

The background of the cover is a photograph of a young man with dark hair, wearing a dark hooded jacket, looking back over his right shoulder. He is positioned in the lower-left foreground. Behind him is a vast, mountainous landscape with green valleys and dark, rocky peaks under a hazy sky. The overall tone is dramatic and atmospheric.

FOREST AT THE EDGE
~ Book Five ~

SAFETY
ASSURED
LEAVING
EAST of
MEDICETTI

WHEN THE
WORLD
IS OUT
TO GET YOU
... RUN AWAY?

TRISH MERCER

Safety Assured Leaving East of Medicetti

F O R E S T A T T H E E D G E
~Book Five~

SAFETY
ASSURED
LEAVING
EAST of
MEDICETTI

TRISH MERCER

Copyright © 2016 Patricia Strebel Mercer

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law.

All characters in this book are fictitious, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental but I'm still holding out hope they exist.

ISBN-13: 978-1533116154

ISBN-10: 1533116156

Cover art and design by the mother of Teagan Mercer, who agreed to be on this cover to prove he could pose better than his father. Now he sees the problem is that his mother doesn't give very good direction, but he figured out how to give a cynical-why-are-we-doing-this look all on his own.

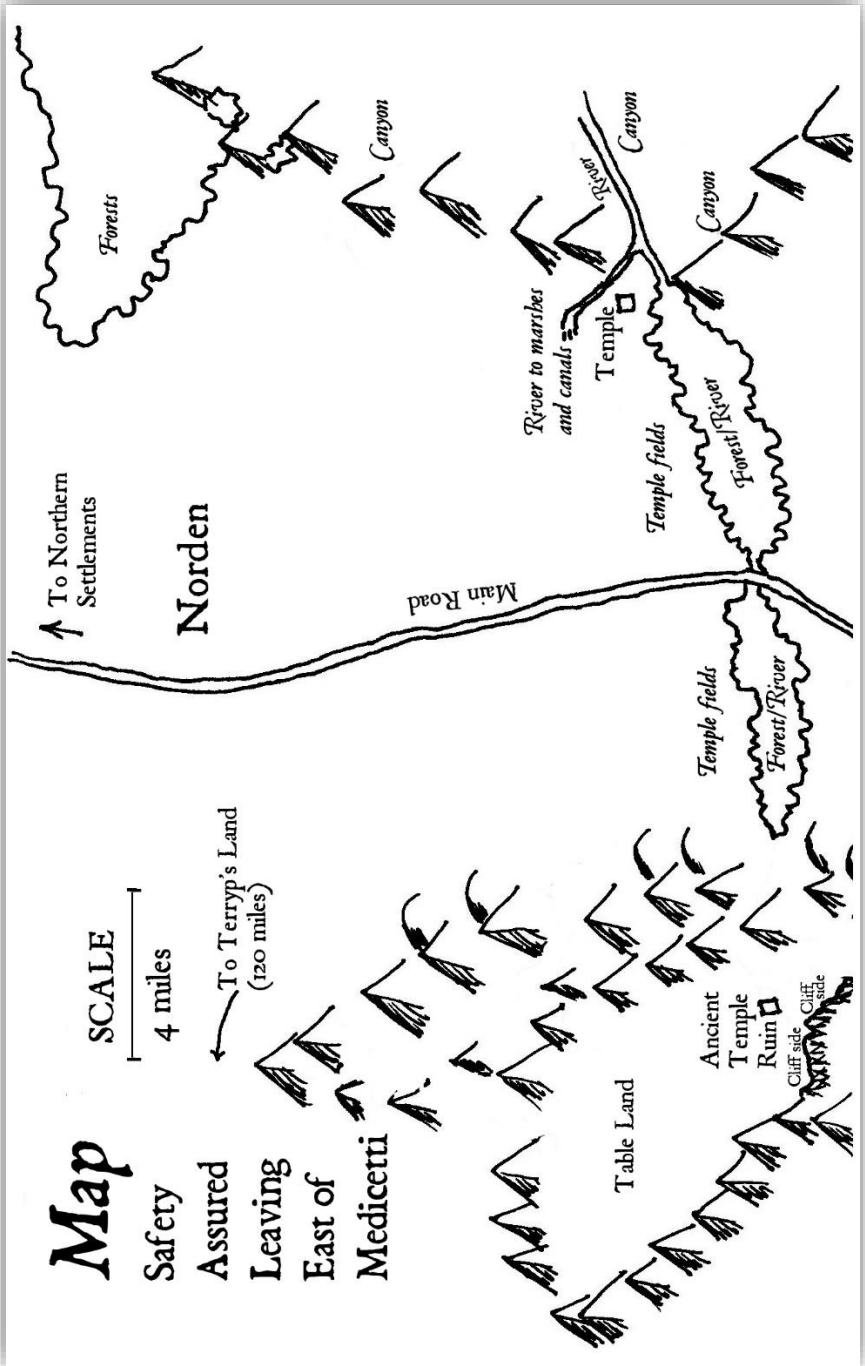
The stunning photo of the Polish Tatra mountains in the background is from dreamstimes.com.

