light gray clouds were beginning to dissipate, revealing gaps of blue. Soon the sun would be blazing through, filling the world with blinding brightness. Already the air was warming, but Perrin’s chest burned hot with understanding.

He had a duty to do.

---

Mahrree could hardly concentrate as she took notes and supervised the soldiers bringing the carpets back into the Great Hall. She couldn’t pull her eyes away from the windows where she watched the massive snowflakes lazily falling until she heard, “Mrs. Shin?”

The timid whisper turned her around from her useless vigil. “Kindiri?”

The young woman squirmed before she said, “It’s just that . . . I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to overhear your conversation with Mrs. Shin . . . Well, that’s not entirely true. I was kind of listening . . . makes the job more interesting, you know?”

At least she blushed at that, Mahrree thought.

“It’s just that . . . he really does look at you that way,” Kindiri said, her brown eyes taking on a dreamy quality. “The way I wished Tace would look at me.”

“Uh,” Mahrree knew she’d regret getting into this conversation, but— “who’s Tace?”

Kindiri blinked back into reality. “Lieutenant Riplak!” she giggled as if that was the silliest question she’d ever heard.

“Oh, of course,” Mahrree tried to drift away, but found herself entangled in Kindiri’s chatter.

“It’s just that . . . I don’t know how to get him to look at me like *that*.”

Mahrree sighed. If she could get the *it’s-just-that* girl to her point more quickly, she’d get out of this faster. “And ‘look like that’ means . . .?”

“Oh, he looks at me hungrily,” she sniggered, and Mahrree regretted that she ever let Jaytsy go anywhere with her alone, “but I want him to . . . to . . . love me. Like the colonel loves you.” Genuine pain filled her eyes.

Mahrree pressed her lips together in empathy. “Kindiri, you can’t force love. He has to decide all by himself to love you.”

Kindiri looked down at the pressed tablecloths she was carrying. “So how do I make him decide?”

“You can’t.”

“It’s just that . . .” Kindiri looked up again, hopeful. “Last night he said that he was making plans. Big plans. He wants to do something more than just be the general’s watchdog, no offense meant—”

“Oh, none taken. The boy must be bored out of his mind by now, plodding around the mansion after a weary old man.”

Kindiri nodded. “And I asked him, ‘Do I get to be part of those plans?’ And you know how he responded?”

“I honestly don’t know, Kindiri.”

“Well, he just rolled over and ignored me!”

Mahrree blinked.

Then blinked again.

She had a horrible feeling this conversation didn’t happen at The Dinner. Or the dance.

“Uh, Kindiri? Exactly where did your discussion take place?”

She blushed again. “My room.”

“Uh-huh. And how often has he been to your room?”

Kindiri now looked more proud than ashamed. “Come on, Mrs. Shin—you’re married to a handsome officer. You know how

“What we need is someone who has a special talent.”

these things go.”

Up until that moment Mahrree had thought of Kindiri as just another nice albeit dim-witted young woman, someone who could have been her student years ago. Until she said *how these things go*. There was something grubby about her tone, and now about her.

Mahrree wanted to scrub her ears out. “Actually, I don’t know how these things go.”

Kindiri rolled her eyes, and there was something ugly about that, too. “Surely that young officer who fell under your influence made his way to your bedroom a few times?”

“He did,” Mahrree said simply.

Kindiri waggled her eyebrows.

“—with his second in command right behind him, to make us a new bed, which we did not share until after our wedding.”

Another eye-roll. “Mrs. Shin, the army, the city, it’s all changing. Everything’s progressing—”

Now Mahrree felt like rolling her eyes. Mal’s progress speech had been manipulated for a couple of decades now, usually to explain why something sweet and good was about to be thrown out for something controlling or depraved. Slap a happy label on it, such as progress, and everyone buys into the nonsense.

“That’s all different now—”

“Hmm,” Mahrree mulled it over. “As far as I know, *that’s* still done the same way it’s always been done. But perhaps I should ask the Administrator of Science if something new has popped up.”

She’d meant to lighten the mood that was growing dark, but Kindiri just looked at her blankly. “Nooo,” she said slowly. “I’m pretty sure that when a man—”

“Anyway,” said Mahrree loudly, trying to throw Kindiri off of whatever thought was sticking in her doughy head. “I think I know what you meant. But Kindiri, men have always been *that way*. You’re not the first girl to ever sneak a man to her bedroom. Or to sneak into his.” Perrin had affirmed her suspicion of that kind of behavior in last night’s late discussion. She learned a wide variety of definitions for what it means to be a young officer in Idumea.

She also appreciated that he fled Idumea for a posting in Vines the day after he graduated.

Kindiri turned red under Mahrree's studied glare.

"It's not progressive, Kindiri, and it's certainly not new. What the two of you have isn't special. It's just what dogs do in the alley."

Kindiri swallowed. "It's not like *that*, Mrs. Shin."

"It is if he won't marry you."

Her chin began to tremble, and Mahrree felt badly for putting it so bluntly. But Kindiri wasn't going to hear or believe anything less than the ugly truth.

"Kindiri, no man treats a woman he truly loves as a common sow."

Yes, Mahrree knew what that phrase meant. It certainly wasn't uttered in polite conversations in Edge, where there were no "common sows" that she knew of. But Idumea—through its more explicit performances that it sent to Edge's amphitheater—had introduced that idea to the innocence of Edge, and to the titting of her teenage boys who frequently ruminated about the impossibilities they saw, hoping against irrational hope they'd run into such a senseless and willing female.

And Mahrree, who always eavesdropped hoping for juicy details about thefts, instead heard titillating details about things she never wanted to know. But maybe all of those repugnant discussions were helpful at times like this. After all, she'd already concluded that when one was in Idumea, one should shock like Idumeans.

Mahrree ignored the young cook's stunned expression at her new label and continued, "Surely you must know the Shins don't approve of any of that."

Kindiri recovered from her shock and firmed her stance. "Well, it's none of their business!" she proclaimed, as if someone had once told her that excuse and she just now remembered it.

"Oh, yes it is. This is *their* house. They give you a generous wage and put you up in a bedroom that's even larger than what I have in Edge. They deserve some respect back, Kindiri. And they deserve to know what's going on upstairs when they think a certain lieutenant is elsewhere."

"He's never up there until he's secured the house, Mrs. Shin," Kindiri insisted.

Mahrree's eyes widened. "He's up there when he's on duty?"

“What we need is someone who has a special talent.”

Kindiri looked around. “Shh! Please! He’d get so angry if he knew I told anyone.”

But Mahrree didn’t care. “Oh, if he thinks he can get paid for *being upstairs*—”

Kindiri grabbed her arm and dragged an enraged Mahrree to the privacy of a closet around the corner. “Please, Mrs. Shin! I didn’t mean to say anything—”

“If you have *any* respect for the High General and his wife, you WILL put an end to this!” Mahrree insisted.

Kindiri nodded, panicked. “He never came upstairs when the general was missing or ailing—I promise. We were both worried about him and Mrs. Shin. The best we could hope for was five minutes alone in the second pantry.”

Mahrree rubbed the sides of her head. If ever she became the mistress of this mansion, all the servants would be old and ugly. “Kindiri, if you have any respect for yourself, lock your bedroom door!” Then, realizing who she was talking to, she added, “With him on the *outside* of it.”

“All right! All right, just . . . don’t tell the Shins. Please? He’ll never be upstairs again.”

Mahrree knew the look on her face. It was the same trapped look her students had when they were backed up against a wall and there was only one way out, only one solution to the situation: lie.

Kindiri was lying right now, but hoped that Mahrree would believe she’d really give poor old Tace and his fondness for sweet rolls and cucumbers a swift goodbye.

But she wasn’t mistress of this mansion, fortunately. Someone else far more threatening was. She’d have a little chat later with her mother-in-law . . . and then maybe her father-in-law.

She had to keep her lips from twitching into a wicked grin at the thought of the High General gesturing with just one intimidating index finger that a certain young lieutenant and a certain old general were going out to the stables for a *talk*.

Instead, Mahrree pointed at Kindiri. “I’m putting a lot of trust you in, Kindiri. Don’t disappoint me. And don’t disappoint yourself.”

Kindiri’s shoulders sagged in relief, although she didn’t seem to really understand what Mahrree was saying. She nodded quickly and hurried away to the back stairs. Mahrree chose to be-

lieve she was putting away the tablecloths in the linen closet up there.

She walked back to the Great Hall to supervise the unrolling of the carpets again, and stopped abruptly.

It had finally ceased snowing, and the sun broke out, dazzling everything in eye-squinting light.

That meant it must have stopped snowing in Edge, too, a few hours ago.

---

Perrin returned for midday meal about fifteen minutes later, blinking hard as he came in the back door that opened to the eating room.

“A total of six inches of heavy wetness. I’m guessing twice as much in Edge. But the food reserves are plentiful at the garrison.” He sat wearily on a chair at the table where the family had gathered.

His father, already eating last night’s leftovers for midday meal, didn’t even look up. “Don’t worry, son. I’m sure Edge’ll be all right.”

Perrin shook his head and looked at Mahrree. “I think we need to be going home soon. I can’t get Edge out of my mind.”

Mahrree sighed and nodded back. That was all she could think as soon as the snow stopped: we can go home now.

“No!” Joriana cried. “You promised to stay another week. Please, there’s still so much more to see and do.”

“Duty first, Mother, remember?” Perrin said sharply. “My duty is to Edge first, my family second. I’m sorry. Father’s well, and we’ve had our fun, as it were.”

“Perrin,” Relf said gently, “wait for the news, then make your decision.”

“I’ve already decided. Father, I want twelve large wagons of the reserves. I already have tentative approval from Giyak, and I spoke to the major over the stables. He agreed that they could supply me with enough horses, and the wagons would be available during the next few weeks. I did a full survey of the reserves and worked out just how much we need.” He handed his father a piece of paper with columns of numbers. “We’ll take the grain,



“What we need is someone who has a special talent.”

there’s a huge amount of that. We can live on bread for a few weeks. Some of the dried venison would be helpful, too. Doesn’t seem to be many here who appreciate that, but people in Edge would.”

“And something like dried apples and carrots, Perrin, for variety,” Mahrree suggested. “Those weigh less than the grain, so it might be easier to transport.”

Perrin nodded. “Already included. That will get us by.”

“It’s not that easy, son,” Relf said heavily. “I spoke with the Administrator of Taxation yesterday at The Dinner. He stayed only long enough to tell me taking any of the reserves is unthinkable.”

“Why?” Perrin demanded. “Edge pays part of its taxes in goods. Some of that is theirs. I just want it returned. I’m asking for only a fraction of the reserves. No one will miss it. There’s no need here, only in Edge.”

The general rubbed his forehead. “I understand that, and I agree. But the law is set. That reserve is for no one else but the Administrators, the army, and their families. And the laws take time to change.”

“So I’m in the army, and I take it for my family. And,” he started to smile, “We’re all family. The Writings say so.” He held out his hands in triumph.

Relf wasn’t buying that. “Do you want to guess how many of the Administrators read The Writings? Or how many in the army? Besides you, me, and Zenos, I think no one else. Perrin, we may have a battle on our hands.”

“Surely not!” Mahrree said. “Dr. Brisack’s a reasonable man. Let’s start with him. I’ll hold our parenting information hostage until he agrees to help. And the Administrator of Security has agreed? Once we have those two, the other three might come along more easily.”

“We have to try,” Perrin agreed. “After I eat I’ll go see Dr. Brisack.”

## Chapter 18 ~ “But the people of Edge are beginning to panic, sir.”

The rest of the afternoon, while Mahrree, Peto, and Jaytsy sorted out the candlesticks, they watched the stables from the back windows of the large gathering room and waiting for Perrin to return from visiting Administrators.

“Mother,” Jaytsy began slowly as she rubbed wax off of a candlestick, “what do you think your bedroom looks like now?”

“Thank you, Jaytsy. I hadn’t thought of that at all, but now I am,” Mahrree said miserably as she pushed a full crate toward Peto for him to set it by the terrace doors.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean . . . I just thought you had considered it. Maybe you could get new blankets and pillows and everything.” Jaytsy brightened. “This could be really good!”

“Jayts,” Mahrree groaned, “you’ve been in Idumea too long. You’re looking for reasons to go shopping.”

The sound of horse’s hoofs made them look out the window. Perrin rode into the stable and came out a moment later. He burst through the terrace door announcing, “We have Brisack, but with *provisions*,” he cringed. “And Windrow, Administrator of Agriculture.”

Mahrree smiled hesitantly. “What about the others?”

Perrin shook his head and shut the door. “Gone on holiday. I’d forgotten many leave after The Dinner for a short recess. They won’t be back for three more days.”

“So we can’t leave before then,” Peto said hopefully. “So we could still see the first kickball tournament? The director’s box?” His voice grew tiny when he saw the severe demeanor of

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his father.

“Peto,” Perrin said gravely, “our village is facing a catastrophe, and you’re worried about a game? You and your grandfather’s plots will just have to wait for when starvation isn’t a threat!”

Any additional guilt-laden lectures Perrin had planned were going to have to wait, because they heard many more horses outside, muffled by the slushy snow. The Shins looked out the windows to see several soldiers arrive in a hurry. Their shouts even brought a slow-moving General Shin to the gathering room.

“What’s going on out there?” he demanded as he reached the large windows. Joriana joined him as more soldiers on horseback arrived, now a dozen, and a few were pulling another soldier roughly off a horse.

Perrin opened the terrace door. “What’s this all about?”

Mahrree leaped to her feet and ran to the door to stand with Perrin, because there was something familiar about the man they threw to the white ground. A soldier placed a boot on his back to keep him down.

“Colonel, he stole a horse from the fort at Pools. And the horse he left in its place came from an Administrators’ messenger service! How many more he took, we’re about to find out. We caught up to him about a mile away from here, but he insists that you’d want to see him,” a captain said doubtfully. “So I thought you’d enjoy the privilege of incarcerating him yourself. We also have reason to believe he stole that jacket as well. There’s no way *he* can be a master sergeant!”

The prisoner looked up pitifully, bits of slushy snow stuck to his face.

“Qualipoe Hili?” Perrin rushed over to him. “Mahrree!”

But she was already running behind Perrin to reach Poe who looked as if he had recently been beaten up. An eye was swelling shut and he had a fresh cut on his cheek.

“But Colonel!” the captain said, reluctantly removing his boot from his back, “He’s—”

“I’ll take care of this myself, Captain!” Perrin snapped as he lifted a weary Poe from the ground, Mahrree supporting him on the other side. “You and your men are excused. NOW!”

The soldiers looked at each other in surprise as the colonel put an arm around their prisoner and helped him into the mansion.

Joriana was already holding open the door for them.

“What’s happened, Private?” Perrin said as he and Mahrree brought him into the gathering room. “Why are you here? Sit down, sit down.”

But instead Private Hili did his best to stand at attention after Perrin released him. Clearly exhausted, and with his bruised eye getting narrower by the moment, Poe looked nervously at the High General of Idumea. Relf nodded to him encouragingly.

“Sirs, I have an important message to deliver first.” He took a deep breath and recited what he’d carefully memorized. “Lieutenant Colonel Shin—”

He paused when he noticed the brass buttons on Perrin’s uniform, but went on with his speech.

“Master Sergeant Zenos—and Major Karna,” he added as an odd aside, “sent me to inform you that the reserves from the fort and the village were all moved to School Building Number Two to keep them secure from arriving thieves that . . . I knew from a previous endeavor,” he said in a nervous rush. “We had reports that food stores have been stolen all over the northern villages. We realized that Building Number Two is a central location for better distribution to the citizens. But early this morning, a few hours before dawn, excessive snow on the roof caused it to collapse, destroying most of the reserves.”

Mahrree gasped, and Joriana whispered, “*Oh no!*” Jaytsy and Peto just stared at Poe. Relf remained unmoved, and Perrin turned whiter than the snow.

“When I left Edge before sunrise,” Private Hili continued formally, “there was already six inches of snow on the ground, with more still falling. We assume that the weight of the heavy snow weakened the roof. Two soldiers on guard were still trapped by the debris when I was dispatched to come to Idumea. Sir, we retrieved some reserves, but have food left for only about five more days. Neeks and Zenos predict freezing temperatures tonight. We don’t know what to do next. Many of the livestock has been butchered—” his voice began to quaver, “—and many more will be slaughtered over the next few days. But the people of Edge are beginning to panic, sir. We need your advice.”

Mahrree couldn’t help herself. She rushed over to Poe, wrapped her arms around his scrawny body, and hugged him.

Poe broke his formal stance and hugged her back. He closed

“But the people of Edge are beginning to panic, sir.”

his eyes and sighed. “I could use something to eat now, Miss Mahrree—I mean, Mrs. Shin.”

She kissed him quickly on the cheek. “Of course! You look terrible, Poe. Sit down.”

“It’s been a long night. And day.” He sat in a chair at the writing desk and sagged as Mahrree hurried off to the kitchen.

Perrin pulled up a chair to sit down across from Poe, and the general motioned to Peto to get him a chair, too.

Instead of responding to the news, Perrin leaned over and shook Poe’s overly large and ill-fitting jacket. “This isn’t yours, Private.”

“No, sir,” he smiled weakly in apology. “But mine’s on underneath, so I’m not actually out of uniform. This was Master Sergeant Zenos’s idea. He thought I could get further in his jacket than in mine.”

Jaytsy touched the sleeve of the jacket. “I miss Uncle Shem. Is he all right?”

“Yes, and he wanted me to tell Mrs. Shin that we finished the roof two days ago. No snow is in your bedroom, sir,” he said to Perrin.

Perrin smiled faintly. “Good old Shem,” he said, still avoiding talking about Edge. “So Private, why send you?”

Private Hili looked over at the High General of Idumea again, obviously worried about what his answer may do to him.

The general nodded once. “Go on, son. I’m interested in hearing this as well. Don’t worry; you were only following orders, right?”

Private Hili cleared his throat. “Major Karna wanted to be sure you got the message as soon as possible, from someone at the fort. He and Zenos thought I would be the best to send, considering the hour and the way I may need to travel, my experience and everything.”

“Your experience in stealing things like horses to hasten your progress?” Perrin suggested.

Poe nodded guiltily. “The messenger system doesn’t like to lend out their horses to non-messengers, nor did Zenos or Karna think the messengers would relay our urgency as well. They thought that someone with my background and ability could get here better than anyone else. I’m sorry, sirs.” He tossed a pleading glance to General Shin.

“You won’t be thrown into incarceration for horse theft or impersonating a superior, so don’t worry,” the general assured him. “I have a little clout here, Private.”

“Even though I volunteered, sir?”

High General Shin smiled slyly. “Now why would a mere private volunteer for such a risky task?”

“To begin to repay a debt?” Poe whispered.

Perrin just stared at him, his eyes growing wet.

“And sir,” Poe turned to Perrin, “Zenos didn’t want Karna’s name mentioned, but Karna insisted his name be attached to this too. I haven’t been serving long enough to know who I’m supposed to obey—”

Perrin smiled. “I’ll take care of it all, Hili.”

Mahrree, who had come into the room a few moments before, cocked her head at Poe’s unusual words. She put down a plate full of food from The Dinner in front of the private. “I hope you find something there you like, Poe,” she said.

“Yes ma’am!” Poe grinned at the options. He took a large bite of a pheasant leg and garbled with his mouth full. “Maybe Neeks was right. Grandpy said you might not want to come home after experiencing all of this.” Poe took in his elegant surroundings for the first time and shook his head. “I wouldn’t blame you, either. You live like kings here!” He took another aggressive bite and Perrin leaned over to pat him on the shoulder.

“No Poe, we’re going home.” He looked at his wife, then his father. “I’ve decided: we’re leaving tomorrow, *with* the wagons. I want twenty now, Father—a ton of grain in each. The situation has changed.”

“Oh, Perrin,” the general started and shook his head. “I’m not sure how we’re going to do that.”

“It’s the right thing to do! You’re the High General of Idumea!” Perrin reminded him. “Doesn’t that mean something? You have clout, remember?”

“Perrin!” Joriana snapped. “How dare you speak to him like that?”

“Because Mother, five thousand citizens are going to starve soon,” said Perrin sharply. “And I refuse to just sit by and wait while a group of men bicker about if a bad law should change, and how, while people suffer. I want the general to do something about this!”

“But the people of Edge are beginning to panic, sir.”

General Shin looked at his son, holding his gaze for a moment. “And I will.”

---

“But General,” Chairman Mal simpered in a sickly sweet tone, “the reserves are not for the citizens. You know that as well as I do.”

Mal leaned back on the sofa in his grand gathering room and evaluated the High General seated across from him in a stuffed chair. For someone so frail, the general sat tall and commanding. He had a fire in his eyes the Chairman hadn’t seen for some time.

“As much as I feel for the people of Edge, it’s just a tragedy, Relf. I’m sorry. We already let Moorland die. Perhaps we need to let Edge die, too.” Mal leaned forward. “We’ll send a messenger to tell the fort to start evacuation immediately. Within the next few days everyone can be housed in new villages—”

General Shin shook his head. “That’s not an option, and *you* know that as well as I do. Many of the displaced citizens of Moorland moved to Edge! They probably just arrived. And with this snow, all of the other villages in the north will be suffering food shortages as well. According to the reports of the other commanders, the surrounding areas have just enough to get them through until the first crops come in. None of them can take an extra five thousand people! Thieves are looting all of the northern villages, and with this storm, who knows what kind of condition everyone’s crops are in!”

Now the Chairman shook his head. “Relf, *my friend*, I know this is difficult. But it’s like—well, remember that calf, born a year or two ago, with the two heads? It just wasn’t meant to be. After a day it died. Nature’s way of taking care of what should not be. Relf, the land tremor, the snow, the ruined food stores—this is Nature’s way. Be grateful your family is here. We’ll put Perrin to good use at the garrison. Let those in Edge who are strong enough leave, and those who aren’t shouldn’t be reproducing anyway. Nature chooses who survives and who dies, and it’s choosing now.”

“Nicko,” Shin’s voice was low and livid, “I never would’ve imagined such words from you. From King Querul the Third, yes. But from you?” He threw his hands up in exasperation. “Compar-

ing the people of Edge to a deformed calf? Nature's way? No! I refuse to accept that explanation! This isn't Nature destroying a useless creature. This is an opportunity to help those in need. You want the citizens of the world to be loyal? Take care of them!"

"Relf, Relf," Mal held up his hands in a soothing manner which he knew would only further enrage the old soldier, "Brisack already has a way to provide aid. He has a coffer of gold precisely for this situation—"

"They don't need gold, Nicko! They need grain! There's no food to buy anywhere, but there are barnfuls just sitting at the garrison doing nothing."

"But the reserves are different, Relf."

"Because it's for *us*, Nicko?" General Shin asked pointedly.

Mal sighed. "Consider: if we release even a fraction of the stores for Edge, we may have to do it for everyone. We simply can't do that. How disastrous would it be if every village expected us to feed them? There'd be nothing left for us—"

"This is a crisis!" Shin smacked the armrest. "It's just to get them through! There'll still be plenty left, and even to share with other northern villages if they need it. Edge will grow extra this year to repay what they took. Tax them higher if you must, but Brisack and Windrow are already in agreement to release the stores. You can push this through tonight."

"The Administrator of Taxation will not agree," the Chairman said simply.

"But if I put pressure on him, he will!"

"Relf, just wait," Nicko said smoothly, noticing how it only further ruffled Relf. "In three more days everyone will be back from their holidays, rested and happy and willing to help. Then we can discuss the need in Edge."

"And how long after you finish discussing will you release the food?" asked General Shin warily.

Mal bobbed his head back and forth, considering. "We most likely will form a subcommittee to investigate the amounts needed, then have a decision in no more than . . . a week, I'd guess."

The general's eyebrows shot up. "Perrin's already figured out the amount! Did so this morning in conjunction with the keeper of the reserves. But no—you want to wait three days for everyone's return, then another week to decide a number already figured out, then two more days for them to travel to Edge? That's



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nearly two weeks! Half of the children could be dead by then!”

The Chairman shook his head. “I don’t like the way Nature works either, Relf. But then again,” he tilted his head thoughtfully, “they wouldn’t need as much grain.”

Shin smacked the armrest again. “It’s not Nature that’s killing them, it’s you!”

Mal bristled. “General Shin, I don’t appreciate your accusations!”

“And I don’t appreciate your willingness to let a whole village die!” Shin would have been on his feet if he had enough strength. “And for what? Food you’ll never eat? No one will *ever* eat? You want it just because you think it’s yours. But you didn’t plant it and you didn’t harvest it. You just took it. You don’t even need it. We never have. In eighteen years no one’s ever needed that surplus, until today. And now you’re demonstrating the same conceit as the kings. I didn’t help you get to power for *this*, Nicko!”

Now the old wolf was going too far. “General Shin,” the Chairman’s voice was barely controlled, “I must inform you that you are bordering on traitorous speech.”

Relf didn’t care. “Do you even remember *why* you wanted to be the leader? Why you formed this Administration? Or have you forgotten all those ideals you used to spout about at the university? ‘Here for the people!’ That’s what you proclaimed in the throne room the moment before I sent the execution squad to kill that idiot King Oren on his throne.”

General Shin shook his head and looked down at his hands that he clasped in front of him.

“Just an hour ago,” began Relf quietly, “I was accused by an innocent young man of living like a king. And you know what? I do. We all do. I sat there wondering when that happened. When did we become what we destroyed?” He looked up. “Nicko, this is a way to reverse some of that.”

The Chairman looked at his High General. He clasped his hands together in front of him too and spoke calmly. “Relf, we just need a little time. I promise you the first day everyone’s back, the crisis in Edge will be the first item of business. Maybe the subcommittee can be pushed forward a bit. Send me Perrin’s calculations, and I’ll do my best.”

Shin stared at him for an entire minute before finally saying

to the man squirming under his glare, “Nicko, it doesn’t sound like your best will be good enough.”

---

Nicko Mal watched as General Shin was helped into his carriage by his lieutenant. It wasn’t until the carriage pulled away and was heading down the long drive that Mal waved over one of his guards.

“Find Brisack and bring him here immediately. We have a problem that’s about to get a lot worse.”

---

General Shin limped through his front doors shortly before dinner time.

“He’s back!” called Joriana to the gathering room. The family rushed to meet the general in the Great Hall.

General Shin waved to his lieutenant accompanying him from the trip to the Chairman’s mansion. “Riplak, in here. Perrin, Joriana, Mahrree, you too. Peto, get that private. I realize he hasn’t slept long, but we have business before us. Jaytsy, get me something to drink.”

His grandchildren looked disappointed, but he smiled at them. “I promise you won’t miss anything.”

He hobbled slowly to his study as those he called for followed him in. Without another word he sat at his desk, pulled out a piece of paper, and began to write.

Perrin, Mahrree, and Joriana exchanged questioning glances while Riplak stood at attention and tried to surreptitiously see what the general wrote.

A moment later Peto and Private Hili arrived, Poe trying to force his sleepy eyes open while standing at attention. Jaytsy darted in a moment later with a mug of juice she sat on the desk next to her grandfather.

And then everyone stood as patiently as possible, the only sound in the room the small and rapid scritch of Relf’s quill.

Perrin and Mahrree tried to trade some facial communication as to what this was all about, but Mahrree wasn’t as good at it

“But the people of Edge are beginning to panic, sir.”

as Perrin, and after a minute they both had confused scowls on their faces. Private Hili’s eyes kept closing and he swayed gently back and forth. Peto shifted his weight from one foot to the other, while Jaytsy worriedly studied her grandmother. Joriana pursed her lips as she watched her husband.

Finally General Shin glanced up.

“Close the door, please, Jaytsy. I’m writing something for you, Riplak.” He looked back down to continue writing as Jaytsy shut the door. “You’ll be a messenger tonight, Riplak. You get to ride all of the way to Edge, in fact.” He gave Riplak a small smile while the rest of his family watched, open mouthed. “I’m sure you’ve always wanted to see it. The mountains really are quite something up close. No one here appreciates them, but they’re impressive in the right light. You should be there to see the dawn.”

He reached into his desk and pulled out his official mark to stamp the bottom of the message.

“You’ll not delegate this assignment to anyone, Riplak, nor will you reveal the nature of your assignment to anyone. Kindiri will just have to hear about it later.”

Then he lifted the paper.

“It reads, ‘To the forts and messenger stations of the Administrators. Arriving shortly after this messenger will be an emergency caravan of twenty large wagons’—”

Joriana clapped her hands happily and Mahrree and Perrin burst into big smiles, which they aimed at Poe, who closed his eyes in relief.

The general cleared his throat. “You will have twenty teams of horses ready to relieve the horses coming, as well as four additional horses for riders. You will do all in your power to conscript these teams, using force if necessary. Officers and soldiers from Edge will see to it personally that the horses are returned within three days to their proper owners. You will do nothing to impede this messenger from his progress, and will provide him with whatever means of travel he requires. Also be prepared to avoid being deceived. There is increased Guarder activity at this time, and later messengers may try to convince you that the caravan is illegal—”

Mahrree was tempted to gasp but felt strongly that she should make no sound. No one did, but she noticed her children

shifting anxiously.

“Counterfeit messengers may even claim they are from the Administrators. But be assured that the stamp below from the High General of Idumea guarantees the legality of this caravan. Do all in your power to detain any counterfeit messengers until soldiers can retrieve them.”

The general looked at the stunned faces in front of him.

“Riplak, you’ll present this message at each fort and changing post, take a new horse—I don’t care if the messenger servers complain; they answer to me as well as the Administrators—then move on to the next until you reach the fort in Edge. But try to use fort horses as much as possible, beginning with Pools. Many of the messenger posts recently experienced horse thefts and are likely a bit jittery.”

Poe remained stoic and immovable, but Perrin smirked.

“Present this message to those in the command tower in Edge,” Relf continued to Riplak, “to let them know that aid is on the way, and that they should be prepared for any kind of eventuality. Any questions?”

“Just one, sir,” he said taking the message from the general’s hand. “May I start with the new bay from the Stables at Pools? He’s the fastest horse.”

“Of course,” the general smiled. “Thank you, Riplak. And please be careful. Not a word to anyone. I don’t want you hurt.”

“I appreciate that, sir.” Riplak folded the message quickly, shoved it in his shirt pocket under his jacket, then bounded out of the study.

“Father—”

Relf held up his hand to stop Perrin, listening for Riplak’s progress. Perrin stared hard at his father, but he wouldn’t look at his son. Instead he pretended to read the calculations Perrin had made on another piece of paper. Joriana wrung her hands, and Poe kept his eyes closed, most likely asleep on his feet.

They heard the lieutenant exit through the front doors, and a moment later his horse left at a fast gallop.

“Father, would you *now* mind explaining that bit about the Guarder activity?” Perrin said quietly.

General Shin looked at each one of them with unusual sadness in his eyes. “You leave tonight. In one hour.”

Each Shin gasped. Poe’s eyes popped open.

“But the people of Edge are beginning to panic, sir.”

“I’ve already sent a messenger to the garrison. Your twenty wagons should be hitched up in the next few minutes. They’ll be wanting these notes,” he held up Perrin’s calculations. “I thought your Private Hili would bring it over there.”

“Yes sir!” Poe stepped up to take the page, but the general held on to it.

“In a moment; I’m not finished yet. I just want all of you to know the importance of leaving as soon as possible.”

“Because you got nowhere with the Chairman, did you?” Perrin asked in a dead tone.

Relf stiffened at the implication. “I’m the High General of Idumea, Colonel Shin! I can order whatever I want. I can choose to make the most important decision of my career without anyone’s approval. Is that clear?”

Perrin bit his lower lip, but his jaw still trembled as he regarded his father with renewed pride. “Absolutely, General!”

Relf’s stance softened a bit, and he pretended to toss something on his desk. “That gesture would be a lot more impressive if I still had the key to the reserve to throw down in dramatic emphasis, but I already sent it to the garrison with a messenger.”

Joriana was growing pale. “Relf, what does this all mean?”

Relf hobbled around his desk to his wife. “It means that I’ve ordered the reserves to be released without anyone else’s permission. There’s no real Guarder threat, but the threat of Nicko finding out and trying to stop us.”

Mahrree squirmed anxiously and gripped the arms of her children on either side of her, on the pretense of reassuring them.

“But I refuse to wait weeks for the Administrators to make a decision!” Relf declared. “People’s lives are more important than living like a king.” He glanced over at Private Hili, who gulped. “I’m convinced the Creator never intended anyone to live like a king. He created all of us equal. We’re to provide relief with the excess He has given us.” Relf put a hand on his wife’s arm. His tone was uncharacteristically gentle when he said, “You and I will just live with the consequences.”

Joriana’s chin began to wobble. “Of course, of course.” She turned to her family. “You come back, as soon as you can. I can’t bear the thought of living in this big empty house without you!”

Mahrree couldn’t fight the tears anymore. “Of course we’ll be back. Next season, even!”

Everyone in the room knew it was a lie, but it felt good to hear it anyway.

“Wasting time,” the general said in a shaky voice. “Get packing. The fort coach is getting ready as we speak. You women and Peto get it loaded up. Perrin, you and I and Hili will take my carriage to the garrison. I want to see to this personally.”

Peto’s sudden movement caught everyone off guard. He rushed his grandfather, forgetting about his mending ribs, and caught him in a big hug.

Relf wrapped his arms around him, as much for the support as for the embrace. “Glad you came, boy.”

Peto nodded into his grandfather’s chest. Jaytsy turned to her grandmother and hugged her as well. The two of them began to sob so loudly Mahrree started to chuckle through her tears.

Perrin caught Mahrree’s eye. “We’ll meet you at the garrison.” He glanced around the study as if trying to memorize the room. His gaze lingered on the large portrait of High General Pere Shin, and his shoulders slumped.

Mahrree looked at her grandfather-in-law as well, his stern eyes still twinkling as they did the first morning. It was the right decision to leave with the reserves, he seemed to be saying. Sometimes only one man can go over the wall . . .

. . . or release the stores.

Pere Shin would be proud of his son.

Perrin turned to Mahrree. “Don’t forget anything, all right? All my clothes should be in the wardrobe. Let’s go, Father. Peto, you can finish good-byes at the garrison.”

Peto nodded and wiped away a tear. His grandfather gripped Peto’s head and kissed him quickly on the forehead, then hobble-marched out of the room with Perrin and Hili.

---

“You’re absolutely sure about this?” Gadiman asked the lieutenant who stood in his dark doorway.

“By the oaths, sir, yes.”

Gadiman clenched his teeth, made a fist, and huffed. “Yes! Now go—we don’t want anyone to miss you. And get out of my way! I have a visit of my own to make.”

“But the people of Edge are beginning to panic, sir.”

Gadiman snatched his overcoat from the hook and put it on as he barreled out the back door.

Finally!

His chance to redeem himself was laid right at his doorstep. Thirteen years ago his plan to use two lieutenants to assassinate the High General and Joriana Shin at the fort of Edge had gone terribly wrong; there was a fool in his foolproof plan. The two lieutenants were found dead at door of the guest bedroom at the fort, their long knives protruding from their bodies, and Relf and Joriana Shin completely unharmed.

Brisack said the officers killed each other, but the doctor had doctored their files himself. It was the cover story, but what truth was it covering? Gadiman had never been able to find out. He always suspected the problem was that Lieutenant Heth simply wasn't ready, but Mal was sure he was.

It would be his hunger that would make him succeed, Mal had insisted. The former Sonoforen—the *Son of Oren*; Gadiman never got that until just now—while he wanted to succeed, either wasn't “hungry” enough or clever enough to pull it off.

Desire rarely equates ability, yet simple-minded folks thought all they needed was something inane like believing in themselves to get whatever they wanted. But when, in all the history of the world, had that occurred except in made-up stories?

It was hard work and patience that accomplished great things, at just the right moment. And someone, years ago, had seen the “right moment” and thwarted Gadiman's well-planned assassination.

Gadiman shook his head as he jogged along in the cold night. For so many years his failure had kept him from that inner circle in Mal's library. So close he'd come to moving beyond being their errand man to becoming a strategist—

Then Mal's heart gave him problems. Brisack said it was caused by the failure in Edge, but Gadiman knew it was just another story.

Then they stopped meeting so frequently, and the orders for Gadiman tapered off to nothing. But he kept waiting, and planning, and thinking.

Then, only weeks ago, Mal invited him to his office to tell him he was bored and wanted to be entertained again. The Guards were about to return.

It didn't take Gadiman long to make all the connections again. In fact, there seemed to be even more willing to renew the oaths. Several brought their sons, too. They were tired of thieving to support themselves, and wanted the direction that had come in the beginning, along with the easy gold.

It was going to be better this time, Gadiman knew. No more of this petty thieving nonsense, oh no. Everyone was hungry, and they could earn their gold the honorable way through properly planned raids and murders.

And, as proof that he was ready for the inner circle, tonight Gadiman had the perfect plan. There wasn't any time for Mal and his library mouse to gab endlessly about what to do. By the time they finally came up with something, Gadiman would already be standing at the door, ready to show them the most spectacular success they'd seen in years.

They once wanted Perrin Shin brought to his knees. Gadiman would present him writhing on the floor.

---

The next hour was a blur.

Mahrree knew all that she had to grab, but couldn't seem to get a hold of any of it. As hastily as they came, they were more hastily leaving. She tried to shake off the heaviness of this parting. The Shins had visited them dozens of times before, but never had a visit been so full of unexpected drama, from start to finish. It shouldn't have made a difference how they separated today, but somehow it did. The Shins were scheduled to visit them in Edge during Weeding Season. Perhaps it was the worry of what could happen until then that seemed to cripple Mahrree.

As she fumbled to pack her husband's uniforms and work clothes she smiled that maybe by Weeding Season both officers would be staring at a field of cattle, now their own, trying to figure out how to be ranchers. She loved the idea of father and son and grandson trying to corral the cows that ran in terror from Perrin.

There were so many options, she assured herself as she shoved her new dresses into the bag, but purposely left the gray silk gown in the wardrobe. It'd be difficult to get all their new



“But the people of Edge are beginning to panic, sir.”

things to fit as it was.

The men could rebuild houses and the collapsed school. Cultivate the catapult fields. Go into business with Poe Hili and become private guards for the Edge of Idumea housing community. Someone needed to man the gates they just put in. Who better than the man who created the need for the gates, and the man who—usually—stopped him? Relf could do the paperwork.

Mahrree laid Perrin’s dress uniform on top and ran her hand over the medals and ribbons. Silly little decorations. Chasing cows and thieves were much better vocations.

Before she had time to wonder what to do with the rest of her new clothes, Joriana came to the door, pushing a huge crate filled with dresses.

“Add anything you don’t really like to the pile, dear. That purple one doesn’t flatter your eye color,” she huffed, a few stray hairs dangling out of her perfect bun. “Surely someone in Edge can use these things. Some of these I haven’t touched in years. Seems a waste doesn’t it? Clothes should be worn.” Tears filled her eyes again and she rushed out of Mahrree’s room before she could respond.

There could be a place for her as well in Edge, Mahrree decided as she tossed the rest of her clothing into the crate. Someone needed to teach Edgers how to dance. Joriana could be as resourceful as Kuman.

A thought sprung into Mahrree’s mind, and she nearly laughed out loud. Hycymum could sew, and these two grandmothers could make a wonderful dress shop, as long as they didn’t drive each other insane with their ideas of what was elegant. Hycymum always thought everything should be accented with a flower or a stylized insect that looked ‘charming.’ Joriana thought embellishments should consist of jewels and gold. Mahrree combined the two in her mind and shuddered at the thought of jewelry cockroaches.

Still, it had potential.

---

Perrin clapped a hand on Private Hili’s shoulder as they stood outside in the growing dark and watched the hitching of the forty horses to the twenty wagons. Perrin only wished it wasn’t by

torchlight. So many animals, wagons, and men working together would have been a grand sight for Poe to witness. High General Shin was in the Reserve Storehouse nearby, recommending how to load the goods for the best balance of weight.

“Doing all right, Poe?” Perrin asked quietly. “I’m sorry to be sending you back north already. Most people never get to Idumea.”

“It’s all right, sir,” Poe assured him. “My welcome to the city wasn’t the friendliest. I don’t have a lot of desire to stay.”

Perrin squeezed his shoulder. “I am sorry about that, but very grateful. You’ve done a brave and exceptional thing today. I made arrangements for you on the third wagon. You can nap on the bags of dried apples.”

Poe turned quickly to him. “No, sir. I thought I was riding with you!”

Perrin shook his head. “You’ve slept only a few hours—”

“You’d be surprised what I accomplished with only a few hours of sleep, sir.” Poe cleared his throat. “Or, perhaps shocked.”

When Perrin chuckled sadly, Poe added, “Remember—I’m Mr. Out All Night. I can help you, sir. I’ve had a few lessons with the sword, too. And more recently than when I was nine and you taught me how to hold one. Apparently I’m a natural.”

Perrin didn’t answer right away, but watched the positioning of another wagon for yet another team of horses.

“How about you act as a relief driver?” he eventually suggested. “Each wagon will have two drivers, one to drive, the other with his long knife out and ready. You could still rest, then—”

“I can handle it, sir,” Poe promised.

Perrin felt his shoulder droop under his hand.

“Oh. I see now. Sorry, sir.”

“Sorry about what, Poe?”

“You don’t trust me yet. I don’t blame you—”

“That’s not it at all, Private,” Colonel Shin said firmly. “I have complete faith in you. You’ve already demonstrated your devotion to me and to Edge.” Then, in a gentler tone he added, “But Poe, you look thin and exhausted. I really am just worried about you.”

Poe grinned. “Sir, I always look thin and exhausted. And I promise, all I need are a few hours of sleep, and I’m good for the rest of the night. Try me!”

“But the people of Edge are beginning to panic, sir.”

Perrin slapped him on the back. “Then go get us two mounts. And uh, Poe? Ask for them this time.”

---

Somehow Mahrree, Jaytsy and Peto got everything packed in bags and two large crates. Even Peto’s new ball from his grandfather was shoved into a corner of the coach that wasn’t occupied by food that Joriana had Kindiri pack. Two captains from the garrison loaded everything into the coach, and all too soon it was time to go.

Mahrree felt as if she could barely breathe from the rush of it all. Was it really just last night that she was watching the dancers and her husband, who nearly all of Idumea came out to meet?

But also just last night she’d been so homesick for Edge. Now that she was heading back there she was confused to find herself missing Idumea. Her head pounded so much with trying to sort it all out that she just wanted to sit on the ground and wail like the baby Perrin held in his arms.

But it was time to go.

Peto and Jaytsy climbed in the coach, both of them sniffing and subtly wiping their eyes. Before Mahrree took to the coach steps, she looked to say goodbye to the majestic house, but she had to turn away. There was much she disliked about Idumea, but she had to confess that on an occasion or two she had fancied herself as mistress of the mansion. She’d even paid attention to where Joriana placed all of the notes from The Dinner. Those were the moments when she forgot she was Edgy.