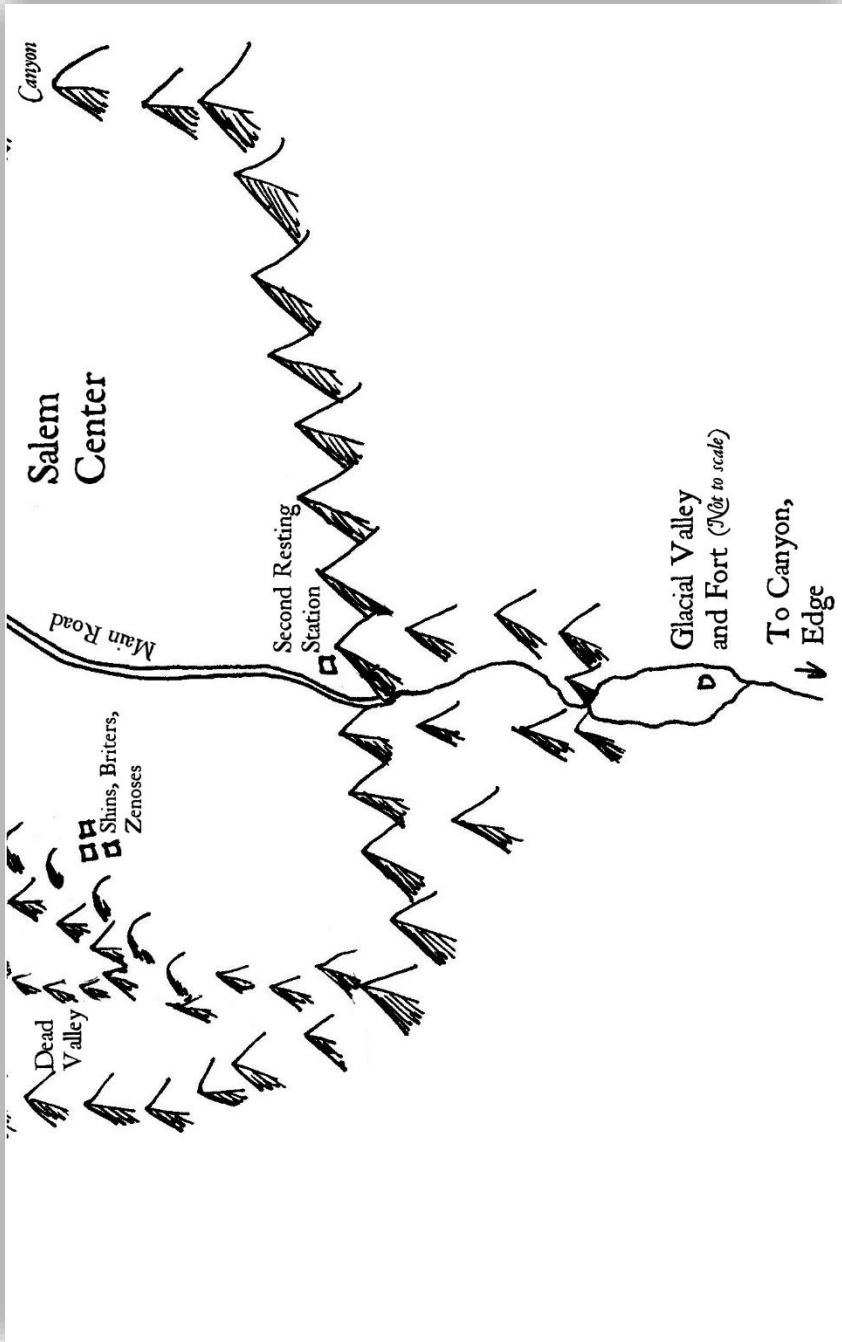
Contact author via website: forestededgebooks.com.

You know you're on the right path
when the world tries to shove you off of it.

Book Five

MAPS





Book Five

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

Nicko Mal	NEE-koh MAL
Querul	KWER-el
Idumea	i-doo-ME-uh
Mahrree	MARR-ee
Peto	PAY-toh
Jaytsy	JAYT-see
Jothan	JOH-thun
Asrar	AZ-rar
Terry	TARE-up
Bustani	Boo-STAH-nee
Caraka	Kuh-RAH-kuh
Gizzada	gi-ZAH-duh
Qayin	KAY-in
Trovato	troe-VAH-toe
Fadh	FOD

For background information on all character names and derivations, visit forestedgebooks.com/characters.

Book Five

Chapter 1--“Last night, your mother and I had some visitors . . .”

Early in the morning of the 34th Day of Planting Season, 338, Mahrree stepped out on to her front porch to witness her last sunrise in Edge.

There are a handful of days in a person’s life that start out seemingly benign, then dislodge and uproot and toss aside everything you thought your life was. Usually such days involve a birth, or an unexpected death, or a sharp twist in one’s future, and the color of everything suddenly shifts.

Yesterday was one of those days.

At the beginning of it, she’d been nearly vibrating with the idea that she and Perrin and Peto would be sneaking away in Weeding Season to find Terry’s land themselves, because Perrin had secretly possessed, during all of these years, the very map of the very historian she’d admired more than anyone.

Then, her daughter started feeling birthing pains, and the day was spent timing and watching and, ultimately, comforting Jaytsy when her baby decided the 33rd day wasn’t when he or she wanted to be born after all.

As if that hadn’t been enough, when she came home after dark, she discovered that she and her family weren’t alone in their house.

And that the world wasn’t alone, either.

There was another civilization, called Salem.

The husband-and-wife scouting team, dressed in mottled green clothing, had explained that the Shins were in trouble because Mahrree had spouted off that the Administrators were liars about Terry’s land, and because Perrin had resigned from the army instead of becoming the new High General. They promised they could whisk them all away—even Jaytsy, still heavy with child—from the world.

Tonight.

In a very real way, there *were* births and unexpected deaths and twists that kinked Mahrree's thoughts. The birth of a new life for all of them, and the death of who they were—

It's a good thing, Mahrree decided as she massaged her head which felt packed with cotton from too little sleep last night, that days like yesterday happen only a few times in one's life, because they were thoroughly draining.

But, surprisingly, she didn't feel empty this morning. She felt full to overflowing.

They were leaving it all, tonight.

She could hardly make that unusual idea take hold in her brain, as if she'd been told that if she flapped her arms fast enough she could suddenly take flight. Yet deep down she knew it was true.

Leaving Edge, that is, not flying.

But then again, who knew? No one in the world knew that there were thousands of *other* people living *elsewhere*, yet that had been true since King Querul drove Guide Pax away from the world one-hundred-thirty-eight years ago, so maybe she could fly out of there, she just didn't know it yet!

She chuckled as she breathed in the morning air and, not being able to stop herself, flapped her arms experimentally. The two soldiers on permanent patrol at the end of the road must have thought she was waving a bizarre good morning to them. She quit after an unsuccessful five seconds. She felt so light and happy, which completely confused her. Shouldn't she feel some sense of dread or loss about leaving everything she knew behind tonight?