But then she’d remember there was no place else that could ever be home.

From the kitchen Kindiri came running with a basket to interrupt her disparate thoughts. “Mrs. Shin—here!”

Mahrree took the basket. “Apples?”

“Yes,” Kindiri panted. “I overheard you one day telling Mrs. Shin that you haven’t seen these in Edge since last year. And since you’re leaving so suddenly, I wanted to give you something for your trip home. I found them in the cellar. I *trust* all will be well.”

She wasn’t very good at that, Mahrree thought. Her obvious wink when she said “trust” nearly bobbed her entire head.

Mahrree suspected Kindiri hoped her gestures would be enough to keep Mahrree from telling Joriana, who stood right behind her, about her and Riplak's late night dalliances.

Mahrree smiled guardedly at Kindiri, because she'd already decided to send Joriana a letter when she got back to Edge. "Yes, I *trust* they will be as well. Thank you for the apples, and remember to lock your door," she added in a whisper.

"I will," Kindiri lied.

Mahrree turned to her mother-in-law.

"Oh, I'm coming with you! As far as the garrison, that is," Joriana added as she prodded Mahrree to get into the coach.

Mahrree gripped her arm. "And then come to Edge, as soon as you can. Just bring a bag of grain."

They climbed in the coach for the short ride to the garrison. Joriana put her arm around her daughter-in-law as they sat next to each other on the bench, leaning sadly against each other.

"Be careful, all right?" Mahrree said to her.

"I was about to say that to you," Joriana sniffed.

"Grandmother," said Jaytsy, with tears in her eyes, "are you and Grandfather going to be in trouble?"

Joriana put on a brave smile that looked convincing in the growing darkness. "The Administrators owe us a great debt. If we're in trouble, then it's just a little. Perhaps we'll retire early."

"And come to Edge," Mahrree repeated.

Joriana nodded. "That's a possibility I'm entertaining more every minute, Mahrree."

---

Perrin made his way over to the Reserve Storehouse. The loading of the twenty oversized wagons, designed extra deep and long for hauling supplies to forts, was nearly finished.

High General Shin came out to watch with his son as dozens of soldiers methodically moved bag after bag into last wagon. Frost was definitely in the air, and Perrin was grateful he remembered to wear his thick riding coat.

Relf leaned slightly against him. It'd been a draining couple of days for a man who nearly died not too long ago. "I estimate you have a good eight hours ahead of you before any Administrators

“But the people of Edge are beginning to panic, sir.”

realize you’re gone without permission,” Relf told him. “Maybe even twelve. Barring any breakdowns or delays, you could even be home by tomorrow evening. Don’t push the caravan any faster than you have to. These are tremendous loads and the horses will be well-strained as it is.” In a quieter tone he added, “And with most of the Administrators gone until after Holy Day, you may have everything distributed before any of them even realize what’s happened.”

The Edge fort coach containing Mahrree, Joriana, and the children rolled up to the storehouse. Perrin sighed when he saw it. It meant the end.

“Well, this is it, I suppose,” Relf said to his son. He stood tall, supporting himself with his crutch, and formally held out his hand.

Perrin looked at it, insulted. “That’s not going to be good enough tonight, Father.”

“It’s going to have to be,” Relf said stoically. “We’re on garrison land.”

Perrin shook his head. “I don’t care. I’m going to say something to you,” he said with the beginnings of a smile. “And you’re going to hear it.”

“No, son. That’s the kind of thing you say when you think you won’t see someone again. Save it for later.”

Perrin smiled at the diversionary tactic. Relf had a dozen of those. “I don’t have to save it. I have an unlimited supply of words, saved up for the past forty-three years. And when you feel a great debt of gratitude and respect, and want someone to know—” He began to choke, unable to finish the preamble that wasn’t getting him any closer to what he wanted to say.

“I know,” Relf said quietly. “Really. The feeling’s mutual.”

Perrin shook his head, ignoring the tears that made his eyes itch. He was a full colonel, for crying out loud. How hard could this be? “No, you’re going to hear it! I know that look of dread in your eyes. It’s the same look you had when you walked Mahrree to the fort when you first met her. Father—” He was so sure he could say it this time, but the words piled up in his throat again.

Relf took his son’s hand instead, pulled him close and, for the first time Perrin could remember, hugged him. “I love you too, son,” he muttered as his crutch clattered to the ground.

“I love you, Father,” he whispered back and chuckled.

“Now, how did you say it first? Because I’ve been practicing it in my head for days now!” He pulled away from the general and grinned blurrily at him.

“I’ve been practicing for years,” Relf said gruffly and feigned a cough as cover.

---

Mahrree had let herself out of the coach and stared in astonishment at the Shin men . . . hugging? Something in her heart twanged. She put her hands on her hips as father and son stepped away from each other and looked at the coach almost sheepishly.

“When Shins decide to break rules, they break all of them, I see. General, may I be next?” and she held out her arms.

To Perrin’s growing surprise, Relf hobbled over to oblige her.

“Take care of him, all right?” Relf said in her ear. “And yourself?” He kissed her on the cheek.

“Of course. And thank you for everything.” She squeezed him gingerly. “I really enjoyed getting to know Relf.” She stepped back just in time to see the High General of Idumea quickly wipe away a tear.

Realizing he started a trend, Relf held out his arms to his willing grandchildren.

Mahrree turned so as to not see their embrace. She was sure her heart would crack in half at any moment. But she turned the wrong way, and found Perrin holding his mother who was sobbing uncontrollably.

“Just come to Edge, Mother. We’ll take care of you. Hycymum has room, I’m sure.”

Joriana laughed in her sob, which was extremely inelegant.

Perrin kissed her on the cheek. “I love you, Mother. Watch out for him, and yourself.”

Joriana couldn’t speak but nodded as she kissed her son on the cheek, and didn’t even bother to wipe it off. She turned to Mahrree for another hug, needing someone to embrace.

“Thank you for being so aggravating!” she whispered to Mahrree.

Mahrree laughed softly. “Thank you for forcing us to

“But the people of Edge are beginning to panic, sir.”

Idumea. I’ll never forget these days. The Dinner was remarkable, and so are you.” And, remembering what Relf told her last night before The Dinner, she added, “I’m so impressed.”

“You’ll be back, you know,” Joriana squeezed her tighter, obviously hearing what she wanted. “You *will* be in that mansion, and I’ll sit in that guest house and nag you all the time.”

“I hope so, Mother.” Mahrree turned to Perrin and saw him holding the reins of a horse. There was no more time to spare.

“I’ll ride behind you. We have only four guards: Hili and me, and two lieutenants. We won’t need more, I’m sure,” he said to her worried expression. “Can’t take too many garrison soldiers,” he whispered. “Even though Thorne’s got thousands here, he’s still not going to be pleased when he wakes up and finds about fifty of them missing.”

Perrin watched his father finally release his grandchildren. He kissed each of them, and they rushed back to their grandmother for one last goodbye.

“Need to go, now,” Relf said, wiping away another tear which defied the general. “There are hungry people waiting for you.”

Relf tried to help Mahrree in the coach, and she pretended to let him. She watched as Relf lent a hand to each of his grandchildren, then stepped away from the coach and put an arm around his wife.

It occurred to Mahrree she’d never seen him do that before.

Joriana gripped her husband’s free hand and smiled fearlessly. Mahrree wondered if she was wearing the last dress she owned.

Jaytsy and Peto, seated on either side of Mahrree since the bench across from them was occupied by crates of Joriana’s clothing, leaned to look out the window and waved miserably at their grandparents.

Perrin mounted his horse and called over to the lead driver of the caravan who was waiting for the command. “I’ll take the back with the fort coach. You take the lead with the two lieutenants.”

The soldier nodded and slapped the reins on his team to start the caravan.

“Hili,” Perrin called to the private who was waiting on his mount several paces away, “ride near the tenth wagon. You can

be the go-between man. Keep track of the condition of the horses. Let me know if any look like they're failing."

Hili nodded to Perrin before saluting the High General.

The general saluted him back and smiled. Mahrree would later tell Poe Hili how rare an honor that smile was.

The Shin family watched in silence as the horses and the twenty full wagons headed toward the open gates of the garrison. It was only a short trip through the garrison to the open road reserved for the army through Idumea, where the horse teams would be spurred on to a gallop. The drivers knew time was of the essence, and that the loss of a horse or two was far less important than the loss of human lives. The first relief teams would be encountered in twelve miles.

When the last of the wagons approached, and the coach followed to bring up the end, Mahrree peered out the window at her in-laws one last time.

Perrin was also looking at his parents standing together in the cold.

They gave him proud smiles.

Perrin sat up tall and saluted his father.

His father stood at solid attention and saluted back.

Then Colonel Shin kicked his heels into his mount and followed the coach out of the garrison.



## Chapter 19 ~ “Mother, who’s driving the coach?”

Chairman Nicko Mal stood at his front door impatiently waiting for Brisack to make his way up the thirty grand steps that lead to the mansion.

“Well?” Mal hissed as the doctor jogged up to him. “Where is he?”

Brisack reached the top and took a deep breath to refill his lungs. “I don’t know!”

Mal squinted. “What do you mean, you don’t know?”

Brisack panted as he followed Mal into the mansion and to the library that used to be a throne room for five previous kings. “He wasn’t in his house, he wasn’t in his office, and he wasn’t at the inn where he takes all his meals. Those are the only three places I’ve ever seen Gadiman. He didn’t go on holiday, did he?”

The severe scowl of Mal told Brisack he should know that answer.

The doctor collapsed in his usual chair. “I can’t imagine where he’s off to.”

Mal sat across from him and grumbled. “Well, it’s his own stupid fault. The first time we’re going to let him in on our planning session, and he disappears. He can’t complain, then, when we don’t include him again.”

Brisack nodded, and ran his hand over his balding head to smooth down the last hairs. “So, tell me what happened with Relf this evening. Before we can speculate what they might do, I need to know exactly what he said.”

“Agreed,” Mal said, taking a piece of parchment and hand-

ing it over. "I've already made some notes. First, Relf barged in here as if this were *his* house . . ."

---

If Mahrree and the children thought the trip to Idumea was uncomfortable, going back to Edge was even worse. Every spare inch of the coach was taken up by leftover dinner and dried goods from the Shins' pantries and cellar.

But it was a good kind of uncomfortable; no one would complain. At least it smelled pleasant. Altogether there was a sweetly savory scent that Mahrree wished she could have bagged and hung around her house. The mixture of apples, bread, dried beef and apricots would always remind her of this night, one she hoped she'd never forget.

What could have been more satisfying than rushing home to Edge with much needed relief after saying such a poignant goodbye to Relf and Joriana? Mahrree felt they had been granted so many miracles in such a short time that it seemed as if the tender mercies of the Creator were focused entirely on her family. It didn't seem fair to be the recipients of so much.

They had suffered some too, but in the balancing of the Creator the miracles always outweighed the tragedies. They just needed to wait long enough, as her father Cephas frequently told her, for a happy ending.

Mahrree sat with each child leaning against her. Jaytsy wept quietly and Peto stared out the dark window.

"He's an old wolf," Peto whispered. "He'll be all right."

"Of course he will," Mahrree said, kissing his light brown hair. "And so will she," she patted Jaytsy's thigh. "It's been an amazing trip, hasn't it?" she said brightly. "When we get home we'll have to write down everything."

Peto sneered. "Sounds like school work."

"*That's* what we've been missing!" Mahrree snapped her fingers. "School work! Well, as soon as we're home, we'll begin on our own. No sense in us not keeping up."

"Oh, Mother!" Jaytsy sniffed. "What would the Administrator of Education say? Teaching your children at home?"

Mahrree smiled at her children's attempted chuckling. "I

don’t really know. He was the only administrator I didn’t talk to last night.”

“I’m sure Father had that Administrator seated far, far away from you at dinner so you couldn’t debate him,” Peto said. “You’d definitely be written up by that gad-awful-man for sure if you did.”

Mahrree and Jaytsy chuckled as Peto continued. “I can see the Administrator of Loyalty now in his little office somewhere, writing ‘Mahrree Peto Shin’ in big bold letters on some ugly file, then sneering at it. ‘You’re in trouble now, lady!’”

Peto’s old man voice was so funny Mahrree laughed out loud.

“You know, he was there last night,” she told her children. “At least for the dancing.”

Jaytsy frowned. “Was he that tall, gangling man in black? Looked like a constipated weasel?”

“Yes, I didn’t realize you noticed anything else,” Mahrree said with a hint of suggestion, “but the young men you danced with.”

“Oh, I noticed him,” Jaytsy shuddered. “He kept watching me. And Father, too.”

Mahrree fidgeted. “Really? I didn’t notice.”

“Then it’s probably good,” Jaytsy murmured, “that you didn’t notice him watching *you*, as well.”

Peto snickered as Mahrree exclaimed, “What?!”

They heard a knock on the side of the coach, and Peto put his head out the window.

“Hey, I heard laughing. Don’t have so much fun without me, now,” Perrin said from his horse.

“Well, you’re where all the action is, Father,” Peto said. “I have to keep the women entertained all by myself.”

Perrin grinned and nodded as Peto sat back.

Mahrree decided not to say anything more about Gadiman. Each member of her family was trying hard to keep up a cheerful attitude, but it was a precariously balanced mood. The slightest knock would send it all crashing down.

“I swore last time I was going to bring something to read,” Jaytsy sighed. “I wished I would’ve grabbed something from the study.”

“Well, it’s too dark to read and the selection of books was

too dull. I tried a few of them,” Mahrree told her.

“Oh, I don’t know. There was one titled ‘Physical Characteristics of Soldiering’ that could’ve been interesting,” Jaytsy hedged.

Mahrree laughed. “I’m pretty sure it wasn’t full of details of handsome young men, Jayts! Ah, it’s a good thing we’re leaving. Seeing all those young men around you last night . . .” Mahrree waited for Jaytsy to finish.

“They were all right,” she said as she played with the hem on her cloak.

When another pause went by with no further details, Mahrree decided to try again. “I noticed Lieutenant Thorne danced a lot with you.”

“Yes, but . . . I don’t know. He was so *serious*. Handsome, I’ll admit that,” she said analytically as if evaluating a new desert, “but so army-ish. Much worse than Father. He kept wanting to talk about tactics and horses. Blah!”

Mahrree breathed a sigh of relief. “That’s all I wanted to know.”

“Why, did his grandmother say anything to you?”

Mahrree turned to her daughter. “Did she say anything to you?”

“Yes!” Jaytsy exclaimed. “Mrs. Cush stopped me between dances to tell me how *young* her daughter was when she got married, how *darling* Father looked holding that baby, how *I* could make a lot of people happy—It was disturbing! I don’t want to be a mother in two years. I have to see the world first.”

“And so you shall, Jaytsy,” Mahrree declared. “All of it, before any Thornes can come prick you again.”

They chuckled and Peto rolled his eyes.

“By the way,” Mahrree said, trying to sound nonchalant, “I also noticed Lieutenant Thorne whispered something to you as they were leaving. Uh . . . what was it?”

Jaytsy shrugged. “Something odd like, if I ever wanted to know all the secrets of the garrison, he could give me a private tour and show me things I’d never imagined.”

“And you giggled at that?”

Jaytsy sighed in exasperation. “Mother, I know what you’re going to say next, and I agree: it was well after midnight, I was very tired, and everything for some dumb reason seemed giggle-

worthy. Just . . . dumb.”

Once again Mahrree was taken aback by how mature her daughter could suddenly be, even if she wasn’t very articulate.

“There was a lot that was dumb last night, when you think about it,” Jaytsy continued. “Did you see that old lady with the bag that was covered in colored stones? I mean, just how much did that thing weigh before she put anything in it?”

The trip was easier once they, by unspoken agreement, focused on everything “dumb” they were leaving behind in Idumea. The jams. The crowds. The constant stream of people to and from the Shin mansion. Sometimes it felt more like the garrison than a home, with the number of uniforms that tramped in and out. They carefully avoided any topics that would remind them of who they left behind, and what they might find ahead.

When they arrived at the first changing station between Idumea and Pools, Perrin rode over to check on them.

“Spirits holding up?” he whispered to Mahrree.

“Yes, very well. We’re all being careful. How’s the caravan?”

“So far the wagons seem secure, and the teams held out pretty well at this pace,” Perrin told her. “I hope the replacements are just as steady, but we may be getting some mixed qualities coming up. I’ve spoken to a few owners and they understand the need for their horses. They think the Administrators have organized all of this, and I’ve heard nothing but praise for their ‘generous action’ for Edge.” His tone developed an irritated quality.

“Maybe word will get back to Idumea about the citizens’ perceptions,” Mahrree pointed out, “and by the time the Administrators find out, they’ll take all the praise themselves and go easy on your father.”

Perrin sighed. “That would be the best solution, wouldn’t it? Looks like the last of the horses are changed. It’s about fifteen miles to the next stop between Pools and Vines. We won’t have any reason to stop in Pools. Gizzada’s is closed for the night, even though a wagonful of his sandwiches could feed the village for a week.”

Mahrree and Jaytsy spent the next leg of the trip thoroughly criticizing each dress from the night before, while Peto sighed loudly about his boredom. But he stopped when they heard the shouting.

And they realized it was Perrin.

“Behind! Behind! HILI!”

Mahrree gripped the window frame and peered outside. In the dark she couldn't discern anything, but thought she recognized Poe on horseback whipping past the coach to follow Perrin, along with the two lieutenants.

“Mother, what's going on?” Peto asked.

“I don't know. Something's wrong,” she said, straining to hear anything above the clattering of the coach. There seemed to be more riders behind them than just four.

Then she heard a distant sound that churned her stomach.

Swords clanging.

Then there was more shouting, and a horse quickly overtook the coach.

Instinctively Mahrree drew back. The man on the horse passing the coach wasn't in a uniform, but wore dark clothing and his face was blackened.

Mahrree sat back, breathing heavily.

“What is it?” Jaytsy asked.

The driver of the coach answered her as he shouted to the teams ahead of him. “Attack! Under attack!”

“Down, on the floor, now!” Mahrree ordered.

As her whimpering children slid off their seats and huddled together on the floor, Mahrree put her head cautiously out the window, only later to realize that wasn't at all cautious.

The dark rider was now overtaking the wagon ahead of them. He leaped from his horse onto the wagon and out of Mahrree's view. She sank back down, trying to think and trying not to panic.

“What do they want?” Peto wondered.

“I think they want the food,” Mahrree said, struggling to keep her voice steady.

“Who is it?”

She didn't want to say it, but there was no other possibility. “Guarders.”

Jaytsy whimpered.

Another yell made them all flinch. It was Perrin, and he was overtaking the coach.

“Father!” Jaytsy cried out.

Mahrree muffled her with her hand, although she doubted

Perrin would have heard her over the noise of the coach and the horses. “What do you expect him to do, come in here and hold you? He needs to do his duty. You do yours. Sit low and safe!”

Mahrree sat back up and tried to see what was happening in front of them, if nothing else but to gauge if she should feel panicked or brave.

She spied Perrin leaning toward the wagon with the Guarder on it, and a body flew off the side. Mahrree tried not to gasp, but she couldn’t help it. As they passed the body flopped by the side of the road, Mahrree saw in the quick moment that she could focus on it that it was dressed in soldier blue.

Yes, she should feel panicked.

Only one soldier was left on the wagon ahead with the Guarder, and Perrin was riding next to them on horseback. She tried to look ahead in the dark, but saw instead a leg start to come down off the top of their coach. The soldier sitting in relief driver position was making his way down the side.

The soldier looked behind, and Mahrree turned to see Poe riding hard up to them holding the reins of another horse, presumably from the enemy. He came up alongside the coach and the soldier made a clumsy but safe landing on the spare horse. Together they rode up to the wagon and out of Mahrree’s view.

She sat back, frustrated. “I have to know what’s happening! There’s an empty seat now up there,” she mused to herself and looked up as if she could see through the black siding.

“Mother, you can NOT go up there!” Peto declared.

“She’d never do that, Peto!” Jaytsy said.

But Mahrree was already putting her head out the window trying to see the footholds the soldier used. She sat down again. “You’re right,” she said, partially disappointed but more relieved. “If I were wearing trousers I might be able to do it, and if the horses weren’t galloping. And if it wasn’t dark. And if I wasn’t terrified of the whole situation—”

Several more shouts shut her mouth. One glimpse out the windows told them the coach was surrounded by men on horseback, all in black, perhaps as many as ten.

Jaytsy screamed and ducked down again. Peto looked like he would be sick. Mahrree tried to pray, but all that would come out was, “Please, Creator! Please!”

She watched out the window—this time trying to be discreet

about it but likely failing—as another figure on horseback who proved to be her husband came into view with his sword drawn. In the dark it was hard to be sure, but Mahrree thought it was dirtied. She felt Peto and Jaytsy come to her side to watch, but she was too engrossed in what was going on to tell them to get back down.

Perrin slashed at a rider nearest their door and the man fell from his horse without a sound.

“*That* was quick,” Peto breathed, genuinely impressed.

Another rider pulled out a sword and then fell from view.

“No, I wanted to see that!” Peto moaned. He leaned out the window to see his father fight the Guarder behind them, but they were lost to the night.

Before Mahrree could yank her son back to safety, a strange rocking motion shifted the coach, and Mahrree twisted to look out the other side. A dark rider had leaped onto the coach and was climbing up past the window.

“What do they want with us?” Jaytsy whimpered.

“They don’t want us, just the coach,” Mahrree said, not at all sure of her assessment. Now she wanted to cry out for Perrin, too. But she couldn’t let panicked win. Not yet.

The coach bounced erratically, suggesting that the dark man and the lone driver were fighting on the top. The horses kept their gallop and Mahrree wondered if there was anything she could do. Poke the Guarder through the coach wall? Throw an apple at him? Mahrree’s bravery was woefully uncreative.

The swaying stopped and a strange whoop came from above them.

Mahrree looked out the window to see the body of another soldier falling away.

That was it. The end. They’d lost control of the coach, and she and her children were now at the mercy of people who weren’t know for mercy . . .

She sat down, sure that the terror on her face was evident even in the dark.

“Mother, who’s driving the coach?” Peto asked, not too steadily.

Mahrree just shook her head. Another yell came, and she looked out the window to see her husband nearing. With a swipe of his sword, a Guarder riding right behind their back wheel fell



from his horse, then another slash from Perrin caused the last Guarder on that side of the coach to vanish as well. Mahrree looked to the other side, but didn’t see anyone in view. The other riders must have gone up ahead.

“Mahrree!” Perrin yelled.

She stuck her head out the window.

“Good—you’re still there.”

Before she could ask him where in the world he thought she might’ve gone, he said, “You’re going to have to help me gain control of this coach.”

“What?!”

Perrin glanced up at the driver in black and shook his head. “No time!” He nudged his horse closer to the coach and leaned over.

“I hate doing this,” he muttered as he tried to match the speed of his horse to the coach. “Always messed up in training. Never could get the timing . . . just . . . right.”

He leaned, grabbed the handholds on either side the door, and left the horse successfully.

“Ha! When it matters, I guess,” he said as his feet scrabbled to find the step.

Mahrree and her children couldn’t even breathe.

“Mahrree, watch how I go up, count to fifteen, then follow me. Have Peto hold the door so it won’t come back and hit you. You’ll have to take the reins while I secure the coach. Are you watching?”

Mahrree spluttered for a moment before she managed a panicked, “Are you serious?”

But Perrin was already inching his way to the front of the coach. He reached for the same holds the soldier had used a few minutes ago to climb up to the driving bench. Soon he was out of sight, and the coach swayed unpredictably again. A loud grunting noise above them fortunately didn’t sound like Perrin. It did, however, sound like Perrin punching someone in the gut.

Mahrree sat with her mouth wide open, stunned, as Peto slowly counted.

The coach bounced again.

“I can’t do this,” she whispered.

Jaytsy squeezed her hand, if in support or agreement, Mahrree wasn’t sure.

“Thirteen . . . fourteen . . . fifteen. Mother, fifteen? I know I said otherwise, but Father’s waiting for help.”

Peto sat up and swung the door open, then put his arm through the window to hold the door. “If you won’t go, I will,” he said, and Mahrree could tell he meant it.

The mothering instinct finally took over, easily defeating panic that tried to take a stand against it. “Oh no you won’t, young man!”

Another violent sway threw Mahrree toward the open door.

“All right, all right! I’m going!” She cautiously turned to back out the door, feeling for the grips above. Firmly grasping the leather handles, she stepped out to the side of the coach.

“Be careful, Mother!” cried Jaytsy unnecessarily.

Even in the dark Mahrree could tell two men were wrestling on top of the coach. She focused instead on finding the holds, ignoring the cold wind and rocking that tried to toss her from the side. She put her foot on the first hold—a small block protruding from the side—and reached for the next one.

“Not made for short women!” she yelled at the coach. As if in response, the coach hit a bump and propelled her upward enough to grab the block above. Not sure if she should feel grateful or disappointed, Mahrree firmed her grip. She knew she was going to make it up there; it was just a matter of actually doing it.

She refused to look up to see what was happening with her husband, but took the next hold up and placed her boot again, glad that the wind was blowing her skirt out of the way, then climbed again and again until she saw the empty driver’s seat in front of her. She crawled onto it and sighed in relief.

“The reins!” she heard Perrin yell. Then she heard him grunt.

Don’t look at him, don’t look at him, she told herself. She saw the ends of the reins just below her where the drivers’ feet were to rest. Laying down on the bench and reaching out her shaking hand, she snatched them with a triumphant, “Ha!”

She sat up in the seat and the coach shifted again. Startled, she spun around to see her husband on all fours on the roof, grinning down at her. “Good job!”

Mahrree exhaled and held the reins up to him. He shook his head.

“Are you all right?” she asked.

“Mother, who’s driving the coach?”

“I’m fine,” he said, a little winded.

“Then why aren’t you standing?”

“Do *you* want to try to stand on a swaying coach? I’ll trade you!”

She held the reins up to him again with a challenging smile, until she saw— “PERRIN!”

He turned just in time to see another Guarder climbing up the side of the coach. Perrin’s swift kick in his face sent the dark man into the air and made Mahrree wince.

But another Guarder was climbing up the back, and still another on the side. Perrin stayed on his knees, drew his sword and Mahrree pivoted to the front. She couldn’t bear to watch him use the sword, or worse, see something used on him.

Just keep control of the horses, she thought. Never mind this was only the third time in her life she had ever held the reins of horses, and that she really didn’t know what else to do but hold them firmly. She focused ahead at the teams in front of her, still in full gallop. In the dim light of the moons she could just make out the full and awful scope of the attack.

The scenario playing out on the coach was being repeated two wagons in front of her, and, by the amount of horses she saw overtaking her, would be happening on nearly all of the wagons as well. Guarders and soldiers fighting for control of the caravan.

“Dear Creator, will we lose everything?” She tried to concentrate on the wagon ahead of her to see who was controlling the horses. It occurred to her that if it were Guarders, they would have left the caravan by now. She prayed it was Hili or the relief driver of their coach holding the reins.

Behind her she heard the furious clanking of steel, and worried tears washed down her face. As long as someone in black didn’t suddenly land next to her, her husband was prevailing.

She chanced a look behind her just in time to see Perrin run his sword through another man, who fell ungraciously from the coach. Mahrree thought she would retch, especially when she saw another Guarder who climbed up the side hit Perrin solidly in the jaw with his fist.

“No, no, no, no!” Mahrree whispered to the horses as she turned quickly around.

She felt a presence above and behind her, then suddenly next to her.

It was a man. Wearing black.

She screamed and the body flopped limply on her lap, unconscious, or worse.

With a noise Mahrree remembered making only once before when she found a large centipede creeping through her little girl's dinner, she flailed and kicked until the heavy body slumped to the other side of the bench. As she cowered on her end of the seat, she watched in horror as the man in black slowly, much too slowly, slid off the other side and into the darkness. A jolting of the coach's back wheel suggested they'd run over him. For the third time in her life Mahrree made the same noise, which used every vowel sound in the alphabet, followed by a severe shudder.

"Perrin!" she whimpered and saw another body tumble off a wagon further up ahead, seemingly dressed in black.

There was another sway of their coach, another clang of steel behind her, and the suggestion of one more body falling off the side.

"Wasn't me!" Perrin shouted.

One morbid side of her mind wished she was keeping tally of her husband's kills. The other part of her mind recoiled at the word 'kills.'

Another body fell off another wagon somewhere ahead, but she kept her eyes forward. A distinct slicing sound behind her sent a spray of something onto her cloak and the seat next to her. She glanced down to see liquid shining in the dim moons' light. Grimacing, she chanced a look behind her.

Her husband cringed down at her and gestured with his sword that dripped again on the driver's bench and her cloak. "Sorry about that. But it's not mine. You're doing well, by the way." He turned and Mahrree saw him thrust with the sword again at someone just out of view.

She looked straight ahead and tried to ignore the moaning sound that fortunately didn't sound like her husband, followed by another muffled thud.

I should've said that to him, she thought. *You're doing well.* What I am doing but sitting here flinching and weeping?

She felt a presence next to her again, but before she could cry out she realized this time it was her husband.

"That's the last of them back here," he said as he positioned himself on the bench next to her. "I can't see anything else com-

ing up. But I need to get to the other wagons.”

Mahrree fought the urge to throw her arms around her husband’s neck, because they weren’t out of trouble yet. “How? We can’t go any faster, and we can’t leave the road or we’ll end up in those freshly plowed fields that are now turning into freezing mud.”

“I know, I know—let me think.” Perrin took the reins from his wife and scanned the dark scenery for any abandoned horses.

The distant horn blast startled them both. They looked at each other expectantly, then heard the second long, loud tone.

“The fort at Pools!” Perrin breathed.

Cheers rose from the wagons ahead as Guarder horses came rushing back past the coach, with fresh soldiers and horses in close pursuit. Perrin joined the cheer, but Mahrree just held her head in relief.

A few moments later an officer rode up to the coach and turned his horse to match their pace.

“Colonel Shin? I’m Captain Lebs. We’re here to escort you to the fort and attend to your wounded.”

“Thank you, Captain!” Perrin saluted cheerfully.

Mahrree patted her chest to catch her breath before turning to call down to the coach. “Are you two all right in there? We should be at the fort soon.”

There was no response.

“Peto! Jaysy!” Mahrree screamed. “Answer me!”

Perrin looked at her, alarmed.

“Fine, Mother! We’re fine,” Peto’s muffled voice finally came back up to them. “Just a little, um, buried. Seems the crate of dresses Grandmother packed wasn’t secure. Just a small nightmare, covering me in silks . . .”

Jaysy’s nervous laugh rose up. “He looks lovely, Mother. Peto in pink. I wish there was more light in here.”

“Dresses?” Perrin asked Mahrree. “With the need for food you packed dresses?”

“Your *mother* packed dresses, *and* lots of food,” Mahrree clarified. “She thought women in Edge might need some new clothing. Quite a gesture on her part when you think about it. I think she gave us nearly everything she owned.”

By the time they reached the fort, Peto and Jaysy had managed to pack most of the dresses back into the crate that had been

perched on the seat opposite of them. As the coach pulled through the fort's gates, Colonel Snyder was waiting with a lantern in one hand, and his sword in the other. When he recognized the Shins, his stance relaxed and he sheathed his weapon. The wagon drivers pulled over to the stables to inspect the condition of the horses and wagons, but Perrin stopped the coach in front of the command office, slid off the bench and helped Mahrree down.

Snyder shook his head. "You looked a sight neater last night, Colonel Shin. The only thing messing up your uniform was a baby, not—"

Instead of finishing his sentence, the colonel held the lantern higher. Mahrree saw splatters and smears on her husband's riding coat that she hadn't noticed before. She quickly looked down to avoid seeing more blood, but discovered a few drying spots on her cloak instead.

Colonel Snyder smiled sympathetically. "Mrs. Shin, I didn't expect we'd meet again so soon. I certainly hope your ride here was . . . well," he raised his eyebrows and shrugged. "What can I say?"

Colonel Shin shook his hand. "I can say thank you, Colonel Snyder. Your men came just in time."

Jaytsy and Peto tumbled out of the coach and hurried over to their father.

Snyder chuckled in understanding as they each gripped one of Perrin's arms. "Quite an evening you two have had," Snyder said. "Two exciting nights in a row, eh?"

"Father was more entertaining tonight than last night," Peto said. "I counted thirteen."

"Thirteen what?" Mahrree asked.

Perrin leaned over to him. "I think you missed three," he whispered.

Mahrree pressed her hands to her temples and groaned quietly. "Colonel, is there a washing room I could go for a few minutes to freshen up?"

"Of course," he said gesturing to the open door behind him. "Sergeant Oblong," he called to a waiting soldier, "show Mrs. Shin and her daughter to the guest washing rooms. See to it that they have some warm water, too."

Mahrree nearly wept to see a cheerful and familiar face approach them.

“If you’ll follow me, ma’am,” Oblong said as he led them down a wide corridor. He pushed open a door for them. “Clean towels are over there, and I’ll go fetch you the water. And please tell Colonel Shin it worked,” he added in an urgent whisper. “I’m being promoted next week!”

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Only after Mahrree and Jaytsy, now willing to hang on her mother for comfort, left to enter the fort did Perrin turn to his son.

“First, counting kills is not some kind of competition—”

“And second,” Snyder said, “never discuss the number in front of the women.”

Perrin pointed at him. “Right.”

“So it was that bad, Colonel Shin?” Snyder asked, nodding at his bloodied coat and leading him and Peto into his command office. Peto took a chair by the door to watch the changing of the horses across the compound.

Perrin shook his head as he slumped into a chair. “It was very bold. Right outside the village border. I never remember them attacking in such a manner.”

“It’s a very tempting load,” Snyder pointed out. “We have no idea how severely they’ve been affected.”

“But that’s not what bothers me,” Perrin said, eyeing the man he knew hoped to be the next High General. Seven years ago when he trained Snyder in new protocols, he’d regarded Perrin as little more than the general’s nuisance son. Last night at The Dinner he’d been predictably cordial, but Perrin felt Snyder sizing him up.

Tonight, the evaluating contest continued, but it took on a different tenor. Now both men were to posture as to who knew more and had better hunches as to what was *really* happening. That’s the way it went with brassies, Perrin knew. Enlisted men decided things with their fists, but senior officers established their hierarchy with deliberately dropping nuggets of information. It wasn’t a matter of who was stronger or a better fighter; it was about who possessed the more valuable nuggets.

“Nor I,” Snyder said. “It’s *how* they knew so quickly. We barely got the message over an hour ago about the caravan, yet they had dozens of men, according to my scouts, just as quickly?”

Shin, someone was talking.”

That was obvious, Perrin thought. He didn't feel like playing any games tonight, and he wasn't interested in establishing himself in the colonel pecking order, so he simply asked, “Who? The only one who knew soon enough would've been Riplak. The other messenger the High General sent went straight to the reserves. I saw him there.”

“How long has Riplak served your father?” Snyder asked, his eyes narrowing with the implication that he'd worked out the solution long before Perrin arrived.

But Perrin had no patience for that. “My father's known him for years. Riplak even worked in his stables when he was a teenager, and my father helped him get into Command School. He's been his assistant for over a year now. He's trustworthy.”

Snyder shrugged at that, suggesting he'd visit that evaluation again later. “Maybe it was just a stroke of good luck on the Guardians' part. Maybe they were on their way somewhere else and happened upon your caravan. But what if they weren't?”

Snyder watched him for a response, but Perrin just sighed wearily. He never was one for my-brass-is-shinier-than-your-brass. He just wanted drivers and a fresh horse.

Snyder gave up and slapped his desk almost cheerfully. If the other man wasn't even going to play who's-got-the-bigger-brass, it was as good as a win. “Well, I'm on it, Colonel Shin. We're rounding up whoever we can right now, and I've ordered the men to keep the Guardians separate so they can't kill each other. We'll also replace the soldiers you lost. I have my captain taking a count right now as they change the horses to see how many more you need to get to Edge.”

Perrin smiled genuinely. “Excellent. That's exactly what I need. Thank you.”

“I have to admit,” Snyder said, sitting back in his chair and settling in for another round, “I'm surprised at the Administrators. This show of generosity is quite unexpected.” He raised an eyebrow.

Perrin gave him a deliberate look. “Yes, yes *it is*, Colonel.”

Snyder broke into a sly smile, realizing that a candidate for High General had just kicked himself out of the race. “Understood. I also understand the need to get you on your way as quickly as possible. I won't detain you any longer, *except*,” he said in



the generous manner of one who knew he would someday become the other’s superior officer, “to order you to clean yourself up. Your wife and daughter have seen enough of our work tonight.”

Colonel Shin glanced down at his hands turning brown with drying blood. “Yes, of course.” He had to concede it was a good idea. “Peto, come with me.”

He left the office and headed to the soldiers’ washroom, his son following close behind.

Perrin was acutely aware of his son watching him as he rubbed his face and hands with the cold water, using the bar of lavender soap for extra measure. His coat and the new uniform underneath, also showing dark splashes, would have to wait. Maybe that’s why the blue was a deeper shade now, he considered—to hide the stains better.

As he took a cloth and dried himself, he asked, “How much did you see, son?”

“A lot, Father,” Peto looked down at his shuffling feet. “Probably more than I should’ve. That’s how the crate fell.”

“What do you mean?” Perrin put down the cloth and inspected himself in the mirror looking for anything else that would make his wife cringe or his daughter whimper.

“I was kneeling on it, up against the window and hanging out to watch you. One of those last bumps knocked the crate over and broke it open. Knocked me down, too.”

Perrin groaned softly to himself. Worse than the talk of explaining “How Peto Came to Be” was the discussion of “How to Make Sense of Bloody Violence.” He should’ve had this talk when Peto was eight as well.

Perrin turned around and leaned against the water pump table. “And what did you think about what you saw?”

Peto shook his head. “I never knew you could do all that. I mean, I’ve seen Uncle Shem and the others practicing, and figured you must know some of it, but you’re always on the horse giving the commands. I never saw you . . . you know, *doing* it. Slashing someone. I must admit,” he looked down at his feet again, “I was kind of proud of you.”

“Kind of proud,” Perrin repeated quietly. “I kind of appreciate that. But what did you think about what you saw happen to those men?”

Peto inspected his boots for another moment before lifting his head, his pale eyes clouded. "It was awful, Father. Some of them died, didn't they?"

Perrin wasn't about to say, *At least thirteen; the others will die from their injuries by morning*. Instead he said, "I've always been far too effective, I'm afraid."

Horrified, Peto whispered, "How do you do it?"

Perrin sighed inwardly with relief. It was the boys who were enthralled by the blood that worried him. "I do it for you, for your mother, for your sister. I don't enjoy it, Peto, but it's satisfying to know you're safe because I know how to use steel. I don't want you to have to see that again. I'm just glad it was dark. I don't like seeing what happens, either. And I never want to get to the point where I do."

Peto nodded at him and bit his lower lip. "Father," he whispered, "I *really* don't want to be a soldier."

"You don't have to be, Peto. It's probably not your calling."

Peto furrowed his brows. "My calling?"

"What you feel driven to be. What the Creator wants you to be. Many men ignore it or try to fight it. Sometimes I find myself fighting it, too," Perrin confessed. "But I know that being in the army is my calling. In time, you'll know yours too."

Peto was thoughtful for a moment before he eyed his father. "Are you sure it was sixteen?"

"Positive. While some soldiers keep track for bragging purposes, I always keep count to make sure I didn't miss anyone who may come back later to surprise me. Learned that in the forest before you were born. And sixteen's pretty good for an old guy like me."

Peto shook his head. "You're not really old, Father."

"I guess you're right," he sighed. "I could be doing this for another twenty-seven years until I retire."

They left the washroom and found Jaytsy and Mahrree waiting for them by the coach. Mahrree's face was brighter now that Perrin's was.

"Sure you don't want to ride with us in the coach?" she asked.

"I wished I could," Perrin said, "but I understand a crate of dresses has taken my favorite seat. I think I'm best put to use where I was."

“Mother, who’s driving the coach?”

Jaytsy hugged him. “That was so scary!” she whispered. “I’m so glad you’re my father.”

“Ah, Jaytsy, enough of that mushy stuff,” Peto said, grabbing her by the arm and pulling her into the coach. “He doesn’t need to hear that. Toughen up, girl. Some dim-witted soldier somewhere wants to marry you, remember?”

Jaytsy smacked his arm and sent a grateful look to her father before she loaded into the coach after her brother.

“Ready for the next leg, Colonel Shin?” Mahrree asked him.

“Only if you are, Mrs. Shin. I should give you a field promotion for driving.”

“For holding the reins,” she corrected.

“And for marshalling all this food and clothing.” He gave her a mischievous grin. “Hmm—marshalling, field promotion . . . how about the title of Field Marshal?”

She pulled a face. “How about we just pray for a quiet night?”

“Already have been.”

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“What did he do?” Chairman Mal shouted as Brisack jogged up the stairs to the mansion for the second time that night. It was late and cold, but Mal was practically on fire with fury.

“I don’t know,” Brisack panted as he reached the top. He bent over to catch his breath, gulping in freezing air that seized his lungs. “But they all went,” he gasped. “None have come back. No notes. No explanations. I don’t know—”

“And Gadiman?” Mal exploded.

“I can’t find him anywhere,” Brisack said as he struggled to stand back up. “But when I do—”

“You’ll bring him to ME!”

## Chapter 20 ~ “I realize it’s not exactly a mansion in Idumea--”

Mahrree, Jaytsy, and Peto couldn’t sleep. The night was extremely cold, probably enough to destroy much of the fruit blossoms and early crops that were just coming up. They used some of Joriana’s dresses as blankets to keep them warm, and kept their eyes focused outside, watching for another attack.

They’d lost seven soldiers—their conditions and locations still unknown when they left Pools—and Poe Hili had a few gashes that the surgeon hastily bandaged. His arm would be stitched later in Edge, and Shem would likely need a new jacket.

At the next messenger station, not all of the teams of horses were assembled yet, but a nervous supervisor assured Perrin they were on the way. The supervisor also stared at Hili, as if he suspected the young man was somehow related to the station losing a horse the night before. On her way back from the washing room, Mahrree noticed that the private purposely avoided the station supervisor’s inquiring gaze.

Perrin made the decision to divide the caravan. The ten wagons already with horses would go on ahead. The possibility that they’d be attacked again was unlikely, but if they were only half of the food would be lost. It was another hour before the coach and the last ten wagons continued on their way. Sometime in the night they reached Midplain, and the fort was waiting for them with fresh horses.

Mahrree and the children somehow managed to fall asleep along the road to Rivers, and well after sunrise their half of the caravan was passing the point where the two rivers converged and

then split to become three. Mahrree woke with a surprise to see them changing horses again. She saw her husband talking to a soldier and he nodded at something he said.

Perrin came over to the coach and smiled wearily. “No sign of danger anywhere. I think we’re going to be fine the rest of the way home.”

“Good,” Mahrree said. “Then come sit with us. Perrin, you look terrible. I don’t know when I’ve ever seen you so tired.”

“Don’t tempt me, woman!” he said with a twinkle in his eyes. “I have other plans. I expect to sleep soundly in my bed this evening. I don’t want any little coach naps to interfere with that. Just a little further to Mountseen and then home.”

Peto and Jaytsy were fully awake by now.

“Home before dinner?” Peto asked.

“I expect so.”

Jaytsy shook her head. “Seems so strange to be back already. Feels like we’ve been gone a lifetime.”

Mahrree agreed it felt strange. She also still felt guilty for eating so well while her mother and their friends had been suffering. She hoped they wouldn’t resent the amount of food she pulled out of the coach, and she worried how she would divide it appropriately.

From outside of Mountseen, they saw distinctly the mountains that bordered their home. The distant bluish-gray bumps occasionally distinguishable in between the trees in Idumea were now tall, rock-covered barriers dominating the landscape over the orchards and pines of Mountseen. Ever since her children were young Mahrree had been looking at the mysterious landscape in a different way. They were her home.

“I never noticed that the mountains are pretty,” Jaytsy said as she craned her head out the window to see them fully. “I don’t know that I’ve ever really looked at them before.”

“No one really does, I think,” Mahrree said. “I’ve never heard anyone call them pretty, but I’m glad you think they are, Jaytsy. For as long as I can remember people in Edge always looked toward Idumea. Even houses that face south cost a little more than houses facing the mountains.”

“I guess I can see the appeal of Idumea, but I also rather like the mountains,” Peto mused. “Kind of feel protective, in a way. In Idumea the land is so flat and it just goes on forever.”

Mahrree smiled that her second child also appreciated the terrain. "I don't care for the flat land, either," she said. "I must admit, I found it disturbing that in some places you didn't know where one village started and another ended. I like the borders of the mountains," she decided, looking out the window. "We've feared the mountains for so long we've failed to appreciate their power. I kind of wished our house faced the mountains, now that I think about it."

"We can just get Father to turn it around for your anniversary next season, Mother," Peto said confidently. "I'm sure it wouldn't be a problem."

At the last changing station just beyond Mountseen, Perrin came up to them again. "Just got word that the first wagons have already reached Edge. They've set up in the village center. Karna has a doling system established. I have a feeling I'm about to lose him," he said dismally. "He'll make a great commander at another fort. So, are we ready to go home?"

"Yes!" his family chorused at him.

When they finally pulled into Edge that afternoon it seemed every citizen was packed into the village greens around the amphitheater and arena, but they eagerly made way for the last ten long wagons and the coach.

Mahrree squirmed, worried how their friends would react. She couldn't help but notice the state of the villagers' clothes: filthy, torn, and in some cases still only bedclothes. That was all they had left. With many houses still inaccessible and so many shops gone, the beautiful gowns in the crate across from her would be the only clothing some women would have, as inappropriately frilly and ridiculously silky as they were.

She felt ashamed of the new pale blue linen dress she wore under her cloak. How utterly inadequate for doing any useful work! At least her dress and cloak were sufficiently rumpled and a bit blood splattered.

To Mahrree's surprise, the coach received a heroes' welcome, as did each wagon. By the time the coach rambled in, to great amounts of cheering, it had to circle the other wagons to find a place to stop, which only prolonged the welcome.

"We can't leave the coach," Mahrree murmured to her children as they heard the shouts of welcome and calls of gratitude. "This is so embarrassing."

“I realize it’s not exactly a mansion in Idumea--”

Jaytsy nodded and covered her cheeks with her hands.

“Don’t worry, Mother,” Peto grinned. “They’re all trying to get to Father.”

His family watched from the coach windows as Perrin dismounted from his foamy horse and attempted to make his way to the doling tables, only to be detained by hundreds of Edgers trying to shake his hand or slap him on the back. He smiled—almost sheepishly, Mahrree thought—at the attention.

Maybe his response was because Edgers regarded him with something akin to adulation, and Mahrree couldn’t decide who wanted him more: Idumea or Edge. She never before appreciated just how in demand her husband really was. Nor had she realized how wholly inadequate she was for him, in the city *and* their village.

Gamely he made his way through the throng, nodding here, shaking a hand there. His dark eyes were baggy and red, his riding jacket stained with dried blood, his cap askew, and his gait stumbling with fatigue; clear demonstration of what he’d gone through that night for his village.

But when Mahrree saw a young father unabashedly embrace Perrin, she knew she had her answer. While Idumea admired him, Edge loved him.

The coach door yanked open and there stood Shem, grinning. “Ever coming out or are you on your way back to the mansions of Idumea?”

“Uncle Shem!” Jaytsy squealed. “I missed you,” and she leaped into his arms.

“Wow, this is quite a ‘Good to see you.’” He laughed as he set her down on the snowy ground. “Better make sure no other soldiers notice and think they can get in line to be next, Jays.”

He turned only to find Peto holding out pretend skirts like his sister. “Uncle Shem!” he did his best to imitate his sister’s squeal and flopped into Shem’s arms.

Shem chuckled and dropped him unceremoniously on the snow. Jaytsy reached over her prone brother to take the basket of apples from her mother and held it up for Shem.

He waved away the offer. “Take it right over to the doling tables, Jaytsy. I’m fine.”

Peto got up, brushing the wet and heavy snow off of his jacket. “It’s deep here, isn’t it?”

“It is,” Mahrree sighed, looking out the door at the nearby tree branches weighed down by snow. “Are the blossoms dead?” she asked Shem in a low voice.

Shem nodded somberly. “I’d guess at least two-thirds are gone. We’ll know more by tomorrow when the snow’s melted a bit. There was a hard freeze last night, too, so the early crops . . .” He shrugged instead of finishing his sentence.

Mahrree nodded that she understood his unspoken worries. Cheers rose up again from the crowd. Apparently Perrin was saying something, but Mahrree couldn’t make it out. She chuckled and Shem grinned at the crowd.

Then he turned back to her. “Mahrree, don’t you want to get out? Are you all right?”

She nodded, but she wasn’t all right. How could she face her friends and village wearing her new dress and knowing that just two days ago she feasted at the grandest dinner in the world? So she only said, “I’m just a little tired, Shem.”

“On closer inspection, you don’t look completely well,” he said, and Mahrree wasn’t surprised that he noticed. Shem noticed everything. He climbed into the coach and was about to sit across from her until he saw the crate on the other bench. Instead he sat gingerly next to her and rubbed at a smudge on her cloak. “Mahrree, is this blood?”

She sighed.

His eyes grew wide. “Whose?”

“Not mine or the children’s,” she chuckled sadly. “Someone Perrin dispatched . . . it just splattered,” she gestured lamely to the other stains on her gray cloak.

“Oh, Mahrree.” Shem squeezed her hand. “We’ve been hearing all kinds of stories about the attack, but I didn’t realize you witnessed it.”

“Witnessed it? I drove the coach!” she laughed miserably. “While Perrin was on top!” She pretended to slash an imaginary sword before dropping her hand. “It was a horrible night, Shem. I think it’s all just starting to catch up to me.” She knew this wasn’t the best time, but she couldn’t stop the tears that slipped disobediently down her face.

“Oh, Mahrree,” Shem repeated, putting a strong arm around her.

She rested her head against his shoulder, grateful for a



brother who could spend a few minutes comforting his overemotional sister. She just needed a shoulder to cry on.

“I’m so sorry, Mahrree. I feel responsible—”

“Why?” she asked. “Are you a Guarder?”

Shem chuckled with her.

“Well Shem,” she sniffed back her tears and patted him on the knee, “since we haven’t had you over for a proper dinner in weeks now, you’re coming home with us tonight to help us finish off some of these leftovers, and to tell us everything that’s been happening.”

“Good idea. Now let’s get you out of here.” He moved as if to stand up, but Mahrree hung on his arm.

“I can’t go out there, Shem,” she whispered, wiping her face. “Not like this.”

“What do you mean?”

“Do you realize how we’ve *lived* the past two weeks?” she nearly wailed. “In a mansion!”

“Well, Grandpy did mention—” he started.

“With silk sheets!”

“Wouldn’t those be rather slipper—?”

“And do you have any idea how well we ate?”

“Well, I imagine that—”

“A Harvest Day meal! Every day! I’ve *gained* weight while everyone here has been losing it!”

“Mahrree,” he chuckled and patted her hand that gripped his arm, “no one’s going to blame you for—”

“I can’t face them. I feel so guilty!”

“Then just don’t tell them how you lived,” Shem suggested.

“What, lie to my village?” Mahrree was shocked.

Shem shrugged. “Sometimes . . . sometimes you have to hide the truth to spare those you love. If they knew everything, it would ruin . . . *everything*. It’s not dishonest, exactly,” he tried to explain as Mahrree frowned at him. “It’s . . . preserving feelings. Protecting people. They don’t *need* to know the truth, do they?”

“Hmm,” she considered that.

“Besides,” Shem continued, “listen to them out there. Edge isn’t angry; they’re astonished. Look—they’re even hugging Peto. We didn’t expect Perrin could do anything as grand as this. Honestly, a few hours ago Brillen, Grandpy and I set up a table over there in the middle of the greens and wondered why. A few vil-

lagers came by, asking what we were doing, and we felt rather foolish that we didn't know what to tell them. Until the first group of wagons came. Mahrree, all of us were overcome to see how much grain they brought, and I'll be honest: there were a few tears shed."

Mahrree chuckled quietly. "Well Shem, I've seen you tear up on quite a few occasions—"

"It wasn't me," Shem chuckled back. "It was Grandpy Neeks. 'Shin did it!' was all he could say. 'Shin did it!'"

Mahrree grinned.

"So come on," Shem nudged her shoulder. "Let's get you out there, and—"

A shadow darkened the doorway. "Mrs. Shin?" Grandpy Neeks said, climbing up the steps. "Is everything all right in here?"

Mahrree was startled by the severity of his tone, and the fact that he was glaring at Shem and not addressing her.

Shem pulled his arm out of Mahrree's grip.

"Fine, Grandpy," she smiled, suspecting that Grandpy feared Shem was revealing the fact that the old sergeant major was seen crying earlier. "Zenos is just trying to convince me that it's safe to leave the coach."

Grandpy shifted his gaze to her. "Are you sure, ma'am? Anything I can do to help you? Because Mrs. Peto has been asking—"

"My mother!" Mahrree shouted. In her self-absorption she'd nearly forgotten about her mother.

"—but she unfortunately planted herself on the other side of the greens and asked me to find a way to get you over to her—"

"Of course! Yes!" Mahrree eagerly took his hand to get down the steps.

Behind her, Mahrree heard Shem chuckle, "Well, that got her out," and he whistled over a few soldiers to help unload the food stuffed in the coach.

Mahrree followed Neeks through Edgers, who caught and hugged almost as frequently as they did her husband. She spotted, over by the doling table, Poe Hili: black eye, banged up, bandaged, and beaming. A couple of privates had friendly arms around him and villagers patted him on the back as they passed. They all knew who Poe was, and they now knew what he was willing to do

to redeem himself.

Poe’s life would never be the same, Mahrree thought. Good.

It wasn’t until early that evening—after Mahrree assured Hycymum again and again that they were fine, and after all of the food had been distributed and delivered by soldiers to those who were unable to leave their homes—that the Shins finally headed back to their house. Hycymum rode with them, touching every inch she could have the “magnificent army coach!”

Mahrree couldn’t wait to finally be rid of it.

Shem and Perrin rode behind the coach, catching up on the past two weeks, while Mahrree and the children watched the houses as they went by. To see so much that had been rebuilt was gratifying. But to see how much rubble and destruction remained was discouraging.

Mahrree had forgotten that Shem had fixed up their house while they were away. She wasn’t even looking toward it when Jaytsy squealed, “It’s done!”

As the coach swayed to a stop, Jaytsy and Peto pushed each other to be the first ones out and into the house. Mahrree stepped out cautiously and looked up, her mouth dropping open. There was no way Perrin could hit his head on the ceiling again, unless he jumped off the bed.

Shem had rebuilt the entire level at least three feet higher. The roof line stood at an impressive peak on top of the house, exactly as she had imagined it could, but somehow better.

Mahrree was still staring, dumbfounded, when Shem and Perrin dismounted and walked over to her.

“Zenos, you missed your calling,” Perrin declared. “That’s amazing! Where’d you learn to build houses?”

Shem grinned. “I had help, you know.”

“Yes, I supervised,” Hycymum announced.

“She sure did,” Shem said sweetly. “Poe Hili and I spent all of our spare time up there working and talking, ever since you left. He confessed a lot, Perrin, and still has a lot to fix. But I have confidence in him. He’s a changed man, and he’s going to be a good soldier. Karna and I felt terrible about making him the messenger, but I don’t think that will lead to any backsliding.”

Perrin nodded. “I could tell he’s changed. You’re the perfect man to talk to, Shem. I can’t imagine how a rector could have done him more good.”

Mahrree sniffed. "I can't stand it," she whispered.

Her family looked at her, confused. "Can't stand what?" Perrin asked gently. He glanced at the house that looked perfect to him.

Hycymum sighed. "Well, Shem didn't take *all* my advice."

"No, it's just too much. These past weeks," she began to weep again. "How can so many miracles be packed into such a small time frame? I thought I'd seen it all. But now to hear Poe Hili is changed because he could talk to Shem Zenos while rebuilding my bedroom because of the land tremor?" She started to sob.

Hycymum blinked in surprise. Shem and Perrin exchanged startled expressions. Perrin shrugged at his family and put his arm around his wife.

"No, it's good! It's all just *too* good. The house I mean, but other things . . ." Mahrree tried to assure them as she blubbered. It'd been such a terrible night, and leaving the Shins so suddenly, and then everything in the past few weeks, and so much was good and bad and worrying, and miraculously she was home again, and the house was fine when so much still wasn't, and now all of that was insisting on piling on top of her right then—

She couldn't explain it, so it just came out in tears.

Shem cringed. He leaned over to Perrin and whispered, "Maybe we should wait until she's calmed down before I show her the built-in wardrobe. I took part of that attic you don't seem to use, and converted it so you can walk right in and hang up the clothes—"

Mahrree burst out into loud sobs.

---

The house was small. Compared to the mansion, it was tiny. Shed-size, and added on to in odd ways.

The garden was pathetic: lifeless, with two spits, tree stumps for stools and a bench, and a big rock in the middle of it.

The upstairs bedroom, while far taller and with a walk-in wardrobe that it didn't have before, was still more confining than the maids' upstairs bedrooms in the Shin mansion.

But nothing was better than being home.

“I realize it’s not exactly a mansion in Idumea--”

For the first time in weeks Mahrree and Perrin lay down tentatively on their bed and looked up at the ceiling that was more solid than even the oaks that gave their lives for it. They were fully aware of the pairs of eyes that watched them.

“Well?” Hycymum asked eagerly.

Mahrree pushed down on the plush blankets and bounced her head experimentally on the new feather pillow.

Perrin rubbed the cotton under his hand. “The curtains match the blankets that match the pillows that match the rug, correct?”

Mrs. Peto stood a little taller and looked proudly at her granddaughter who grinned back.

“I like the blue,” Perrin said. “Sets off the red and white nicely. You said it’s called plaid? I must admit, I . . . I kind of like it.” He sat up and nodded at his mother-in-law.

She beamed.

Mahrree chuckled from her prone position. “Jaytsy thought we needed new blankets in here. I told her it was just an excuse to go shopping.”

“But everything was so dirty and starting to mold, Mahrree! I couldn’t get it clean,” Hycymum explained. “The mattress was salvageable, fortunately, but there was nothing left to do but get new bedding.”

Mahrree sat up. “But how did you get it? So much in the markets burned—” She narrowed her eyes at her mother. “You already had it, didn’t you? You probably weakened the ceiling just hoping it would collapse so that we’d have to use what you had ready, right?” She smiled through her scowl.

“Oh, I didn’t do that. I wouldn’t know how to,” Hycymum chuckled. “But yes, I already had it. I was going to redo your bedroom for your anniversary next season as a surprise, and Jaytsy was going to help get you out of the house for me. I thought Perrin would approve of the plaid.”

He nodded and looked around. “Makes me feel rather woody, somehow.”

His wife looked at him as if she smelled something foul. “Woody?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. I’m new to this, all right?”

Hycymum smiled a bit apologetically. “I realize it’s not exactly a mansion in Idumea—”

“Mother, I’ve had enough of the mansions in Idumea,” Mahrree promised her.

Hycymum’s eyes grew big. “Did you see one?”

Mahrree pursed her lips as her children snorted.

Perrin rubbed his forehead. “I’ll let you break it to her while I’m gone to the fort. I’m not sure if I could handle her reaction right now.”

“My reaction?” Hycymum frowned. “To what?”

Perrin let her question slide, got off the bed, stood on his tiptoes to show his head still had plenty of room, and winked at Shem who, smiling, leaned in the doorway with his arms folded.

Perrin stepped over to his mother-in-law and gave her an unexpected kiss on the cheek. “It’s wonderful to come home to a beautiful bedroom. Thank you.”

Hycymum turned pink.

Perrin turned to his wife. “I want to check on the fort, and then I’ll be back for a late dinner and a good night’s sleep.”

“Leave your jacket, Perrin,” Hycymum reminded him. “I’ll soak it with your riding coat to get out that mud.”

“It’s not mud, Grandmother,” Peto started, “it’s bl—”

“—a real mess. Thank you, Mother Peto.” Perrin unbuttoned his jacket and sent a calculated look to his son. “I’ll wear one of my old ones to the fort.”

“Real brass buttons,” she whispered in awe as she took the jacket from Perrin.

Mahrree shook her head sadly. If her mother swooned over the brass on his new jacket, she’d tip over lifeless at the news they actually lived in a mansion.

Perrin glanced sympathetically at his wife, then punched Shem good-naturedly on the shoulder. “Don’t hang around here too long unloading, Zenos. I’ll need your eyes at the fort soon,” he told his master sergeant before he headed down the stairs.

Mahrree got off the bed and hugged her mother. “It’s even better than silk sheets which, I assure you, aren’t nearly as comfortable as they sound.”

“Silk sheets? They make sheets out of silk? Where’d you see that?”

“Uh, later Mother. Let’s finish unloading the coach so Shem can bring it back to the fort.”

“Absolutely,” Shem said. “It’s had enough airing out.”

---

After inspecting the fort for an hour, making sure nothing was out of place—and blessedly it wasn’t—Perrin walked into his office and sighed in satisfaction. The fort and his office were exactly as they should be, which was immensely comforting since everything else in his life had been upended the past few weeks. He sat easily in the big chair at his desk, his shoulders relaxing before he heard a familiar gait come up the stairs.

“I found him on my way in,” Shem said, poking his head in the door. “He’s on his way.”

Perrin nodded. “Good. Stick around, all right?”

Shem twitched his acknowledgement and stepped back to give room for Lieutenant Riplak as he came up the stairs.

“Colonel Shin, sir!” he stood at attention at the door. “Reporting as ordered, sir.”

“At ease and sit down, Riplak. Sleep well?”

“Yes sir,” he said as he took a chair. “But I should be leaving for Idumea soon, sir.”

Colonel Shin shook his head. “Not until dawn. You’ll accompany the rest of the garrison soldiers headed south to help return the horses.”

The lieutenant shifted nervously. “But your father will be expecting me. I’m his—”

“His what, Riplak?” Colonel Shin interrupted. “Betrayer?”

Riplak’s chin dropped. “Sir?”

The colonel stood up, walked around his desk, and yanked the stunned young man out of his chair. “Who’d you speak to? How’d they know we were coming?”

Riplak stammered, “N-n-n-o one, sir! I left from the mansion and went straight to the stables. I don’t know how the Guards knew you were coming. Maybe it was just a coincidence. I’m very sorry, sir. I was shocked when I heard about the attack. I wasn’t expecting *that*. Honestly!”

Perrin breathed heavily as he stared into the frightened young man’s eyes, looking for deceit. He remembered glaring at Shem like this, years ago, trying to discern if he was a Guarder. Riplak’s face blanched the same way Shem’s had, and his lower jaw began to tremble.

“I’d do nothing to betray your father, sir. Please. I’m committed to serving the world.”

Perrin released his grip on the young man’s uniform and Riplak slumped helplessly back into his chair.

“Can you prove it?” Colonel Shin demanded.

“I-I-I-I rode all night to deliver his message, sir.” Now the tremble in his lower jaw spread to his entire body. “I’ve never been north of Pools, sir. To be honest, I was a bit uneasy. Not exactly my kind of thing, riding in the dark to unfamiliar destinations, all alone.” His breathing quickened. “Was never more happy than to see the sun rise over the marshes! Please, sir, can I just go back Idumea?” He was scared.

Perrin had never known Guardians to be scared of anything. Agitated, shifty, irrational, and impulsive, yes. But not scared.

Perrin stared at the quaking lieutenant and tried to clear his mind to feel for any kind of impression that he shouldn’t let Riplak leave. Nothing came.

Perhaps it *was* a coincidence that the Guardians happened upon them. Perhaps someone in the stables was a contact. If what his father told him was true—that Guardians lived among them—Perrin could think of dozens of men that could have revealed their plans.

“If you leave now,” Perrin said, “you’ll be riding in the dark all the way back. Alone.”

Riplak gulped at the thought.

“But if you wait until morning, you’ll have light and dozens of men and horses accompanying you.”

Riplak nodded. “Sir, I am sorry. Truly,” he said as he got to his feet. “But you were uninjured, right sir? The future High General’s fine?”

Perrin’s brows furrowed at that reference to the future High General, but he said only, “Be careful on the way home, all right, Lieutenant? My father would be disappointed if anything happened to you.”

“Yes, sir. My life’s purpose is to attend to the High General, sir.”

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“I realize it’s not exactly a mansion in Idumea--”

“Think we’re finally back to the same old routine?” Mahrree asked Perrin in the dark of their bedroom late that night.

Perrin snored back.

Mahrree laughed softly and sank into the new sheets. They were cotton and nubby and perfect.

Even though poor Hycymum had nearly hyperventilated to hear that even her grandchildren had slept in silk sheets—and lived for two weeks in a mansion in Idumea—Mahrree wouldn’t have wanted anything else but a plaid bedroom.

That night she dreamed again of a gray, wooden-planked house, filled with children and laughter, but without a stitch of silk in it anywhere.

---

Two men sat in the dark office of an unlit building.

Neither of them spoke for several minutes, still trying to absorb it all.

“And *still* he succeeded.” It was Brisack. He breathed the words partly in awe, partly in rage. “How the *slag* did he pull that off?”

The only thing to drag Nicko Mal out of his stunned reverie was to hear the good doctor using such profanity. While slag was the refuse of smelted metals, it also referred to the filthiest elements of society, worthy only of being cast off. A refined doctor wouldn’t use such language unless—

“You’re angry about this?”

“Of course I’m angry!” Brisack snapped. “We had an arrangement! Then we revised that arrangement, and *still* he went off and did precisely what he wanted!”

As furious as Mal was about the loss of the reserves—the Shins were now nothing more than thieving rogue Guardians in his mind—he was more fascinated that Perrin’s biggest admirer was turning on him. “You’re taking this personally, aren’t you?”

Brisack’s hand clenched into a fist. “With *provisions*, I told him. Provided he’d create a complete report of the conditions in Edge. Provided he’d give me a week to work on the Administrators. Provided he’d allow me to oversee the loading of the wagons! But what did he do? After all these years of defending him, preserving him, speculating for him, he just, just, just—”

Nicko Mal couldn't help but smile as Brisack frothed.

"—just, *did what he wanted!* What an infuriating son of a sow!"

Mal burst into a grin. Observing the breakdown of Dr. Brisack was the greatest entertainment he'd had in years. Two profanities in two minutes? The Shins' betrayal was nearly worth it to witness this.

Nearly.

"Finally you believe me, don't you my dear Doctor? Now you see why I've always thought of Perrin Shin as one of the most aggravating, annoying—"

"Dangerous!" Brisack added.

Mal nodded. "—dangerous men in the world. And now Relf has just joined that little club."

Brisack exhaled. "Now that was unexpected! He wrote the message, he released the stores, he commanded the soldiers—next he'll be saying all of it was his fault, just to protect that insubordinate brat of his!"

"Most likely," Mal agreed, still torn between fury and fascination. "The Administrators will all be in session tomorrow morning. Emergency meeting. We'll decide then how to handle this."

Brisack scoffed. "Handle this? We can't *handle this*. We have to go along with it! Think about it: the world will think Edge was saved by the garrison and Administrators. If we expose the deceit of the Shins and say they acted without permission, *we* come off as the enemy. They *had* to take it because the Administrators wouldn't release it! We have to support this if we want to keep any semblance of order."

"Yes, we do," Mal said easily. "We can come off looking quite good, if we handle this properly. That's what I meant, my good doctor."

"And so then what happens to the Shins?" Brisack seethed. "Patted on the back?"

"Given another meaningless certificate for services to the world?" Mal suggested with a tone of accusation.

Brisack huffed and looked down at his hands.

"What do you think of her?" Mal probed.

Brisack sighed. "I still can't figure out Mahrree Shin. At The Dinner she was brave in her timidity and confident despite her insecurity. Wished I knew what part she played in all of this."

“I realize it’s not exactly a mansion in Idumea--”

“May have been a very big part, Doctor.”

Brisack shook his head. “He has to be punished,” he insisted, ignoring the question of Mahrree Shin. “He can’t get away with this. With such blatant—You realize what it is, don’t you?” He looked up, his eyes nearly ablaze. “Exactly what I warned you about! He’s more loyal to his Creator than he is to us. You wondered what he could do? This! Raid from the garrison, steal the wagons, make up lies all the way to Edge, and convince his father to join him in the deception. And if you were to ask Perrin Shin why, I’ll bet you all the gold in my coffer he’d say he felt a *duty* to his Creator to do this! She said it—she said it at The Dinner!” he suddenly remembered. “She said she doubted Edgers knew *just how much he loved them*. Loved them enough to destroy himself and his career!”

Mal raised a surprised eyebrow. “So what’s next?”

“Exactly what I wonder! And fear!” Brisack barked. “What will he do next?”

“No,” Mal said, “what do *we* do next? How do we prove to him his devotion should be to us, not some imaginary friend?”

Brisack thought about it for a moment, his breathing becoming more rapid the angrier he became. “We prove who’s more powerful,” he finally decided. “Years ago you wanted Perrin Shin brought to his knees, remember? In the name of his Creator, *I will bring him down!*”

“Or you’ll die trying?” said Mal, just as icily.

“Yes!” Brisack exclaimed without hesitation.

Nicko Mal clasped his hands in front of him. “Now, that’s more like it.”

## Chapter 21 ~ “What we did would be known by now, wouldn’t it?”

Even though the next morning was Holy Day again, marking three weeks since the land tremor, Mahrree knew there’d be no congregational meeting. There was still too much work to do.

But that didn’t stop her from studying. She sat at the table and sighed with pleasure at her library. There were far fewer books than in the mansion’s study, and they weren’t bound as beautifully, but she the loved the ragged edges of the pages that were too cheap to be cut to perfection. Somehow they felt more real.

Yesterday she had the impression as if their family had been, in the words of Jaytsy, away for a lifetime. Yet this morning the last couple of weeks were almost a dream. She opened The Writings to study before waking her family to eat the last of the leftovers from Idumea. Then they’d be on bread and chewy apple bits, supplemented with strips of jerky twice a week like everyone else, unless more deer could be found in the forest and roasted in her backyard. Perrin was already planning to spend an hour with Peto fishing in the river for dinner, and not just for fun, he told his wife. But Mahrree suspected fun would be had anyway. At least, she hoped so.

As she thumbed through the pages, she knew exactly what she wanted to read: the warnings of the first and great guide, Hierum.

“What we did would be known by now, wouldn’t it?”

*Before the Last Day will be a land tremor more powerful than any ever experienced. It will awaken the largest mountain and change all that we know in the world. Those changes will bring famine, death, and desperation to the world. And that desperation will cause the world’s army to seek to destroy the faithful of the Creator.*

Mahrree stared at the passage, amazed how once again words she’d read dozens of times suddenly jumped out and throttled her. Why’d she never notice that list before? There it was, plain as day, but she had always skimmed over it.

First was a land tremor. For some reason her mind always jumped to “awaken the largest mountain,” and ignored the earlier words. Their recent tremor was big, but Shem had said his father between Flax and Waves felt only a mild jiggling. This tremor clearly wasn’t a prologue to the Last Day. But maybe it was a warning.

Second on the list was the awakening of Mt. Deceit. No one knew quite how to interpret that, and even the smoke that rose from it three weeks ago had quieted in the past days, so she decided that they were safe for a while.

Next was famine, death, and desperation. Mahrree could see all too easily how that could come to pass. Villages low on reserves, thieves looting for food, and just one late snowfall could doom an entire civilization, driving it to desperation. She made a mental note to discuss with Perrin ways that they could avoid being caught unprepared in the future.

Then came the sentence that always pricked her, and did so again.

*And that desperation will cause the world’s army to seek to destroy the faithful of the Creator.*

There were only two armies: one organized and one Guard-er. The question of who was considered “the faithful” also always

worried her. Surely everyone felt faithful to someone or something, but how could you be sure you were faithful to the *correct* one or thing?

She looked again at the phrase that gnawed at her.

*On that day do not be one of those surprised to find yourself on the wrong side.*

What could be the ‘wrong side’? For years she’d tried to understand that, but figured out only this: the way to be surprised was if she was *sure* she was on the right side, only to find out that instead she was confused, or stubborn, or simply missed—or worse, ignored—the promptings to get to *another side*.

But where could that other side be?

Perrin’s lumbering down the stairs in his frumpled nightshirt startled her out of her thoughts. They’d reached a dead-end anyway.

He rubbed his eyes and tried to focus. “What are you doing? How late is it?”

“I’m reading, and it’s still early,” she assured him. “I just wanted to feel some normalcy again.”

He nodded wearily and plodded into the kitchen. A moment later she heard him call, “Mahrree, it’s Holy Day again, right?”

“Yes. Why?”

“That would explain the installation of a third spit in our back garden. By the shape of him I’d say it looks like Arky and his neighbors. They’re setting up two half-starved deer and . . . if I had to guess, that other animal that looks like a large dog might instead be a sheep or maybe a small boar.”

Mahrree chuckled. “And *that*, Joriana,” she said to herself, “is how we host dinners in Edge: bring your own boar.”

Perrin’s voice came louder, addressing the men in the back garden through the window. “No, no, no, that’s quite all right. That part of the garden seemed to be lacking for something interesting anyway. Yes, yes—it’s good to be back.”

He stumbled back to the eating room and plopped down at the table. “It seems we can’t avoid these. We’re hosting the after-congregation-without-meeting-for-congregation meal again, aren’t we?”

“What we did would be known by now, wouldn’t it?”

Mahrree grinned. “I certainly hope so. Ah, I missed Edge!”  
“As long as there’s no dancing.” Perrin yawned.

---

Perrin sent a message to Idumea that morning as soon as he reached the fort.

*Arrived safely except for trouble near Pools.*

*Snyd is investigating.*

*People of Edge are eternally grateful to the Administrators  
for their generosity, and pledge undying loyalty.*

There was nothing else he could do; it was all out of his hands now.

The rest of that day was spent as the others had been. Perrin went to survey the village and set a few soldiers to fishing the river, while Mahrree, Jaytsy and Peto got on their worst clothes and headed to the first pile they could find. They cleaned up rubble, lugged debris to the river to shore up the banks for those rare years the river flooded, and dragged small timbers taken from the safest edges of the forest to the sawmill.

“It’s almost as if nothing’s changed,” Jaytsy said as the family trudged home to prepare dinner with several women who were already making biscuits and chatting in the back garden. “Finish with one house, there are another five more to do. And we even had a break for a couple of weeks!”

“Remember Major Karna’s estimates? He thinks in one more moon everything will be finished,” Mahrree told her. “We have to stop focusing on what still needs to be done and feel satisfaction in what’s already been completed. It *is* getting better, Jays. Sometimes it’s just hard to see it.”

“I suppose so.” Then she laughed softly. “Did you see those women with Grandmother’s dresses? I was afraid some of them would start changing right there in front of everyone! Mrs. Dede went from torn rags to linens in under a minute. She’ll be the most stylish weaver’s wife ever. I think Grandmother would be pleased.” Then, more quietly, she added, “What we did would be

known by now, wouldn't it?"

Peto looked nervously at Mahrree.

"Yes," Mahrree said slowly. "But the Administrators don't return to meetings until tomorrow. We shouldn't expect any news from Idumea until tomorrow evening at the earliest. No news would be best, remember?"

---

Two men sat in the dark office of an unlit building.

"Well," Brisack huffed, "that was the most unproductive meeting we've ever had! And that's saying something, considering how many unproductive sessions we've had to endure."

Mal snickered. His partner's frustration had been the one bright spot of the entire situation. "It's probably because we called everyone back early from their holidays. Couldn't even come to any consensus about who was responsible. And I thought it quite convenient that Relf was feeling too weakened to come to our inquiry."

"Weakened indeed!" the good doctor sneered.

"Gadiman's up to something," Mal said, clasping his hands in front of him. "He refused to meet with me this morning, he wouldn't make eye contact at the meeting, and as soon as we dispersed for the afternoon, he vanished. Any idea where to?"

Brisack shook his head. "I was going to have him followed, then I got caught up in something else and the weasel had already disappeared."

Mal nodded once. "We need to track him down. He's likely avoiding us because he's embarrassed about the failure to stop the caravan. Once again, his lack of preparation has led to a disappointing conclusion."

"I'm beginning to get tired of these," stewed the good doctor.

"I have been for years. So now what?"

"Working on it," Brisack muttered.

---

They'll *think* it was a failure, Gadiman chuckled mirthlessly



“What we did would be known by now, wouldn’t it?”

to himself. He was headed into the dark fog, unsure of where he was going, but confident he’d find his way—and his contact, who had just returned to Idumea—eventually.

Well, he had to admit to himself that in a way, it *was* a failure. Not exactly what he expected. He thought at least a few wagons would be destroyed—

But never mind. It was only Part One to his plan.

The next part would surely succeed. He’d had years to plan this, to mull over what went wrong the first time, to make sure this one was foolproof.

And then—*then*—after all these years, there’d be sweet vindication.

---

Early the next morning Perrin and Mahrree went down into their narrow cellar, dug out of the soil next to the boulder that served as their house’s foundation. Mahrree went to the shelves set up against the earthen wall and began to remove empty jugs, saved to be filled with juices in Harvest.

But Perrin hesitated. “You’re sure you’re all right with this?”

“Of course,” she said, not pausing in her work. “It’s the most logical thing. It should be done. It’s useless hiding down here.”

Perrin helped her take down the last of the jugs, and Mahrree stepped back as he removed the middle shelf and pried off the planks that served as backing boards. Behind them, dug into the earthen wall, was a crate on its side framing piles of silver and gold slips.

“Well, no one’s found it,” said Perrin.

“Who would think that in a cellar, behind a storage shelf, and entombed in dirt, is a treasure?” Mahrree reminded him.

Perrin just smiled at the thought.

She folded her arms. “Exactly how did you get the idea for creating this hiding place, anyway?”

He only winked at her and began to pull out the heavy stacks of metal. Mahrree took them from him and laid them out on the dark floor, counting. When Perrin had emptied their savings, Mahrree finished her counting and looked up at him.

“I fear it’s not going to be enough. While we have the equivalent of 180 full slips of gold—and if Jaytsy and Peto heard that, they’d definitely declare us to be rich—that’s probably only one-third of what everyone would expect to be paid.”

Perrin rubbed his chin. “Coupled with what we can salvage from the homes of the dead, it may be closer to one-half. And I was thinking of giving only half of my colonel’s bonus to Brillen—he’ll be overwhelmed with thirty full gold slips anyway—and donate the other half to this. If everyone realizes this is all they’ll get, they’ll be satisfied with it.”

Mahrree sighed. “I hope you’re right. I should have brought back my silk dress. Surely someone would’ve bought it and we could have added that silver to the pile.”

She tried to lift up a large clump but strained, forgetting the weight of it all. “And how, exactly, are you going to get all of this to the fort?”

“Karna will come down later,” he smiled as she dropped a stack of gold slips. “Along with being told his pay will be increasing, he’s been told an anonymous benefactor donated this to Edge to pay for the repairs, and that it was hiding in the coach you arrived on. He and some discreet sergeants will come by later today. They’ll remove it in padded crates that will look like wheat. We’ll secure it in my office at the fort, then when all of the repairs are finished and the bills tallied, we’ll begin distribution.”

Mahrree nodded. “Good. The sooner this is out of the cellar, the better. I’ve never been sure if I’ve felt more secure knowing we had a small fortune underneath us, or more paranoid that someone would find out.” She stood and cocked her head at Perrin. He wore a strange smile. “What is it?”

“Thank you,” he said quietly.

“For what?”

“For willingly giving all of this up to help our neighbors.”

She shrugged at that. “Why should we have more when others suffer? That never struck me as right, and today, I’m feeling quite a sense of freedom about giving our excess to those who have nothing.”

Perrin studied her for a moment. “I can’t think of another woman in the world who would say such a thing.”

“Oh, I’m sure they’re out there,” she dismissed his evaluation, a bit overwhelmed by his intensity. “We just haven’t met

“What we did would be known by now, wouldn’t it?”

them yet.”

After breakfast Perrin went to the fort, but he came back to the house just as Mahrree and the children were about to set out for another day of cleaning.

“If you see an Administrative messenger, alert any nearby soldier to come find me. I may be out all over Edge. Any news about the reactions of what we’ve done in Idumea, I want it immediately.”

Mahrree nodded at him with the smile she practiced for The Dinner. “I’m sure all will be well.”

“Really?” he challenged.

“No,” she admitted shakily.

He wrapped her into his arms. “We did the right thing taking the wagons. All of us,” he kissed her hair. “No matter what happens, we can face the Creator knowing we did His will. We shouldn’t fear anyone in the world. We should respect only Him. He’ll reward us in the end.”

Mahrree leaned back. “That’s really insightful. You know, I think you’re right.”

“I am, because it’s what Shem said to me last night when I told him my concerns,” Perrin confessed. “And he’s right, too. I wouldn’t change anything. Nor would I change the look on my parents’ faces as we left. It was if they remembered things they had forgotten. Idumea does that to a person. So easy to become complacent.” He held her close again and sighed. “I’m ready. I just want to know. Officer or rancher or builder? Lots of planning ahead, either way,” he chuckled sadly.

“I was thinking you’d make a good guard at Edge of Idumea Estates.”

He pulled back. “Oh, interesting. I’ll have to add that to my list.” He kissed her and left.

All day Mahrree watched the roads to the fort when she was near them, even when she knew it was far too early for any messenger. By late afternoon she was quite jittery, assuming some kind of decision had been made in Idumea, and the notice was on its way.

When she went home to prepare dinner—fortunately, it had been decided that the community dinner at the Shins would occur only on Holy Days—Mahrree was nearly dizzy with worry.

When she heard hoof beats at the back alleyway, she rushed

to the door to see Shem on his horse looking around hastily as if trying to find something. Mahrree stepped out of the door to ask him what he needed.

He regarded her with an expression of intense concern, pressed his lips together, then kicked his horse into a full run out of the neighborhood.

Mahrree went back into the house, perplexed.

“Who was that?” Peto asked.

“Shem, but he didn’t stay.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t know. He seemed very odd.”

Jaytsy came to the kitchen. “Did I just see Uncle Shem stop and then leave again?”

“Yes, but I don’t know what’s going on. Maybe he’s looking for someone. Well, let’s eat. I don’t know when your father might be home tonight.”

“Things *are* back to normal,” Jaytsy mumbled.

It was in the middle of dinner when Karna, accompanied by two sergeants, came to the door. His eye was bruised and swelling shut, and clutched in his hand was an official looking piece of crumpled parchment.

Mahrree had a dreadful feeling that he wasn’t there to collect the gold and silver waiting for him in the cellar.

“Mrs. Shin,” he said quietly, “Mahrree, may I come in?”

---

What happened at the fort was retold for days, with small embellishments here and there, but with enough witnesses that the truth always came through. And the true story was so affecting it really needed no additions.

Colonel Shin had arrived in the late afternoon from inspecting the village and went up to the forward command office with its full view of Edge. He was pointing out to Lieutenant Rigoff where to work the next day when the messenger arrived. The little man in red marched up the stairs and thrust his parchment under Colonel Shin’s nose.

The colonel froze in place for a moment, took the message, and without a word walked into his private office. The messenger

“What we did would be known by now, wouldn’t it?”

followed without invitation.

Major Karna and Sergeant Major Neeks ran up the stairs, having seen the messenger arrive, and looked at Rigoff for explanation. Rigoff just shrugged. They all assumed it would be news from Idumea about the caravan, and they were just as anxious as their commander to hear how the Administrators would interpret the deed.

That’s when they heard the noise.

It could best be described as a roar, as if a bear had been suddenly surprised in the colonel’s office, and it was enraged. The roar was followed by a bellow, in the form of a word: “*NOOO!*”

Everyone in the fort heard it.

They could even tell each other where they were when the shout made the hairs on the necks stand up.

Then the little man came out of the office, through the wall. He landed on the large desk, unconscious, in a spray of wood and splinters.

Colonel Shin stared with animal-like ferocity at the new hole he’d created, threw down the parchment, and bolted through the door.

Karna made a valiant attempt to stop him, and received a punch in the eye that would later suggest a broken cheekbone underneath.

The colonel ran down the stairs and out through the reception area, knocking down several more soldiers and even breaking the arm of a sergeant who accidentally got in his way.

Neeks jumped through the hole in the wall and retrieved the message. As he read it his jaw quivered, and he crumpled the parchment in his hand.

“What? What happened?” Rigoff asked as he tried to help Karna stand back up.

No one paid any attention to the still body in the red uniform on the desk. They would forget about him for over an hour and remember him only when he finally came to and hobbled out of the compound, without a word to anyone.

“Where’s Zenos?” Grandpy Neeks shouted.

“Getting ready to take the next shift of guards for the night,” Rigoff said.

“No, he’s not!” Neeks threw the message and rushed down the stairs.

Rigoff stepped over the splintered wood to pick up the message. He read it, then looked up at Karna in agony.

“Well?!” Karna demanded, holding his eye with one hand and bracing himself against the wall with the other.

“It’s the General and Mrs. Shin. Guardians invaded the mansion last night.” Rigoff tried to keep his composure but failed. “Sir, they’re dead.”

---

In the stables, the sergeant in charge of horses found the reins of the stallion he just finished saddling grabbed roughly out of his hands.