Nope. Nothing but tingling, from head to toe.

Embarrassed, Mahrree had to admit she'd known thirteen-year-old girls less giddy and erratic than herself.

But there was just so much to look forward to! The scouts last night had even promised her a trip to Terryp's ruins. They had scholars and tours and campsites and everything!

But first, she had to *get* to Salem, and where in the world—or rather, *out* of the world—could that be? Maybe north, she decided as she sat down on the steps and sighed in sublime anticipation. Through the mountains, or maybe west first to Terryp's land, and then north?

If only Perrin would wake up, so she could speculate with him. But he didn't get home until just a few hours ago, after what Mahrree assumed was his most intense interrogation of Shem, the man who

“Last night, your mother and I had some visitors . . .”

had been someone entirely different for the past seventeen years.

A spy from Salem. That’s what he’d been, worming his way into their family, becoming their confidante, their best friend . . . and likely telling Salem all about their secrets.

It was thoughts like those which kept her from sleeping. Random realizations that all which she knew was only a small part of the whole. She felt like a small child again, noticing for the first time that the smudges on the mountains were actually trees, thousands of them, and that she’d never before noticed what was now so obvious.

She remembered how years ago, after two soldiers tried to assassinate Relf and Joriana Shin at the fort but were killed before they could do so, they had briefly suspected Shem of being something *other* than just another soldier. They’d even wondered if he hadn’t been a Guarder who had defected to their side, if he hadn’t taken out the lieutenants himself.

But he’d endured all of Relf’s questioning, and Perrin’s and Mahrree’s suspicions, and they let the matter go because, well, he was their little brother.

They had no idea how close to the truth they’d come.

She had her own list of questions about Salem’s number one spy and the world’s biggest liar, but when Perrin finally crawled into bed next to her, all he said was, “Be ready to go tomorrow night,” before he collapsed.

Perrin still trusted Shem.

That was all she needed to know, for now. As Perrin had left the house last night and snuck past the sleeping guard, Mahrree had been startled to feel gentle peace come over their home, filling her with unexpected joy.

The scouts had told them that Salem was organized the way Guide Hierum, the first Guide of the Creator, had led the world before those who organized Idumea as a way to manipulate their civilization destroyed it all. Guide Pax, who was arguing with King Querul in 200, hadn’t been killed at Mt. Deceit as everyone believed. He’d escaped, with the help of Querul’s guard who were loyal to Pax, and they found a new land.

A *new* land.

The thought was too wonderful, yet one she’d hoped for, for many years. Guarders were, indeed, alive and well and thriving, *elsewhere*. The *other* “Guarders,” who frequently raided the world, hadn’t left it at all, but were just opportunistic local thieves.

But there *was* another land, another group of people, another possibility, *another kind of life*—

How can anyone sleep with such thoughts running around in one's head?

As she lay in bed last night, she wondered if there were any way that Salem might be surrounded by mountains, that perhaps there'd be a house with weathered gray wood and window boxes filled with herbs.

Eventually the exhaustion of the day and evening overwhelmed her, and as she drifted off to sleep she hoped she might have her old and perplexing dream again, but her mind never settled down enough.

Even now, as she sat on the front steps, she couldn't focus.

All she could think was, *Tonight we leave it all, forever.*

She'd be waking Perrin soon, because she just couldn't stand it anymore.

Peto had already gone to the Briters for milking. He didn't say a word when Mahrree told him his father had a "bad night," but nodded wearily and trudged over to his sister's place. It was all Mahrree could do to keep from bursting out with, "This will be your last early morning milking!"

But there was one kink her in joy—her daughter and son-in-law.

Jaytsy and Deckett had a successful farm, a dozen cows expecting calves, and a baby of their own due any day now. While there was nothing left for Perrin and Mahrree in Edge, and not so much for Peto since Edge had been told to shun him as well, the Briters had to leave their entire world.

"Please let them understand," Mahrree murmured her prayer as the neighborhood slowly brightened with the coming sun. "Please help them feel the same joy that makes me want to fly off this porch!"

The first rays of dawn came over the distant marsh fields, catching Mahrree's eye and blinding her momentarily. She shielded her face, focusing instead on the front garden which she had planted some weeks ago.

Peto had speculated that the dirt, which had never deliberately had seeds put into it for all the twenty-five years Mahrree had lived there, wouldn't know what to do about her careful raking and her first attempts at gardening.

But when her eyes adjusted to the light, and she could see clearly again, she barked out a loud "Ha!" that startled a chirping bird.

Mahrree slapped her hand over her mouth to hide her grin.

“Last night, your mother and I had some visitors . . .”

The sun revealed the first leaves of hundreds—no, *thousands*—of seedlings which had sprouted during the night.

The color of her world had turned green.

When Perrin woke up, it was to stare at the oak beams above his bed and sigh in exasperation, mingled with exhilaration.

Tonight. It was all coming to an end tonight.

He'd left the Briters' barn a few hours ago feeling as if he could *nearly* trust Shem again. If it weren't for the hot glow of reassurance that nearly burst out of his chest as he snuck home, he wouldn't have told Mahrree to be ready to go today.

That, and the thought of Administrator Genev readying coaches and horses to head up to Edge intent on arresting his family for sedition against Idumea—yes, that was enough incentive.

And a detail that he would *not* be sharing with Mahrree yet. He needed her to be acting natural today, which, when she was excited or agitated, wasn't something she did very well.

Fatigued, he forced himself to sit up. Somewhere in Idumea, new High General Qayin Thorne was gloating in the mansion where Perrin's parents used to live. And undoubtedly Chairman Nicko Mal was also awake and drafting his notes for their trials which would begin the moment the Shins, in chains, arrived at the Administrative Headquarters.

And there sat Perrin, uselessly clenching his fists in dreadful anticipation for what would transpire in the next twenty-four hours.

That's when the door flew open and there stood Mahrree with both fury and joy on her face.

“Yes?” he ventured cautiously.

“I have a garden!” she beamed, then immediately furrowed her brows. “Everything's come up!”

“Well . . . good for you?”

“I'm mad at you!” she announced, although her mouth wriggled otherwise. “Because you're dragging me away from it.”