Colonel Shin ran the horse out through the barn doors, leaped on to it, and spurred it into a full run past Master Sergeant Zenos and the twenty men mounted with him. He was out the fort gates and down the main road before the soldier with the broken arm in the reception area could struggle back to his feet.

Zenos, astonished, turned to the stables and saw Neeks come running out of the reception area of the command tower.

“ZENOS! HERE!” Grandpy was running to the supply building, and Shem prodded his horse over to meet him. He arrived just as Neeks came running out again with two rations packs.

“Neeks, what’s happened?” Zenos asked. “Where’s Shin going?”

“I’m suspecting to Idumea,” said Neeks hurriedly, checking the packs. “And you have to go with him.”

“What? Why? What’s happened?”

“You said you’re like his brother, right Zenos? Devoted solely to him?”

“Yes, of course!”

“Well if ever a man needed a brother, it’s right now.”

Neeks threw the packs up to Shem and pulled his own long knife out of his boot. He slid it, carefully but quickly, into Zenos’s boot. “He’s not himself. I know you hate carrying these, but you may need it, along with that sword.”

Zenos shook his head in confusion. “Neeks, WHY?”

“His parents, Zenos. Killed by Guardians. That’s not the

“What we did would be known by now, wouldn’t it?”

colonel that just left. That’s a crazed man. Stop him, Shem!”

Zenos’s head snapped up to stare out the empty gates where the colonel had just left. Soldiers were still standing there, dazed and questioning.

“Dear Creator!” Zenos whispered. He spun his horse and kicked it into a run out of the gates.

He rode first to the Shins’ home and stopped at the alleyway. There was no sign of Perrin. Mahrree came out of the door, and, judging by the composed look on her face, it was obvious she had no idea what had happened.

Shem couldn’t spare any time. Someone would undoubtedly come by the house, so he kicked his heels into the horse.

He was going to Idumea.

---

“Major Karna—what happened to you? You look terrible! Come, sit down,” said Mahrree as she escorted him into the house. She led him to the sofa and told Jaytsy to get a wet cloth for his eye.

But he wouldn’t sit down. “No, Mrs. Shin. Jaytsy, I’m fine. All of you, please.” He gestured to the sofa and took a bracing breath as the three of them sat with dread growing on their faces.

Mahrree looked at the crumpled parchment in his hands. “It’s from Idumea, isn’t it.”

Karna nodded. “Yes, ma’am.” He tried to explain the message, but the words wouldn’t come.

“Just tell us,” Mahrree began to tremble. “I’ve been waiting for days to know.”

He shook his head, realizing he could never say the words, and instead handed the message to Mrs. Shin. With her hand quaking, she took the open message and let her children read over her shoulders.

It was only seconds later that Jaytsy screamed and Peto leaped from the sofa and ran to his room, slamming the door. Mahrree dropped the parchment, held her head with her hands and began to shake. Jaytsy wept uncontrollably next to her.

“Where’s Perrin?” Mahrree gasped between sobs.

“Gone, Mahrree,” Brillen whispered. “We think he’s headed to Idumea.”

Her headed came up. “Dear Creator—he’s going to kill someone!”

Karna shook his head quickly. “No, we’ve sent Zenos after him. He should be able to catch him by the first messenger station.”

“He’ll kill Uncle Shem!” Jaytsy cried.

“No, no he won’t!” Her mother wrapped an arm around her. “Shem will calm him,” she said firmly, as if her words would make it so.

Karna crouched and put a hand on her shoulder. “I’m so, so sorry, ma’am. I’ve posted two soldiers here for security, and four more coming down soon. We’ll keep the house surrounded for as long as necessary, and Grandpy Neeks will see to increased patrols along the forest. We’ll keep you safe. What more can I do?”

Mahrree rocked her sobbing daughter while trying to wipe tears from her eyes. She looked toward Peto’s door.

Karna nodded. “Men grieve differently, ma’am.” He patted her shoulder and made his way to Peto’s room, a bit wobbly from the throbbing in his face. He opened the door slowly and saw the boy curled on his bed with his back to the door.

Karna crept in, sat on the edge of Peto’s bed, and noticed a new ball in front of Peto’s chest.

“Your grandfather gave that to you, didn’t he. That’s good,” he said quietly. “You’ll always have something tangible to remember him by. Maybe you could put it on the shelf, honor his memory by preserving it. See it every day. Remember the kind of man he was. How he felt about you.”

Karna tried to keep his voice steady as he watched the boy’s body wracked with silent sobs. He placed a hand on his shoulder and felt him pull away slightly, but he kept his hand there. Peto needed to feel some kind of touch.

Karna didn’t feel he knew him well enough to hold him. He wondered if Zenos should have stayed and if he should have chased down Colonel Shin instead. But Brillen could feel his eye swelling shut and an enormous pain building around his cheek. He probably wouldn’t see anything clearly in less than an hour and would be waylaid by the headache soon after.

“You’re lucky to have such a heritage, Peto. Few men can say they had a grandfather who was High General. You’ll always carry that with you. You will always carry *him* with you.”



“What we did would be known by now, wouldn’t it?”

He nodded to the ball, even though he knew Peto couldn’t see his movement.

“You keep that safe, and someday you can show your grandchildren what your grandfather meant to you. What he gave to you.”

“Yes, sir. Thank you,” Peto whispered.

Karna took that as his signal to leave. He reluctantly stood up. “You let me know if you need anything, your mother, your sister. I’ll be available anytime.” He paused. “I’ve sent someone to get your Grandmother Peto. I’ll come by later and stay the night on the sofa,” he decided. “Just so someone’s here, along with the guards.”

Peto nodded.

Karna shut the door quietly behind him.

The ball rolled off of Peto’s bed, but that wasn’t what he had been holding. An envelope of sturdy parchment was clutched to his chest, as if pushing it there tightly would heal the gaping hole, but it seemed to fall in. The weight of the envelope was tremendous.

Now, he alone in the entire world knew that the envelope existed, and what the words were on the parchment inside. He hadn’t realized how much of it his grandfather had carried until now.

Now that he was alone.

Relf’s dream about the greatest general in the world really *had* been for Peto Shin.

Why?

## Chapter 22 ~ “This really isn’t in my nature, and I’m *very* sorry about this, but--”

Shem Zenos rode faster than he ever remembered, barely seeing the surprised looks of soldiers and citizens as he dodged and weaved through the dinner time congestion of Edge. Soon Edge was a cluster of buildings growing smaller behind him.

He tried to think what he would do, what he would say when he finally caught up to Perrin. He had glimpsed the look in his eyes as he sped past him out of the fort, and Neeks was right: he was murderous. Who his target was, Shem couldn’t even imagine. Maybe the first unlucky man that crossed his path.

Shem didn’t want it to be him, but he *would* be a better target than anyone else. At least Shem would have a fighting chance.

He squinted into the distance to make out Perrin’s figure in the light of the setting sun. The trees that lined the roadside were casting too many shadows to see distinctly, but Shem was sure it was Perrin ahead of him, passing a slow wagon.

Mathematical formulas began limping into his brain, weakened from disuse and neglect. He remembered when they were first taught to him, and he came home to complain to his father.

*“It’s stupid,”* he had said. *“Look at this problem, Papa. Two men are riding horses. One is traveling at one hundred paces a minute, the second is traveling at one hundred ten paces a minute. If the two men leave from the same destination, but five minutes apart, how long will it take the second faster man to reach the first slower man?”*

*“When would I ever need to use this?”* he had grumbled.

“This isn’t in my nature, and I’m *very* sorry about this, but--”

Shem now laughed mirthlessly inside. When would I ever need this? Right now. Perrin will probably reach the first messenger station and change horses before I get there.

*Papa had laughed at his question. He was always laughing, when he wasn’t teary-eyed. The sweet and simple man had only two emotions.*

*“I don’t really know when you’d use this,” he had said. “But if they’re teaching it, it must be important.”*

*“But you didn’t learn it,” Shem had complained. “And you get by all right.”*

*“I didn’t learn it because Archedes just came up with it,” Papa laughed again. “He’s going to hold a lecture on it and some other theories he’s developed. You’re blessed to have such a brilliant man as your upper school teacher. When he does his lecture on displacement, I plan to sit in the front row. I’m always losing things.”*

Shem almost smiled at that memory.

*“That’s not what displacement is,” he had told Papa. His father knew cattle, and that was about it. Granted, he knew just about all there was to know about cattle, from what part of the day they liked to eat clover to exactly how long each cow would wait to be milked. But beyond cattle?*

Young Shem would then sigh and shuffle off to stare at the formulas. The same ones he was trying now to recreate in his mind.

But the formulas faded away and Shem could think of nothing but his own father.

What would he feel if the message had come about him? Papa always greeted Shem with the standard, *“Where have you been, and why have you left me here all alone . . .”* whenever he came home to visit. True, it was with a smile, but there was loneliness in his eyes as well. His father fully supported Shem and his work, and understood why he had to be gone so far, but still Shem ached each time he left him.

Shem had been too young to remember when his mother passed, but he couldn’t even imagine the pain Perrin must be feeling now. After taking out all those Guards on the road, ones that he had missed had killed his parents.

What if Perrin hadn’t left Idumea for Edge when he did, Shem wondered as the line of trees ahead ended and the road

straightened out with no shadows on it. The sun hanging above the horizon illuminated the figure of a distant horse rider, and Shem was gaining. The rider passed another wagon.

What if he and Karna delayed sending Hili? They'd thought about waiting. Maybe Perrin could have still been at his parents when the Guardians came. Maybe he could have stopped it . . .

Shem shook his head and readjusted his stance on the now-foaming horse.

No use thinking like that. Whatever the Creator wills, will happen. It must have been their time to go. Maybe it had been General Shin's time to go three weeks ago, but the Creator gave him time to say goodbye, and to be with his wife when it happened. Perhaps Relf had unfinished business he was allowed to attend to. Who else could have released the stores and saved Edge?

Perrin had told him it was the best visit he'd ever had with his parents. Perhaps it was a tender mercy to let Relf and Joriana see their son and his family, and then watch them leave in such a good way. If the family had been there when the Guardians came, today may have been even more tragic—

No, Shem reminded himself as he closed in on Perrin. There's no tragedy in death. Death isn't the end; it's only a change. The only tragedy is in not living the Plan, in failing the Test.

The Shins' final act was one of pure generosity, without a care for what happened to them. What better way to finish the Test?

I have to tell him that, Shem thought as he saw the red flag in the distance signaling the messenger station. I have to remind him. He already knows; his heart just can't connect with his mind right now.

The sun was setting and the last of the light hit the messenger station that sat a little off the road. Shem picked out some movement at the small distant building and hoped they would delay Perrin. As he got closer he saw more urgent action and realized someone was rushing a horse out of the stable.

"No!" Shem groaned. He was just a hundred paces away when he recognized the distinctly large figure of Perrin mount the horse and take off again.

"PERRIN!" Shem cried.

“This isn’t in my nature, and I’m *very* sorry about this, but--”

He thought he saw his friend look back, then continue at a fast pace.

Shem was at the messenger station now and slid off his tired horse. He grabbed the two packs and rushed into the office.

“I need a horse, now! I need to catch up to the colonel!”

The small, older man standing behind the counter greeted Shem with a mixture of fury and terror. “And you’re far too heavy as well! Weight limit is 120 pounds. You must be over 200! That wild colonel is even bigger and will kill that horse. No!”

Shem stepped up quickly and leaned over the counter. “I need to stop that *wild colonel*, and I need a horse, *now*.” It was a fairly good attempt at intimidation, which was not one of Shem’s strengths, but far better than he’d ever done before.

The older man shifted his stance before saying, “No. Not for anyone but the Administrators’ messengers.”

“What if I told you that wild colonel is most likely *after* the Administrators? If he reaches them, it’ll be your fault. Give me a horse!”

The supervisor didn’t get his position by being pushed around by large soldiers. “I have my orders.” It was hard to argue with that.

Shem took a deep breath, knowing he was losing valuable time. “How’d the colonel get a horse?”

Without meaning to, the man’s eyes darted to the side. That’s when Shem saw the two men lying on the floor. One kept his head back and held his nose which was bleeding profusely, and the other was unconscious. Definitely Perrin’s handiwork.

A third man rushed in, greeted Shem with a yelp of terror, and crouched by the bleeding man to hand him a wet cloth.

Desperate, Shem turned again to the supervisor.

“No.”

Realizing that some situations can’t be worked out any other way, Shem said, “This really isn’t in my nature, and I’m *very* sorry about this, but—”

The force of Shem’s fist hitting the small man sent him backward into a wall. Shem didn’t wait to see him fall but sprinted toward the stable.

The man with the wet cloth—the only one who was still healthy and capable, and wanted to stay that way—cried out, “Give him a horse!”

Another messenger ran out from the stable with a horse, making as if he was about to mount it, probably to send a warning or request assistance, but Shem snatched the reins, nodded a polite thanks, and took off on the animal.

Perrin was now only a blob in the darkening distance.

If Shem were a swearing man, he would have cursed. Instead he pressed his lips together and leaned over the horse in a vain attempt to make his load lighter. There'd likely be no one following them. The messenger services typically had only two horses saddled at a time, one to go in either direction. It would take them time to get a third horse ready to send in pursuit as a warning. By then, somewhere Shem should have caught up to Perrin.

But that didn't happen at the next station. He was even closer this time as Perrin abandoned his horse for a new one, and he was sure the colonel saw him in pursuit. But when Shem barged through the messenger station, the supervisor and riders were panicked. Another man was prone on the ground, motionless.

"Sir, we've been informed that you're to remain here," the supervisor attempted in a shaky voice. "You have a serious illness and a representative from the fort will be here shortly to see to—"

Shem had no time for this. He went directly to the stables and took the next saddled horse, ignoring the cries of protest.

*Clever warning, Perrin,* Shem thought. But worrisome. You're thinking. You're planning. You're trying to throw others off. But you've lost all sense of rationality. What else are you planning, my brother?

Shem was closing in on Perrin about a mile before the third messenger station. He was nearly on top of him, yelling his name, when Shem's horse began to go lame. Perrin was well on his way with a new horse leaving Shem to face another crew of shocked, wounded, and unconscious messengers. But he wasn't going to bother with them. He ran straight for the stables.

"Horse! NOW!"

A farrier shook his head vigorously. "Don't have one saddled."

Shem spun around, found a horse that looked rested enough, and grabbed its reins. Riding bareback was his only choice. Good thing he did that a lot on his father's ranch when he was growing up.

“This isn’t in my nature, and I’m *very* sorry about this, but--”

Once again Shem was in pursuit, but this time he was sure he’d catch up to Perrin. A few miles along the darkening road Shem saw him clearly, and his horse was struggling. It was smaller than the others had been and clearly unsuitable for Perrin’s weight.

They were nearing the station at Midplain when Shem finally pulled up even with Perrin, who looked bitterly askance at him.

“I’m going with you!” Shem shouted at him. “Let me help!”

Perrin tried to spur his horse on faster, but it was flagging. The station came into view and Perrin rode straight for the stables. His horse stumbled outside the open doors, but Perrin slid off the lamed animal and plowed into the stables, with Shem close behind.

“Stop!” Shem shouted at the colonel, but it was Shem who stopped suddenly, just inside the barn, when he found himself facing Perrin.

Or rather, facing Perrin’s sword, which was raised and hovered just inches away from Shem’s chest.

“Go home,” Perrin commanded. It was the look in his eyes that caught Shem’s breath. He’d never seen such fierce resolve, such murderous intent.

Shem couldn’t let anyone else in the world try to deal with him, so he shook his head. “No, I’m going with you. Whatever you’re planning.”

He was aware that two young stable hands stood to the right of him, frozen in place with pitchforks full of straw. They slowly looked at each other. With his hand, Shem made little waving motions to get them to leave, but the boys merely turned to stare at Perrin’s sword.

A messenger in bright red ran into the stable. “What’s going on in—” was as much as he could say before he stopped right next to Shem. He found himself also staring at the tip of Perrin’s sword, which now bobbed between the two men.

The only sound was of two pitchforks dropping and boys scrambling out the door.

“Just leave,” Shem whispered to the little man who began to tremble.

“But, but,” he whispered back, “no one’s supposed to—”

“GO!” Perrin bellowed.

The little man jumped nearly as tall as Shem and ran out,

slamming the wooden doors behind him.

“I meant that ‘go’ for you as well, Zenos!” Perrin snarled.

Shem firmed his stance. “I’m not leaving you. What’re you planning to do?”

“Get justice!”

Shem tried to keep his voice steady. “You don’t want justice, you want revenge. Neither will bring them back, Perrin.”

It was the first time Shem was faster than Perrin in anything, as if something told him what to do the moment before he was to do it.

Perrin lunged with his sword, but Shem was already stepping to the side. He grabbed Perrin’s hand, wrested the sword away from him, and flung it into an empty stall where it buried itself in the straw.

Infuriated, Perrin started to go for Shem’s sword, but Shem drew it faster and pitched it into the straw as well.

“Idiot!” Perrin yelled and swung at Shem, connecting with his jaw.

Shem hadn’t seen that coming, and had never before felt the full force of Perrin’s rage. They’d wrestled dozens of times and sparred with each other for years, but never to any degree of viciousness. The jaw-numbing blow awakened something in Shem, something primal and raw.

He found himself on all fours in the straw with an unfamiliar anger boiling in him, and the anger said, I didn’t spend hours chasing you down just for a fight, but if that’s what you want, Shin, that’s what you’re going to get!

Perrin was striding past Shem to the stall where he had thrown the swords when Shem pushed up and lunged for Perrin’s middle, knocking some of the air out of him and shoving him against the wall. Shem struggled to his feet to punch him, but Perrin caught him first with a hit to his kidney before Perrin fell to the ground, gasping. He was down only for a moment before he righted himself and charged at Shem, who was holding his side and trying to stand back up.

Shem stepped out of the way at the last moment and kicked Perrin as he tried to turn to catch Shem. Perrin stumbled into a stable, frightening the horse in it, and stood back up, seething.

Shem readied himself. “Come on!” he beckoned. “You’ve got to have more in you than that, Colonel!”



“This isn’t in my nature, and I’m *very* sorry about this, but--”

Perrin, his eyes black and impenetrable, stood his full height.

Shem felt a twinge of fear, but he pushed it aside. As Perrin rushed him, Shem stepped forward and planted his fist squarely on his jaw.

Perrin only stumbled backward a bit, shook out his head, and came at Shem again like an agitated bear.

Shem tried to brace himself for the impact, but Perrin was too strong. He plowed into Shem and kept going until the wooden rail of a stall stopped them momentarily, then gave way under their combined weight. Shem groaned as the splintered wood dug into his back, and kept groaning as the full weight of Perrin sandwiched him.

Shem let his rage work for him. Perrin sat up, straddling Shem’s chest, and made a fist. But before he could hit him, Shem swiftly raised his leg and kned Perrin in the back where he knew he was still sore from the long ride a few days ago.

For the first time, Shem saw something else besides murder in Perrin’s face. He saw a glint of agony as his friend arched and writhed.

Shem used that moment. He brought his elbow down hard on Perrin’s stomach, and as Perrin began to lean, Shem pushed himself out from underneath him, flipping Perrin on to his back. In one smooth movement he snatched Neeks’s knife from his boot, straddled Perrin, and held the knife at his throat.

“No more, Colonel!” Shem told him. He sat heavily on Perrin’s chest, knowing full well what his weight must have been doing to his back.

Perrin winced in pain. “Zenos,” he gasped, “we both know you can’t kill me. You can’t kill anything. Never could.”

Shem shook his head. “Don’t make me surprise you, Colonel. And I don’t need to kill you, just need to give you something to remember me by. Remember your advice?” He pressed the sharp tip of the knife into Perrin’s flesh to prick it.

Perrin didn’t even flinch, but as a trickle of blood began to slide down to his neck, he knew Shem was serious.

“What are you intending to do, Colonel Shin?”

Perrin closed his eyes and his breathing became shallower. “I want to get justice.”

“This isn’t the way, Colonel.”

Perrin's breathing became more rapid and Shem noticed his shoulders start to quiver. Something around the hard lines of his face began to soften, and Perrin raised an arm to cover his eyes.

Sensing a change in him, Shem slid off his chest, but kept his leg on top of him and the knife next to his throat.

Perrin's entire body began to shake and Shem finally understood. He scrambled off and tried to lift Perrin to a sitting position, but Perrin had no strength left as he began to sob. Shem sat in the straw next to him, put the knife under his leg just in case, and wrapped both arms around his stricken friend.

Perrin leaned against his chest, dampening his jacket. "Shem, Shem . . . they're taking all I love," he wept. "If I can't stop them— They're taking them by age. The Densals. My parents. Then me. Then there'll be no one left to protect Mahrree, Jaytsy, and Peto. They'll be next—I know it."

Shem held him and rocked. "No, no, Perrin! They're not. *You're* not. We're watching them, always. We're protecting. We're keeping them safe."

Perrin shook his head and trembled like a child. "They'll be gone. No matter what I do, Shem, it doesn't make any difference."

"Everything you do makes a difference!" Shem tightened his embrace as if that could somehow make Perrin believe him. "And you won't be alone. Not now, not ever. I'm here. The Creator sent me to you. You'll always have your brother. You're protected! I'll get you through this, I promise. You'll be all right, Perrin." Shem was almost frantic now, trying to get him to feel the reality of his words. "All of you will be, I *know* it. Trust me!"

Tears streaked down Shem's face, too. He'd never seen another man so distraught, and if what Shem was feeling right now for him was just a fraction of Perrin's grief, he didn't know how Perrin was surviving it. Shem prayed fervently for guidance to know what to do and say as he firmly held Perrin's shuddering body.

---

Outside of the stable the full staff of the messenger station cautiously peered into the windows, wondering when it was safe

“This isn’t in my nature, and I’m *very* sorry about this, but--”

to open the doors. They’d inserted lengths of wood through the door handles on both exits as barricades. No one could see what happened after the two fighting men had broken through the stall, and all had been quiet for several minutes.

The supervisor looked at his employees and came to a conclusion. “We unbarricade the doors in an hour. If they’re alive, they’ll be calmer—most likely from large losses of blood. If they’re dead, then an hour won’t make any difference. In either case, it’ll be easier to remove them if we wait. Anyone feeling a bit peckish?”

Everyone agreed a bit of cake would be most welcome right now. As the men were settling down to a well-earned snack, a messenger arrived, winded and frantic, to warn them about huge soldiers stealing their horses. But when he heard the soldiers were subdued and contained in the stables, he too pulled up a chair and realized that the urgency of his warning wasn’t as urgent as the last piece of cake.

Forty-five minutes later the stable doors burst open, to the shock of the willowy riders who thought the pitchfork handle would hold, likely because it would’ve held *them*.

Two men walked out, side by side, swords sheathed, and horses’ reins in their hands. The lantern light behind them shadowed them dramatically, making them look even larger than they were, which meant they appeared to be roughly the size of wood sheds. They strode calmly up to the office where the entire staff was now staring out the open door as if seeing two ghosts with horses. A mug crashed to the floor.

“We’ll be taking these two horses. Do you have a problem with that?” the colonel asked through the doorway.

The entire messenger staff gave their answer to the supervisor in the form of uniformly shaking heads.

The supervisor hadn’t reached this level by not knowing how to work the rules. Especially when those requesting the rules to be broken just destroyed half his stables and not only lived to tell about it, but walked out serenely, oblivious to the blood and cuts and bruises and straw that covered them.

The supervisor shook his head erratically, as if unable to decide if nodding or shaking it was more appropriate. So he did both. “No, no, no, no problem. Whatever you gentlemen need.”

The colonel nodded at him, then the two men mounted and

rode off into the darkness.



Rector Yung looked around the forest and knew he was in trouble.

Actually, he knew long before he slipped unnoticed into the trees at the fresh spring that soon he'd be in trouble. But there was no other choice. A message had to be delivered, and he was the only one left to do it.

That's what he'd been trying to do for the last hour, but it was maddening how each tree looks exactly like another, especially at night. He couldn't come any earlier, but not because he didn't dare; no soldier ever stopped lowly little rectors, or questioned why they were wandering near the forest.

He couldn't come earlier because he was actually busy. For the first time since he came to Edge a year ago, he was needed all day and all night.

People always wanted a rector when tragedy struck. Distraught, they suddenly remembered snippets of The Writings, warm feelings, and the notion of a Creator that they'd encountered long ago when a grandmother dragged them to Holy Day meetings as children. Suddenly they needed that comfort and a shoulder to cry on. Rector Yung had the dampest shoulders in all of Edge.

He knew exactly what they were experiencing, the realization that someone they were used to waking up to each morning was no longer there, and never would be again. It'd been seven years since he lost his wife who simply didn't wake up one morning. He knew what to say to someone in that same distressing position and, more importantly, what *not* to say. He was happy to be so needed, but equally discouraged as to the reasons why. Yung didn't know the majority of the people he was asked to comfort, but each embraced him as a dear friend when he finally departed.

Yung had just left the home of an elderly man who feared the pains in his chest were a sign he was about die. The rector patted his hand and listened to the man's regrets until he finally fell asleep. A doctor confided to Yung that the man was merely suffering from the stresses of the past several weeks, but he seemed

“This isn’t in my nature, and I’m *very* sorry about this, but--”

much calmer once he unloaded all of the past misdeeds that weighed down his mind and heart for too many years.

But before that, Yung had been at the Shins.

Word of what happened to the High General and Mrs. Shin flew through the village like mosquitoes from the marshes, and Yung hastened to the Shins to find the family predictably in anguish. Mrs. Shin had asked him to offer a prayer for them, and for her husband, and for Shem who was trying to chase him down—

That’s when Yung knew he’d have to go back into the forest. It was now the middle of the night, but already he’d delayed delivering the news.

It was at moments like this that he missed his wife even more. While the rector had a knack for seeing into a person’s heart and guiding them out of their worries, his wife had the ability to see into the forest and find the fastest way through it. He never understood how she did it, and she didn’t understand how he couldn’t. Perhaps it because he was so much at home in the world it was almost as if he’d been born there.

Rector Yung sat down on a log and sighed. Hopeless. He couldn’t even see the stars above him to discern where he might be. Not that he’d know how to even if he *could* see the stars . . .

He looked down at the ground, peered closer to what was next to his boot, and chuckled.

“Of course!” he said out loud. “Everything’s changed! You, my friend,” he pointed to the hole in the ground, “are supposed to be venting right now. I’m only a few dozen paces away.” He looked up at the sky, nodded a thanks, and headed up the slope and over a gentle ridge.

“Well, hello boys!”

The men in green and brown mottled clothing—six of them asleep, six others sitting around a tiny fire and chatting quietly—jumped in surprise.

Yung sauntered down to their fire and pulled up a log as the men stared at him, astonished.

The waking men rubbed their eyes to focus on the unexpected visitor, and one of them found his voice. “Yung!”

“Yes?” he said easily, rather enjoying the fact that he shocked someone, for once.

“What are you doing here?”

Yung sighed. Enough fun. “Boys, there’s been some trouble.

*Big trouble.*”

“And where’s Shem?” asked another man, slightly panicked.

Yung sighed again. “And that may be even *more* trouble.”

Ten minutes later a man sprinted through the forest with the most worrying news he’d ever delivered.

---

Instead of stopping at the next station before Idumea, Perrin and Shem rode to the fort at Pools, Perrin gesturing once to the road that led to Gizzada’s.

“If we had time, you’d be amazed,” was all he said as they rode toward the fort.

Colonel Snyder was at home sleeping, but Captain Despartar was on duty that night. He was obviously startled by the sudden appearance of the colonel and the master sergeant, and stood up from the desk in the command office, trying to force the sleep that wasn’t supposed to be there out of his eyes.

“Colonel! What a surprise. I had no idea—”

Colonel Shin extended his hand to shake his. “No one knew I was coming. Sit down, please,” he said coolly.

The captain sat and Perrin took the same chair he had just a few nights before. “I have some questions about the night our caravan was attacked.”

The captain nodded, turned to a cabinet behind him, and retrieved a file. “All we have is right here, sir. And may I add, I’m very sorry about your parents. We just got word a few hours ago. Everyone is on high alert.”

“Except in this office, I see,” Colonel Shin murmured. He opened the thin file and started reading while the captain looked down nervously and resisted the urge to rub his eyes.

“What’s this?” Colonel Shin demanded. “The captured Guardians were in your custody for only a few hours? Then they were retrieved at dawn. By who?”

He handed the top page to the master sergeant who scanned it. Colonel Shin looked at the paper behind it and didn’t find the answer he wanted. He gave a pointed look to the captain who was

“This isn’t in my nature, and I’m *very* sorry about this, but--”

trying to think of how to phrase it.

“The . . . the general. From Idumea. The other one. General Cush. He sent Colonel Thorne, and his men took the four Guards we captured.”

The master sergeant sighed and looked over to the file in the colonel’s hand. “Doesn’t look like they got anything out of them.” Now he gave a disappointed look to the captain.

“I recommend talking to Colonel Thorne,” Despertar suggested.

“I intend to!” Colonel Shin snapped. He threw the file on the desk, scattering pages over the floor, and left with the master sergeant.

That’s when the captain finally rubbed his eyes and cursed that he traded the major shifts that night. He didn’t find out until later in the morning that two of their best horses had been replaced by smaller, exhausted messenger horses, and that for some reason new Master Sergeant Oblong—while seen near the stables but not assigned to them—had a smug smile on his face all morning.

---

Normally Gizzada’s was closed for the night, but this was no ordinary night.

Bad news flies quickly, into the elitist establishments and also into the lowliest. Gizzada’s happened to be both—one in the front, the other in the back.

Just before the midday meal rush, Sheff Gizzada heard the news from a few shocked officers and, stunned himself, could do nothing else but sit in the back half of the restaurant for the rest of the day and well into the night.

He didn’t sit alone. Enlisted men filed in and out in record numbers, wanting verification and shedding a few tears themselves. It wasn’t so much that they knew Relf or Joriana Shin personally, but as a figurehead the High General had been around for all of their careers. He was a solid, honest man, and those were becoming rare.

But the tears shed behind hands shielding faces were more for his son, the silverest brassy who bought rounds of ale for the enlisted men. It happened not even two weeks ago, but news

spreads.

News also grows. The night the Shins were there, Gizzada had counted just over two dozen enlisted men. But now it seems as if half of the enlisted men in Pools and the garrison in Idumea—easily several hundred—had also “been there” that night, singing with the brassy and meeting his family. And by the middle of that long dreadful night, every man considered himself part of that family as well.

That was probably helped along by the ale, Gizzada considered later. He’d opened the tap and told Margo to take the night off. The boys needed to drown their sorrows freely in peace. They especially appreciated the free part.

At one point Gizzada took down the sign advertising his simple menu, scratched off the word “Gizzada” in front of “sandwich,” and with a burned stick from the fire wrote, “Shin.”

“That’s the new name, boys. My first Large Gizzada sandwich was actually created for the younger Shin, years ago. He was out at the forest’s edge, trying to track down some noise—never did figure it out. He’d missed his breakfast and midday meal, so Mrs. Shin ordered me to make him a couple of sandwiches. I put everything on it I could,” he remembered fondly to a packed and silent room. “He told me later it was the best thing he ever ate, and that I should sell them in the marketplace. So later I did. In honor of all Shins—generals and colonels—the sandwich is now a Shin.”

The men held up their mugs of ale in honor, and a weepy Sergeant Oblong patted Gizzada on the back. His shift was coming up before dawn, and he needed to get back to the fort.

He was still thinking about generals and colonels and fathers and sons and sandwiches when he strolled through the back door of the stables and noticed a movement in a dark corner. Training told him to draw his weapon, but instinct told him to quietly see what it was.

Oblong didn’t have time to tell Shin about the sandwich honor, or to officially meet the master sergeant he remembered Shin telling him was his best friend. They looked as if they’d had a fight with a barn which they’d obviously won, and now they needed horses to get to Idumea.

Oblong put his fingers to his lips, gestured for the men to wait outside, then found Snyd’s favorite horse, and his second



“This isn’t in my nature, and I’m *very* sorry about this, but--”

favorite horse, and led them quietly out of the dark stables.

Shin patted him on the back, the master sergeant winked gratefully at him, and off they rode.

Oblong stood at attention, saluting, for a full minute after they were out of sight.

---

The Administrators would most likely not be in their offices until mid-morning. That was Perrin’s evaluation, and the reason Shem used to force him to rest for a few hours before they made their presence known in Idumea.

They were in a barn that didn’t appear to have been used for some time, but there were old bags of oats suitable for Snyder’s horses to feed on. Shem had taken Perrin’s sword and long knife, and ordered him to rest for a while.

“You need sleep too, you know,” Perrin said to him, lying down in the straw.

“I need to watch you more, though.” Shem sat near him.

Perrin’s voice was calm as he closed his eyes. “You can trust me, Shem. If something happens to me, Mahrree and the children will be alone. The only man I could ever imagine taking care of them would be you. But then again, I don’t think I could tolerate any man marrying my widow, *especially* you. I’d find a way to haunt you in that bedroom you just made.”

“I’ve no doubt you would,” Shem chuckled nervously. “And I don’t think I could bear Mrs. Peto as a mother-in-law, anyway,” he tried to lighten the moment. “She was there nearly every day while we worked on your bedroom, giving me bad advice, telling me what I was doing wrong . . . you’re a braver man than I am.”

“Then I guess you wouldn’t want to marry her, either.” Perrin sounded almost as if he were smiling.

“What?”

“The night you brought her to our house after the land tremor, well, there’s something you don’t know about that . . .”

When Perrin finished mortifying Shem about Mrs. Peto’s fleeting fancy for him, Perrin sighed. “I could be a builder too, Shem.”

“A builder?”

“Just give it all up. Be a builder. Feels good to create, not

destroy.”

Shem was thoughtful for a moment. “But we need you as a colonel. Not all that you do is destructive, Perrin.”

“I had it all figured out, too, a few days ago,” Perrin continued as if not hearing Shem. “When I thought my parents—” He stopped.

Shem searched for a distraction. “Do you know what this reminds me of, Perrin?”

“No, Shem, what does our lying in a barn remind you of?” Perrin’s tone was a touch impatient.

“Not so much the barn, but . . . the time you failed to train the cook properly.” Shem smiled into the dark.

“The cook?”

“The one that transferred over to Scrub a few of years ago? He cooked because cooking was the only thing he could do? Not really qualified to do that, either. His chicken stew was, well, hard to forget and for all the wrong reasons. I don’t know why he thought mushrooms belonged in everything. Stews, breads, cakes—”

Perrin grunted in response to get him to continue the story.

“That accident was one of the oddest things I’ve ever seen.” Shem chuckled softly. “We tried so hard to teach him. No matter how much I worked him and how much you trained him, he could never manage to hold that sword steady.”

“I’ve tried unsuccessfully to forget him,” Perrin sighed. “Scrawniest thing I ever saw. No muscle. Still don’t know how he managed to fall on me.”

Shem chuckled again, trying to make it sound natural. “If I hadn’t witnessed that accident myself, I would’ve sworn he was a Guarder in disguise sent to get you. But he truly was just that clumsy. Horrible gash. And I think he was more traumatized by it than you. He kept saying over and over, ‘I’ve stabbed the major!’”

“And how does this barn remind you of that?” Perrin asked, a little hotly.

Shem sobered. “I remember one of those nights when you were in so much pain that you couldn’t sleep. Must have been the second night, when all those stitches in your side started turning red.”

Perrin ran his hand along his liver where the white scar re-

“This isn’t in my nature, and I’m *very* sorry about this, but--”

mained. “That was a bad night,” he whispered. “Mahrree was so anxious. She’d never seen so much of my blood before. She never left my side, trying to care for me. Refused to let me stay at the surgeon’s. You sent her upstairs to bed so she could finally rest,” Perrin recalled, “and you stayed on a chair next to me while I was on the sofa. We talked all night, didn’t we? You told me the most ridiculous stories to distract me from the pain. Even something about putting a piece of moldy bread on the stitches to prevent them from becoming infected.”

For just a moment, Perrin’s voice sounded a little lighter.

“I still think of that each time I see bread gone moldy. Peto came out of his room that night, remember? He didn’t dare come near me—I think my moaning worried him—but he sat in his doorway listening to your stories. Must have been about four years old.”

Shem smiled. “He fell asleep there, too. I put him back in bed just before Mahrree came down in the morning.”

“You stayed for five days and nights, didn’t you?” Perrin said quietly. “Supposed to have gone on leave, but you spent your leave at our house helping Mahrree, instead of visiting your father. I still need to apologize to him in person about that some year.”

Shem waved that off. “He didn’t mind. Mahrree had the surgeon’s assistants so riled up none of them wanted to stay around for long after checking you each hour. I was just glad the timing was right so I could stay and help her.”

“You’ve always done more than just ‘help,’ Shem,” Perrin whispered, a slight tremble in his voice. “I remember earlier that year when my father sent me all over the world training the fort commanders. Mahrree told me how you put yourself on guard duty every night at our house while I was gone for those weeks. You even spent one night in Jaytsy’s room when there was a bad storm and she was missing me. Jaytsy never thought Mahrree was ‘strong’ enough to keep away the thunder,” Perrin smiled briefly at the memory. “But you were strong enough. Mahrree said it wasn’t until you lay down on the floor next to Jaytsy’s bed that she finally felt safe for the night and went to sleep. You’ve always been there for our family, Shem. You’re more of a brother to us than any real brother could have been.”

“My pleasure,” Shem whispered.

“Someday I hope to tell your father in person how much you’ve done for us. Maybe I’ll have to get down to Flax or Waves again. He won’t be taking any more trips, will he?”

“He still feels bad about that,” Shem told him. “The one time you go all the way down there to train the fort commanders, and my sister takes him to Coast for a week! As if he doesn’t see enough salty water in Waves. It’s been what, about ten years now? He’s still talks about meeting you some day.”

“The one time I had the opportunity to do something for you and him, and I missed it,” Perrin said. “We just take and take from you, and you just keep giving to us.”

“It’s not like that at all, Perrin,” Shem said diffidently. “You’ve given me everything. You’ve given me a family in Edge.”

“As long as that satisfies you, Shem. You’re a man who doesn’t ask for much.”

Shem squirmed. “Perrin, I mentioned that night when you were hurt so long ago not because I wanted you to compliment my desperation to feel like I belong to a family, but because I wanted you to remember that time. I was as worried about you as Mahrree was. She said that injury was worse than what you suffered when your back was slashed in the forest almost five years earlier.”

“But that scar’s more impressive,” Perrin said in a pitiful attempt to be light-hearted.

Shem chuckled obligingly. “It is, I agree. But that gash to your liver cause you so much pain, and there was nothing we could do for you but stay by your side and be with you while you suffered.

“But you made it through, Perrin,” Shem said earnestly. “You endured it, and eventually improved. The last time I saw your scar, it was barely visible. Tonight’s a lot like that. You’re enduring a tremendous pain, and I’m terribly worried about you. But you’re a strong man, and you’ll get through it. I wish I knew more of what to do to help you, but no matter what, I’ll stay by your side until you heal.”

“I know you will,” Perrin whispered. “Thank you. I have to confess I was hoping you would follow me.”

“And stop you?”

“And help me. Again,” Perrin said darkly.

“This isn’t in my nature, and I’m *very* sorry about this, but--”

Shem stiffened. “Help you with what, Perrin? What do you want me to do?”

Perrin was silent for a moment before he said, “Keep me safe. Take care of my family.”

“That’s what I’ve been trying to do for the past fourteen years.”

Perrin stared up at the roof of the barn for a few minutes. Eventually he rolled over. “Wake me in three hours, all right?”

Shem would’ve done it, if he hadn’t fallen asleep himself. When he awoke with a start, it was because the sunrise was pouring in through the cracks of the barn and hitting him in the face. He looked in front of him and saw the impression in the straw where the colonel had been.

“PERRIN!” he yelled as he scrambled to his feet. He rushed outside and found the two horses with Perrin adjusting the straps.

“Just getting everything ready,” he said easily. “Thought I’d let you sleep a few more minutes. Trust me, all right?”

“I’m trying to,” said Shem, leaning against the barn wall and massaging his eyes.

“It’s less than an hour to the Administrators’ Headquarters from here. Are you still ready?”

“Yes, I’m ready.”

“Good. Now Shem,” Perrin said as he climbed onto his horse, “when we’re there, that’s when you should *stop* trusting me.”

“I’m ready for that, too.”

## Chapter 23 ~ “Once she even caught a falcon.”

Mahrree woke up with a start, immediately recalling every horrible moment that had transpired the endless night before.

She looked around, a bit disoriented, before remembering she was on the sofa. Jaytsy was curled up on one side and Peto was on the other. Their faces were still blotchy from weeping. At what time they finally succumbed to the brief respite sleep offered, she didn't know. But all the pain was back again, in full pounding force.

She sighed and slouched back on the sofa. Through Peto's open door she spied Major Karna asleep on Peto's bed, with his sword on the floor and at the ready. Mahrree remembered her mother had gone to Jaytsy's bed to lie down in the middle of the night.

She looked over to see Jaytsy's door open, but heard a soft shuffling in the kitchen behind her. For a moment, Mahrree's heart leaped in hope, until she identified the sounds as her mother trying quietly to cook breakfast.

Mahrree rubbed her temples with her fingers and muttered the same prayer she'd been saying all night. “Please, dear Creator—help Shem find Perrin. Let them both come home safely. And please, somehow, help our hearts heal.”

---

“Where is he?” Mal demanded as Brisack came into his office.

“Someone just spotted him coming to the Administration

“Once she even caught a falcon.”

Building. But there won't be any time to interrogate him before the meeting.” Brisack sat heavily in a chair. “But don't worry—I have three men that will be waiting at his office, and four more to tail him should he leave to go elsewhere. We'll pin down Gadiman and find out *what else* he's ordered.”

Mal shook his head. “Unbelievable,” he whispered and glanced quickly around his large office. Since they weren't in his library—the unexpected events of the past day and night hadn't allowed for any private meetings—Nicko Mal felt just a little anxious. Never did they discuss *such matters* outside the privacy of the former throne room, but the urgency of the crisis meant they had to figure out something, and fast. “I can't believe the weasel finally pulled it off.”

“About twelve or thirteen years too late,” Brisack murmured back. “But he did it. Relf and Joriana Shin are dead. I saw their bodies myself and still it's . . . unbelievable. That's the only word.” He shook his head, still numb and incredulous. “So, given any thought as to who will replace Shin?”

“There's only one choice,” Mal whispered, also immensely distracted. “The only one with the access and connections we need right now.”

Brisack nodded once. “And his assistant?”

“Also already chosen. He'll be the highest man we'll ever have had placed. Great potential, now.”

“Potential to do what, though?” Brisack sighed and gestured lamely. “Who's left to challenge?”

Mal's eyebrows went up. “Who's left? You seriously asked that? Perrin's left! You think he's just going to roll over and accept this? He might even come for the burial.”