He stopped rubbing his eyes. “Wait. Mahrree, are you trying to say you're *changing your mind*?”

“Yes! I mean, no! Don't you get it?” she said, a bit flustered. “I'm trying to start an *argument*. You realize this is our last day here,”

and she raised her eyebrows.

He stared at her. “You’re not serious about *arguing*, are you? Do you have any idea how tired I am? This is a terrible idea.”

Her shoulders sagged. “But, but it’s our last day, and—”

“I’ve never told you this before, but Mahrree? You’ve never been good at arguing.”

Wholly affronted, but seeing the spark in his eyes, she put her hands on her waist. “Oh really? Well, we’ll just see!”

Peto shoveled the muck and reviewed a decision he’d made two weeks ago, when he realized Edge was serious about shunning them: he could shovel manure out of the goodness of his heart for his sister and brother-in-law, or he could shovel for slips of silver.

Or, rather, he could begin reclaiming his family’s name and fixing all of this mess.

Once the Briters no longer needed his help, he’d head south and plead his case to Colonel Brillen Karna. Who could say no to a brawny young man willing to work the massive stables of the fort at Rivers? Peto would even do it voluntarily at first, maybe just live at the fort as payment, and begin proving that Shins were still worth their weight in potatoes.

He needed to get away from Edge. A week ago, as he was hoeing a row in Deck’s field, he was surprised to see half a dozen boys from his old kickball team sauntering through the dirt. He nearly broke out into a smile, until he realized they were sniggering at him.

“Yep,” one boy called out loudly, “practice is starting again, and with a *certain someone’s* records scribbled out of all the books, it looks like we have some new most valuable players.”

Peto leaned on his hoe. “What are you talking about?”

What followed was the worst acting Peto had ever witnessed. His former friends put their hands to their ears like old men, looked dramatically up and down, and exchanged overly practiced looks.

“Did you hear that?”

“I don’t know. It was something odd, but—”

“It was *nothing*, boys. *Absolutely nothing.*”

Peto gritted his teeth, seeing the way this was going. He turned back to his hoeing.

“Yep, everything’s different now, as if a *certain someone* had

“Last night, your mother and I had some visitors . . .”

never been there, and never will be again.”

Peto firmed his grip on the hoe to prevent himself from thrusting it into someone’s foot.

“Yep, the world’s a better place now—”

To be honest, he firmed his grip in order to idly swing the tool around, the handle smacking the nearest boy on the side of the head with a satisfying *thunk*, and knocking him to the ground.

Over the protests and exclamations, he said serenely, as he went back to hoeing, “It was nothing. *Absolutely nothing.*”

Only because the boy he leveled was bleeding—and probably out of worry they’d be next—did his former team rush away to get their friend help.

Peto hoed that row so deeply that he had to go back and fill it in again so that the carrot seeds wouldn’t be drowned by a foot of dirt.

He also needed some distance from his parents. They rained down upon him so much guilty sympathy that he was drowning in it.

Seeing them so subdued—well, it was getting to him. Yesterday, former General Perrin Shin hopelessly chased a wayward chicken around the yard. Peto laughed, but it really was quite pitiful. His eyes burned with frustration to later see his father meekly taking advice from Deck about what constitutes a weed.

Peto didn’t necessarily want him to be an officer again, but Perrin Shin needed to be something much more than just a farmhand.

He could still be something great in the world.

Something like the greatest general the world had ever seen.

And the only one who could start to make that impossibility a reality was his son Peto, the only person in the world who knew who his father was supposed to become. Peto realized that was why Relf had told him of his dream, had made Peto write it down and keep it safe. Only Peto had the power to restore the Shins to greatness.

And it couldn’t happen while they played farmer.

After breakfast, Perrin and Mahrree walked to the Briters. Just to annoy the soldiers keeping an eye on their route, the Shins cut through neighbors’ yards on a new path to the farm.

“We’ll never do that again,” Perrin murmured to Mahrree, and felt another flood of mixed emotions. “Cut through that garden.”

"I know," Mahrree said. "I don't know whether to sob or laugh. I may do both."

"Quietly, please. The soldiers seem a bit sharper this morning. They may suspect something's up."

"Why would they think that?"

Perrin hesitated. He wasn't used to lying to his wife. But it wasn't as if he couldn't come right out and say, *Because they know that tomorrow the world is literally coming to get you.*

"Shem told me that Thorne was getting pressure from Idumea. Word must have reached the garrison that soldiers were requesting transfers and even deserting. As of yesterday, he was down to one-hundred-sixty."

"Good," said Mahrree smugly.

"Now remember," he told her as they strode through the corn field, the shoots just breaking through the soil, "we're to go about our day as usual so as to not arouse any suspicion. When we 'disappear,' it has to seem to have taken us by surprise."

"How's it going to happen? Making us 'disappear'?" Mahrree wondered. "Won't anyone come looking for us?"

"I've wondered that, too," he admitted. "But Shem wouldn't give me any other details, so that I'm safe."

"And what does *that* mean?"

Perrin rubbed his forehead. He really didn't want to tell her that not everyone escaped successfully. One group had even been caught and detained by Qayin Thorne years ago, and was never heard from again. "I'm not sure what he meant by that." He'd never told so many lies to his wife in such rapid succession.

They walked in silence the rest of the way. At the barn they found Deck, Peto, and Jaytsy already at work.

Perrin gave a sidelong glance to Mahrree.

She nodded back once.

As they walked through the doors, Perrin said loudly, "Looks like that calf might wander, Deck. Let me get the doors." He didn't even glance in the direction of the soldier trying to crouch behind an inadequate shrub just thirty paces away. But now the sergeant wouldn't be able to eavesdrop.

Deck, bucket in hand that he was bringing to Jaytsy seated at the churn, looked around in confusion. "What calf, Perrin?"

Jaytsy cocked her head at her father. "Something's up, isn't it? I've seen that look too many times before."

“Last night, your mother and I had some visitors . . .”

Peto came from a stall, wielding a pitchfork. “Nice for the two of you to finally show up for work.”