Brisack shook his head. “Surely not. Perrin will be on his knees, ruined. Slag!” the good doctor swore and stared out a window filling with early light. “I wanted to be the one who did it! I wanted to crush him, but that stupid weasel beat me to it.”

“What did you have planned?” Mal asked with a hint of a smile.

“Nothing firm,” his companion admitted. “But I had several options.”

“Keep those options, Doctor. Perrin won't crumble that easily. Just watch. He'll be here, in grand fashion like a raging bear, and certainly not on his knees.”

Brisack folded his arms. "Then I speculate against you. Perrin's a sobbing mess somewhere, broken."

"Remember, he has ways of surprising us."

"No," Brisack said, "he always has a way of surprising *you*."

"Have you already forgotten how much he surprised *you* while he was here? But don't worry, my good doctor; you'll still get your opportunity. Trust me."

---

Instead of appreciating the massive buildings, houses, and shops of Idumea, Shem kept glancing over at Perrin, trying to read his face. He was very practiced at it, and what he saw there wrenched his heart.

Perrin regarded everything as if it were betraying him. All the snow was melted in Idumea, revealing vibrant green grasses and an almost obscene amount of flowers; life, bursting out everywhere. But all there was in Perrin's eyes was death and pain as even Nature seemed to mock him.

As he rode, Shem looked furtively around at the people dressed in fashions and finery far more ridiculous than anything in Edge, and noticed they were all staring back at him, alarmed. He glanced down and saw for the first time how much muck, straw, and dried blood dirtied his uniform.

Perrin was just as deplorable, but on him it worked, making him all the more terrifying.

"Which route do you usually take through the city?" Perrin asked as they turned down another road. The horses were slowed to maneuver around a tipped wagon and the carriages stalled behind it.

"I don't. My first time here," Shem confessed.

"But you grew up south of here. You go home every year."

"But I always avoid Idumea," Shem explained. "My father made me promise never to come here, so I take the long way around."

That was one of his conditions Papa had required before he agreed to sign Shem's form verifying he was of age to join the army. "*Don't ever go to Idumea. You know how I feel about that*



“Once she even caught a falcon.”

*place.”*

When Shem was twenty years old he never intended to break that promise.

Actually, until last night he never intended to break that promise. He felt dishonest about letting down his father, but it was for a good reason.

Not like it was the first time he'd ever been dishonest, or betrayed anyone. Certainly wasn't going to be the last—

Perrin nodded once. “My apologies to Mr. Zenos for making his boy break his promise.”

“He'll get over it,” Shem said, “but I see why he hates the place. It's so crowded I wished I could fly out of here.”

As the horses made their way past the wreckage in the road, Perrin leaned over to Shem. “Then let's get this over with and get out of here.”

He kicked his heels into his horse and Shem joined him, galloping toward the Administrators' Headquarters.

People scattered out of the way as the two filthy men rode through the crowds. They stopped abruptly at the white steps of the large orange and red stone building, slid off their horses, and handed the reins to a startled page at the hitching post.

Perrin looked up at the white steps and drew his sword. A woman nearby screamed, but he ignored her as he marched up to the doors.

Shem reluctantly drew his sword as well, received another scream for his effort, and followed Perrin.

The pages at the doors glanced uneasily at each other. The usual crowd traveling the stairs parted quickly with cries of surprise as the colonel and the sergeant took the steps two at a time. Colonel Shin scowled at the two young pages, and immediately they pushed open the doors and stepped out of the way.

More gasps and shouts greeted them as Perrin marched unimpeded through the large and polished hallway and down to the right, Shem on his heels. He prayed he didn't have to use his weapons today, because there was only one person on whom he would, if necessary.

Scattering like turkeys before a farmer with a hatchet, Idumeans made plenty of room for Colonel Shin to blaze straight to the waiting area of the Conference Room. He didn't even hesitate when he saw the closed doors.

Shem glanced over to the recording desk where two men in short red jackets sat. One of the men raised his brow in astonishment as he caught Shem's eye.

Shem did his best to quickly communicate there was about to be *a bit of a problem*. The other man in red leaped to his feet to protest.

"Sir, you don't have an—" was all he got out before Colonel Shin kicked open the doors and startled the entire body of the Administrators.

"Good," Shin said as he barged into the room and stepped up to the table. "You're all here."

Half of the Administrators scrambled to stand up.

Master Sergeant Zenos, who followed Shin, promptly closed the doors behind him and latched them. A tumbling noise on the other side of the doors suggested several men crashed into them: the Administrative Headquarters guards, arriving just a moment too late. There was muffled shouting behind Shem, calling for the guards to find another way in.

"What's the meaning of this?!" cried an administrator.

"That's what I came to find out!" Colonel Shin told him. He looked at each of the men in the room and paused when he saw the unanticipated faces of a general and another colonel standing behind the Chairman. "Cush. Thorne."

The officers nodded once back.

Shem swallowed and stared straight ahead across the immense table, surprised to find himself facing the most powerful man in the world. At least, Mal *thought* he was.

Perrin's gaze also shifted to Chairman Mal and he threw his sword on the polished table. Its clattering echoed in the tall room. "It stays right there, until I get some answers," Shin explained. "If I don't hear the truth, I get to use it."

The Chairman hid his surprise well, Shem thought. His relaxed-and-in-control demeanor had vanished as soon as the colonel stormed through the door, and now he leaned forward on the table, his hands clasped so tightly together that his knuckles were white.

The Administrators that were still standing nervously sat back down, as if worried they presented too easy a target.

Mal glanced over momentarily to the man who was the Administrator of Family Life, according to the gold and wood plaque

“Once she even caught a falcon.”

in front of him. Then Mal shifted his gaze past the colonel to Shem. “Master Sergeant, your sword?”

“Is to defend you, sir,” Shem announced, grateful that his voice was so steady, “and the other Administrators. In case the colonel forgets his promise.”

The Chairman nodded once and Shem thought he suddenly seemed paler.

“What happened?” Colonel Shin demanded. “All that wretched little message said was that the house was invaded and they were killed. That’s all you could spare for the High General and his wife? No more ink than that?”

General Cush lumbered hastily around the table. “Perrin, Perrin! We sent another message, just an hour later, with much more information. The first message was brief because we thought you should know immediately. It’s terrible news, no matter what. I’m so very sorry.” He reached Perrin and tried to put a hand on his shoulder.

But Colonel Shin shrugged it off. “Where were the soldiers?” he asked the room. “How many Guardsers? Were they the same that attacked our caravan?”

That last question made all of the Administrators change positions. Some sat up, some slunk down in their chairs, and others leaned forward.

“We have yet to finish discussing the issue of *your caravan*,” Chairman Mal said coolly.

“You mean the theft!” a man snapped. Shem could just make out the title on the wooden plaque in front of him. Administrator of Loyalty.

“You mean the rescue effort!” countered the Administrator of Security. “Which has brought messages of praise from several villages.”

“A brilliant public relations move, if I do say so myself,” added the Administrator of Culture.

“But a serious violation!” argued another.

The Chairman stood up.

Judging by the stunned looks on the other men’s faces, he never did that. “This discussion will continue another time,” he said loudly.

“Where were the guards, Nicko?” Colonel Shin demanded.

Colonel Thorne came up to the table. “Riplak was, we be-

lieve, in the house, and the other four normally stationed around the mansion were there as well,” he reported tonelessly. “Three were killed. One—a corporal—was critically injured. Riplak’s missing.”

Shin squinted. “Missing?”

“Found his jacket.”

“Where?”

Thorne hesitated for the briefest of moments. “In the cook’s bedroom.”

Shin squinted more severely, as if he could see it all if he focused hard enough.

“No one’s seen him since the night before,” said Thorne in a slightly bored tone. “The grounds were thoroughly searched. The cook was seriously injured as well. She’s at the garrison hospital being tended to.”

Cush tried to take Perrin’s arm again, but he flinched at his touch. “Perrin, your parents are there, too. Burial’s not scheduled until this evening. Let me take you there.”

“How’d they get in?” a furious Colonel Shin asked Thorne. “Busy roads, crowded neighborhoods all the way there, and no one saw them? How is that?”

Thorne matched his cold gaze. “They came in the early hours, maybe up to eight of them. From what we can tell they weren’t dressed in their version of uniforms. They looked like farmers. Nothing suspicious about that, is there?”

“In the early morning hours?” Shin challenged.

“Dairy farmers!” Thorne shouted.

“Who saw them? How do you know?”

“The cook gave the description. Ask her yourself!”

“Four Guards were also captured and brought to Pools,” Shin bellowed at Thorne. “I was told you brought them to the garrison. So what have you learned?”

“Nothing.” Thorne matched Shin’s glare and raised it by several degrees.

“And why not?”

“Because they’re dead!”

Shin threw his hands in the air, ignoring the stunned expressions exchanged between the Administrators. “Oh, now *that’s* convenient. Come on, Thorne—don’t you know how to deal with Guards? You’re supposed to check them all over for blades.

“Once she even caught a falcon.”

Didn't they teach you that in Command School?”

Thorne's glare was so severe that Shem felt it cutting straight through Perrin and into his own flesh. It was a good thing there was a large table between the two colonels.

That's when Shem realized *he* hadn't taken all of Perrin's blades, either. While his sword was on the table, he didn't know where Perrin's long knife was. Not on his hip, Shem was reasonably sure, but probably in his boot. As long as Perrin didn't suddenly bend down—

Shem gulped in dread over his own carelessness.

“I took all their blades personally, Shin,” Thorne seethed. “It seems they had a *friend* who was rather disappointed they allowed themselves to be captured. Sometime during the last evening he entered the garrison prison and killed each one of them.”

Several of the Administrators gasped at the news, but Colonel Shin just slowly shook his head. “What a surprise. How'd you let *that* happen, Thorne?” He ignored the colonel's growing sneer. “Thousands of soldiers, and no one notices a Guarder coming in to destroy his associates?”

“Guarders live among us, Colonel,” Thorne said in a dangerous tone, his hand on the hilt of his sword. “That's quite obvious now. It's very difficult to know who to trust.”

Shin matched his sneer. “Oh, *it most certainly is!*”

“Boys, boys!” General Cush said loudly, as if merely breaking up a tussle between two privates. “Everyone's a bit on edge right now—”

Colonel Shin leaned aggressively on the table, aiming himself at Thorne. “None of this makes sense. Why my father? My mother? Why were your guards so ineffective, Thorne? And why now?”

“Perrin!” Cush said sternly. “We know you're grieving, but don't say something you'll later regret. Come on, let me take you to the mansion—”

“NO!” Perrin shouted, pushing Cush away. “This didn't have to happen! I know it!”

“Perhaps if you hadn't left so *hastily*, Colonel Shin,” the Administrator of Loyalty began in such a smug manner that Shem firmed his grip on his hilt, “you would've been there to protect your father and mother.” His tone was like an excited mosquito buzzing around a bleeding gash, delighted to see an easy meal. “Is

*that* what's bothering you?"

Shem should have anticipated it, but he didn't.

Colonel Shin exploded onto the table and lunged for his sword. Perhaps that was why the table was so highly polished: it proved to be nearly impossible for him to get traction on his first scrambling attempt.

"NO!" Shem yelled and leaped on the table, tackling the flailing Perrin just as he reached his sword. Shem dropped his own weapon but pinned the colonel to the table.

"Colonel, NO!" Zenos yelled again, wrapping his arm tightly around his throat, his knee firmly in Perrin's back where he knew there was a growing bruise from their fight hours before.

Colonel Shin, gasping in pain and fury, gripped his sword's hilt and, despite Shem immobilizing him, managed to aim the tip of the blade just inches away from the Administrator of Loyalty. The terrified man, who was a nauseating shade of gray, didn't think to push his chair away from the table and out of range.

But two blades were on Shin.

One was Shem's, who held Grandpy's long knife to Perrin's throat with his free hand while keeping him in a choke hold.

The other blade belonged to the sword of Colonel Thorne, who now stood between two ashen Administrators and trained his point just inches away from Perrin's temple.

"Colonel, *please!*" Shem whispered into his ear. "Don't make me do this—"

"How dare you, Gadiman?" Perrin rasped at the Administrator with his last breaths. "Makes me wonder . . . if you didn't . . . plan this whole thing . . . yourself—"

"Perrin!" Shem snapped.

Gadiman shook as if he would pass out from terror.

Colonel Shin turned purple as the sergeant's grip tightened. He had only seconds left as his throat gurgled—

"Enough!" Cush cried. "Enough! Off of him! Get his sword, Master Sergeant. Perrin, come on." The general was doing his best to push his girth between stunned two administrators to reach him. "Enough of this!"

Shem was more than happy to obey the order to release his best friend, and had planned to choke Perrin only until he lost consciousness, which would have happened in another second or two. Gingerly he pulled the sword out of the colonel's weakened

“Once she even caught a falcon.”

grip and slid off the table as Perrin began to gasp for air.

Cush had a hand on his arm, trying to drag him off the table. “Let’s go to the garrison, Perrin. You need to cool off.”

Colonel Shin’s eyes were glazed and unfocused as he crawled off the table and let General Cush put a supporting arm around him. He was a completely different man, Shem could tell, disconnected from everything around him. It’d been too much, all of it: the news, the long ride, the lack of food and sleep. Perrin could hardly stand as he coughed to refill his lungs.

Another Administrator jumped to his feet. “Let me come with you. I have something—”

“No, Brisack!” the Chairman said abruptly. “Not yet!”

The rest of the Administrators, still stunned by the outburst of Colonel Shin, now turned to look quizzically at either Brisack or Mal.

Brisack raised an inquiring eyebrow himself.

Mal, feeling the stares, swallowed. “I mean that . . . Doctor Brisack, I need a few words with you first, in private. Meet them at the hospital in a little while.”

Doctor Brisack slowly sat down.

Shem, now on the other side of Perrin with an arm around his waist to steady him, remembered the name of Doctor Brisack. He was the one Perrin and Mahrree liked. He might just be their only ally right now.

“Thorne,” Chairman Mal turned to the colonel who still held his sword at the ready, “go with them for now.”

“Yes, sir!” Colonel Thorne said, a little too eagerly, Shem thought.

Thorne quickly moved around the table and unlatched the door. Several men on the other side opened it and fell back quickly as they saw the four soldiers leaving the room: one supported on each side by two others, and the fourth with his sword drawn and trained at the middle man’s neck.

The crowds parted even more rapidly than before as the four men strode—or more precisely, three men strode while one was dragged—through the halls and to the general’s carriage waiting at the back entrance.

Cush carefully pushed Perrin up and into the open carriage where he stared, unseeing and glassy-eyed, at the floor. Shem took the seat next to him as Cush sat across from him. Thorne had

a word with the driver, and, with his sword still in hand, sat across from Shem, his focus solely on Colonel Shin.

Shem looked nervously at General Cush, who watched Perrin with fatherly concern. Perrin now stared blankly at the scenery as it passed, not seeing any of it.

Shem cleared his throat politely and Cush shifted his gaze to him.

“I’m sorry, sir,” the master sergeant said. “I should’ve moved faster.” He sent a fleeting look to Colonel Thorne. “I really didn’t think he’d do that.”

General Cush smiled at him kindly. “You did very well, Master Sergeant. I think all of us were surprised. But Perrin’s going to be all right,” he said a bit loudly, as if Perrin had gone deaf. “Aren’t you, son? Just need a little rest, a little time to think. We’ll take care of you.”

Perrin didn’t even blink, but stared vacantly.

Colonel Thorne turned to the sergeant. “It was an impressive move, flattening him like that. You took his breath nearly instantly.”

Shem wasn’t sure how to take that, but the sandy-haired colonel had admiration in his cold blue eyes. “Yes, sir,” seemed to be the safest response. “Thank you.”

Cush leaned over. “Are you by any chance Uncle Shem?”

Shem’s eyes widened. “Uh, yes sir. Master Sergeant Shem Zenos.”

Cush sat back and smiled. “I had a feeling. Heard a lot about you from the Shins. You’re quite the favorite, aren’t you? Ran a few races against our Perrin here? Was even the children’s baby tender when they were younger?”

Shem searched for an appropriate response, and settled on the tried and true, “Yes, sir.”

“The family has a lot of trust in you. So does Perrin, I see,” Cush said. “You’re a good man to have around, Master Sergeant Shem Zenos. You may have preserved a family today.”

The carriage swayed to a halt.

“Oh, what now?” said Thorne crossly. He turned behind him to see an Idumean jam ahead.

“That’s all right.” Cush said. “We’re in no rush, now, are we? Gives us some time to get to know the master sergeant here, and let Perrin have some fresh air. Tell me, *Uncle Shem*, how long



“Once she even caught a falcon.”

have you been in Edge?”

“Nearly fourteen years, sir. I arrived at the same time as Peto Shin.”

“Are you married?”

“No, sir.”

“Raised near Edge?”

“No, sir. I come from between Flax and Waves. My father owns some land there.”

“So you left home for the other side of the world, did you?” said Cush, surprised.

“Yes, sir. I like the mountains more than I like the sea.”

“That makes you an unusual man, then,” interjected Thorne. “Usually everyone tries to go south.”

Shem looked Colonel Thorne in the eyes and knew what he had to say. He’d been waiting years for the opportunity. “I guess I find the north more appealing, sir.”

Thorne and Cush both smiled at Zenos.

After a silent moment, Thorne said, “Many of us do. Chase many Guarders, Shem Zenos?”

“Yes, sir. More than I care to remember. Sirs, may I ask a question?”

Cush glanced at Perrin, who still stared blankly at the road. “Of course, son.”

“Why are Guarders now living in the city in disguise? Why change the tactics now?”

Thorne cleared his throat slightly, and his father-in-law gave him a brief look. “Go ahead. We have time. And I’m not listening.”

It was times like this that Shem was grateful for his training. While his ears fairly burned at General Cush’s words—and what it seemed he knew and tried to ignore—Shem kept his face completely placid as Thorne began to speak.

“When one strategy is no longer *satisfying*,” Thorne said meaningfully, his gaze focused solely on Shem, “another must be employed, Master Sergeant.”

Shem sighed. “Yes but, why? After all these years, why not make one unified attack—take out the Administrators all at once and set up their own leadership? It certainly seems possible.”

“Yes, but is that what the Guarders *want*, Zenos?” Thorne said. “Control of the world?”

Shem swallowed. "I'm afraid that right now I don't know what the Guarders want, sirs."

Thorne nodded. "That's understandable, Zenos. But I believe I can help you."

He sat back, checked that Shin still seemed to be lost in another world, and looked back at the sergeant. "The past several years have demonstrated that the Guarders are a very patient people, Zenos, and they think differently than most. You see, they don't enjoy the victory, they enjoy the *pursuit*. Do you know what I mean?"

"Yes," Shem said slowly. "I believe I do."

"I believe you do too, Master Sergeant." Thorne smiled halfway, but his blue eyes remained hard. "Did you ever own a cat, Zenos?"

"We had a couple in the barns," Shem shrugged, "but I never paid much attention to them."

"That's too bad. Cats are highly underrated, Zenos," Thorne said thoughtfully. "We had an excellent mouser in one of our barns when I was a boy. I would sit and watch her for hours. You see, she was an expert at pursuit and attack. She didn't need the mice she caught—my mother kept her well-fed—but she caught prey anyway, just for the joy of it. And she always brought what she captured into the barn: moles, squirrels, even large bugs. She'd injure her prey just enough that it couldn't escape, then she'd watch it struggle for life. She'd stay within a few feet of it, observing it trying to flee, batting it occasionally when it stopped moving. Sometimes she'd leave for a while and let the doomed creature think it could escape."

Thorne had a chilly smile of appreciation on his face that caused Shem to develop a twitch in his eye.

"Then when the victim least expected it she'd come back and give it a new wound, just to keep herself entertained," Thorne continued. "And when she tired of it, she'd pounce and kill it, just for something to do. Then she'd leave it to rot and find another victim."

"Once she even caught a falcon. They were after the same prey, and she wounded its wing. She dragged it into the barn and taunted it with the possibility of flying away, but it had no chance. She could jump as high as its injured wing would let it rise, and if it didn't plummet on its own, she'd smack it down. She studied

“Once she even caught a falcon.”

and tormented that bird for days before it finally began to fail on its own through starvation. Only then did she finish it off.”

The colonel sat back in satisfaction.

“And *that’s* how Guardians see the world, Master Sergeant Zenos. They are the cats, the world is their barn, and whomever they want is their prey. Just to give them something to do.”

“For entertainment,” Shem clarified.

Thorne tipped his head. “And perhaps a bit of research and gold.”

“A fascinating metaphor, Colonel,” Shem answered, hoping the colonel couldn’t see that his skin had developed goose bumps. “And a disturbingly insightful one as well.”

Thorne smiled more broadly. “I’m glad you appreciate it.”

Shem wasn’t about to contradict his evaluation. This was, after all, a man who as a child enjoyed watching a cat torture a falcon to death. Shem may not have known a lot about the ways of Idumea, but some things are pretty easy to figure out. You don’t disagree with some kinds of men.

Cush leaned forward, apparently hearing the conversation again. “I wouldn’t ask his theory on women if I were you, unless you want to hear ‘fascinatingly disturbing metaphors’ about every barnyard animal that exists. Had I heard those before he married my daughter, I might have changed my mind about giving approval!” He laughed.

Shem tried to smile at him, while Thorne gave a tired and obliging nod to his father-in-law who nudged him.

“Ah, here we are,” Cush said as they pulled into the garrison.

Perrin still showed no awareness of his surroundings as the carriage drove up to the hospital. But as the carriage came to a stop, Perrin slowly looked over at his friend.

Shem shivered. He’d never seen a dead man staring at him before. He helped Perrin out of the carriage and Perrin mumbled, “I want to see my parents now.”

“Perrin, I need to warn you,” Cush said as they assisted him, weakened and clumsy, up the steps and into the main hallway. “The attack was brutal. I’m not sure this is such a good idea, considering your state of mind.”

The surgeon spotted them from down the hall and jogged over to greet them. “Colonel Shin,” he said extending his hand,

but Perrin didn't take it. "I'm so very sorry." He let his hand drop. "There was nothing I could do, and I was there very quickly."

"I just want to see them," Perrin whispered.

The surgeon started to shake his head but then reluctantly nodded. He led the men, Perrin stumbling a bit, downstairs to the holding cellar. Cush and Thorne stayed outside, but Perrin grabbed Shem's arm.

"I don't need you to look at them. I just want you to stay with me," he whispered, his eyes still not focusing on anything clearly.

Shem nodded and put a bracing arm around his waist as they followed the surgeon into the dark and cool cellar. The surgeon lit a lantern and held it before the two covered bodies. Once he gingerly pulled back the cloth covering them, Perrin needed only a moment to verify they were his parents.

He collapsed in Shem's grip.

"I knew this was a bad idea," the surgeon said as he caught Perrin's other arm. "How much sleep has he had?"

"Maybe two or three hours."

"Food?" the surgeon grunted as Perrin's weight slowly dragged him down.

"None that I know of, sir," Shem said as he hefted his friend off the surgeon. "I also sort of choked him recently," he felt he should add.

"The man needs rest," the surgeon decided, struggling with Shem to support Perrin between them. "I have just the thing upstairs."

Shem thought Perrin needed to eat and drink, and maybe be checked over by the surgeon to make sure Shem didn't cause any lasting damage.

The two men strained to heave him up the stairs, Perrin oblivious and half dead himself. They were followed by Cush and Thorne, who didn't offer to help with moving the colonel, Shem noted with some irritation. The senior officers posted themselves at the door of the first unoccupied room they found, while Shem and the surgeon laid Perrin down on one of two narrow beds. The surgeon left to speak to his aids while Shem sat helplessly next to his friend.

Perrin just stared blankly at some indistinct spot above the open doorway where the Cush and Thorne stood on guard. It

“Once she even caught a falcon.”

seemed to Shem that only one of them looked concerned. The other kept a finger twitching on the hilt of his sheathed sword.

The surgeon returned soon with his aids and the officers stepped out of his way to let them in. In the surgeon’s gloved hands he held a small brown bottle and a thick cloth.

“Colonel Shin,” he said louder than necessary as he doused the cloth with the something from the bottle, “I want you to breathe this.”

Perrin put a hand awkwardly in front of his face.

Cush and Thorne were now joined at the door by Doctor Brisack. He was slightly winded, having rushed over from the Administrators’ Headquarters. Brisack, seeing what was in the surgeon’s hands, pushed between the two officers and crouched in front of Shin.

“Colonel, this will help. Trust me,” he said.

“No,” Perrin said listlessly. “Just leave me alone.”

The doctors exchanged looks.

“Colonel Shin,” Brisack said more forcefully. “You *will* breathe this.”

“Don’t make him,” Shem held up his hands. “I’ll take care of him. Just bring him something to eat—”

“He’s not in his right mind, Master Sergeant,” Brisack cut him off. “This will help get him there.” Brisack turned again to his unwilling patient. “You’ll feel nothing, Colonel Shin.”

Perrin sat up abruptly, forcing Shem off the bed and onto the floor. “I already feel *nothing*, Doctor!” he yelled. “I want to feel *better!*”

The garrison surgeon motioned to the two aids. They promptly stepped over to the colonel, pushing Shem aside.

“What are you doing?” Shem cried, scrambling to his feet.

The two aids grabbed Perrin’s shoulders and forced him down while Doctor Brisack threw himself on to Perrin’s thrashing legs. The surgeon shoved the cloth onto his face.

“Stop it!” Shem lunged for the surgeon.

But Thorne was faster. He caught Shem’s arm and yanked him back. “It’s all right, Zenos. It will help. I’ve seen it work before.”

Perrin gagged and choked and flailed for what seemed like five minutes, but Shem, feeling helpless in the firm grip of Colonel Thorne, knew it was much shorter than that.

Finally Perrin went completely still, and the doctors smiled at each other in triumph.

“What did you do to him?” Shem cried, staring at his lifeless friend.

“Put him to sleep!” Doctor Brisack said proudly, brushing off his red jacket and straightening his white ruffles. “Fantastically beneficial concoction. We’ve been experimenting with sulfur, acids, gases—”

“And requiring new workrooms when those experiments go awry,” Colonel Thorne interrupted in a loud aside to General Cush.

Brisack scowled at him before turning back to Shem. “It’s still in the testing stage, and we’re working on the potency to get it consistent, but it’s quite harmless.” He sent another withering glare at Thorne, who didn’t even blink. “Perrin will wake up feeling like a new man.” Brisack turned to one of the aids. “Keep administering as needed for the next six hours.”

“I was thinking eight,” said the surgeon who was already handing the bottle and cloth to an aid.

Brisack shook his head. “We don’t want him groggy for the burial.”

The surgeon nodded and motioned to the aid to follow the orders.

“But he didn’t want it!” Shem said miserably, watching Perrin’s very still chest. “Are you sure he’s all right?”

The surgeon checked Perrin’s pulse and smiled. “Strong and steady, just very slow. We call it sedation.”

“It’s all right, Master Sergeant. Really,” said Doctor Brisack, patting his shoulder. “I used some of it just yesterday on a young boy who got in the way of an agitated bull. Poor little thing had a broken leg and a broken arm. Gave him some sedation and he slept right through the most agonizing pain of setting his bones. He woke up later in splints and in much better spirits.”

“But you forced it on him!” Shem tried again, knowing his protests were useless, but feeling as if he should point that out. What Perrin wanted, no one cared about. What was best for him, no one even discussed. All they wanted was for him to be quiet and out of the way.

“He’ll thank us when he wakes,” Cush assured him. “I tell you what, Zenos: take that second bed there. Get some rest your-

“Once she even caught a falcon.”

self. You look exhausted. Stay close to Perrin, and we’ll talk again when he revives.”

Shem sighed at the unconscious figure splayed haphazardly on the narrow bed.

Doctor Brisack walked over to the window and closed the curtains, the thick dark blue cloth hiding the sunlight. He patted Zenos again comfortingly. “It’s been a terrible night and day for him. We’ll be merciful when it’s time to discuss the repercussions of his behavior. The man’s been forced to his knees. Even lower.”

Something in the manner in which the doctor said those last words made Shem think he was *happy* about it. But Shem must have been more tired than he realized.

“Rest, Sergeant,” Brisack said kindly. “Then the two of you can prepare for the burial this evening.” He gently pushed Shem onto the other bed next to Perrin, and the men filed out the room.

After they closed the door, Shem got up, checked Perrin’s slow pulse himself, and frowned in apology. He repositioned Perrin’s legs more comfortably, lifted his arm hanging off the bed onto his belly, put a pillow under his heavy head, and carefully placed a gray wool blanket over him.

Still deeply worried, Shem watched him for a moment. Eventually he leaned over and positioned his ear almost next to Perrin’s nose and mouth to hear him breathe. After a minute he was satisfied that Perrin was only in a deep sleep.

Shem considered taking off Perrin’s boots, but the exhaustion of the night and the excitement of the morning began to overwhelm him. He sat on the bunk, just for a moment to rest—

He didn’t notice when he fell over, unconscious.

---

No one really ate their breakfast, but just sat at the table staring past the beautiful spread Hycymum created. She wasn’t eating either, just pushing around bits of dried berries in the last of the syrup.

“She was always so kind about the fashions we had here in Edge,” she said quietly, continuing the reminiscing they began last night. Hycymum had said that before, but Mahrree knew her mother needed to talk it out. And talk. And talk.

Someone might as well talk.

“I knew that what we had in our market would never match Idumea, but Joriana always helped me find the best items. She never told me they had silk sheets.”

Mahrree felt a pang of regret she didn't bring back her gray gown, just for her mother to play with.

“Imagine . . . silk sheets.”

Jaytsy sniffed repeatedly as she rested her head on her hand, and Peto stared glumly at his plate. Mahrree took a few tentative bites of breakfast, but oddly it all tasted of ash.

The only one who ate anything was Major Karna, who stood at the front windows with his plate of pancakes and berries, wolfing them down and squinting out the thick wavy windows.

“Really need to replace these with something thinner and clearer,” he murmured to himself, but in the dreadful silence of the house his words carried to the eating table. “I can barely make out who are soldiers and who aren't. Serious security concern. Then again, I can't see anything clearly out of this eye.” He closed his good eye experimentally, shook his head in disappointment, and swallowed down the last bite of food.

Hycyum smiled dismally at him. At least someone still had a working stomach, but it seemed to Mahrree that Brillen ate more because of nerves than hunger.

He returned the plate to the table and nodded once to Hycyum. “Thank you, Mrs. Peto. I should visit the Inn more often—once it opens again—if everything tastes as good as that.” He turned to Mahrree. “I'm going to get an update from the soldiers. The sergeant we sent out after Perrin and Shem should've returned with word by now.” His shoulder twitched.

Actually, the sergeant should have returned last night, but he, just like the colonel and the master sergeant, was missing.

Mahrree smiled feebly. “Thank you, Brillen. I'm sure we'll be fine for the day. We have enough guards.”

“I'll be back,” he promised her as he picked up his cap. “I'll stay the night again. Just in case.”

Mahrree nodded, conflicted. It was good to have an experienced officer in the house, but his presence also reminded her as to *why* he had to be there.

He sent a strained smile to the children, who didn't notice, before he headed out the back door and slammed it just like Perrin did.



“Once she even caught a falcon.”

Mahrree’s heart would have broken at the sound, if it weren’t already in too many little pieces.

“Guess I should clean up,” Hycyum said quietly and took up Karna’s plate. “Nice man. Even with his thinning hairline and whatever happened to his eye—” she diplomatically referred to the swelling and bruising caused by Perrin, “—he’s a pleasant looking fellow. Needs to find himself a woman.”

“He’s been talking with one,” Mahrree said dimly. Normally a conversation about a potential match between a soldier and a villager would have kept Hycyum and Mahrree entertained for at least half an hour, but not today. “An egg supplier, in Rivers. Brillen’s visited her a few times. Perrin was going to recommend he put in for a transfer . . .”

Saying her husband’s name sent her thoughts in a completely different direction, and she couldn’t finish the sentence.

Hycyum nodded in understanding. “Need to clean up,” was all she could say as she took the dishes to the kitchen.

“So what do we do today?” Jaytsy whispered to her plate.

“I just want to go back to bed,” mumbled Peto.

“I know,” Mahrree sighed. “But I fear just staying around here will make us all feel worse.”

“So what do we do?” Jaytsy asked again.

“Everything. There’s rubble to move, logs to drag, people to comfort—”

“Like us,” said Peto dismally. “Why haven’t they come back yet?”

Mahrree swallowed. “I don’t know. Maybe . . . maybe they’re sleeping somewhere. Your father will be feeling as low and depressed as you are, I’m sure. Shem’s likely just letting him rest, and then they’ll be back.” She couldn’t make any of that sound convincing, because she was wondering the same thing: Why haven’t they come back?

Unless . . .

Unless something more horrible than her in-laws murder was happening—

She stood abruptly from the table. “I have to do something, and so do you two. Up! If we’re busy, we can’t think, right?”

Her children half-heartedly pushed back their chairs and followed her to the shed to retrieve the shovels.



Hew Gleace stared, disbelieving, at the man in green and brown mottled clothing. For a minute he couldn't say a word, and the man in front of his desk licked his lips nervously, waiting for some kind of response.

"He's really gone?"

The man nodded. "Your brother-in-law visited the Shins himself. They were devastated."

"Naturally, naturally," Gleace said, not focusing on anything as his eyes darted around his desk. "Unbelievable. I didn't expect this—I mean, there was always talk and plans and . . . But they actually *killed* both the High General and his wife. Unbelievable," he whispered again. "How did I not see this coming?" he murmured. "There was no . . . Someone just . . . And now Shem's gone after him?"

He covered his mouth with his hand as he pondered this latest development.

Eventually he said, "This will change everything."

## Chapter 24 ~ “Can you help him see reason?”

Shem awoke about five hours later, just as an aid was coming in to apply another cloth to Perrin’s face.

“He won’t be needing any more doses. He needs to be alert in time for the burial,” Shem said in his best authoritative tone.

The aid nodded and left.

Shem got to his feet, feeling groggier than usual after a long nap, but he bit it back. He opened the curtains to see afternoon on the garrison.

He hadn’t looked at it properly when they first brought Perrin there, but now he had a moment to take it in. The place was immense, more than ten times larger than the fort in Edge. As far as he could see there were blue uniforms, wooden fences, block buildings, mules, horses, and silver blades.

But he couldn’t focus on any of it, his head feeling strangely muzzy and his stomach a bit queasy. There was something repulsive about all that gray and blue and brown out there. For the first time he could ever remember, Shem Zenos hated being a soldier.

A low moaning sound turned him around. Perrin was stirring, so Shem sat down next to him on his bed.

Perrin’s eyes slowly opened and he squinted at the sunlight. “Shem, where are we?”

“The garrison hospital. We brought you here after—”

Perrin nodded. “I remember now. They did something to me.”

“They put you to sleep. Sedation. I’m sorry—I wasn’t successful in stopping them. You’ve been out for about five hours. They wanted another hour, but I told the aid you didn’t need any

more.”

Perrin sat up quickly and held his head. “So dizzy.” He slumped back down and closed his eyes. “Oh, my stomach. Worse than ale. Didn’t think that was possible.”

“Give it a few minutes,” Shem said, suspecting the reason they didn’t feed Perrin was because they knew the sedation would make him nauseated. “Maybe that’ll help. You’ve been breathing in something. Maybe if you just breathe normally you will feel better.”

“Shem, there were other bodies down there,” Perrin mumbled as he rubbed his forehead. “In the cellar. Find out who they were. If they were Guarders, I want you to look at them for me.”

Shem recoiled at the idea. “For what purpose, Perrin?”

“So, I thought I heard voices!” General Cush stood smiling at the door. “How’s our Perrin?”

Perrin opened his eyes a crack. “Dizzy, nauseated, and *not* feeling better. Sir.”

“Give it some time,” Cush said good-naturedly. “Come out of it a bit more. Heard you talking about the bodies downstairs. Yes, Perrin, they were the men taken at the mansion. The Guarders that died last night at the garrison—well, Thorne’s already disposed of their bodies,” he added quietly.

“Figures,” Perrin muttered so quietly that Shem almost missed hearing it. In a louder voice he asked the general, “Are any of the men in the cellar Riplak?”

“No, Perrin. But one of them is slightly familiar to me, though. I was hoping to get Kindiri to take a look at them before their burial tonight, but I don’t think she’ll be up to it.”

Perrin waved vaguely in Shem’s direction. “Go find her. Talk to her for me. Cush will take you. I just want to know what happened.”

Shem looked reluctantly at the general.

“Come on, Uncle Shem. Let’s take a little walk. Let Perrin get his mind straight again. We won’t be long, Perrin. Stay down.”

Shem followed the general down the hall to another wing. He felt a bit disoriented and completely out of his element. Maybe he had been sedated too, at some point in the afternoon, to keep him down. But he didn’t feel the level of illness that Perrin was experiencing, so perhaps he had only one dose.

“Can you help him see reason?”

Still, the idea that someone did something to him while he slept made him clench his teeth. But there was nothing to be done about that now, except to focus on someone else instead of himself.

“Uh, General? About Riplak’s jacket . . . does anyone have an idea why it was found in Kindiri’s room?”

Cush looked at him askance. “Yes. We have an idea or two.”

They walked in silence for another moment, Shem feeling he was missing something. “So . . . why was it there, sir?”

Cush slowed his pace and looked more fully at Shem. “You really can’t figure that out? Uncle Shem, there’s a saying among officers, but surely heard by enlisted men: Don’t get caught with your trousers down. Well, at best guess, Riplak *was*. To be honest, I don’t think we’ll ever see him again. It seems he abandoned his post for a little late night snacking with the cook, if you know what I mean—”

The light of comprehension was slowly, so slowly, growing in Shem’s eyes.

Cush sighed. “Had he been where he should have been, things may not have turned out as they did. If Riplak’s smart, he’ll stay far away, change his name, and take up a safer occupation, like raising pigs. He can chase his sows all he wants and no one will question him about it.”

Shem didn’t like the little snigger that followed that comment. “So if he’s found, and it’s discovered that he did abandon his post, leading to the deaths of the Shins—”

“He’ll be executed,” Cush said grimly. “First time we convened an execution squad since Oren.” He didn’t snigger anymore, Shem noticed, so at least the man had some sense of decorum.

Cush motioned down the wing of the hospital. “We’re caring for Kindiri here, in one of the officers’ rooms,” the general told him. “Best not to house her with the other men, especially since so many seem to have come down with some ailment. Strangest thing: fevers, chills, hallucinations, then itchy spots. Had a breakout just a few days ago, so best stay away. Here we are.”

General Cush knocked politely on the door then opened it a little. “Sorry to bother you, but are you up to talking, dear?”

The young woman, clutching a blanket in the bed where she rested, nodded. Cush and Shem walked in quietly, and Shem involuntarily flinched when he saw how horribly she'd been beaten.

A purple and black bruise covered most of her face and a bloody gash split her lip. One of her arms was fully wrapped, and her hands, cut and bandaged, gripped the blanket tighter.

She tried to sit up until Cush said, kindly, "No, no. No need for that. We don't want to keep you long. Kindiri, this is Master Sergeant Zenos. He came with Colonel Shin this morning."

"Colonel Shin is here?" her voice trembled.

"Yes. He's a bit distraught, as you might imagine. We have him resting down the hall. He asked the sergeant here to find out what happened. Can you tell us?"

Kindiri's eyes filled with tears and she nodded. "It's just that I was . . . sleeping," she began haltingly, and Shem, experienced in recognizing a lie, looked down at his boots. "Then I heard someone break through the kitchen doors. Those never did latch properly. I heard running to the Great Hall, so I got up to see. It was so dark, but from the top of the stairs I saw several men." Her voice slid into a frightened whisper. "They ran for the study, then for the general's bedroom. They had knives or daggers or something shiny in their hands that caught the candlelight. I heard them when they . . ."

She faltered, and tried again.

"I ran down the stairs, but it happened so fast. They came out of the bedroom and I was screaming, and they came for me."

Her face contorted in remembrance.

"One of them shouted something, I don't know what, and two others just started hitting me, beating me. I thought they would kill me, but they didn't. I couldn't do anything. I screamed for Riplak, but he never came." A sob caught in her throat. "Where is he, General?"

Cush shook his head. "We're looking, my dear."

"Tell the colonel I'm sorry! I'm so sorry!"

Shem nodded, but couldn't find his voice.

"Kindiri," Cush said in a tone as warm and soft as butter on a hot day, "we did find Riplak's jacket, in your room."

Kindiri wiped her nose on her sleeve. "Oh . . . really?"

"Why was it in your room, dear?"

She gulped.

“Can you help him see reason?”

“Because he couldn’t find it!” she burst out. “Found his trousers, but not the jacket . . . He ran as fast as he could, General! He had his long knife, too, but—” She hid her face in her hands and sobbed.

Cush gave Shem a sidewise glance that said, *What’d I tell you?*

A suddenly flutter at the door caught Shem’s attention, and when varied and multiple layers of flowing cloth finally came to a rest, they revealed a young woman who was panting, trying to catch her breath.

“Kindiri!” The woman—and her dress, which Shem guessed could have covered another four women—rushed to the battered girl. Noticing Kindiri’s condition, the woman hugged her gingerly. “Are you all right? I got here as soon as I could. Where’s Kuman?”

Kindiri grew pale under her bruises. “He’s not at your home?”

The woman shook her head.

“Who’s Kuman?” Cush asked.

“My brother,” Kindiri said. She nodded to the woman. “Her husband.”

Growing more anxious, Kuman’s wife turned to Cush. “I’ve been at my mother’s in Pools. I heard the news and left immediately, but I can’t find Kuman. They said he wasn’t at the dress shop all yesterday or today.”

Terrible ideas taking form in his imagination, Shem stared at Cush, but noticed another presence at the doorway.

Perrin.

He had to support himself with the doorframe, but he stood fully awake. “Kuman, the dressmaker? The dance instructor?”

The two women looked apprehensively at each other, then turned to Colonel Shin and nodded.

“What’s your name?” Shin addressed Kuman’s wife.

“Brittum,” she squeaked nervously.

Something about the vacant look in Perrin’s bloodshot eyes made him appear even more terrible, Shem decided. He’d squeak out any response Colonel Shin demanded of him, too.

“I’m sorry, Brittum,” Colonel Shin said dully, “but we need to take a walk down to the cellars. Cush, Zenos, will you help us get there?”

Brittum's reddish-brown skin turned pale. She looked at her sister-in-law, nodded slowly at the colonel, and walked to the door.

Perrin stepped clumsily aside to let her pass and swayed slightly. Cush followed to lead Brittum, while Shem put his arm around Perrin to help keep him upright.

They passed the surgeon on their way down the hall. He blinked several times at Perrin, who, by his calculations, was supposed to still be sleeping.