“Sit down. All of you,” Perrin said.

The gravity of his tone forced his sons to squat on bales of hay.

“Last night, your mother and I had some visitors . . .”

Fifteen minutes later Perrin finished with, “So Salem feels it’s imperative that we leave tonight.”

Peto was the first to finally break the stunned silence that hung in the barn. “So . . . *run away?*”

Perrin bristled at the insinuation, but said, “Well . . . yes.”

Peto’s shoulders twitched. “Tonight?”

“Yes.”

Mahrree watched her son who grew more agitated.

“All right,” Peto said slowly. “But I have another suggestion. I haven’t told you this yet, but I’ve got a plan to go down to Karna—”

“NO!” Perrin thundered.

“Why not?!” Peto hollered back. “I’m sure Karna will—”

Turn you over to Genev immediately, because he’ll have no choice! was what Perrin wanted to roar back at him, but he couldn’t let them know any of that yet, especially with Mahrree still beaming next to him, hoping her enthusiasm would radiate out far enough to engulf her son.

Perrin rubbed his forehead. “You have to come with us, Peto,” he mumbled. “Arrangements have been made, and—”

“I need to stay here,” Peto said simply. “I’ll sob and throw hysterics that you’re ‘missing,’ then there will be sympathetic commanders willing to take in Perrin’s orphaned son. Karna, or Fadh, or—”

Perrin had been clenching every muscle in his body. He knew that once the new laws Idumea had passed went into effect, no man, anywhere, would dare shelter his son.

“No, Peto. That’s not possible—”

“Why not?!”

“Because we all *stay together!*” Perrin hissed, remembering there was a soldier outside who may have heard the earlier shouting.

“You mean, us too?” Jaytsy said, squirming.

Perrin exhaled. “Yes, all of us.”

Jaytsy looked at Deck. “But . . . we’ve got expecting cattle, and our baby’s coming anytime—”

“We know that,” Mahrree said. “And so do those who are coming to take us. They specialize in moving expecting women!”

But Jaytsy watched her father earnestly as she said, “I think Deck and I should stay, at least until the baby’s here. We’ll be as hysterical as Peto, and my tears would be genuine—”

“NO!” said Perrin with such brittle fury that no one dared talk back to him. “Jayts, after we leave,” he whispered, “there’d be no one here to protect you.”

“Protect me from what?” Jaytsy whispered.

Perrin’s gaze flicked in the direction of the fort. “Thorne.”

Deck squared his shoulders. “What about me?”

“You’re coming too,” Perrin said. “You—”

“No, I mean, I can protect Jaytsy—”

“Sorry, but no, you can’t,” Perrin interrupted. “You’d be useless against Thorne, and we all know it. Even with your pitchfork. I’m afraid there’s no choice.” *Because Thorne’s out to get you, too. He wants your wife, which means he has to eliminate you first.*

Deck tried to hide his insulted expression, but Peto didn’t.

“I just can’t go, Father,” he said. “It’d ruin *everything*.”

“Everything’s already ruined, Peto,” Perrin told him. “Has been for longer than three weeks. This really is our only option, and it has to happen tonight. Everyone. You included.”

Peto sighed. “But you don’t understand—”

“And neither do you!”

“Ah-ha-HA-HA!”

Mahrree’s rigid laugh made everyone turn to her.

“You know how they say the tension’s so thick you could cut it with a knife? This would require a . . . hooked, cutting thing. You know, with the long, curved blade thingy?” She gestured madly.

“A scythe?” Deck suggested.

“I think so?”

Perrin smiled dimly. “Thank you, Mahrree, for . . . whatever that was.”

Even Peto managed half a smile.

Perrin tried again. “We realize we’re asking a great deal of each of you, that this is the last thing you would have expected to hear from us today. But Salem feels we are in danger, and I have to admit that I feel it as well. The only hope for our family is to *run away* tonight, and trust that we’re running to a much better place.”

“And your source of most of this information is Shem?” Peto raised a critical eyebrow.

“Yes, we spoke at length last night, right over there in that stall.”

“Last night, your mother and I had some visitors . . .”

Deck spun to look. “So it wasn’t a dog that bedded down there?”

“No, Shem and me.” Perrin didn’t add, *And we buried a file about Mahrree, started by Administrator Gadiman fifteen years ago. Right there, under that appropriately steaming pile of cow dung.*

Every muscle in him clenched again, especially when Peto’s gaze hardened. “So you’re trusting the man who for seventeen years lied to us about everything? You’re putting our futures in the hands of a *liar*?”

For the first time that morning, Mahrree’s enthusiasm flagged. “Peto, I realize this is a lot to take—”

“No, Mother. It’s impossible to take! And two people who sneak around in the dark shared everything about Salem with you? Is there any evidence such a place even exists?”

Perrin blinked at his son’s cynicism. “Peto, I didn’t want to believe them at first either, but—”

“But still you are! You’re trusting your future and ours to an admitted liar and his two contacts who wouldn’t even give you their names?! They could be Guardians, and this could be a trap!”

Perrin and Mahrree exchanged looks, each one hoping the other had an idea.

Neither of them did.

Eventually Mahrree came up with, “All I can tell you is this, Peto: when they spoke, I felt it, in here.” She patted her chest. “I felt the Creator, I felt peace, and I even felt my parents. I knew that leaving was the right choice, and I still do. Is it absurd to leave behind all that we know and possess, and follow strangers—and a *liar*—to somewhere we don’t know? Yes, it is! But do I want to do it anyway? Oh, Peto—yes! Yes, because I feel it!”

Jaytsy sniffed. “Drat. Now I feel it, too!” she chuckled.

Deck nodded and dabbed at his eyes.

Perrin, his own eyes swelling with affirmation, turned to Peto.

He scowled back.

So Perrin turned to Deck instead. “Your uncle, aunt, and cousin won’t know what happened to you. We don’t have any family left who will miss us, but you, Deck? You have the fewest reasons to leave, but the most to lose simply because you married into this family. I need to know—honestly—how do you feel about all of this?”

Deck met Jaytsy’s eyes. “She and our baby are my family now, Perrin. I go with her.”

“It’ll be worth it, Deck,” Mahrree said. “I’m sure they have cattle

in Salem.” She turned to Perrin. “Don’t they?”

Perrin shrugged. “If not, we can come back and steal some, as good Guardians should.” He was sure that’d elicit a smile from Peto.

He was wrong.

“Peto, Please, trust me—this is the only option,” his father said.

“According to Shem, *the liar?*”

“Yes, yes, yes—he’s a liar. Point made! Shem was quite forthcoming last night, confessing a lot and explaining a great deal of his behavior. I choose to trust him. He was never dishonest in his feelings toward us.”

“So why isn’t he here now?” Peto’s gray eyes hard with animosity. “Why isn’t he convincing me of his plan?”

“Because he’s on duty, trying to spy *for us*. The garrison is making life uncomfortable for Thorne, disappointed in his poor leadership. Chances are he’ll try to do something noteworthy and stupid, and it might involve us. We need to get out of the way so that we’re not a target.” It was close enough to the truth that only half of Perrin’s muscles stiffened.

Peto shrugged at that and let his gaze wander back to the ground.

“Peto?”

Reluctantly he looked at his father.

“You have to go. I realize you’re legally an adult now, but as your father I’m order—I’m *asking* you: please, come with us.”

“Peto,” Mahrree said, “you know it’s the right thing, don’t you?”

“No,” he said flatly. “But you’re not going to take no for an answer, are you?”

“Nope,” Mahrree said.

Peto sighed heavily and shook his head.

“I’ll take that as an agreement to leave with us,” Perrin decided.

“It’s for the best,” Mahrree assured him, once again overflowing with enthusiasm. “It’ll be an adventure!”

Perrin tilted his head in warning at her. At any moment she might burble something about Terryp’s land, and now just wasn’t *quite* the right time.

Mahrree clapped her hands cheerfully. “We need to get back to work! Can’t do anything suspicious or out of the ordinary!”

“Mother,” Peto said, “That sing-song voice is not only suspicious and out of the ordinary, it’s also annoying.”

“Ah-ha-ha-ha!”

Acting natural was easier said than done, Perrin realized later. At

“Last night, your mother and I had some visitors . . .”

midday meal, when he and the boys came in to eat, Jaytsy was sobbing at the stack of changing cloths she was folding, while Mahrree stroked her hair.

“I just told her she can’t take any of it with us.”

After they ate, Perrin spied Deck patting a cow ready to deliver soon, and Perrin offered a prayer that someone would notice the cattle needed a concerned rancher.

Peto said nothing while he slowly raked out the stalls, often stopping in his work and sighing in frustration.

And when Perrin came into the Briters’ house to wash up, he found Mahrree weeping in their pantry.

“What are we doing?” she wailed. “We’re really leaving?”

“Didn’t you want to play Terryp?” he reminded her.

“I can’t remember what I want sometimes,” she sniffled. “No, we’re going. We’re going. Oh, but I haven’t visited the burial grounds to tell my parents!”

“Don’t you think they already know, Mahrree?”

But he felt it too, the wildly swinging moods like an axe on a rope during a land tremor. Yet there was no way they were staying. Edge had turned its back on them, and the world would be here in the morning to take them to Idumea and try them for sedition. He hadn’t heard anything from Karna, Yordin, or Fadh since he resigned. Shem had said they were ordered not to correspond with him. But surely *one* of them would have been clever enough to circumvent the Administrators and send him *something*.

Never mind, he told himself as he repaired the fencing on the west side of a pasture. If only he could see Clark, his massive black horse, one last time. Maybe Offra would still take care of him.

Perrin scratched the ears of wide-eyed Clover who had warily wandered over to see what he was up to. She was the first and likely last cow that he’d ever successfully milked. Perrin wished that somehow Clark could hear his muttered, “Thanks for everything. You’re a marvelous animal. I’m sure going to miss you.”

The other thought that nagged him all afternoon was, Where is Salem? Through the mountains? How were they supposed to get past the massive boulder field at the base of the mountains? And the forest before it, always patrolled by soldiers?

In frustration he yanked too hard on the rope he was tightening and gave himself a mild burn. He sucked on his palm until the heat went down.

Where's Salem? Where's Salem?

For dinner the five of them walked to the Shins' home as naturally as possible to have their last meal together in the house they would never see again. Jaytsy and Deckett didn't even look back at the Briter farm for a final goodbye.

Two soldiers recently posted on either side of their drive were watching too intently.

"And where do you think you're going? Hew Gleace, turn around!"

Gleace stopped, frozen in position with his hand on the door. Reluctantly he released the knob and turned to face his wife.

"Dearest, it's tonight—"

"I know it's tonight. *Everyone* knows it's tonight. So where in the world do you think you're going?" She eyed his clothing—all black—and folded her arms.

"But we haven't 'killed' a taking in such a long time."

"Oh, I wish you'd stop saying it like that!"

Hew smiled apologetically. "Everything we've been working for, *for years*, ends tonight. Every available man is needed—"

"You are *not* available!" Mrs. Gleace insisted.

He held up his hands. "Who's in charge of all of this?"

She tightened her folded arms. "You're too old. You haven't done this kind of work in years. It's too dangerous." Her voice quivered. "You're needed here more!"

"Dearest, there are others here who can—"

"No they can't!" she insisted. "Please don't go. The Shins will be taken care of. This is younger men's work."

A frantic pounding came at the front door. Hew yanked it open to see a middle-aged man holding a hat in his hands.

"We need you—now!"

Gleace sighed and sent his wife an accusatory glare. To the man he said, "The new stock from Sands?"

"She's one of the best we've had in years, Gleace! If we lose her and the calf—"

"I know, I know." Gleace grudgingly took up his straw hat and pulled on an old jacket over his black clothes. "Can't afford to lose the new bloodlines after all we did to get them here." With a glance

“Last night, your mother and I had some visitors . . .”

back at his wife, he murmured, “It’s calving season, after all.”

As the man hurried away, Mrs. Gleace brought her husband his work gloves.

“You did this, didn’t you?” he said, only slightly put out as he slid on a glove.