"We may need your assistance in a few moments, Doctor," Perrin said, ignoring his surprised look. "Please follow us."

They made their way down to the cellar where Perrin focused only on the three still forms on the other side of the room, and not on the two coffins on the ground ready to receive his parents.

Perrin's prediction that the surgeon would be needed was correct. When Brittum saw the first dead Guarder's face, darkened with soot, she screamed out her husband's name. Shem caught her as she collapsed, and carried her and her many skirts up the stairs. By now he knew the way.

Ten minutes later Perrin and Shem sat in their room after having delivered Brittum to her sister-in-law down the hall. Both women were sedated to help "calm them down," the surgeon explained.

Perrin was agitated, not only by realizing that Kuman had been in the mansion, but by what the surgeon did to the women. He had protested their treatment, but to no avail.

"When they wake up, the pain of what they feel is still there, Doctor. I know! The sedation doesn't help solve the heartache. It only postpones it. They don't need to avoid their grief; they need to face it—"

Shem had dragged him out of the women's room before the surgeon came after both of them with his suffocating cloth. Now they sat in their room, staring just beyond each other.

"The burial is in an hour. We should be getting ready," Shem hinted.

"Kuman was one of them," Perrin said impassively. "How many more Guarders know my family? Where's Riplak? Was it Kuman or Riplak that knew the kitchen door didn't latch properly? Or both? And they knew exactly which doors to try: the study



“Can you help him see reason?”

and the master bedroom. The mansion has fourteen doors on the main floor, Shem. They knew which two to check. Who else—”

A quiet knock came at the door.

The men looked up to see two well-dressed women: one older and very round, the other younger and very tall. The older woman had uniforms draped over her chubby arm, and she sniffled.

The younger woman, shapely and blonde but with a tear-stained face cried out, “Perrin!” and rushed to him.

He stood automatically and she threw her arms around him.

Shem got up too but stopped, astonished, when the beautiful woman kissed Perrin’s neck.

“You poor man! I’m so sorry! What can I do for you?” She embraced him firmly and kissed his cheek, then kissed him again and again, moving closer and closer to his mouth—

Shem’s eyes bulged. Idumeans had rather extreme ways of administering comfort.

Perrin took her arms and pushed her away, holding her at a distance. “Versula, I’ll be fine. Really.”

“That’s not the story we heard,” the older woman said, giving him a motherly kiss on his other cheek—actually, she had to jump a little to reach him—as Perrin released the blonde woman.

Perrin glanced at Shem and nodded at the women. “Mrs. Cush and Mrs. Thorne,” he curtly made their introductions.

Mrs. Cush didn’t seem to think anything unusual about his behavior, or her daughter’s excessive attempts to comfort him. “It’s terrible. Just terrible. We’ve been at the mansion all day, preparing a crate for you to take back of their personal things. But I think they stole all of Joriana’s dresses!”

“Mahrree already took them to Edge, Mrs. Cush,” he said dully. “We need nothing else.”

“But maybe your children do, Perrin.” Mrs. Cush gripped his arm. “They’d love to have remembrances. We can’t send any of the furniture, since it belongs to the mansion, but your father’s clothes, their writings, Joriana’s jewels and hats—all that should go to Jaytsy and Peto.”

Shem stepped forward. “I’m sure they’d appreciate it, ma’am.”

Mrs. Cush smiled. “And you are, most undoubtedly, *Uncle Shem*, aren’t you?”

Shem blushed.

“It’s lovely to finally meet you. I’m Mrs. Cush, and this is my daughter, Versula Thorne,” she made the proper introductions.

Mrs. Thorne smiled and looked him up and down, noticing him for the first time. “I see the fort at Edge gets all the handsome, well-built soldiers. Baby tender indeed!”

Shem was sure he was nearly purple under her intense gaze. He didn’t know a whole lot about Idumea, but he could see why Papa told him to stay away from the city. Something in Mrs. Thorne’s eyes made Shem want to wrap a blanket around himself.

Mrs. Cush held up the uniforms, still unfazed by her daughter’s forwardness. “Perrin, you look terrible. Maybe you hadn’t noticed. We borrowed these from the tailor shop for you and the master sergeant for the evening. They should fit all right. You need to look presentable for—” Her lip began to quiver, and her daughter put her arm around her.

“It’s all right, Mother,” but Versula’s voice quavered as well.

Perrin was unmoved by their emotion. “No, thank you, Mrs. Cush. My parents won’t be buried in their best clothing, so why should I attend in anything else than this? Besides, they won’t see what I look like, and theirs was the only opinion I cared for, aside from the Creator’s.”

Mrs. Cush turned to Shem. “Can you help him see reason?”

He shook his head. “I haven’t had too much success with that recently, ma’am.”

Mrs. Cush gave him a sympathetic smile. “I’ll leave these here, just in case. There’s a washing room with supplies down the hall.” Mrs. Cush ran a motherly hand across Perrin’s stubbly chin to remind him he was in need of a shave, but he recoiled at her touch.

If she noticed, she didn’t act like it. “Come by the mansion tonight, after everything, dear,” she said pleasantly, either out of habit or amnesia. “There are many guards, and you and the master sergeant can sleep comfortably there. Show him around the place.”

“Why?” Perrin said shortly. “It’s not my home. It’s not *theirs* anymore, either. It belongs to the High General of Idumea. I’m sure you and Cush will be most comfortable there.”

Mrs. Cush flinched as if she had been struck. “Why, I . . .

“Can you help him see reason?”

Perrin, no one knows these things—”

“I thank you for your trouble,” he cut her off. “The master sergeant and I will stay in the guest quarters at the garrison. That’s my home now in Idumea.” He sat down and focused on the wall.

Shem shrugged apologetically at Mrs. Cush, and the two women nodded back. After a half-hearted wave of farewell, Mrs. Cush left, but Versula Thorne hesitated.

“Perrin?”

She watched him earnestly, but he didn’t respond. After an uncomfortable moment, Mrs. Thorne followed after her mother.

Perrin finally glanced at the door to see that they were alone. “By the way, Shem, Mahrree knows all about Versula Thorne. She does *not*, however, need to know about what just happened there.”

Still stunned by ‘what just happened there,’ Shem nodded obediently. “Of course. I agree.” Besides, what in the world would he say to Mahrree about Versula Thorne?

“And Shem—only you and I will touch the coffins. No one else. Are you up to it?”

“Of course.”

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An hour later two men in filthy uniforms with disheveled hair littered with bits of straw and no caps—neither man was sure just when or where they lost them—and with cuts and bruises on their faces stood at attention as the carriage bier carrying the two coffins made its way to the garrison cemetery. A bright sword laid on his coffin, a branch of newly blossomed lilacs laid on hers.

It was a short trip from the hospital, but by tradition the bier had traveled slowly the long way—up past the Administrator Headquarters, through the university, along the mansion district, and through the garrison.

Every road was lined with thousands of people standing shoulder to shoulder to bid farewell to the High General and his wife. Women wept, men stood at attention even if they had never worn the uniform, and children quieted as the bier passed, feeling the suffocating gloom that came over Idumea.

Soldiers, more than ten thousand, had come from the garri-

son and nearby forts to pay their respect. Each was in full dress uniform and lined the roads throughout the garrison, saluting as the bier passed them. There was no section of road that was not heavily protected.

The significance of that coverage was not lost on Colonel Shin. If only it had been that fortified two days ago none of this would be happening now.

A steady drum beat began from a soldier behind Colonel Shin and Master Sergeant Zenos. The bier drawn by the single massive black horse came into view over the slight hill to the waiting line of officers who blocked the road of the burial grounds and signaled the end of the procession.

A large group of officers' wives and other women stood glum and sniffing on the other side of the road. Mrs. Cush stepped up to the carriage, kissed her fingers, and touched Joriana's coffin as it passed before stepping back into the huddle of women. Her daughter put her arm around her as she began to sob.

The horse was stopped in front of the two rows of soldiers that lined the path from the road to the waiting graves. Tradition was that the coffins be handed down between the soldiers, so that all hands could help bring the fallen to their final resting places.

But tradition was about to be broken.

The colonel and the sergeant walked unexpectedly to the bier as the major in charge of the burial began to signal to a group of soldiers to retrieve the coffins.

"My parents, my duty," Colonel Shin told him. He stepped to the head of his father's coffin, carefully removed the sword, and placed it on top of his mother's box. He stood on one side while the master sergeant took the other.

The line of officers looked at each other, and several began to step out of line. They had allowed the two men to put the coffins on the bier at the hospital alone—Colonel Shin laying the general's sword and the flowers he cut from a nearby bush on their caskets—but this was too much.

But Cush shook his head and held out an arm to stop the man closest to him. The officers reluctantly stepped back into line with pained expressions on their faces as they watched the colonel and the sergeant strain to pull the coffin partially off the bier.

Colonel Shin crouched to take the front, and the sergeant

“Can you help him see reason?”

positioned himself to take the back. In silence they dragged the rest of the coffin out and hefted it onto their shoulders. Slowly they walked the coffin to the rows of soldiers.

The rows shifted uncertainly until, finally recognizing that the coffin wasn't about to be handed off to them, all of the soldiers took a large step backward to allow the two men enough room to make their way down the gently sloping hillside. Shin and Zenos struggled visibly with the weight and the unpredictability of the soft, wet ground. Once the colonel slipped a little, then the sergeant, but they didn't drop their precious load. More than once a soldier broke from the line to come forward to help, but was ignored.

After passing more than two hundred men, Shin and Zenos reached the open grave. Still with no words, the two men awkwardly lowered the coffin to the ground and set it painstakingly on the ropes that would lower it in the hole.

Master Sergeant Zenos stood back up, but the colonel kneeled next to the coffin. He ran his hand along it tenderly and paused. For a moment he didn't move.

Nor did any of the hundreds watching him.

Eventually he kissed the coffin, patted it, got back to his feet, and looked up the hill at the carriage.

As he and the sergeant trudged up the soggy slope together, most of the soldiers were no longer officially at attention. Sniffing and dropping a few tears, even if no one moved, were considered violations. But no one noticed because everyone was absorbed in watching the colonel.

The scene at the bier played out again as the coffin of Mrs. Shin was dragged out, this time with less trouble than the general's. Colonel Shin removed the flowers and sword, and placed them silently in the bed of the carriage.

Even among the line of officers there was now a great deal of sniffing, throat clearing, and vague concealing coughs.

Again Colonel Shin took the front and Sergeant Zenos took the back, heaved the coffin on their shoulders, and plodded carefully to the graves between the soldiers, some who began to weep.

The colonel and the master sergeant set the coffin down by the first. Shin leaned over the wooden box holding his mother and kissed it. Then he kneeled between the two boxes, with a hand on each one, and bowed his head.

## The Mansions of Idumea

Not even the birds that normally darted among the tall trees of the burial ground dared to make a sound.

After a minute, the master sergeant came behind the colonel and gently put a hand on his shoulder. He squatted next to him and whispered something to Shin. After another moment Colonel Shin nodded, wiped his eyes with his dirty sleeve, patted both coffins and struggled to his feet.

The sergeant put his arm around him, and the lines of soldiers took another step back to allow the two men, arm-in-arm, trudge back up the slope.

When they reached the road, they didn't stop or turn around to observe the lowering of the coffins, but continued on slowly away from the gathering, across the vast cemetery past the thousands of other fallen soldiers, and out of view.

## Chapter 25 ~ “So the Quiet Man is still *our* man.”

It'd been an impossibly long day for Mahrree and her children. The plan had been to work. Just work. Not think, not worry, just work.

Except that Edge didn't get the message. The message they got was, Rush over to the Shins and tell them how sorry you are.

It was nice to hear, Mahrree had to admit, but it always happened just as she was finally making some decent progress in loosening a stubborn timber from a pile of rubble, and the focus of her concentration made her temporarily forget the agony in her heart—

That's when the, “Oh look—it's the Shins! We just heard, and I'm so sorry . . .” cut into her efforts. Each time she heard the wailing croon it sucked her energy and resolve nearly dry. She'd give up, take the embrace, and miserably wait until it was over so she could get back to something real and useful, such as freeing a timber.

Four soldiers followed them around, on Karna's orders, and in turn Mahrree ordered them to work. They could easily snatch up their swords in a moment's notice if some brazen Guarder decided to attack the Shins in broad daylight in the middle of the village.

But what they found when they trudged home that evening, exhausted and depleted, stopped Mahrree and her children in their tracks and wrenched out a new set of tears.

Flowers.

Flowers, everywhere.

Wedged in the slats of the wooden fence, along the rock

path to their front door, all over the porch, and even into the house. Every bulb that had sent its blooms bravely up through the last snowfall, every shrub that had dared to open its buds, had been cut and delivered to the Shin house.

Mahrree sat down, right there in the road, and held her head to weep. Others had died in their village—over one hundred—but none of them had been given the entire village’s supply of flowers.

“They wanted to do something,” said a gentle and familiar voice above her. Someone squeezed her shoulder kindly. “Relf and Joriana saved the village from starvation, and it seems it cost them their lives. Everyone asked me how they could honor their memories. This was all anyone had left to give.”

Mahrree looked up into the peaked expression of Rector Yung. The poor man must not have slept in weeks, but here he stood again, ready to check on them, and ready with a shoulder to cry on.

“It’s beautiful,” Jaytsy sobbed quietly. “Reminds me of the gardens in the mansion district. Rector Yung, you would’ve appreciated their gardens. Flowers, everywhere. Just like this.”

Peto just sniffed and nodded.

Hycymum stood at the front door; she hadn’t left all day, but waited for news about her son-in-law that never came. “There’s more inside,” she called softly. “They’ve been bringing them all day. Fortunately you have a lot of empty jugs I could use to arrange them. Your gathering room has never looked lovelier.”

Mahrree chuckled pitifully. At least her mother had a pleasant time arranging the tribute to and for the Shins. She massaged her forehead, unable to release the pressure building there.

“It is lovely,” she confessed as she allowed Rector Yung to help her to her feet. “Please send out the word that we’re most grateful and overwhelmed.”

“I will,” the old man told her. “What more can I do, Mrs. Shin?”

“Just keep praying for us, Rector. Pray that our men come home.”

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“So the quiet man is still *our* man.”

Two men sat in the dark office of an unlit building.

“Not that I’m one for saying ‘I told you so,’—”

“Oh, yes you are!” Doctor Brisack snapped at his companion.

But Nicko Mal wasn’t about to be silenced. Not tonight, of all nights. “But *I told you so!* Not only did Perrin Shin show up, he barged unannounced into my Conference Room, jumped on my table, and tried to kill Gadiman!” He slapped the armrest of the chair in triumph. “Ha!”

Brisack slowly began to smile. “I’ll admit it: when you’re right, Nicko, you’re really right.”

Chairman Mal threw back his head and laughed. “What a marvelous day! Not only did I see my old irritant buried, but I also watched his son fall to his knees and writhe in misery—”

“—then fall into a pit ten feet deep!” Brisack grinned back. “Should’ve seen him at the hospital, Nicko. Completely broken and destroyed. I went back to my office and spent an hour detailing every behavior, movement, and word I could remember. I’ll be studying his reactions for seasons.”

Mal sighed in contentment. “The old weasel—Slag, I wished Perrin had killed him! Just one thrust,” Mal gestured to his own chest. “His sword was right in line with Gadiman’s puny little heart. I kept thinking, ‘Do it, Perrin! I dare you! Just *do it!*’ He could have, when Cush was pulling him off the table. There was that moment before the master sergeant took the sword, when Perrin could have just—”

Mal made a thrusting motion, but sighed in disappointment.

“Ah, well. I guess we have to give Gadiman a little credit. I thought you were going to bring him tonight?”

“Couldn’t find him again.” Brisack held up his hands. “I thought perhaps he’d gone out to celebrate, but that’s not his style. Maybe he’s out looking for a blacksmith that can make him a shield he can wear under his shirts. I’ll tell you,” the doctor began to chuckle, “I have never, *never*, seen a man go so gray without passing out!”

The two men laughed.

“We should have brought mead tonight,” Mal sighed as he wiped tears from his eyes. “Or ale to celebrate. This was easy and brilliant. And there was something else we were lucky enough to observe first hand. Or rather, *someone* we were allowed to meet.”

He looked at his companion meaningfully.

Brisack pointed at him. "That's what I thought too. When I saw him execute the suffocation technique on the table, it suddenly hit me—it was *him!*"

Mal nodded. "After all these years, I thought he was gone or even dead. But no—our Quiet Man is alive and very well."

Brisack leaned forward in his chair. "So we have confirmation?"

"Revealed himself to Thorne in the carriage on the way to the hospital. He said he 'always found the north appealing.' He *was* the baby tender, after all! Stunning." Mal looked up at the ceiling. "Oh, if only I could get him alone for five minutes, just to know what he knows—"

"You can," Brisack pointed out. "Who can turn down an invitation from you?"

"It's too risky," Mal shook his head. "I've already contemplated several scenarios, but whatever he does while he's here, Perrin will know about. Then fourteen years of our Quiet Man's work will be gone. No, I'll find another way to reach him."

"I find the north appealing," Brisack muttered. "Haven't heard that one in years. Nearly forgot about it. But he didn't. I guess it's not surprising he doesn't know the later codes, since he hasn't left Edge for many years."

"He said he was from between Flax and Waves," Mal told him.

The doctor shook his head. "I doubt that. I spoke with him in the hospital. His demeanor and speech are nothing like those from the southern edge of the world. Then again, he *has* been in the north for quite some time."

"Extraordinarily close to the family," said Mal, a bit awestruck. "Did you hear him call Shin by his first name when he was choking him nearly to death? Never have I heard an enlisted man call an officer by his first name, not even out of uniform."

"I noticed that as well," Brisack nodded in concern. "That *could* signal a problem."

Mal scoffed. "That Perrin's closest man is also one of *our* closest men?"

"But is he still?" the doctor pressed. "Nicko, what if the Quiet Man has bonded to Shin? What if he has a skewed sense-of-duty problem just like his commanding officer? If he's forgotten

“So the quiet man is still *our* man.”

he’s loyal to us, then . . .” Brisack shrugged. “He was extremely concerned about Shin’s treatment at the hospital.”

“Worried that you might be eliminating him?”

“That’s what you thought I’d do, isn’t it?” the doctor accused. “When you didn’t want me to go with them to the hospital?”

Mal shrugged.

Brisack shook his head. “Nicko, you know I’d never do that! I still respect the man. Perrin completely fascinates me, now more than ever. I certainly don’t want to eliminate the most fruitful research project we’ve ever encountered. I really was just intending to sedate him.”

“Of course you were,” Mal smiled thinly. He pursed his lips in thought. “Qayin told me he got the impression the master sergeant is tiring. He was questioning the methods. He seemed to accept Qayin’s coded explanation that the testing *is* the point, but still . . .”

“But still, fourteen years is a very long time,” Brisack finished his sentence.

The two men pondered the question of the master sergeant for a few minutes.

“Perhaps,” Brisack eventually began, “perhaps Zenos’s attention to the colonel was an effort to make sure the colonel remains in the game *for us*. He has no idea who I am, but he apparently knows who Thorne is. He was quite adamant about our not administering the sedation, but when Thorne pulled him back, he seemed to accept the decision. Would a man who’s switched sides bother to ‘check in’ with Thorne, and then listen to his advice?”

Mal considered that. “A traitor would avoid those he betrayed at all costs, so that they wouldn’t be able to see the deceit in his eyes. Qayin was impressed with him, and Qayin’s never impressed with anyone.”

Brisack nodded once. “So the Quiet Man is still *our* man.”

Mal nodded back. “I’m going to assume so. He just doesn’t know what to do, is all.”

“We’ll devise something for him to do. In the meantime,” the good doctor said, massaging his hands, “you realize we can’t just let this go. The caravan was one thing, but barging in here and threatening to kill the Administrator of Loyalty? That’s just a little tough to ignore, Nicko.”

“Agreed,” said the Chairman. “Now tell me, my dear doctor: for how long can a man remain on his knees in a pit?”

Brisack shrugged. “I really don’t know. That’s never been tes—” He stopped. “Oh, Nicko—brilliant. That’s never been tested!”

“We can drag this out for a very long time, my dear doctor. We can pick at his heart like a scab. Just when it’s starting to heal over, we can peel it off and expose the wound yet again, watch it fester. I’ve already decided that there will be some major changes to his fort. Perrin must remain in Edge for the time being. There were too many in Idumea who fell under his influence. Several reports came back to me as to how ‘impressive’ he was. If he remains here, in some other capacity, he may become too confident. The time’s not right for him just yet. Besides, now he’s everyone’s favorite pathetic orphan, so sending him back to his favorite village will be seen as an act of mercy. But it won’t be. Our colonel will lose all who are close to him, except for our Quiet Man. We’ll need him for the next steps.”

“And is Qayin’s request going to be honored?”

“Might as well. His little scruff needs a posting somewhere. In time, he may even find the north appealing.”

“Excellent,” Brisack agreed. “And then?”

“We’ll just see how long that festers, then . . . I hope you’re ready for this: Perrin faces more loss.”

Brisack’s smile dimmed. “What kind of losses?”

“Spread out over time, I assure you. But don’t worry, my dear doctor; we’ll let Mahrree Shin survive for as long as we can. Her death will be the biggest blow of all. After he’s lost his officers, his children—one at a time, mind you, and that’s how the Quiet Man will demonstrate his devotion to us—the last thing he’ll be able to bear will be losing her. Tell me, Doctor—can a man die of a broken heart?”

“Again, Nicko,” said Brisack with unusually severe resolve, “that’s never been tested. But it will. He will come to realize that we are far more powerful than his Creator.”

Mal smiled. “This is so much more enjoyable when you agree with me, Doctor. Finally, after all these years, you’re beginning to see the light.”



It was dark as two different men sat at the table in the guest quarters of the garrison with dinner in front of them. The plates were brought by a major some time ago. Only one of the men was eating; the other was filling a sheet of parchment.

Shem watched Perrin intent on writing line after line. He wondered if he should reveal what he suspected—what he *knew*.

After a few silent minutes, he tried. “You know, I was just remembering that time, maybe eleven years ago, when we spent every Weeding Season night sitting up in the trees on the edge of the forest listening in on the Guarders below us. We sure picked up a lot of information then, remember?”

Perrin didn’t look up but kept writing.

“They were so careless in those days,” Shem went on, “thinking that no one was spying on them as they spied on us. We just climbed high enough, and they never bothered to look up. Why would soldiers be dressed in black themselves and sitting at the tree line to overhear their plans?”

Perrin scratched out another line.

“Some of those nights sure were dull though, weren’t they? Except when we saw the occasional mountain lion under us, sniffing the trees. But we had plenty of time to perfect our silent communication of winks and facial tics, right? So those nights weren’t a complete loss.”

Perrin scrawled yet another line.

“But then there was that night when Brillen and his partner eavesdropped on two Guarders talking about a raid, and we surprised those ten Guarders the next day just as they came running out to the field.”

“Yes, Shem—I was there,” Perrin said, a bit impatiently.

“Swiftest end to a raid ever,” Shem said, and then attempted a soft chuckle. “Remember that time I had to climb down to go, uh, water the trees, and that Guarder mistook me for his contact?”

Perrin merely grunted.

“Yeah, *that* Guarder—we were talking about needs in the south and lack of silver slips, until suddenly he became suspicious of me. Starting saying a slightly strange phrase—”

“You messed up in responding,” Perrin cut him off. “So I dropped from the tree and slashed his throat before he could slash

yours.” His quill continued to move methodically across the page.

Shem smiled faintly. “Quite a mess, and thank you again for saving my life. But I’ve frequently thought about that *phrase*. It was about the north—”

Perrin looked up at him, his eyes dark and cold. “Not now, Shem.”

“But Perrin—”

“I’m not in the mood for any of your stories, Zenos!” Perrin snipped. “Now is not the time for ‘Remember when.’”

Shem took a deep breath and let it out as Perrin went back to work. He was right; now wasn’t the time. Someday it would be, but now, considering his state of mind . . .

Shem looked at Perrin’s plate, still untouched. He knew it was well over a day since Perrin had eaten. “You need food. If you want to be strong enough to go home tomorrow you need something.”

Perrin didn’t answer, but started on a second page.

“I realize it’s only *army* food,” Shem tried to say lightly, “but still.” When Perrin remained silent, he asked, “Is that for the major?”

Perrin didn’t look up but instead regarded the notes he made. “Yes. Some questions I want him to investigate. I want them to look more into Riplak’s background. He started working for my father as a teenager, in the stables, but where did he come from before that?”

“Uh, they have some ideas as to why his jacket was in Kindiri’s room.” Shem hesitated to go into further detail.

“I know why,” Perrin said offhandedly.

“You do?”

“Caught Riplak coming down the servants’ stairs one morning.” Perrin dipped his quill in the ink and continued with his notes. “He was buttoning his jacket, but had missed a button. When he saw me, he seemed surprised but tried to be casual about it.”

“What’d you say to him?”

“That I expected better behavior from an officer. But he wasn’t an officer. Not *really*.” Perrin’s quill never stopped moving.

“What do you mean, not really?” Shem asked, mystified.

“He was one of them, Shem. A Guarder. He used Kindiri.”

“So the quiet man is still *our* man.”

Perrin said it so plainly that Shem shook his head a little to make sure he heard that right. “Riplak was a Guarder? How do you know?”

“He set us up. All of us. Worked for my father for years so that he trusted Riplak. Used Kindiri to keep close access to the house when he was supposed to be sleeping at the garrison. He left his jacket in her bedroom on purpose, Shem, so they’d think he was ‘caught with his trousers down,’ right?” Perrin looked up briefly into Shem’s stunned expression.

“Well, uh, yeah, uh . . . that’s what Cush was suggesting—”

Perrin turned back to his pages. “That’s what he wants them to think: that he was a derelict officer, and now he’s run away in shame.”

“Yeah . . . exactly . . .” Shem shook his head, dumbfounded.

“They’ll never see Riplak again. He’s long gone, but not in shame—in triumph. He’s probably been given a sizable bag of gold and will become the newest trainer of Guarders in how to infiltrate, murder, and get out alive and rich.”

Shem sat back, deflated. “That’s . . . that’s . . . How’d you put that together? The way your mind works—Perrin, sometimes you really startle me.”

“Thank you.”

“That wasn’t exactly a compliment.”

“I know.”

Shem sighed. “I thought Riplak sounded honest in your office. He had me fooled, too. I guess Guarders *are* living in Idumea in disguise.”

“Probably have been for years. The Guarders never quit; they just planted a few apple trees in some choice land, knowing they’d be back in a few years and would want a harvest.”

“Wow,” Shem said dismally. “How’d you come to that conclusion?”

“It’s what I would do.” He didn’t look up as he made a note on a smaller piece of paper.

“Guess you would have made a good Guarder, then, with forethought like that.”

“Three Guarders may have had free rein in that mansion,” Perrin bristled. “One of them even held my daughter for an hour teaching her to dance!” He scribbled more furiously.

“Three? But,” Shem started hesitantly, “Kindiri couldn’t be

one of them. She was beaten, horribly.”

“Because she followed them, perhaps? Because she recognized her brother’s voice? Or went after her lover, trying to see what he was up to? She condemned herself. Oh, by the way—that corporal that survived but was found wounded and unconscious?” He waved a little note impassively. “Died this afternoon, of course. The only man with any answers as to who did what and where?” Perrin scoffed. “Besides, what better way to show Kindiri’s not connected to them but to attack her? Leave her bloodied and beaten in the house?”

Perrin dropped the quill and exhaled. Shem blinked at his abrupt manner.

“Leave them bloody and beaten in the house,” Perrin repeated tonelessly. “I’m such an idiot.”

“Perrin?”

He slowly looked up at Shem. “*Leave them bloody and beaten in the house.* Like you were. Left in the Arkys’ house during that first successful raid of Edge.” He leaned back in his chair and glared. “There’s been an apple tree in my back garden for fourteen years.”

Shem’s mouth fell open in shock. “What are you talking about? Perrin! That was, that was—are you, are you suggesting, after all this time . . .” He struggled to know how to say it as angry tears filled his eyes.

Perrin sighed and put his head in his hands. “No, no, no,” he said quietly, “of course not. I’m sorry. I’m just feeling . . .”

He stopped, released his head, and looked at the affronted face of his friend. “Shem, there are *cats* everywhere.”

Shem looked at him, baffled, before he understood. “You heard all of what Thorne said?”

“Of course I did. I was in the carriage right next to you.”

“But you seemed, you looked . . .”

“Like a man who didn’t want to talk to Cush and Thorne? Like a man who just wanted to be left alone?”

Shem smiled feebly. “Yes, and you were. But Perrin, I’m not like them. If anything has shown that, I would think the last thirteen, fourteen years would have.”

Perrin held up his hands. “I know. I know. You’ve said so many things to me no Guarder could ever consider.” He looked away and seemed lost in thought for a moment. “Shem, what did



you mean earlier today? As I was asking the Creator to watch over them at the burial? You said my parents were *there*.”

Shem put his fork down and looked intently at Perrin who now stared at the flickering candlelight. He'd been waiting for him to ask. “They *were* there. On either side of you as you knelt between their coffins. You mother on your right, your father on your left. I don't mean their bodies. Their spirits.”

Perrin slowly looked up at him. “Why didn't I see them?”

“Because you're too angry.”

Perrin breathed out heavily. “How did they look, honestly?”

Shem began to smile, to Perrin's surprise. “Wonderful! Much younger, radiant, and very concerned about their son.”

“They were . . . cleaned up?”

“Perrin, it's only their bodies that were hurt, not their souls.” He leaned forward earnestly. “They looked as if they could be experiencing great joy, if only they could see you freed. They're going to stay with you until they're sure you're fine. They had their arms around you, and each had a hand placed right—”

Perrin put his hand on his chest, just above his heart. “Here?”

Shem smiled. “Yes!”

Perrin nodded slowly. “I wondered at first if it was the start of a heart attack, but it felt peaceful, like a glimpse of the sun during a terrible thunderstorm. But it didn't seem right to feel such comfort at a time like that. I guess I pushed the feeling away—”

“They're trying to reach you, Perrin,” Shem said as his eyes shifted back and forth across him. “Right *now*, in fact.”

Perrin looked down at his plate, breathing deeply. “There's nothing I want to believe more than that.” His eyes darted to either side of him and saw nothing but the table and empty chairs next to him.

“Then you have to forgive,” Shem said. “It's the only way you'll feel them.”

Perrin's head shot up. “Forgive?!” He leaped to his feet, shoving the chair behind him. “Do you see any Guards kneeling at my feet begging for my mercy? Do you see any officials saying anything more than, ‘Sorry Perrin, let's go get you sedated’? No!”

“In the hospital you said you already felt nothing,” Shem reminded him. “But you wanted to feel better. You won't feel better, or feel your parents, unless you release that bitterness. It's

consuming you. There's no room for anything else. *Let it go.*"

"Let it go? How can I ignore what happened?"

"Forgiving isn't ignoring the act; it's moving past it."

"But my parents deserve justice!"

"That's the Creator's domain, Perrin. It's up to Him to give justice or mercy. Do you think the Creator won't be fair? Or that maybe He'll go too easy on whoever did this?"

Perrin's breathing slowed. He dully straightened his chair and sat back down. "I've known many evil men. And I think I'm beginning to find more. They sit in large, beautiful homes and do whatever they please and suffer no consequences. How's that justice?"

"It's not justice *yet*," Shem said. "But their success cannot last. The Creator watches all, and rewards and punishes accordingly, but not until the end of the Test. Perrin, it's not up to you to exact revenge or justice. You're not the Creator's destroyer. It's your duty to move on."

The two men sat in silence. Shem couldn't see anything on his friend's face but deadness. Finally he said, "Perrin, eat. We have a big day ahead of us tomorrow. Depending on how long the Administrators take with you in the morning, we could be on the road by midday meal. Let's find out your punishment for the 'stolen' wagons of food and your little show on their table, and go home."

Perrin still sat listlessly.

Shem sat up straighter. "You're not going home, are you?"

Perrin looked up at him.

Shem leaned forward. "You're planning to stay, to investigate this!"

"No I'm not." He was very convincing. But not enough.

"Yes, yes you are!"

"What makes you say that?"

"Your father! He's just told me. Perrin, he knows what you're planning and he doesn't want you to stay. You want to send me back to care for Mahrree and your children until you find your answers. Well, what if you never do? Perrin, your father wants you to forgive, leave Idumea, and go home!"

Perrin's jaw trembled. "Stop it, Zenos. Just stop it! It won't work. Besides, who else could do investigate this properly? Everyone else will think like Cush and believe Riplak was merely

“So the quiet man is still *our* man.”

derelict instead of a Guarder. But I can get to the bottom of this, Shem. I’ve figured out so much already, now I just need to figure out who gives those bags of gold, then I—”

“No, you can’t! They don’t want you to do this!” Shem pleaded, nearly crawling on the table in earnestness. “Feel them! Just release the burden! At the burial, could you have carried their coffins alone? No, you needed me to help. I carried half the weight. Now it’s enough. Now give *all* the weight to the Creator. Let Him exact justice in His time. You can’t move on unless you release this. It’ll crush you, Perrin, just as trying to carry them to their graves would’ve crushed you. You don’t have to feel this way. Choose to release it! Give Him your burden.”

Perrin stared at him.

After a long silence he said, “Sometimes I think I still hear my uncle Hogal Densal. You sounded just like him there. Years ago he said something similar, but he was talking about how to start again when you need to change your life.”

“Repentance and forgiveness go hand-in-hand, Perrin,” Shem told him softly. “No one may ever ask your forgiveness, but you still need to forgive. It was your parents’ time to go, Perrin. The Creator *allowed* this. He also allowed it to be done by . . . whoever, to seal that murder’s fate with your parents’ blood. Now the Creator can punish him not only for the darkness of his thoughts, but also for the darkness of his actions. In the meantime, your parents are enjoying themselves with their friends and family in Paradise.”

Shem leaned forward and, to Perrin’s cynical scowl, said, “*All is well*—truly. You must be well, too. Only you can choose to live again. Stay here to investigate and you *will* die, crushed under the weight of this anger and grief. Your parents don’t want that. They can’t feel complete joy until you release this burden. Choose to keep living, for them if for no one else.”

Perrin’s eyes grew wet. “I wished it was that easy. I wished I could just let it all go, but you have to have a heart to do that. I buried my heart this evening. I’m going to bed, Shem.”

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The fog was thick again, likely because of all the melting snow, Gadiman concluded as he made his way to the usual spot.

Something about water on the ground becoming water in the air . . . Oh, he didn't care about the tedious explanation. He was in too good a mood.

It was brilliant—all of it!—from beginning to end. They wouldn't be able to deny him now. He patted the pockets of his trousers filled with two bags of gold. He was even paying for it himself. Granted, the gold was originally destined for Edge, from Brisack's coffers, but now it was to pay off the most effective lieutenant Gadiman had ever trained.

It wasn't revenge that motivated lieutenants; Gadiman now had hard evidence of that. It was greed. Sonoforen/Heth failed years ago likely because . . . well, Gadiman never did work that out, but Mal had said he *would* succeed because he was angry about his father's execution.

But anger's not the right motivator. Riplak wasn't bitter about the High General. He actually respected the man. But he respected two bags of gold even more.

The young officer was clever. It was his idea to leave behind his jacket, to make it appear as if he was derelict in his duty and allowed the Shins to be stabbed. But it was also Riplak who stuffed a camouflaging black shirt into his trousers, along with a jagged dagger he left behind as evidence, and had no qualms about smashing in the face of his convenient upstairs friend. He was growing bored with the dull girl anyway.

Now if Gadiman could only *find* Riplak.

He didn't locate the lieutenant last night to pay him, but realized the timing may have been off. In this part of Idumea one can't sit around waiting for long before someone mistakes you as one of *them* and decides you look too rich in that coat or those shoes. Then they relieve you violently of your burdens.

Gadiman picked his way through the heavy cold, wishing he had worn his warmer overcoat. But it didn't matter. The glow of his victory heated him, head to toe. He didn't even have to deal with that creepy Kuman, either. Once again, greed triumphed as Riplak made sure he killed Kuman, along with the other two, before they left the mansion. Not only did he get their share of the gold, but he also left behind the prime suspects dead. Any investigation would be over by tomorrow morning, when the Administrators dealt with that *other* piece of annoying slag.

Gadiman was going to insist Perrin Shin be tried for at-

“So the quiet man is still *our* man.”

tempted murder, although he knew that was the last thing Brisack wanted. He argued against that most vehemently at the little gathering Colonel Thorne organized in the afternoon.

There still needed to be *someone*, Brisack told them again and again. Why destroy it all? Now that it was finally becoming interesting again? Why be so quick to take out the wounded falcon?

Gadiman didn't quite follow all of that, but Thorne seemed to take that peculiar falcon reference as some kind of code and reluctantly agreed no execution squad would be convened in the morning.

But Gadiman had access to prisoners in the garrison. And when Shin was imprisoned, he could send Riplak, disguised with longer hair and a beard, to finish off what the others were oddly hesitant to.

If only Gadiman could *find* Riplak.

He'd reach their meeting place along the banks of the Idumean River West in mere moments, just below where the homeless people sat in wooden crates mumbling to themselves.

“Stupid crazy people,” Gadiman muttered as he walked passed one of them. He made his way warily along a path sloping down the river banks. The water was unnecessarily noisy tonight, more so than he ever remembered.

“Must be the fog. Traps the noise of the river or something. Where do those smelly men live when the river banks are flooding? Ridiculous . . . Ew, and now I've got muck on my boots! How can a man walk properly along here with muck on his boots?”

He didn't notice two men sitting nearby on large rocks watching him trek further down the bank. Probably because their layers of filth and tatters of clothing made them look like wind-ripped vegetation.

“Should pave it or something. For those wishing to enjoy the water . . .”

The two men looked at each other and smiled about the crazy man going further and further.

“Should we tell him?” one asked the other.

“Mebbe. But would he tell us?”

The first man shrugged.

It was becoming harder for Gadiman to see, and even harder

to hear himself. “Riplak!” he hissed to the foggy banks. “Where are you? I’ve got your payment! I couldn’t find you yester—”

There was a slip and a splash, but the sound was quickly swallowed up by the roar of the swollen river.

The only ones who noticed were the two scruffy men.

“What’s wrong with them fancy suits?” the first man asked his companion. “Can’t none of them tell the river’s flooding?”

The second man shook his head. “They’re too full of nice coats and blue uniforms and whispers and shifty eyes and wandering about and secrets. Mebbe when you’re too smart, you don’t notice the real things. You think you already know it, until you walk right into it and it eats you.”

“Good entertainment, though, you must admit,” the first man nodded. “First there’s that young officer last night. Gave a proper fight against the water, that one did. Then some stuffed suit tonight? Sounds like he went down much faster.”

“Mebbe his pockets were lined with gold,” the second man drawled. “Nice coats full of nice gold, dragging him down to the nice rocky bottom. They’ll find bits of him by the southern sea in a few days, mixed up with that splashing young officer.”

“And when the river’s gone down, we’ll nose about the bottom and find a few pockets?”

“Mebbe. If we’re lucky.”

“Maybe tomorrow we’ll hear a proper lady drown.”

“Mebbe. If we’re lucky.”

## Chapter 26 ~ “Snakes, cats—I know you hate them all.”

Going to bed and going to *sleep* are two different things.

Sleep wouldn't be coming for a very long time. Especially since Perrin had awoken from a long forced nap just a few hours ago.

He sat on the narrow bed in the small adjoining room and tried to think of what to think. He couldn't concentrate on anything for any length of time because a little old man kept butting into his thoughts.

Hogal Densal kicked away Guardsers, pushed out the Administrators and officers, and gently nudged his parents to the side so he could stand in the middle of Perrin's mind with his mischievous smile and his eyebrows wagging.

Perrin couldn't put out of his mind his first trip to Edge. The memory nagged him, insisting on being revisited, so Perrin indulged it just to have something different to think about, and to be rid of it.

He'd been eighteen when he was sent to Edge, and he remembered staring glumly at the little old man and woman he was to stay with. They'd shrunk in the years since he'd seen them last, and were more wrinkled. He folded his brawny arms across his broad chest as he evaluated them in front of their small stone house, in that ridiculously tiny village, against those ugly rocky mountains. He'd been hoping for a season at Waves, or even Coast, but was stuck at the Edge of Nothing.

Hogal Densal had smiled at him and said, “Plan to serve the world as a general, I understand?”

“Of course,” he replied arrogantly. Everything that came out

of his mouth in those days was smug, prideful, disdainful—any variety of haughtiness, he had it mastered.

“Good, good.” Hogal eyed him in a way that seemed to pierce straight through his conceit and into his soul. “Then you’re here to learn how to do the first part of that sentence, while your father will train you to do the second part at the end of the season.”

“The first part?” Young Perrin had asked, trying to remember what it was.

Rector Densal smiled kindly, but his eyes were on fire. “The ‘serve’ part. No leader is truly great that doesn’t know how to serve. Service first, leadership later. First rule of leadership.”

“No it’s not,” Perrin retorted. “First rule of leadership is to identify the rival and eliminate it through defeat or feigned friendship.”

Hogal sighed. “A true product of the king’s educational system. Learned your lessons well, I see. We do things differently here in Edge. No king has been here for many years and we like it that way. Trust me; to be a great leader, you need to be a great servant. You’ll begin tomorrow at a widow’s house not far from here. She has a large herd, no children, and lots of feed to gather in.”

“Baling feed? The son of the High General of Idumea, baling feed!”

“Don’t worry. No one here knows your parentage. I told everyone *my* nephew from Quake was coming for Weeding Season, and he’s a little daft.” Hogal smiled and tapped his head. “Tell the village whatever you want. No one will believe who you think you are.”

“I’m not standing for this,” Perrin had huffed. “I’m going home!”

“My wife’s niece is adamant that you stay,” Hogal said pleasantly. “You have no choice. Steal a horse to go home, they won’t let you in the army. I’d report you as a thief. Tell a lie to get out of here, I’ll send lies back to your home ahead of you. Who are they going to believe more, a teenage boy or a revered rector?” He was more wily than anyone realized.

“I won’t work,” Perrin had threatened.

“Then you won’t eat,” said Hogal simply. “Everyone works for what they get. So will you. In fact, there are still a few hours



of daylight. We’re going to that widow’s house right now to let you get a start.”

“What!?”

“Are you hungry? Is that the problem?”

“Yes, part of it!”

“Then you’ll work for your dinner. And your great aunt makes a wonderful berry pie. You really don’t want to miss that.”

Older Perrin sat on the bed remembering that walk to the widow’s house. Ten years later he had looked for her when he came back to Edge as the captain, but she’d already died, and she wasn’t even that old.

He tried to picture her now. When one is eighteen everyone older than twenty-five might as well be grandparents.

No, she wasn’t a grandmother. She was probably not even forty-five. Close to Mahrree’s age. A widow.