“What, you think I put that cow into distress?”

“No, but you’d pray for something like that.”

The slender, wrinkled woman’s eyes gentled. “I *may* have asked the Creator to remind you that your duty lies here first . . .”

He kissed her quickly on the cheek. “Don’t wait up.”

When he’d shut the door behind him, his wife looked up at the ceiling. “Thank you!”

Chapter 2--“Oh, I’m trying to be helpful.”

Peto entered his room, knowing it would be one of the last times he ever would. He wished that the moment was somehow more *momentous*, but his room didn’t seem to understand he was about to leave it. The kickball given to him by Relf in Idumea didn’t even do anything but sit sedately on the shelf.

“Peto?” Perrin called him from the eating room table. “Come out here when you can. I’ve got something to show you before dinner.”

“In a minute,” Peto said. He closed his door, walked over to the wardrobe, and saw the corner of the parchment envelope under a folded jacket belonging to a suit hopelessly too small for him. He patted the jacket with brass buttons one last time, slid out the envelope, and peered inside at Relf Shin’s recorded dream about his son becoming the greatest general that Idumea—*that the world*—would ever see. Along the top were still scrawled the names of Lek and Lorixania Shin: the first Shin general, and his wife, whose family were Guarder traitors.

He sat down heavily on his bed and sighed. “Grandfather?” he whispered, hoping that somehow he could pull him from Paradise, wherever that was.

Feeling a bit more mature, he tried, “Relf?”

He held up the envelope.

“We’ve got a problem, sir. I’ve been mulling it over all day, and I think I’ve figured out what’s going on. I hate to say this, but . . . your son is scared. He’s scared to stay, he knows he doesn’t have a future here, and I think that man Jothan he told us about has him shaking in his boots, but he won’t admit it. He’s holding back stuff, I can tell. Maybe he’s been threatened? And as for my mother—well, she’s a bit batty today, I’ll be honest. I think she’s so desperate for something to happen that she’s jumping into this without thinking.

“Oh, I’m trying to be helpful.”

“But *I’ve* been thinking, Relf, and now I think I understand why you gave this to me.” He waved the envelope. “I’m the only one in this house still in his right mind, the only one who could be trusted with this information. My parents are walking into a trap, into a mess bigger than we’re leaving, and it’s up to me to save them from that.”

He leaned back on his bed, feeling confident.

“I’ll go with them until I can find proof that this is all a big mistake. Then . . . well, we’ll need a way to escape all of this. Will you be able to help?”

The cosmos didn’t answer, but Peto would’ve been surprised if it had.

“I’ll just have to trust that the correct solution will present itself, and that I can knock some sense into my parents at the right time. Until then, I’ll gather evidence. And if I can’t convince Father, I’m sure I can enlist Karna, Fadh, and Yordin to get through to him.”

He carefully stuffed the envelope into his shirt pocket. “Yes, it’s going with me, just like you said it should. And when the time’s right, I may pull it out and show him what you said he *should* be doing instead of *running away* like a . . .”

He couldn’t bring himself to say the “c” word.

The silence in the room said it for him.

“Guess I better see what Father wanted to show me,” Peto whispered as he got off his bed.

Halfway to his door a thought banged so abruptly into his mind that he stumbled. If he actually heard the words, or if he just imagined them, he wasn’t sure. But he couldn’t deny the question: *So where did Lorixania’s family run away to?*

Peto staggered.

His great-great-great grandfather didn’t retrieve them, as King Querul had ordered. That’s why Lek Shin’s name was lost to history. So that meant his in-laws got away.

That *could* mean they were—

“In Salem?!” Peto gasped. “*If* Salem really exists,” he added, still wrestling with that possibility. “Relf worried that his ancestors were Guarders, but the first Guarders actually ran away to Salem, which means . . . which means that *if* all of this *is* true, then we may have family there already.”

He sat clumsily on his bed, never before feeling so disoriented. It was as if someone had stood him on his head and said, “Ah, there. *Now* you see the world as it really is. Funny how you lasted seventeen

years seeing everything upside down and didn't know it.”

“Suddenly I'm not so sure about anything anymore.”

He was surprised to hear those words come from his mouth, and to feel his previous plans, revised many times today, growing fuzzy in his mind.

“Grandfather? What do I do next?”

The last time he felt Relf Shin was on the kickball field when he impressed Peto with the notion of *Wait*. The word once again filled Peto's mind, and he wasn't sure if he was just imagining that.

“So . . . *wait* for more evidence to help convince my parents all of this is a horrible idea? Or *wait* to—”

“Peto?” Perrin called again from the eating room. “I'd really like you to come see this.”

Peto sighed. “Wait,” he said to himself. “As usual. All right.” In a louder voice he said, “Coming, Father.” He patted the envelope, concealed by his pocket, and opened his bedroom door.

In the gathering room, Jaytsy was sobbing, *again*, as she kneeled next to the completed cradle made by their father that her baby would never sleep in.

“Can't we just take this? As the only thing?” she begged.

Deck bit his lip, and Peto knew why. Deck had eyed the small-scale incarceration unit over the past few weeks. While Perrin wanted it strong enough to withstand a major land tremor, Peto thought it would also make a suitable cage for rabid bobcats.

It probably didn't help that Peto had once said to Deck, “Good thing it's so sturdy. Mother told me some of the stories about Jaytsy and me when we were little, and that cradle *might* have contained us. But don't worry; your baby will probably not be nearly as much trouble as your wife was.”

Besides, the thing was so bulky it would have taken all three men to drag it up to the Briters.

Mahrree, patting farewell to each book that had belonged to her father, smiled miserably. “No, Jayts. Nothing goes with us.”

Deck, standing next to the table, sighed quietly in relief.

“We have to maintain the appearance of being kidnapped,” Mahrree reminded them. “The only things we can take are some personal papers that no strangers would notice missing. Your father can make a new cradle in Salem.”

Perrin nodded as he looked at the table, not yet set for dinner.

“Oh, I’m trying to be helpful.”