He gripped his head and rubbed it. “Hogal, what do you want from me? What’s the purpose of this?”

The memory wouldn’t leave, not without being attended to.

Perrin had been working for about two weeks on the farm when he realized the cut hay never seemed to end. He was sure that when he baled and moved the feed, Hogal had sent other farmers to throw more in the field at night just to keep him busy. There wasn’t much else to do while working in the hot sun. No friends to ride with, no girls to chat up—

It was the lack of girls that bothered him the most; finding women had been the reason he wanted to see the world to begin with. Yes, there had been something between Versula Cush and him, more than just false accusations and scars from sticks. Their teenage years had run cold and hot, dangerous and stupid, back and forth. It was during one of those cold periods that the sixteen-year-old Versula caught the eye of an older third-year cadet named Qayin Thorne.

Only years later did Perrin suspect that Versula pursued Qayin to make Perrin jealous, but sixteen-year-old boys simply don’t notice such games. He was too busy realizing there were many other officers in the world with daughters, and all of them quite happy to visit Idumea with their fathers and be shown around the garrison by the strapping and, he was loath to admit, rakish son of the High General. They eagerly accepted his invitations to see the secrets of the garrison he told them he only knew.

It was a stupid line, to offer them his private tour, but it always worked. He couldn't even remember how many girls there had been in those years. At least a dozen, but likely many more. All of them were quick to swoon, then just as quickly were conquered and crushed. He didn't even remember their names. They were just silly girls who were too willing and vulnerable for their own good. And in those days, Perrin was up to no good.

Before he entered Command School he wanted to do a little exploring, that was true. But he wasn't interested in scenery or villages, only in finding a challenging conquest.

Instead he found only mindless repetition in baling hay. And, he reminded himself with recurring gratitude, *not* an eighteen-year-old Mahrree Peto. Any relationship they would have had then would have been disastrous.

The only female he had contact with besides his great aunt was an older woman—no, a woman still in the prime of life—bringing him cool water and smiling gratefully at him every day.

Then older Perrin remembered something else. Every night Hogal kept him there in his little house and read out loud to him, usually from The Writings but also from some older books. A few times Perrin had tried to sneak out to see the action down in the village green, but his uncle always blocked him, and only out of politeness—and dread of punishment by his parents—did he not push the old man away.

“You said you were too tired to help me milk the cow, so you must be too tired to see any of the village. Besides, they all think you're mad and no one wants to be seen talking to you. But I'll talk to you. Tell me, Perrin, what's life like in Idumea? Tell me everything, and I mean everything, I've been missing.”

So Perrin did, trying to prove to Hogal Densal how dismal Edge was in comparison. Hogal listened attentively, as did Perrin's aunt Tabbie, and asked thoughtful questions.

“I'm afraid I don't understand about the houses near the pools, Perrin,” Auntie Tabbie once asked. “Why do people want to be so close to something that could destroy them?”

“But they rarely do! Only once in a while does one erupt. And only once in a while does a house go down in one when the crust breaks. Not that many people die each year.”

“Isn't just one death enough to discourage people?” Hogal said. “And if there's land away from the danger, why play so

close to the edge of it? I knew of a man that wanted to drive carriages along the cliffs in Coast to give people views of the sea,” he said thoughtfully. “He told the carriage owner he could get very close to the edge without sliding off and into the sea. He didn’t get the job. The carriage owner wanted someone who could drive the *farthest away* from the edge, away from danger.”

Perrin rolled his eyes. “I’ve heard that story before. It’s even older than you, so it wasn’t your friend. You just made that part up.”

But Hogal was undaunted. “It’s like teasing a poisonous snake. You may avoid getting hit for a while, but your chances of escaping unharmed decrease the longer you taunt it. My thinking? Live a long life by avoiding the snakes altogether.”

Every night Perrin was exposed to a little more Hogal Densal thinking, and every day as he baled the never-ending hay he thought of ways to argue against the old man. At dinner he’d challenge an idea from the night before, and the old rector always seemed to have a way to counter his arguments.

When Perrin discovered that Hogal was using ideas from The Writings, that’s when he started to study them too, just to find ways to anticipate his arguments and punch holes into his thinking.

But Perrin had fallen into Hogal’s trap. Studying so intently didn’t give him weapons against Rector Densal, but destroyed his Idumean theories instead. He felt his arguments weakening, his ideas changing, his heart softening.

He didn’t fully notice it until it was almost time to go. One week before he was to return to Idumea he nearly finished the baling. In the late afternoon the widow came out of her house to point Perrin down the road. A large herd of cattle was making its way down the quiet dirt road to her corral.

“My brother has been keeping them for me until I could take them again. My husband’s herd. And now I can feed them all Raining Season with what you’ve put away. I’m going to survive, thanks to you. You’ve saved me!” and she kissed his cheek.

That night after dinner, which he ate quietly still thinking about what the woman said to him, Hogal cracked his knuckles and said, “What are we to argue tonight, my boy?”

“I don’t feel like arguing.”

“Because it’s useless? Because you keep losing to me?”

“Because I’m tired,” Perrin said evasively, “and I’m thinking of other things.”

“Because you’re finally thinking there’s more to life than just getting what you want, isn’t there?” Hogal said. “Life is about taking care of others, not yourself. When you finally feel that in your heart, Perrin, you *will* be a great leader. Not a leader the king would be proud of, but one the Creator would be proud of.”

The forty-three-year-old Perrin held his head again and rubbed his temples. “Hogal, Hogal,” he muttered. “I *am* taking care of others. I’m trying to find the source of all of this. I’m trying to make a safer world for the woman you tricked me into debating, and the children we have. I *am* serving them and all of Idumea!”

*No, you’re not, my boy.*

Perrin heard the words distinctly as they were announced in his mind.

*You’re serving your rage and anger. I haven’t seen that pride in you in years. Come now, Perrin. Let it go. Come back to Edge.*

“Just give me some time. Hogal, I can get to the root of this. I can solve it! Just a few weeks—”

*Why play with the danger, Perrin? If you insist on staying, they will get you. Snakes, cats—I know you hate them all. So why mess with them?*

“But my parents—”

*Don’t want you here, my boy! Are you doing it for them or for yourself? Staying here will end in death—yours. Don’t leave another widow in Edge. There’s another plan for you, my boy. You’ve changed your path before, now do it again. Don’t take the wrong path.*

Perrin lay down on the bed, weary from the wrestling in his mind.

He remembered when he went home to Idumea after that season. Hogal had given him a copy of The Writings and Tabbith had given him a huge pie that turned to a messy but delicious sludge in his pack on the horse. He licked it all clean.

But before he left, he spent most of that last night confessing to Rector Densal all that he’d ever done, and to whom—well, as many of the poor girls as he could remember. His great uncle lis-

tened carefully, never interrupting. When Perrin finally finished all the torrid details, Hogal said, “The past is behind you, my boy, and the world is before you. Now, head out on the right path.”

*Remember how we talked about the Refuser? He hated you then, and he held you securely in his grip. But you escaped him, my boy. With the Creator, we freed you that night.*

That night the self-indulgent boy vanished, and what returned to Idumea was a refocused young man. Suddenly realizing he wasn't the center of the cosmos changed the way he viewed everything. Gone was his desire to conquer hapless, hopeless females, but instead to conquer himself. Relf Shin thought his son had grown three inches taller while he was away, but Perrin knew he'd actually learned how to walk with a better purpose.

*The Refuser hates you even more now, and he wants to destroy you. If you stay, you'll give him ample opportunities. Perrin, go home.*

Back in Idumea he occasionally ran into some of those girls from his past, still optimistic despite his treating them like cheap paper that he used once and tossed away. He usually met them at the wretched dances his mother forced him to attend. But he'd use those few minutes on the dance floor with his past victims to tell them he was sorry for his treatment of them, and then he'd sneak out of the building when his mother wasn't looking. The closeness of the young women nearly drove him from his resolve to have no contact with females, and he knew there were many more girls he missed apologizing to.

That was another reason he dreaded returning to Idumea; he wasn't sure if someone's wife or a woman he politely tipped his cap to along the busy roads in the past few weeks wasn't someone he once took advantage of. On more than one occasion he felt a female's eyes on him longer than was necessary, and he worried that it may have been someone still justifiably harboring a grudge, or worse, lingering feelings. The last thing he wanted was an uncomfortable meeting in front of his unsuspecting wife and innocent children.

The only encounter, though, was running into Versula. She probably was still clinging to her adolescent feelings for him, unless Idumea had a new custom to express sympathy by attacking the bereaved with one's lips.

Never had Perrin been so happy to have his wife by his side

as he was when Versula approached them at The Dinner. Not only because he used Mahrree as a buffer, but because the comparison between what he used to want and what he had now was so extreme. Deciding to have no relationships with women for ten years had purged his soul and taught him what he really wanted in a companion.

Little wonder, then, that when he finally met Mahrree at age twenty-eight he had no idea how to properly court her. Not only was he rusty in talking with women, the kinds of conversations he'd had as a teenager were all focused solely on achieving one selfish result. He didn't know then how to tell a woman he wanted to give her his soul. Fortunately Mahrree figured it out.

And still she loved him, in spite of himself. He'd told her everything that night after The Dinner. He'd already explained a bit as to why he'd been in Edge as an eighteen-year-old, but that night he felt the need to explain a few things more. Even though Hogal had told him his past was forgiven and gone, and reminded him just before he married that he needn't burden Mahrree about the boy he used to be, Perrin had always felt a bit dishonest. And now, with his past crowding him on every side, he decided Mahrree needed to know why he grew more anxious each day.

So he spilled everything: about Versula, their past, and why he didn't want her over for dinner, about the rest of the innocent girls, his shameful roguishness . . .

He'd wrapped himself around her in their bed that night, partly so that he could feel her responses to his confession, but more so because he feared that once she learned what kind of a young man he had been, she'd never allow his arms around her again.

She had lain there, patient and motionless, listening to the stories of his sordid youth, and when he finished, she remained quiet for several minutes. He'd squeezed his eyes shut in the dark bedroom, waiting anxiously for her verdict.

Eventually she startled him by kissing his lips, returning his embrace, and confiding that somehow she always knew he had a past, but also knew he wasn't that man anymore. He didn't try to mask the tears of relief that slid down his face onto hers, and concluded that only a woman from Edge could love him so intensely and forgive him of so much.

Only a few short hours later came that cold snowy morning,

then the frantic ride back to Edge . . .

It wasn't hard to understand why he loved Edge so deeply. The little village had grown on him, and now Edge had grown up before him. Even his old hay field had been recently taken over by the Edge of Idumea housing development, but he would make it a point of riding by frequently just to remember what he'd been and what he was now.

And now that he was an officer with a beautiful and trusting daughter, he hated what he'd been even more—

—*That was it.*

It slapped him, clear and cold.

Suddenly he understood as stared up at the ceiling.

He didn't hate Idumea as much as he hated who Perrin Shin was in Idumea.

*That's right, my boy. So don't take the wrong path again. Come back home to Edge.*

“Message received, Hogal,” Perrin whispered to the darkening room. Edge was where he found his purpose, his soul, his family, and even forgiveness.

But even though he understood, it didn't mean it was easy to let go. The pang in his chest demanded he get to the bottom of all this, to find out who sits in that filthy pit and spews out the orders that killed his parents while they slept. Shem claimed they were happy in Paradise, but how could that be enough?

Perrin couldn't imagine how he could ever sleep that night, but somehow he did.

And then he was sitting, and a small child—a boy, maybe five years old—was leaning against his knee intent on telling him something. It was amusing. Perrin laughed.

He saw other children and people, lots of them, listening and laughing. The child smiled at him, unsure of what he said that was funny, but enjoying the attention.

There was something familiar about the children. Or rather, something that *would* be familiar about them.

Perrin took control of the dream. If he could just turn his head to see what was behind him, if there were a structure of some kind, a house of weathered gray wood with window boxes filled with herb plants . . .

Perrin could tell he was awake, but he didn't bother to open his eyes. The scent of rain filled the morning air, and for a few

glorious moments he wasn't sure where he was as he let the heavy humidity weigh him down on the bed. He concentrated on that little boy, trying to remember the details of his face that were already blurring away—

But then everything came back to him.

The guest quarters, the garrison, the burial.

Something dark and twisting and bitter spread through his chest, but just as suddenly as it rose, another feeling overcame him, curiously warm.

And then it grew.

It grew until it glowed hot like a fire on a cold rainy night, fully engulfing the dark. The heat dissolved the sorrow and filled his entire body until there was nothing left but a new and unexpected feeling.

Joy. Pure joy.

In the space above his heart he felt the pressure from the evening before, as if two warm hands pressed past his flesh to touch his soul.

He knew he was smiling. His face hadn't been in that position for so long it felt almost unnatural.

A memory came to him as clear as if it was happening at that moment. He was a little boy, not yet old enough for school, lying in bed listening to a thunderstorm tearing through the night. He ran to his parents' room, not because he was scared, he'd told himself, but because he needed to make sure his parents were all right. Besides, their bed was always warmer.

He had crawled over his sleeping father to slip under the blankets between his parents. His father placed a warm, heavy hand on his chest.

"I appreciate your concern, son, but the storm can't touch me here," Relf had told him groggily.

Joriana had kissed his head and placed her warm hand on his chest as well, interlacing her fingers with her husband's. "But you can stay with us until morning, Perrin, just to make sure we're all right."

And he had.

Perrin didn't know he even had any more tears as he laid there with eyes still shut. But these tears came for a different reason. As they slid down his face they released the last of a weighty burden that had sat on his shoulders all night like coffins. Light



“Snakes, cats—I know you hate them all.”

filled the room that Perrin could discern even through his closed eyelids. The warm pressure on his chest expanded his lungs fully for the first time in days, willing him to go on.

“I’m glad you’re all right,” he whispered to the presence that surrounded him, “and that nothing can touch you now. I’ll be fine, too, eventually. And I’m going home to Edge.”

The pressure pushed tenderly into his chest and straight into his soul. The presence filled him so completely he was sure he would feel some of it for the rest of his life.

He knew it was morning. He knew it was time to get up. He knew it was time to leave. He hated to break the moment, but he also knew the moment was his forever. He opened his eyes to greet the light.

Outside the dark, heavy clouds continued to rain, and there was no fire lit yet in the guest quarters, but Perrin’s room was inexplicably bright and warm.

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In the next room, Shem woke with a start in his narrow bed to see Perrin standing over him like a great black shadow.

“Up, Zenos! We have Administrators to face. Then, we go *home*.” His voice sounded like the man Shem always knew.

Shem grinned and sat up as Perrin plopped down next to him, his eyes remarkably soft.

“You saw them, didn’t you?” Shem said reverently.

Perrin shook his head but smiled. “Better. I *felt* them.” He put an arm around Shem. “I told you recently that you missed your calling, that you should’ve been a builder. I’ve changed my mind. Shem, you should’ve been a Guide.” Impulsively he kissed him on the forehead. “Come on, little brother. We have scary old men to face, then we go home to Edge.”

Shem sighed in relief. “Good, because Perrin, I have to say this, and I hope you don’t take it the wrong way: I know this is your home and everything, but I’m so glad we’re leaving. I have to admit, I *really* hate Idumea.”

For the first time in days, Perrin laughed.

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They'd looked for Gadiman everywhere in Idumea. But he wasn't in his office, not at his usual inn taking his usual meal—boiled beef, one fried potato, one slice of black bread with onion, without fail—and he wasn't at home.

His housekeeper, a woman with a pinched face and a scowl likely acquired from working for the Administrator of Loyalty for so many years, told Doctor Brisack that morning, "He went out last night for the burial, and never came back. What he does is his own business. Now, unless you want something else, I have a gathering room to sweep."

Doctor Brisack went back to the Headquarters early that morning, baffled.

"Nicko," he reported to the Chairman, "he's simply vanished! He was seen at the burial last night, but then he gave me the slip again. I sent out ten men searching last night, and all reported back this morning they found nothing. He never went home last night."

Mal considered this. "He'd know we wanted him for the hearing this morning. I'm sure someone got him the message. You'd think this is precisely the kind of thing he'd be eager to show his face for. I don't get it."

The doctor sat in his chair and sighed. "Must have done something out of the ordinary."

"Maybe the weasel went out to celebrate at a tavern for the first time and didn't know how to hold his mead," Mal guessed. "He's likely under some filthy table wondering why his hair is stuck to the floor."

The men chuckled.

"Ah, well. We can proceed without him," Brisack decided. "I'll make some excuse for him. In the meantime is everything ready?"

"Oh, yes," Mal nodded. "Perrin's not going to know what hit him, nor will he know what to do with his new *little buddy*. His father spoke to him last night, and I imagine he still hasn't stopped salivating."

"He's untested, though," worried Brisack. "We haven't even started his training. That was supposed to begin after graduation—"

"We don't need to train him," Mal said simply. "All we

“Snakes, cats—I know you hate them all.”

need to tell him is that he’s going in as the new captain.”

Brisack squinted. “Nothing more? He’ll be useless to us.”

“Oh, he’ll become useful,” Mal assured him. “As you pointed out, we haven’t trained him sufficiently for the task. But there’s someone very close to the situation who can train him for us, and I suspect that after all he’s witnessed here, he’ll be most willing.”

Mal clasped his hands on his lap.

“The Quiet Man is about to receive his first direct assignment, after all of these years. It’s almost become too easy, my good doctor. Too easy.”

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There’s something soothing about plunging one’s hands into soapy water, even if it’s to scrub the mud out of work clothes for the second time that day.

The warmth. The repetition. The evidence that something was improving. A sense that while everything else was spinning out of one’s control, at least the clothes were relatively clean. In that washing room, one small corner of the world was in Mahrree’s power, even if it meant she was scrubbed Peto’s work trousers so hard that the knee was wearing thin.

But she wasn’t about to stop until their work clothes were bright again. Something had to be, because everything else for the past two days and nights had been dark and heavy.

There had been no news.

Nothing since the long second message arrived from General Cush an hour after Shem rode away from their house. The message detailed what had happened that awful morning when Relf and Joriana were discovered stabbed to death in their bed by one of the maids. Three Guardsers and two soldiers were killed, one was seriously injured, and Riplak had come up missing. Kindiri was found bludgeoned and unconscious in the Great Hall, but the two maids upstairs had slept through it all until the morning.

Then . . . no more news.

Yesterday was the longest day Mahrree. The burial was to have been yesterday evening, according to Cush’s message. Perhaps Perrin and Shem made it to Idumea, unless . . .

Today had proved to be as slow and unbearable as yesterday. Mahrree, Jaytsy, and Peto sifted rubble and moved debris again—anything to distract their imaginations from what might be happening in the middle of the world. They kept their heads low to avoid speaking to anyone, but it didn't help.

Again villagers hurried over to hug them, weep for a few minutes, and tell them how brave General Shin was, how lovely Mrs. Shin seemed to be, and—worst of all—to ask how the colonel was handling the news.

The only thing Mahrree could say was, “He’s gone to Idumea. Thank you for your concern. Can I help you with that rock now?”

But there were a few people whose embraces she gratefully accepted.

“Oh, Miss Mahrree! I’ve been looking all over for you,” Teeria Rigoff called as she rushed over to the Shins while they added broken dishes to a rubbish wagon. “Milo told me there’s still no word?”

Mahrree tried to smile bravely at one of her favorite former students, but it was a pitiful attempt. “No, nothing yet,” was all she could whisper. Only the fort knew that Perrin had left in a fit of temper, and was followed by Shem.

Teeria sighed. “And what about the sergeant that Karna sent after them?”

“Haven’t heard back from him either,” Mahrree murmured.

“Then send out more!” Teeria insisted. “Milo said he’d—”

“Lieutenant Rigoff is needed here, as are all of the other soldiers,” Mahrree said firmly. “Karna told me last night he’d go himself, but I told him no. Edge needs its major, especially now. Look around, Teeria! The village is still a mess. Every man is needed. Besides,” she said in a quieter tone to avoid the attention of Edgers trying to listen in as they dropped more rubbish into the wagon, “this is a family matter.”

Teeria narrowed her eyes. “Miss Mahrree, others may not remember, but I certainly do. You taught us that we are *all* family. Colonel Shin and Master Sergeant Zenos are like my brothers. I’ve known them since I was a teenager. I volunteer my husband to find my brothers! And Poe Hili wants to help, too. Just say the word.”

Mahrree couldn’t fight the tears welling in her eyes. “Thank

you, Teeria,” she said. “Maybe tomorrow, if we have no news.”

Teeria nodded, satisfied that Mahrree was finally considering accepting help. “They’ll be fine, Miss Mahrree. I know it.”

Mahrree sighed. “No, you don’t, Teeria. What’d we discuss in class about ‘knowing’?”

Teeria smiled dutifully. She never forgot a lesson. “That we shouldn’t claim to know something unless we really do. That what we know isn’t the same as what we hope for.”

“So,” Mahrree said analytically, “you don’t ‘know’ that they’re all right. Neither do I. All we can do is—” She faltered, unable to keep up the pretense of teacher.

And Teeria was no longer her student as she hugged Mahrree again. “Then I *hope*,” she whispered, “with all that I have. And I’ll cling to that to get me through until we hear something more, just as you will.”

“Very good, Teeria,” Mahrree sniffed. “There’s a reason you were always my favorite student.”

“And not just because I married the lieutenant you thought was a perfect match for me?”

Mahrree almost managed a smile. “That helped, I must admit.”

Teeria released Mahrree. “I also *feel* it,” she said quietly, “although I know we can be deceived by our feelings. But I feel a sense of calm when I think about them.”

While Mahrree did too, it was the lack of news which was most distressing—the not knowing.

But as Mahrree scrubbed Jaytsy’s tunic, she had an idea. If only the Administrators would realize no one read the notices they forced the printers to create, maybe they’d let them send out useful updates instead, about discoveries, improvements, bodies found along the side of the road . . .

Maybe not.

As she rung out Jaytsy’s tunic, she tried to concentrate on what would need to be done tomorrow, but all she could think of were . . . bodies on the side of the road.

If someone found Perrin or Shem lying injured or worse, how would they know who he was?

Names, Mahrree thought as she held up Jaytsy’s light brown top, now a permanently darker brown. Names needed to be on their uniforms, or on papers in their pockets, or maybe even en-

graved on thin pieces of metal hung around their necks. Something to identify who they are and to tell others where to return them.

Mahrree set aside the tunic and put one of her skirts in the warm water, feeling badly again for the poor sergeant sent out after Perrin and Shem. He finally arrived back in Edge that afternoon, about two hours after Mahrree had spoken to Teeria.

Major Karna and the sergeant brought the news to Mahrree as she worked at a neighbor's house. "He made it only as far as the first messenger station," Karna sighed.

Jaytsy and Peto came over from their work to hear the update.

"And? Did you see them?" Mahrree asked with her hands balled in nervous fists.

"Ma'am, they were there *all right*," the sergeant replied with contempt dripping from his voice. He tried to keep it low to avoid sharing the news of his commander, but several people in the area were leaning subtly over to hear. Gossip was a major pastime in Edge, and with the entertainments temporarily halted, the saga of the Shins was the most popular distraction in the entire village.

"I didn't steal two horses or beat up messengers, ma'am, but *I* was the one who spent a day and two nights locked up in incarceration! Just because I was in a uniform and showed up ten minutes after their tantrums!"

"Oh dear . . ." Mahrree rubbed her cheeks.

Karna had looked at Mahrree apologetically. "I'm rather surprised we haven't heard anything more from Idumea. With all due respect to the High General's memory, no news doesn't always mean 'no news'. We need to consider the possibility that they never got there."

Mahrree nodded sadly.

"I'm sorry, Mahrree," Brillen continued. "I fear we've already waited too long. I'm pulling forty men from the reconstruction efforts and sending them out immediately to look."

Mahrree shook her head. "No, Major. The soldiers are needed for securing Edge."

"We can spare some men for our commander, Mrs. Shin. And besides," he added with a dismal twinkle in his eye, "it's not exactly appropriate for you to tell the second in command what to do with his soldiers."

“Snakes, cats—I know you hate them all.”

“Sorry, Major,” she said meekly. “I just see this more as a family concern—”

“So do I, Mahrree. Perrin once gave me a copy of *The Writings*, and I do remember that the first line is, ‘We are all family.’”

Mahrree sniffled, knowing that Perrin thought Brillen hadn’t ever opened it. “Then I *suggest*—to my family—that we wait till morning? If we hear nothing, then send a search party?”

Mahrree used all of her worry to vigorously scrub out a stain in her skirt, ignoring the fact that she was rubbing out the dye as well. The fort had been most helpful. Guards were posted day and night at the house, and Karna slept last night on the sofa with his sword on the floor next to him. He would most likely come again for the night since the sun was about to set, and he’d try to talk with Peto or get Jaytsy to smile. He was such a good man, just completely inexperienced with teenagers. Still, Mahrree was grateful for a capable officer in the house.

And no Guarder activity had been detected around Edge, but obviously Guarders were working differently now.

When she heard the fast hoof beats coming up the cobblestone in front of the house, a wave of panic washed over her. She dropped the skirt in the warm water, dried her hands on her apron, and ran to the front of the house prepared for anything, but hoping for nothing. Hycymum, in the kitchen washing dishes, followed closely behind.

Jaytsy and Peto got to the front door first, though, and watched tensely as the small man in a red messenger uniform dismounted. Hycymum stood behind Mahrree, her hands apprehensively in front of her face, but Mahrree took a bracing breath and walked out onto the porch.

The messenger trotted up the stairs and handed her the envelope. “Mrs. Shin? I am to tell you that the colonel and the master sergeant are on their way.” With that he swiveled and marched smartly back to his horse.

Mahrree whispered, “He said *colonel* and *master sergeant*, right? That means they’re still in the army. That means neither was demoted, and both are still alive.” Relief rained down on her like the morning’s thunderstorm.

They were coming home. Both of them.

“Read it!” Jaytsy exploded next her. “The message! Read it!”

Peto snatched it out of Mahrree's hands and tried to rip it open.

"Let me do it!" Jaytsy grabbed the envelope from her brother.

Mahrree could only stand there, tears of gratitude trickling down her face, while her teenagers battled in front of her on the porch.

"Thank the Creator!" Hycymum said, and went to sit down on the sofa to fan herself.

Both alive, Mahrree thought, still unable to move. Both still all right. Maybe. She closed her eyes and didn't hear more hoof beats until her children cried out, "They're here!"

Mahrree's eyes flew open to see four horses come to an abrupt stop in front of the house. Her eyes fell immediately on Perin.

There wasn't even a word to describe his appearance. She couldn't remember ever seeing him so exhausted, dirty, and scruffy. His uniform was a disgrace. His face was bloodied and unshaven. His cap was missing and his hair looked as if he'd been wrestling a bale of hay—

And he'd never looked more wonderful.

Mahrree leaped down the stairs as quickly as he slid off his horse. She didn't care who saw her, and neither did he. He jumped over the fence and she ran into his arms where he picked her up in a fierce embrace.

"I was so scared for you! I was sure you were going to do something terrible," she whispered in his ear as she squeezed him with all her strength. His normally earthy-sweet smell was far more earthy than sweet today, but she could overlook that.

"I'm sorry to admit that I was," he murmured back. "But I'm all right now. I'm home. Please forgive me, one more time?"

"I already have."

He kissed her cheek, but that wasn't good enough. He set her down, took her face in his hands, and kissed her properly in front of everyone.

Until Shem cleared his throat. "That *is* a little unfair, Colonel. The rest of us are lonely, single men . . ."

"Poor Uncle Shem!" Jaytsy laughed for the first time in days. She and Peto had come down the stairs and were waiting to hug their father, but caught Shem instead as he dismounted, each



of them taking a side.

Perrin released his wife and held out his arms to embrace his children. Mahrree wiped away happy tears as Perrin attempted to pick up both Jaytsy and Peto, unsuccessfully.

She chuckled and turned to Shem, grabbing his arm. “Oh Shem, how can I ever thank you? What did you have to do?” she whispered.

“Beat him up,” Shem murmured back.

Mahrree cringed.

“Stop him from murdering an Administrator—”

Mahrree flinched. “Gadiman?”

“Yes, how’d you know?”

“Just a lucky guess. What else?” she asked and bit her lip in dreadful anticipation.

“Let’s see,” Shem started, but noticed Perrin and the children watching him. “I think I’ll finish this later.”

Perrin nodded once at him, with warning in his eyes.

Mahrree hugged Shem. “Well, thank you anyway!”

“Anything for my family,” Shem whispered as he released her.

Perrin cleared his throat. “Mahrree, a couple of introductions here.” He gestured to the two soldiers who had also dismounted and now stood patiently at the gate.

Mahrree had completely forgotten there was anyone else in the world besides her family. She looked over at the other two men and her eyebrows went up.

Perrin put a smile on his face that was slightly unnatural, but only Mahrree and Shem knew that. “May I present our new *captain*, Lemuel Thorne—”

“Captain?” a startled Mahrree said, but tried to cover her surprise with The Dinner smile.

Captain Thorne sauntered over to the family with what Mahrree would classify as a triumphant swagger.

“Yes, quite the accomplishment,” Perrin said, trying not to grit his teeth. “For graduating top of his class *and* half a season early, he gets the rank of captain and the choice of his first assignment. And guess where he chose?” His expression turned grim.

Captain Thorne was grinning fully now, but not at Mahrree. He was gazing earnestly at Jaytsy. “I chose to come to the Edge

of the World, just like Captain Shin did.” He took Jaytsy’s hand and kissed it.

Jaytsy was taken aback. From the moment she recognized him she stared at him with an indefinable look. But when the captain kissed her, she blushed and let escape a curious noise that was a blend of a giggle, a snort, and a guffaw.

Thorne was enchanted.

Shem was alarmed.

Mahrree was troubled.

Perrin was livid.

He clenched his fist and released it before turning to the lieutenant still waiting by the gate. “And this is Lieutenant Offra. This poor unfortunate man has been enjoying the warmth of Trades for the past year and now has been shipped all the way north. He still won’t tell me what he did wrong to earn this transfer.”

The lanky lieutenant smiled bashfully and nodded. “It’s a privilege to serve under Colonel Shin. Every soldier knows that. I wanted to be here as well.”

Perrin turned back to Mahrree. “I hate to say it, but—”

“I know. You need to go to the fort,” she said. “And you don’t know when you’ll be back.”

“But it won’t be long, I promise.”

“Don’t make promises you might not keep,” she warned him.

“Colonel!” a voice from the up the road came running to them. It was Karna. “I can’t believe it! You’re back!” He stopped in front of the colonel and looked as if he might hug him.

Perrin grinned, shook his hand warmly, then pulled him into a quick embrace.

“I saw the messenger leave,” Karna said as he patted Perrin on the back, “I was on my way down for the evening, and—”

“Yes, I’m back. And, Brillen, I’m sorry about that,” Perrin gestured at the large black and purple bruise under Karna’s eye.

Karna waved his apology away.

Perrin smiled. “I trust everything here was well?”

“We kept your house under constant watch, have detected no Guarder activity, and the fort in good condition, sir.” Major Karna flashed a grin at Shem that told him ‘*Good job!*’

“I’m glad to hear that, and I’m also sorry,” Colonel Shin

told him.

The major looked disappointed. “Why?”

The colonel put on another smile, this one slightly pained. “I’ve been spoiled for far too long. You’ve languished in my shadow for so many years, and you’ve done far too good a job here. So good that you’ve been given your own command.” Colonel Shin pulled out an official envelope from his jacket pocket. “The fort at Rivers is yours, *Lieutenant Colonel* Karna. And *Captain* Rigoff is yours, too.”

Mahrree gasped to realize Teeria would be leaving Edge for the large village of Rivers.

Karna was speechless as he opened the envelope and read the orders. “I can’t believe it, sir,” he finally whispered. He grinned at Sergeant Zenos who smiled sadly. Then Karna looked at the colonel and his grin faded. “Oh, sir. But I’ve been here so long, I can’t imagine actually *leaving*.”

“It’s graduation day, Brillen!” Perrin said cheerfully, but his eyes were clouded. “And when you graduate, it’s time to move on. Surely a Miss Robbing who delivers eggs to the Rivers fort will be a bit happy about that as well.”

Karna began to smile again. “She, uh, she and I were talking, and . . . She won’t believe it!” He choked out a laugh.

“You better send us an invitation to the wedding, Brillen.” Mahrree kissed him on the cheek. “We’re going to miss you, but I’m so happy for you! It’s been a long time in coming.”

Karna nodded and reread the orders, his face a manifestation of mixed emotions. “I suppose you don’t need me here tonight, Mrs. Shin.”

“I’m afraid you leave tomorrow afternoon, so you best get back and get packing,” Colonel Shin told him. “I’ll come with you to give Rigoff the news. And Neeks.”

“Where’s Grandpy off to?” Karna asked, surprised.

“Down to Grasses.” Perrin’s pained smile remained on his face. “General Cush thought his old bones would appreciate something warmer. He won’t be going alone, though. Private Hili will be accompanying him.”

Mahrree covered her mouth.

Perrin turned to her. “It’ll be good for him. New place, no one knows his background. He’ll truly get a fresh start. Just what Shem told him he needed.”

Mahrree's chin trembled but she nodded. Jaytsy sniffed.

"What about Unc—Sergeant Zenos?" Peto asked timidly.

Perrin smiled at his children. "Seems the Administrators think Zenos is best at my side. Right now they trust me only as far as Zenos can reach. Terrified horses couldn't drag him away. I know; I already tried something like that."

The Shin family tried not to look too relieved in front of the new officers.

"We need to go," Perrin said. "But I'll be back as soon as I can." As the other three soldiers mounted up, he gave his wife another quick kiss.

She caught his arm. "You've got a lot to explain to me tonight, you know," she whispered. "Why all these changes, and why now?"

His answer couldn't have been more cryptic. "Because the cats in the barn have found themselves a new wounded falcon."

## Chapter 27 ~ “Then again, Shem impresses everyone.”

It was an unusual hearing early that morning, Perrin told Mahrree, convened jointly by the Army of Idumea and the Administrators, since what Perrin had done over the past week had violated rules and protocols of both organizations.

“Well, first of all,” he explained as he held her that night in their bed as if he’d never let go again, “I’m officially on probation for trying to attack Gadiman. Had I been successful, I would’ve been tried for treason instead of just censured.”

Mahrree clung to him too, curled up into his chest but clutching his arms, just to make sure he was really there. “And the punishment for treason?”

“Execution,” he tried to say easily, but he nearly choked on the word. “Apparently several Administrators and a few officers had met the afternoon before—I suspect Qayin Thorne had called them together—while I was napping in the hospital, to discuss also stripping me of my command.”

“Oh, Perrin . . .” But Mahrree wondered if that wouldn’t have been so bad after all.

“It seems our friend Brisack was in attendance, and he argued valiantly that I had been acting out of ‘extreme grief,’ and shouldn’t be held completely liable for my aggressive behavior.”

“Hmm,” Mahrree began, “so if someone’s angry enough, their behavior is justified?”

“To be honest, Mahrree, as furious as I was, there was still a part of me that could have just turned it off. It would have been extremely difficult, but not impossible. I chose to lose my temper and make a play for that sword. But, if Brisack thinks I’m beyond

controlling my actions, which I know isn't true, then . . . let him."

"I can imagine what Gadiman must've looked like at your hearing!"

"Really? Because I can't."

"Why not?"

"He wasn't there."

"Why not?" she repeated.

"They were kind of fuzzy on that point. It seems Brisack had tried to convince him to come, but when he told Gadiman he wouldn't try me for attempted murder, Gadiman refused."

"Whew!" she breathed.

"So," he continued, "as part of my probation, which is indefinite, I've been ordered to stay within the confines of Edge and its surrounding farms."

"What?" Mahrree nearly squealed.

He chuckled. It was chuckle filled with gloomy undertones, but he'd found one tiny thing to be happy about, and he latched on to it. "Yep. I nearly broke into a grin when Mal read that 'punishment.' Took all my strength to keep a straight face. To think, I finally found a way to stay here. The Creator really works in mysterious ways sometimes."

She giggled just as drearily, but with a drop of joy. That drop quickly dried up. "So why have you lost Karna, Neeks, Rigoff, and Poe?"

"Part of my punishment for my 'exceptional forwardness and callous regard for regulations' in forming the caravan and taking the reserves. And for stealing horses," he added, "and for throwing an Administrators' messenger through my office wall. Actually, I'd forgotten about that, but a representative showed up to the hearing and informed the Administrators about my fit of temper. The messenger will live. Taking early retirement, though. By the way, it was the same messenger who barged into our house a few weeks ago."

Mahrree actually snorted. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't find any of that fitting or funny."

"No," he agreed. "You shouldn't." He snorted too. A moment later he added, "Then there's Poe."

She groaned. "Oh, Poe."

Perrin sighed. "I had Grandpy Neeks with me to tell him about Grasses. Grandpy's pretty excited to go south again. He has

“Then again, Shem impresses everyone.”

a lot of connections. His enthusiasm was wearing off a bit on Private Hili. He’s being sent away for *assisting* me, but I convinced Cush to not let his past go with him. I told him Poe was just following standing orders that I had left with the fort. I’ll personally create his records, and I’m giving Poe a clean start.”

“I suppose that’s for the best, then,” she sighed sadly. “Just when I was getting excited about the thought of Poe around again. I have such hope for him.”

“Grandpy will take care of him. He’s already promised me,” Perrin assured her with a kiss.

“And Karna to Rivers? Did you have a hand in that as well?”

“Actually, Shem did. When Mal announced I was losing my second in command, Shem spoke up and said he thought the fort at Rivers was in need of a new commander, and wouldn’t Karna be an excellent fit there.”

Mahrree frowned. “And Mal listened to him? A mere master sergeant?”

“Interestingly, Mal paid a great deal of attention to Shem. Somehow, he’s impressed the Chairman of the Administrators. Then again, Shem impresses everyone.”

“Thank the Creator for Shem!” she said. “Perrin, I need to tell you—I really thought, for a few horrible moments, that I might never see . . . you alive again.”

“I know,” he whispered. “I thought the same thing.”

“Perrin, should something like this ever . . . if there comes a time that you—” It wasn’t easy asking one’s husband what to do when he dies.

Fortunately she didn’t have to get those words out. “I’m making provisions,” he cut her off.

“What does that mean? ‘Provisions?’”

He kissed her again. “Don’t worry about it. Should anything ever happen to me, I promise you’ll not be left alone. Shem will know what to do. The Administrators already love him, by the way.”

While she was desperately wanted to know what Perrin was planning, his comment about Shem intrigued her. “They love Shem? How do you know?”

“Gave him a certificate that looked exactly like yours,” he droned. “Written in black and gold, for outstanding service to the

world, blah, blah, blah, for stopping me from killing Gadiman.”

“Oh, my. What’d he think of that?”

“He told them thank you, then after we saddled up to go to the garrison for the other orders, he dropped the beautiful parchment into the dung wagon.”

She chuckled darkly. “I’m sure it blended right in. I should have done that with mine, instead of tossing it in the fireplace. So,” she tried to redirect the conversation, “why will Shem ‘know what to do’ should . . . you never return.”

He hugged her tighter. “There are many other things to discuss, Mahrree.”

Sensing he wasn’t about to be forthcoming with anything else, she let it go for now. “I was worried you weren’t going to come back,” she whispered. “That maybe you might even try to stay there and investigate what happened.”

“I was thinking that, for a time,” he confessed.

“What changed your mind?”

He was silent for a moment. “Lots of things,” he eventually said, and tightened his hold on her, “but mostly I knew I needed to be right here.”

Mahrree sighed contentedly. “You truly have become Edgy over the years. And that’s a compliment, by the way.”

He chuckled softly. “While I agree I belong in Edge, what I really meant was that I needed to be right *here*, with you.” His voice turned husky and Mahrree squeezed his arms tighter, a few tears slipping from her eyes.

“Don’t ever leave me again, please,” she whispered. “I don’t want to know what those provisions are.”

His hold on her became so firm her ribs ached. “I won’t ever leave you again. I promise. We’ll just stay like this in our bed together for the next forty years.”

“Sounds perfect. So I suppose we no longer have to worry about you becoming High General, then.”

He didn’t answer her.

“Perrin?”

He cleared his throat.

“Oh . . . you’re not serious . . . what?”

“I’ve been informed that there’s still the desire for another General Shin in Idumea, but I need to do a great deal to earn the position. How I prepare these new officers—and two more are



“Then again, Shem impresses everyone.”

arriving with the wagon coming with my parents’ things—will determine my future. Cush is sixty-six now. In four more years, there’ll need to be a new High General named.”

“No, no, no, no—”

“Then,” said Perrin with a weighty sigh, “the position will likely be handed to one of two men: either me, or Qayin Thorne, who is now *General* Thorne and Cush’s new Advisor. Whoever’s not chosen as High General will then most likely be the next Advisor. That should make a few colonels not too happy about things.”

“And how do you feel about that?” Mahrree asked as if she didn’t know.

“Let Thorne have it!” Perrin declared. “And let me stay here. Keep me on probation for decades. I can be a barely adequate colonel and stay here until I’m seventy, can’t I? Watch our children marry, have grandchildren, maybe even great-grandchildren, while I sit here and stare at the mountains. I hadn’t realized how much I’ve grown accustomed to them until I left. I can be a colonel for the next twenty-seven years, right?”

“Absolutely!” Mahrree said, sounding almost believable.

“Sure,” Perrin mused, his tone losing confidence. “I’ll train these officers well enough. Get Lemuel promoted so fast he’ll be general before me and can be Advisor to his father—”

“Of course,” Mahrree said with strained brightness. “And take your daughter and your grandchildren back to Idumea with him.”

“What?!” Perrin nearly shouted.

“Why else do you think he’s here?” Mahrree said. “Not just to keep a close eye on you for his father and grandfather. I’m sure part of his duty is also to become Colonel Perrin Shin’s son-in-law.”

“Oh no,” Perrin groaned. “Of everything I’ve had to consider today, that’s the most revolting.”

“He’s really that bad?”

“He’s as bad as mushroom pudding! Ask Shem sometime.” He sighed again. “You just might be right about Thorne, though. What do we tell Jaytsy?”

“I think Jaytsy already knows what everyone’s expectations are for her. She doesn’t really like him, though. And I had a little talk with her the other day.”

“What kind of ‘talk’?” he probed.

“Another update of the talk we had when she was eight. About what to expect from young men and their intentions.”

“Good,” Perrin exhaled.

Mahrree made a little noise in her throat.

“What?” Perrin asked.

“There should be a follow-up from you, though.”

“Why?”

“As a father you may have some additional insight to offer, about young officers, since you used to be one. *That kind of thing,*” she added heavily.

She had no idea her husband could groan for so long.

---

In the compound of the fort the next afternoon was a sad party of sorts. Among the loaded wagons and waiting horses was a gathering of soldiers, villagers, friends and families who did their best to smile at those leaving for their new posts. But there was too much sniffing, according to Peto, and no cake.

There was also something else missing: the commander of the fort.

Mahrree knew Perrin had said a private goodbye to each man, and now, as she subtly glanced up to the command tower, just behind the reflections of sunlight she could see his form at the edge of the window watching the shaking of hands and giving of hugs. Her chest ached for him. He felt responsible that so many men he counted as friends were being sent away. His punishment meant their punishment, and his fort was never going to be the same again.

It wasn't as if Mahrree would ever consider that the label of 'fragile' could be applied to her husband, but considering all that he'd been through in just the past week, she couldn't imagine how any other man wouldn't have been overwhelmed today. She was fairly confident he'd locked the door to his office to keep any soldiers from accidentally coming in and seeing his tears of regret.

There was still, however, a messenger-sized hole in the wall, but a few years ago Hycymum had presented Perrin with a long purple banner with the word “Edge” stitched in bright yellow,

“Then again, Shem impresses everyone.”

embellished with far too many swirls and curlicues. This morning Mahrree pulled it out of the storage wardrobe he'd hidden it in, and showed him how it could cover the hole until lumber was available to rebuild his wall. Perrin had smiled sadly at it as he tucked it under his arm. “If she ever asks, tell her it was always hanging in the forward office.”

Mahrree turned from the tower to see Teeria Rigoff finally pull out of her mother's embrace. Although Teeria would be back next week to finish packing her house to move to Rivers, Mahrree was sure she never expected to be leaving Edge. Her mother blubbering behind her certainly didn't.

“Well, Miss Mahrree,” Teeria wiped her eyes with a handkerchief, “looks like Edge provided me with my own captain. Just like you!”

“And a fine one at that, too,” Mahrree smiled proudly at Captain Rigoff whose uniform already sported the insignia proclaiming his new rank. He beamed.

Lieutenant Colonel Brillen Karna hugged each of the Shins almost bashfully, perhaps worried that the colonel was watching him. With a small but eager smile, he said, “I'll let you know about the wedding.” But then his smile evaporated. “Wait—Colonel Shin can't leave Edge. He won't be able to come down to Rivers—”

Mahrree smiled as cheerily as she could. “Don't you worry about that. Remember, Perrin and I had a very small wedding. All who really needs to be there is you and Miss Robbing. We'll be happy for you wherever you are.”

Grandpy Neeks startled Mahrree by kissing her briefly on the cheek. “Take care of yourself, ma'am,” he said, nodding at the Jaysy and Peto. “And keep your fine husband in line for me.”

“I will. And Grandpy, I'm sorry I never found you a wife,” Mahrree said.

“Why? I'm not.”

Saying farewell to Poe was the hardest, though, and Mahrree was grateful Perrin wasn't there to see her emotion. Her face was wet as she kissed Poe on the cheek and gave him a long hug.

“You remember to always look at the color of the sky, Qualipoe Hili,” she whispered in his ear. “Don't ever believe it's always blue. Check it for yourself. You've always been a bright

boy, and I've been so proud of you these past few weeks. Now promise me you'll always be a thoughtful man."

He couldn't answer her, but gruffly cleared his throat and nodded before mounting his horse next to Grandpy Neeks, who surprised Mahrree again by wiping away a tear himself.

But Mahrree wasn't surprised that Poe's parents didn't show up to see him off. She had hoped for his sake they would, but that hope ran out when Lieutenant Colonel Karna whistled to start the group out of the compound. Poe waved half-heartedly one last time to the Shins—the only family he had left—and Mahrree sighed to her children.

"Poor Poe. I feel like I just said goodbye to my lost son."

The crowd of villagers and soldiers waved and cheered as Karna led the group out, but Mahrree turned slightly to catch a view of the command tower.

Perrin still stood there, to the side of the window, but he wasn't alone. Shem was next to him, almost out of view, but with a brotherly hand on Perrin's shoulder.

"Thank you, dear Creator," Mahrree murmured under the sound of cheering, "for letting us keep Shem Zenos."

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The envelope delivered yesterday by the messenger, which they didn't remember to open until much later, was from Mrs. Cush, wife of the new High General of Idumea. The message told Mahrree that Mrs. Cush and Versula Thorne had put together a crate of the Shins' belongings, and it was on its way to Edge.

Mrs. Cush had also asked for regular updates about their pride and joy Lemuel, and hoped that Jaytsy was doing well. Mahrree was sure there was some conspiring giggling that occurred when those words were written. The wagon with the crate was due that evening.

So after dinner Mahrree sat on her front porch watching for the promised crate and mulling over what her husband had told her of his time in Idumea. She had the distinct feeling Perrin left out some important details—such as why he sounded so irritated about taking a long nap at the garrison and who else was in the cellar of the hospital. But she wasn't about to press him on any of

that. It'd all come out, eventually.

She watched Peto on the side of the road, kicking his old ball between his feet. His new one from his grandfather sat on top of his wardrobe in near-pristine condition. Peto looked up, noticed his mother, and shook his head. No wagon in sight yet.

Jaytsy came around the side of the house with a smirk on her face and sang, “Oh, Mother! Your husband needs you in the back garden.”

“Why?” Mahrree asked suspiciously.

“Because I now know how to disable a man.” She batted her eyelashes. Perrin had told Jaytsy at dinner that it was time to teach her a few defensive techniques, and after the washing up he had escorted her to the back garden while Mahrree, chuckling quietly, headed out to the front porch. At least teaching his daughter how to fend off amorous young men gave Perrin something else to concentrate on after the loss of his favorite soldiers.

A part of Mahrree wanted to laugh as she stood up. “What did you do to your father?”

“Something Shem taught him. It's called a throw or something. The idea is to flip someone over your back. First you disable them in a *vulnerable* area—” She gave a sideways groin-high kick in the air.

“Jaytsy, you didn't—not my husband!” Mahrree exclaimed as they jogged around the house to the back garden.

“No, of course not. I just did the other part: when they double over in pain you flip them. Honestly, I hope I never encounter any men as heavy as Father. I nearly hurt my back. And that's his problem right now.” She held her hands out in display as they rounded the back of the house.

Perrin lay sprawled on the rocky ground, flat on his back. “A little help, please?”

“What did you do to yourself?” Mahrree and Jaytsy each took an arm and slowly raised him to a sitting position.

“Ow, ow, ow, ow. Just what Shem suggested. Honestly, he's been holding out on us,” Perrin said, now sitting on his own. “He showed me a few moves, all kinds of hits and kicks. Said his sister was very good at them. As you can see, it was effective.”

“On men with back problems,” Mahrree chuckled and used all her weight to help pull him to his feet.

He stretched cautiously and grunted. “That's better. He said

it was a style of defensive fighting women did in the south, when they had Guarder problems years ago, but it's nothing I've ever seen before."

"Well," Jaytsy said striking a pose with one arm in the air and a foot slightly raised, "send me any man—I'm ready for him."

Peto came running around the house. "It's here—the wagon, the crate, and the two new soldiers."

"Just what you ordered, Jayts," Mahrree chuckled. "Go get them!"

When they reached the front of the house, Jaytsy realized only one of them could ever pose a real problem. The two soldiers had already left the wagon and were placing a large crate on the ground. One soldier was older and more gnarled than Neeks, while the other was a young lieutenant. He took one look at Jaytsy and a smile—or what Mahrree worried was more of a leer—spread across his face.

Until his new colonel loudly cleared his throat. "At attention, Lieutenant!"

"Yes sir!" the young man said, startled by the shout, and stood at attention while the old sergeant major, already in position, sent him a dour glare.

The older soldier cleared his throat and announced loudly, "Sergeant Major Beneff and Lieutenant Radan, reporting for duty, sir. And I will work on the impertinence of the young men, ho-ho, while I am here, Colonel! Forgive the absence of Lieutenant Kel, sir. He came down with an outbreak of fever and spots, hi-hum. I volunteered to come in his stead, sir."

Mahrree blinked at the odd dithering of the sergeant major, and glanced at her husband. His mouth was pressed firmly together to avoid smiling, but his lips quivered.

"I was disappointed to lose Neeks," Perrin said, "but Beneff, you'll take over quite nicely. It's good to see you again."

That's why Perrin wasn't startled by the man's bizarre delivery, Mahrree realized: he already knew him. Of course. He knew everyone, everywhere.

"We seem to have quite the crop of budding new officers to train," Perrin continued. "I'm sorry you had to leave Orchards, though. My father said you were very happy there."

"Not at all, sir, not at all, hum-hum. I was in Idumea await-

“Then again, Shem impresses everyone.”

ing a new transfer anyway. I’ve always wanted to serve under a Shin,” his voice cracked with emotion. “Your father was a great man, oh-HO. And besides, I’ve always found the north appealing, with diced apples on top.”

“Glad to hear it, Beneff,” Perrin nodded, ignoring the snickering and questioning look his children exchanged.

Perrin nodded to the men. “If you two will bring the crate to the house, you may then take the wagon to the fort. Captain Thorne is expecting you and will see you to your quarters.”

It’s not as if Perrin was really worried that if he bent down to pick up the crate he wouldn’t be able to get back up again, Mahrree concluded, but if he stiffened up that wasn’t exactly the way to make a good first impression on his new soldiers. Besides, he needed to evaluate their strength. Beneff must have been over sixty, but he readily picked up the crate with the strapping Lieutenant Radan like a twenty-year-old.

Once inside, Beneff glanced around the house as if expecting a thief to be hiding, then nodded to the lieutenant. Both of the men reached into their inner jacket pockets.

“Was given these by Mrs. Cush herself, he-ho,” he said uneasily, and produced a cloth bag filled with something that clinked.

Lieutenant Radan did the same thing.

“Said she’d have our patches and anything else, ho-hem, she could rip off if these didn’t reach you safely,” Beneff added.

“What is it?” Peto asked, but Mahrree knew by its heaviness as soon as she took the tied cloth from Beneff. Perrin intercepted Radan’s bag before Jaytsy could get close to touching him.

Mahrree undid the string and sighed. “Mother Shin’s jewelry.”

Jaytsy snatched the other bag from her father and hurriedly fumbled with the knot. A moment later she gasped and pulled out a thick, gold chain. “I never saw her wear this. It’s amazing!”

Perrin shook his head. “She never wore her best when traveling. Too worried about thieves.”

“I promise, sir—the lieutenant and I won’t tell anyone you possess such finery now, ho-no,” Beneff assured him. “Besides, the wheat grows when it’s dark, too.”

Lieutenant Radan started to nod in agreement, until he considered that last nugget dropped by Beneff. Mahrree fully under-

stood his confusion, and her children looked at each other wondering that wheat had to do with . . . anything.

But Perrin's eyes glowed with amusement, and he winked subtly at Mahrree as if to suggest, Just get used to it.

Lieutenant Radan shrugged off his bemusement. "It's a relief to be rid of them. Sagged down my jacket. I've been feeling jittery the whole ride here. That jewelry's worth more than twenty wagons of food, I suspect. That's why Mrs. High General didn't want anyone to know we had them."

Perrin took the chain out of Jaytsy's hand. "I thank you. Well done. But these won't be here long," he said quietly. "We have no use for such things, but others do." He looked at Mahrree meaningfully.

She burst into a grin. Selling the gold chains, the colored stones, and the fancy silver work would certainly be enough, once it was coupled with their hidden savings, to pay for the rebuilding of Edge.

After Beneff announced that hats don't weave themselves, and the new soldiers headed back to the wagon, Perrin retrieved the iron bar by Mahrree's side of the bed and began to pry off the top of the large crate that now sat in the middle of the gathering room.

Mahrree surveyed their house. "We may need to put up another bookshelf. I'm sure I heard the thudding of books in there."

"Where, Mother?" Jaytsy asked. "There's hardly any room left!"

"We'll make room," Peto decided. "For everything in there."

Mahrree put an arm around him. "Of course we will."

Perrin wrenched off the top and they were greeted by gray silk.

"My dress!" Mahrree pulled out the shimmering gown and looked at it with weepy eyes. A note dropped from it.

Jaytsy picked it up. "It's from Mrs. Versula Thorne. She wants you to come back next year wearing it again. It's your official invitation to next year's Dinner. We're all invited," she grimaced.

"Hmm," Mahrree said, not interested in going to a dinner where Relf and Joriana weren't leading the evening. Not interested in going back to Idumea at all, but glad that she could at least



“Then again, Shem impresses everyone.”

give her mother quite a bit of gray silk to play with. “We’ll have to consider next year’s dinner at another time, right Perrin?”

But he wasn’t looking at her. He was staring at the contents underneath the dress.

Slowly he crouched to be nearer the crate. With one hand he picked up the gleaming sword of General Relf Shin. With his other he picked up a large spray of lilacs, wilted and drying. Without a word he stood again, turned and plodded up the stairs.

Mahrree had the sensation that something had died, again.

A moment later they all heard the bedroom door shut.

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Shem heard the knock on his bedroom door.

Knock-knock.

Pause.

Knock-knock-knock.

It was a distinctive rhythm that said, “I’m here and I’m important and this is how I will announce myself every single time, so you better get used to it, *master sergeant*.”

“Come in,” Shem sighed and got up from his bed.

The door opened and Captain Lemuel Thorne stepped in with a smile that seemed to be made of molded sugar.

Shem didn’t return it. Perrin had been right: Thorne was mushroom pudding.

Perrin first said that when they were leaving the Administrative Headquarters. “*Captain Thorne?*” he had bristled when the two of them were finally alone. “He’s barely twenty-two, never been tested outside of Command School, and they have the *nerve* to promote him to captain?”

“That’s really young,” Shem agreed.

“Younger than I was,” Perrin grumbled. “And everyone thought twenty-five was too young. I’m warning you right now, Shem: he’s mushroom pudding.”

Shem’s upper lip curled. “Yuck! And what’s that supposed to mean?”

“Exactly the right response, Shem. It means he’s the wrong combination of everything, and he’s being placed before us, and we’re supposed to *like* him.”

“Ugh,” Shem groaned. “Like beets. Oh no,” he had moaned

with new understanding. “With Karna gone, and Thorne as captain—”

“Yep,” Perrin said dully. “Guess who’ll be second in command at the fort.”

“They can’t do that!”

“They just did, Master Sergeant. The new High General and his Advising General just put their best little apple tree in my garden. Wished I had a goat to nibble away at him.”

“This is bad,” Shem mumbled.

“Pray for conflict, Shem,” Perrin suggested.

“Why?”

“Doesn’t matter what rank Thorne is,” Perrin reminded him, “in a battle situation, you still have far more experience. You outrank him in the field. In fact, now you’ll be second only to me. At least, in situations where it counts.”

Shem had shaken his head at that. “That’s right. I don’t believe it. Now I’m actually hoping for Guarder attacks just so I can order him around!”

Perrin patted him on the back. “Idumea has a way of confusing everything, doesn’t it? I really hate this place.”

All during the long, wearying ride back to Edge, Captain Thorne had done his best to initiate, monopolize, and control every conversation. It wasn’t hard; Perrin and Shem weren’t about to answer him with anything more than a one or two-word response.

Poor Lieutenant Offra, however, had been quite confused about the forwardness of the captain, but began to realize just how overbearing the mushroom pudding was.

He talked about rules. Books. Rules in books. His grandfather General Cush. His father the new general. Rules his grandfather and father—the *generals*—put into books.

By the time they passed Pools, Thorne was talking only to himself. That’s when Perrin decided they would frequently stop for fresh horses, and race all the way back to Edge.

That’s also when Thorne started to talk about the exceptional horses his paternal grandfather raised, how Edge likely had nothing to compare to those studs, and that his Grandfather Thorne would be sending him a most excellent specimen in another season.

Shem had never seen Perrin roll his eyes so much. He must have grown dizzy.

“Then again, Shem impresses everyone.”

And now, the mushroom pudding stood in his doorway, with a squidgy smile on his face. “Did I wake you, Sergeant?”

“Just preparing for my evening shift, Captain. What can I do for you?”

Without waiting for an invitation, Thorne shut the door behind him. “Master Sergeant, you’re a very difficult man to find alone.”

“You’ve been here only two days, Captain. I frequently work the night shift, and you work during the days, therefore . . .” He held up his hands.

“Of course, Zenos,” he simpered. “I was wondering if I could have a few words with you, just the two of us.”

“Make it quick, Captain,” Shem said, “I have new recruits to take out. Regular training resumes this evening.”

“Yes, that’s right!” he said brightly. “Read your record: highest recruiting and retention rates of any fort in the world. You’re to be commended.”

“But that’s not why you’re here.” Shem folded his arms.

“No, no.” Thorne scratched his angular chin and took a step closer.

He seemed to be sizing Shem up. While Thorne was taller than the average man, he didn’t reach the height—or the bulk—of Shem, which Shem noted with some satisfaction.

“It’s just that I understand that you have a special relationship, shall we say, with the Colonel and his family.”

Shem shrugged. “So?”

Thorne took another step closer. “Master Sergeant Zenos, *I’m here to help.*”

Shem’s throat went dry and his shoulders tensed. He’d heard those words before, a few times, and by lesser men. It had been simple to lure them out into the forest where they ‘deserted.’ But the son of General Thorne? It’s not as if he could vanish without any question.

“And here I thought it was just because you found the north appealing,” Shem tested.

Thorne squinted. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Shem’s shoulders relaxed ever so slightly. Maybe wasn’t one of *them*. Yet. “Nothing.”

Thorne reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a sealed parchment. “This is for you,” and he held it out.

Shem kept his arms folded as he eyed the parchment. “Who’s it from?”

Thorne shrugged slightly. “My father handed it to me, but it’s not written in his hand. I don’t know.” He looked at the script *Master Sergeant Zenos* longingly.

Shem still didn’t take it. “What’s it about?”

“How am I supposed to know?” Thorne impatiently shook the message at him. “All I know is, I’m supposed to give it to you in private and that—”

Whatever he was about to say next was apparently painful. Shem studied his eyes and enjoyed every moment.

“—and that I’m supposed to be *learning* things from you,” the captain admitted. “I’m not ready for . . . everything yet. Not even sure what any of that means,” he mumbled in frustration. “But apparently you do.”

Shem stared at the captain, completely perplexed.

The younger Thorne wasn’t one of *them* yet, not a Guarder like his father, but soldiers younger than him had been in the past. Shem was adept in reading men’s faces and eyes, and it was obvious that Lemuel Thorne was deliberately being left out. Maybe this was some kind of new procedure, some kind of test.

But for who?

And the thought of learning from a master sergeant? Well, Shem wasn’t sure which of them was more irritated about that.

Shem finally took the message from Thorne’s hand and shoved it into his jacket. The captain was clearly disappointed it wasn’t about to be opened and read in front of him.

“I thank you, Captain,” Shem said formally, “but I’m sure there’s nothing I can teach you, nor is there any way you can provide assistance with the colonel.”

Thorne took yet another step closer. One more, and he’d be on Shem’s toes. “Oh, but there is. There are a great many—”

“I’m late for duty, Captain Thorne,” Shem snapped to attention. “I’m sure you don’t mean to hold me up from doing my duty, correct sir?”

Thorne blinked in surprise and stepped back. “Why, of course not. We’ll talk later—”

But Shem was already out the door, clenching his fist as he marched out of the private quarters, through the barracks for the rest of the soldiers, and into the growing twilight with the parch-

“Then again, Shem impresses everyone.”

ment nearly burning a hole in his jacket.

He knew what he needed to do, and hoped he could pull it off, even if it wasn't dark yet. Some things just couldn't wait. He was still early to lead out his new recruits for a training ride—not that he'd admit that to Thorne—and he had a few minutes.

He retrieved his saddled horse from the stables and rode out to the forest. With a quick glance around to make sure no one was watching, he directed his horse to a small break in the trees, then prodded his mount to hurdle the low cattle fence. He dismounted, tied up the horse behind some large boulders and out of sight, then slipped up through the trees in a fast jog.

“Whoa! What in the world are you doing here? And now?”

Shem nodded at the two men in green and brown mottled clothing he startled near a fresh spring. “Been given something that I was, honestly, afraid to open on my own.” He chuckled nervously as he pulled out the parchment.

The two men came over to see. “Who's it from?” one of them asked.

Shem shook his head. “Delivered by Captain Thorne, handed to him by General Thorne, but originally?” He shrugged and broke open the white waxy seal. With a deep breath, he unfolded the parchment and read out loud, his two companions on either side.

“Master Sergeant Shem Zenos: For years we wondered about you, our Quiet Man—”

Shem groaned.

He'd nearly forgotten about that title he gave himself long ago. In the beginning, the Guardians were putting someone in to get close to Perrin. Shem took that position, and then he let the Guardians know, through a dropped message, that he'd always remain the Quiet Man and not interact with them, but would keep Perrin Shin in the game. A few times over the next few years they'd sent in others to “help” Shem, but Shem always helped them out instead: out to the forest to never be heard from again.

He thought they'd forgotten about him. Obviously not.

One of the men in green and brown clothing patted him comfortingly on the back as Shem continued to read.

“Now that we finally know who our Quiet Man is, we wish to thank and congratulate you for your years of devoted service. We also now expect great things of you. Placed into your care,

and for your training, is a young man of great promise, such as yourself—”

Shem frowned. “They can’t be talking about Lemuel Thorne!”

“I think they may be,” the other man in green and brown said. “Onion cake?”

“Mushroom pudding,” Shem clarified.

“Just as bad.”

Shem continued reading. “—great promise . . . who we expect you to instruct and bring up as—” Shem stopped reading, his mouth too dry to continue.

One of his companions completed the sentence. “. . . bring up as your *replacement* in Edge.’ Oh, Shem. I’m so sorry—”

“Not going to happen,” Shem whispered firmly. “They have no idea what’s really going on, nor will they. Ever.”

“Keep reading, Shem,” the other companion said gently.

Shem swallowed and finished the message. “Once the captain is fully trained, under your guidance, he will be ready to become one of us. And you will be sent to do even greater work—”

He could barely say the next words out loud.

“—with Shin in Idumea’.”

One of the men let out a low whistle. “You’ve impressed someone, Shem Zenos! No signature.”

“Of course not!” said the other man. “What’d you expect? ‘All our love, Mr. Evil, Head of the Guarders’?”

Shem stared at the message.

“What are you going to do?” one of the men asked.

“Nothing,” Shem whispered.

“Nothing? Shem, do you realize what this is? Who it’s from?”

“No, not really,” he admitted. He handed it to one of the men. “You knew some of the handwritings—does this look familiar?”

The man sighed sadly. “Been waiting for years to be useful in that manner but . . . the hand is tight and forced, as if purposely trying to disguise the writing. Sorry, Shem. It’s not familiar to me at all.”

“It’s all right, Dormin. Was a long shot, anyway. Still pass it around, see if we get lucky. I’m sure it’s not General Thorne’s writing, but since it traveled through him, it’s reaffirmation of

“Then again, Shem impresses everyone.”

what we know about him.”

“True,” Dormin, the last son of King Oren nodded. “We’ll do our best. But Shem, you can’t ignore this.”

“I’m not,” he assured the men. “But I’ve been thinking: Thorne doesn’t know what’s in this message. He was only told he was to learn from me. But no one has specified *what* he’s supposed to learn, have they?”

Dormin and his companion looked at each other with knowing smiles.

“And they already trust me, so if Thorne fails to make any progress—whatever kind they’re looking for—the blame will be on him, not me. They’ll assume *he’s* failing in his duty, not the Quiet Man.”

The men’s smiles grew broader.

Shem began to grin as well. “The only thing left to do is to send our own message back. Something vague so as to not be dishonest, but something they’ll interpret as what they want to hear.”

“How about, ‘Message received, Quiet Man understands?’” Dormin’s companion suggested.

Shem grinned. “Perfect! Can I leave the delivery of that to the two of you?”

“May take a few days to find a contact,” Dormin told him, “because they’re just reentering the forests again, but we can take care of it.”

“Good,” Shem said.

“Uh, Shem?” Dormin’s companion started hesitantly, “what about the *other* problem?”

Shem exhaled and rubbed his chin. “Working on it. Right now I’m just watching, but I have a feeling he won’t be as troublesome as we fear.”

“But he *could* be, Shem. Remember that; there’s a great deal that he knows, and someday he just might slip up.”

“Message received,” Shem said soberly. “Quiet Man understands. Well then, I suppose it’s time for me to get back and teach my recruits a thing or two about identifying Guardians.”

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Mahrree was grateful to see Rector Yung coming up the road. She’d been sitting on the front porch with her children,

thumbing through a collection of old army books, setting some out to sit overnight to try to remove some of their musty smell before they were donated to the fort.

But what they were really doing was avoiding the house. Something *had* died in there.

It wasn't just the wilting flowers that gave the effect—flowers that Mahrree intended to throw out into the front garden before bed. But it was the heavy mood that accompanied Perrin when he lifted out High General Shin's sword. They all felt it, and they all avoided talking about it. Perrin still hadn't come back down, and Mahrree hadn't dared to go upstairs.

Rector Yung turned at their gate and came up the walk, looking at the dying flowers. "Was lovely at first," he said softly. "But now . . . maybe not such a good idea."

"It's all right," Mahrree assured him. "My neighbors across the road were going to let their goat in here in the morning to clear it all out."

Yung nodded and stopped on the stairs to evaluate the dozens of books laid out as if on display. "From the Shins?" he asked reverently.

Mahrree nodded, Jaytsy sniffed, and Peto cleared his throat.

Mahrree looked deliberately at her children and said, "Would the two of you see what else is in the crate while I chat with the rector?"

There was nothing left in the crate—they'd unloaded the rest of the books, Relf's old uniforms, and Joriana's hats already—but her children knew how to take a hint.

After they had gone into the house, Mahrree sat on a step and patted next to her for Yung to sit down.

"How is he?" the rector asked as he joined her.

"Surprisingly well, considering."

"Shem filled me in a bit on their little adventure to Idumea," Yung confessed, and gave her a significant look.

"So what did Perrin *not* share with me?"

Yung sighed, checked behind him to make sure the door was secure, and said, "Did he mention sedation?"

A while later Mahrree held her head in her hands, and Rector Yung patted her back in a grandfatherly way.

"He told me about half of all that," she whispered to Yung. "And not so many details about what happened in the Conference



“Then again, Shem impresses everyone.”

Room. Or his reaction in the cellar. Or that it was Kuman. Kuman!” Her head snapped up. “He made my dress! Well, now I MUST let my mother slash it to shreds!”

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Shin. I wrestled with my mind all afternoon if I should tell you all that Shem revealed to me. I certainly don’t want to step in between a husband and a wife, but when men like your husband experience all that he has—”

Mahrree turned to him. “What do you mean by that?”

Yung studied the stairs he sat on, thinking for the right words. “You said he seems to be doing surprisingly well. Mrs. Shin, I’ve been a rector for a very long time. I know men. Perrin shed a few tears, felt some comfort, and now that he’s home again he’s going to think it’s all over. He misses his parents, but believes he’s finished mourning. He hasn’t.”

Mahrree bobbed her head back and forth. “Well, of course not. When I lost my father, I went up and down for many moons, so I can—”

“You can relate, yes Mrs. Shin,” Yung cut her off gently and put a hand on her shoulder. “But he *thinks* he’s over it. I just want to warn you, when a man thinks he’s over something, he refuses to deal effectively with it when it rears up again and surprises him.”

Mahrree’s shoulders sagged. “What does that mean, exactly?”

“Men in the army deal with violence and death frequently, and know that on any day they may face it. That creates a heightened state of alertness. Does your husband ever seem tense?”

Mahrree scoffed. “A better question would be, does he ever seem *not* to be tense?”

Yung nodded slowly. “A mind can handle only so much of that, Mrs. Shin, and only for so long. Something like this can . . . push him too far.”

“Meaning?” She was starting to grow anxious.

And Yung could tell. With great compassion in his eyes he said, “This might be the berry that breaks the bear.”

Completely bewildered she asked, “What in the world are you talking about?”

Yung frowned. “They don’t have that expression here?”

Mahrree’s blank look answered that question.

“Guess it’s a Flax and Waves story,” said Yung apologeti-

cally. “You see, years ago some teenagers went to the berry fields near the edge of a forest. The wild blackberries were ripe and they went to have a little feast and enjoy the sunshine. Further down they noticed a bear, also enjoying the berries and the sun, but far enough away that the bear didn’t pay them any attention. During the course of the afternoon, the teens and the bear drew closer together, until one of the young men decided to toss a berry at the bear. He hit the animal on his back which didn’t bother him.

“Well, you know young men: it became a contest, and despite the warnings of the girls they were trying to impress, three boys tossed more and more berries at the bear, a few even hitting him on the snout, which made him snarl briefly, but wasn’t enough to distract him from his gorging.

“Until one young man hit the bear in the eye. Something in that massive, and—up to that point—*harmless*, beast snapped. He roared, lunged through the bushes, and attacked the first teenager he could reach: an innocent young woman who’d been trying to get the boys to stop. It was a battle after that, and eventually the teenagers beat off the bear with a variety of sticks and thrown rocks. The girl lived, but it took several moons for her leg to heal from the ravages of the bear, and she always walked with an obvious limp. It was that last berry that broke the bear.”

Mahrree nodded, understanding too much what Yung was trying to say. “But the world’s been throwing things much harder than berries at him for years.”

“I know,” Rector Yung said solemnly. “That’s why I’m worried for him, and for you. When a bear goes on a rampage, it doesn’t discriminate its victims. It goes for the closest and most convenient target.”

Mahrree swallowed. “Which would be me. Or the children.”

He patted her back again. “Then again, nothing might come of any of this. I may just be overly concerned.”

“And I appreciate it,” Mahrree told him. “You remind me of Perrin’s great uncle Hogal.”

Yung looked down. “I feel him there, in that house sometimes. As if he’s checking up on me, watching to make sure I’m continuing his work properly.”

“You are. You say what I think he’d say. That’s important now, since Perrin doesn’t have his great uncle, and now no longer has his fa—” The word seized in her throat. Just when she thought

“Then again, Shem impresses everyone.”

she was able to deal with it all, she was overwhelmed again.

Yung squeezed her shoulder and tenderly pulled her close as her tears dampened his shoulder, again.

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That evening Shem stood listening outside the doors of the training arena, a cringe etching itself on his face.

“Mennn,” Beneff held out the word for three counts, “welcome to the Army . . . of Idumea, ho-ho,” he droned and paced.

“I’m so sorry,” Shem whispered, as if any of his ten recruits could hear him. Beneff had insisted on introducing himself to the men immediately, before Shem could take them out on their nighttime orientation ride.

In a way it would provide an interesting contrast, Shem The Optimist decided. The dullest experience of training, followed by the most terrifying.

“To-daaaay,” Beneff continued, taking most of the evening to say the word, “we will begin . . . by learning . . . to care for . . . your horse, hum-hum.”

Beneff’s strange delivery was amusing for five minutes; beyond that it was agonizing. Maybe the soldiers were already asleep on their feet. If not, Master Sergeant Zenos would teach them how, out of kindness.

“For if . . . you take care of your horse . . . he or she—or *it*, snip-snip, ho-ho, as the unfortunate creature may be—will then care for you.”

Shem groaned. Beneff would take three hours to review something that took five minutes.

“First . . . the blanket. May be wool . . . may be cotton . . . may not be silk, may not be linen . . . may not be sheepskin, because we all know that there’s a reason why wheels aren’t square—”

At least the random bits of Beneff’s dubious wisdom should keep them somewhat alert, trying to puzzle out his meanings.

“Really, boys,” Shem whispered, “if there was *anything* else I dared have him do—”

“—may not be leather . . . may not be linen . . . I believe I mentioned that already, good to repeat, ho-hah—”

“That’s right,” Shem whispered, “ramble about nothing im-

portant so you say nothing revealing.”

Shem leaned against the wall. It was bad enough when he realized that a Thorne would be coming back with them to Edge, but then Beneff showed up. Shem was fairly confident Beneff was just an “old horse” no one in the army wanted, but didn’t have the heart to put out to pasture. Yet one could never be sure when someone who’d been predictable for years would suddenly remember his true nature.

After all, Shem had gone through the same training himself.

“At least I’m dealing with only two cats,” he whispered to himself. “One so young and inexperienced it doesn’t even know it’s a cat, and the other so old it can’t remember what it is. Both manageable, for now. But at some point,” he closed his eyes in dread, “they’re going to send in the mountain lions. And then?”

And then . . .

“What will Perrin think of me?”

---

Perrin sat on the bed for probably hours—he lost track of time. He stared at the wilting lilacs, now releasing a sickly decaying odor, as he slowly fingered the ornate hilt on the general’s sword.

It had been made in honor of the High General’s installment and presented to him after he made his oaths of fidelity and loyalty to King Oren. As far as Perrin knew, the gleaming steel blade had never been used in all those years. But that didn’t mean it couldn’t be. This was no decorative sword—not like the flimsy thing General Cush kept at his side as a symbol rather than as a weapon, and used to clean his fingernails when he thought no one was looking.

No, *this* sword, this masterpiece of metalwork and intricacy—the hilt was an elaborate mass of twisting steel and careful cutwork, called filling-gree by the swordsmith—no, this sword was made to be much more than a symbol or a piece of art.

It was meant to be *used*.

Perrin wasn’t sure why they’d sent it to him: as a promise for his future, out of pity for his loss, or as a taunting reminder why the previous owner no longer needed it. It didn’t matter.

“Then again, Shem impresses everyone.”

He fingered the carefully twisted bits of shining steel and breathed in the stench of rotting flowers. He shouldn't have been feeling this way, he knew. They were fine. He heard them, he felt them—he *still* felt them, burning constantly and quietly in his chest. They were fine in Paradise, with Hogal and Tabbitt and countless others whose existence had graduated to the next life.

*They were fine.*

He had shed his tears, near to dehydration, before they reached Idumea. And then he buried them, and felt them, and they were fine.

So why did it hurt so much? Again? Still?

Yes, he'd miss them. Nothing would ever fully take their place in his life, but he was adaptable. Granted, he hated change—everyone does. But change happens, and you accept it, deal with it, rearrange your mind and soul in accordance with it, and you move on.

But he couldn't move. He hadn't moved for hours. He just sat there fingering the filling-gree.

After a while, he looked up in the darkening bedroom to see his sheathed sword leaning by the bedroom door, in precise position for him to strap it on in less than five seconds when the call came.

Eventually, he knew something he could do, a way he could move. He stood up, made his feet shuffle to his sword, and pulled it out of the sheath. Carefully he slipped it under the bed, between two of Mahrree's storage crates.

Then he took the general's sword and reverently slipped it into his sheath by the door.

And then . . .

. . . everything changed.

## Sneak peek at *Falcon in the Barn*

Eight weeks after the land tremor that shook the world, Jaytsy sat on her bed late at night with her knees pulled up to her chest. She slowly rocked, but didn't dare go to sleep. There was a chance tonight would be quiet, but she'd had her sleep disturbed far too many times.

She knew it was self-centered to think so, but more and more she began to suspect that the shaking she had wished for everyone else, just to "wake them up a little," had been focused primarily on her. While the world was looking more and more normal with all the rebuilding, nothing in Jaytsy's world was the same.

Her grandparents were gone. And now, so was her father.

Perrin Shin's body came home from his enraged ride to Idumea, but it was soon apparent his mind didn't. Where it was most of the time, no one in their family really knew. All they knew was as soon as he put General Relf Shin's sword into his sheath, everything changed.

It was the day after the crate had come from Idumea, the 55<sup>th</sup> Day of Planting, that he replaced his sword with his father's. That night he tried to use it.

Jaytsy had been sleeping when she heard shouting upstairs. Panicked, she opened her door at the same time Peto opened his. They stared at each other across the dark gathering room, hearing their father yelling and their mother trying to calm him. He came running down the stairs, Relf's sword drawn, and looked dimly at his children in the dark.

"Upstairs! Now! My bedroom! The only place you'll be safe."

Mahrree followed him. "Perrin, no one's here. There's no danger."

"Yes there is! It's everywhere!" His eyes flashed wildly around the room as if seeing something.

Jaytsy and Peto searched the darkness, then each other's faces in worry.

"NOW!" he bellowed at them.

“Just go,” their mother whispered, “I’ll deal with him.”

They ran upstairs and sat on the edge of their parents’ bed, listening to their mother try to reason with their father. It was obvious by his shouting that she wasn’t getting through to him.

“What’s wrong with him?” Peto whispered.

“I don’t know,” Jaytsy whispered back. She pulled her legs up to her chest and hugged her knees. “Maybe he saw something in a shadow.”

Peto crawled along the bed to look outside the new window. It was exceptionally large and clear, providing an unobstructed view to the back alley. “It’s really quiet out there, the alley is empty, and the tower doesn’t look lit. I don’t think there’s anything.”

He crawled back to sit next to his sister, but not too close. “I don’t hear him anymore.”

Jaytsy listened for a moment. “Me neither.”

“What does that mean?” Peto whispered.

Jaytsy shrugged. “It’s really . . .” she couldn’t think of a word. She had never seen her father act like that before.

“Creepy,” Peto supplied, and wrapped his arms around himself.

A moment later their mother came upstairs to the dark bedroom. “Just a nightmare, nothing more!” she said in an overly merry voice. “He’s asleep on the sofa. I don’t think he was even fully awake. You can go to bed now.”

Jaytsy didn’t dare move. Neither did Peto.

“Does he still have the sword?” her brother asked.

They heard a heavy sound from their mother. “No, I took it after he fell on the sofa. We don’t need him mistaking any of us for someone we’re not, do we?” she laughed softly, but her voice was shaky. “It’s all right, I promise. Just . . . keep your doors closed.”

In the morning when Jaytsy passed her father on the sofa, he opened his eyes and looked at her, baffled. “Why am I here? Did I have a fight with your mother that I slept through?” he smiled.

“Uh,” Jaytsy stopped, unsure of how to explain. He looked completely normal, just a little tired. “Sort of?”

Jaytsy rushed to the washing room and shut the door securely behind her. She sat in there waiting until she heard her mother come down the stairs. Through the door she heard the muffled conversation become louder and louder. She cringed when she heard her father shout, “I would never do that!”

By the time she came out a few minutes later for breakfast, her father was sitting at the table holding his head. He gave her a weak smile which she half-heartedly returned.

Peto just nodded at his father as he sat down to eat.

By dinner everyone was easier again, smiling and laughing as if nothing had happened, and they slept well that night. Jaytsy thought nothing more about her father's unusual nighttime activity, especially since the night after was also calm and quiet.

But in the middle of the fourth night Jaytsy woke up, feeling a presence next to her bed. The light from the two full moons coming through the window bounced off the sword she saw her father holding over her.

"They're after you."

Jaytsy froze in terror, trying to see her father's face in the night, but shadows covered him. She noticed a movement by the door and yelped in fear. Perrin spun to see what caught her attention and pointed the sword at the figure, his stance ready.

Peto trembled there in horror.

Jaytsy wanted to scream "Run!" but she couldn't find her voice.

But suddenly a voice shouted from the gathering room, "Colonel Shin, put away your sword! That's an order!" Their mother pushed Peto out of the way and stood in the doorway with her hands on her hips.

Perrin slowly lowered the sword, then looked around blankly. Jaytsy slipped out of her bed and rushed over to Peto's side. She didn't know which of them was shaking more.

"That was close!" she whispered to him.

Peto merely made a strangled sound in response.

They watched their father walk, dazed, over to the sofa. He sat down on it and stared at the dark floor.

Mahrree walked over to him and cautiously laid a hand on his shoulder. "Perrin? Are you all right?"

He looked up at her. "What am I doing down here?"

Peto and Jaytsy sighed in relief as he looked, confused, at the sword in his hand.

"You've been walking in your sleep," Mahrree told him. "I think you had another nightmare."

He glanced over at his children. "Did I scare you?" he asked, almost timidly.



“Yes!” they squeaked.

“I’m sorry,” he breathed out, then got up and trudged back upstairs.

Mahrree stopped to kiss each of them quickly. “Everything’s fine!” she said too cheerfully. “Back to bed, now!” She followed their father up the stairs. “Perrin, give me the sword.”

Jaytsy had never before realized just how brave their mother was.

The next morning she and Peto got their own breakfast and ate early before their parents got up. Neither of them said it, but they both seemed to think it was just safer that way.

Two days later Jaytsy found her father asleep on the floor by the back kitchen door, curled in a ball, with General Shin’s sword by his side. She crept away and rushed upstairs to get her mother, then waited on their bed until the shouting downstairs stopped.

Everything was *not* fine. That was obvious. But no one was talking about it. Peto just looked at her that morning across breakfast with a mixture of understanding and dread. She returned it. At least, for once, they had something in common.

## The Mansions of Idumea

## Acknowledgements . . .

First, I acknowledge that I'm not an *AUTHOR*.

I'm barely a writer; more like a *Drafter* with rewriting issues. (I'm pretty sure rewriting means taking *out* problems, not *inserting* new ones.)

I dabble with stories that insist on being told, and because the characters didn't plop themselves down in anyone else's head (I guess God didn't know what else to do with me), they're stuck with whatever I can churn out about them. But oh, has it been fun!

If you enjoyed any of this book, I'm thrilled. Thank you for sharing in this.

(If you didn't enjoy the book, then I take comfort in the fact that you likely downloaded it for free or for very cheap, so you're out only a few hours of your time.)

I so appreciate those who served as beta readers, catching my many inconsistencies, dangling them in my face like a load of smelly laundry and saying, in the *kindest* of ways, "How did you manage to miss this?!" My daughters, Tess and Alexandria Mercer, and my sister Barbara Goff, my dear friends Debbie Beier, Stephanie Carver, David Jensen, Kim Pearce, Liz Reid, Paula Snyder, and Ron Snyder (not like the colonel; well, not *that* much).

I also appreciate the rest of my children for allowing me to tap away for hours on my keyboard.

("What, another book? I thought you were done!")

I'm also grateful for my husband who tosses Lindt truffle balls at me when he can tell I'm frustrated yet again by my inadequacies.

*"You know, you could just quit," he says from a safe distance.*

*"But I LOVE writing this! It makes me so darn happy," I yell back, pulling out my hair. "Once I figure out how to fix it!"*

*He looks at the empty bag in his hands. "Lemme see if Lindt sells in bulk," and he makes a hasty getaway.*

## The Mansions of Idumea

## About the author . . .

Trish Strebel Mercer has been teaching writing, or editing graduate papers, or changing diapers since the early 1990's. She earned a BA in English from Brigham Young University and an MA in Composition Theory and Rhetoric from Utah State University. She and her husband David have nine children and have raised them in Utah, Idaho, Maryland, Virginia, and South Carolina. Currently they live in the rural west and dream of the day they will be old enough to be campground managers in Yellowstone National Park.



## The Mansions of Idumea

(This time I left words at the top, so that the last page won't be completely blank. It has purpose. Not sure what that purpose is, but that's up to the page to decide. Free will, and all that.)