When Peto saw what was laid out on top of it, he gasped. “Terryp’s map! *You really have it!*”

“I thought you’d like to see it at least once before you never see it again,” Perrin smiled.

Deck chuckled and bent over for a closer look. “It’s amazing. I can’t believe you really stole this and kept it all these years.”

Peto couldn’t help himself. “And in *our* house,” he laughed. “Terryp. *Unbelievable!*”

Jaytsy wiped away her tears as she joined them. “I don’t know what’s more shocking,” she said. “That our father took this from the garrison storage room when he was younger, or that our mother abandoned us when we were small to find a Guarder in the forest.”

Mahrree spun around. “I’ve told you, I would never have abandoned you!” she defended herself for the ninth time. “I just, just—”

Their parents had been confessing a lot of things today.

“Yes, yes, yes, we know,” Jaytsy said. “*Wanted to know the truth.* You know, Peto, some people worry about rebellious teenagers, but you and me?”

Peto shook his head with feigned sadness. “Rebellious *parents.* They are *out of control,*” he added with emphasis that no one noticed.

“We need to leave this place that has influenced them in the very worst of ways,” Jaytsy rolled her eyes dramatically.

“All right, all right,” Perrin nodded at his laughing family. “Yet another reason why we need to leave. And unfortunately, we also have to leave Terryp. You know, Shem said he knew I was the one who made the copy.”

Mahrree turned from her book patting. “How?”

“By the arrows. He said whenever I made arrows on our plans, ten percent of them wouldn’t be fully closed. When he saw the copy of the map the Expedition brought to my office, he had a suspicion and counted the arrows. Of the eighteen arrows, two weren’t completely closed.”

“He concluded by two arrows that you made the map?” Peto squinted. “Why did you tell him you had the original?”

“I told you, Peto—he already figured it out. Last night we shared a lot of secrets,” Perrin said, noticeably uncomfortable.

“And what kind of secrets did he reveal *to you?*”

Perrin’s gaze flicked over to him. “Now’s not the time, son.”

“Why not? We should get to know some of Shem’s dark little secrets, shouldn’t we? He knew all of ours!” Immediately Peto knew

he'd pushed it too far; his father's glare had gone steely.

"*Not tonight*, Peto!"

Peto had seen that behavior before, in an injured wolf limping along the edge of Edge. The closer anyone got to it, the more it snarled and sheltered its hurt leg. A noble and naive doctor *was* trying to help it, until it bit off one of his fingers.

Peto didn't feel like losing any appendages tonight, so he sat down at the table to be closer to the map. It was full of possibilities, calling to him—nearly screaming—and no one else heard it?

"Father," he said quietly, tracing the drawings of stacked pyramids Terryp had labeled *temples*, "I would have gone with you on The Great Shin Expedition of 338 to Terryp's land."

Perrin softened and smiled. "Thank you. Perhaps we still can."

"*You know*," Peto said, looking up at him, but Perrin was staring longingly at the map, as if putting off burying a loved one at a funeral. "We *still* can. You have to leave Edge? Then let's leave, but go to Terryp's land instead of going with these Salem people."

His father sighed, and it seemed to Peto that he wasn't really hearing him. "They said, uh . . . they said *they'll* take us themselves. Tours and campsites and lectures." He waved aimlessly. "We'll still get there, son. Later."

"But let's take the map, Father. You and me and—"

"The map stays," said Perrin dully. "Shem's suggestion. People will be searching the house, looking for clues. When they find this, they'll be speculating for a long time as to why I had it."

"That was Shem's idea?" Peto clarified. "To leave this map?"

"Yeah."

Peto rested his chin on his fist. *Shem's idea*. He didn't like this, not one bit. Why leave behind such a valuable document, just as a clue? Leave behind the copies his father made—that's enough!

But by the look in his wistful and—dare he think it?—*sad* eyes, Perrin Shin wasn't going to do anything today that someone else didn't *order* him to. He was so meek, so trusting, so . . .

Peto couldn't look at him anymore.

"I can't believe we're leaving without saying goodbye to Shem," Jaytsy sniffed.

Peto scoffed quietly to himself.

"He has to lead the patrols away from where we're going," Perrin told her. "And since the maneuvers he scheduled were usually in the west, I'm assuming the route starts somewhere in the east."

“Oh, I’m trying to be helpful.”

Under his breath, Peto said, “Yet another one of Shem’s ideas.” Deck winced. “East? All that’s east are the marshes.”

“And nobody ever goes into the marshes,” Peto pointed out. “Well, except for teenagers hiding from their parents.”

“And how often did you hide there from me?” Perrin dropped casually.

“I hate mosquitoes, you know that. I hid at Rector Yung’s most of the time.”

“Mahrree, our children are right. Edge had been a terrible influence. It made our son hide out at a rector’s home, of all places.”

Peto had to smile at that. “And Yung’s really from Salem? He’s gone back there?”

“Apparently,” Perrin shrugged again.

“And what kind of evidence do we have of that?”

His father, still staring forlornly at the map, waved that away. “Guess we’ll have that evidence when we see him there. And now Terryp, my dear friend who I never met, I bid you a fond farewell.” He ran his hand over the map one last time. “You have inspired so many. Never feel you didn’t accomplish anything. You don’t know how many lives you touched.”

Peto’s eyes burned to hear his father’s voice tremble.

Perrin slid the mugs off the corners of the map, rolled it up, and nestled it with the copies he made but never sent. They watched in silence as he somberly walked the rolls to his study, and Peto realized the funeral was over. Hearing his mother sniffing, he watched her wipe her eyes and hurry off to the kitchen to check on dinner.

At the table, Peto massaged his hands and brooded quietly.

Jaytsy set the table for dinner around him.

When their father came out of the study, his eyes were noticeably redder, and he was folding a stack of pages.

“What’s that?” Jaytsy asked, balancing a plate on Peto’s hands.

“My parents’ letters to me over the years, and a few lists from my mother,” he told her.

“I have some of their letters, too,” Jaytsy said, nudging over her brother’s arm to put down a fork. “And a few recipes from Grandmother Peto. Could you be any more unhelpful?” she snapped at Peto.

“Oh, I’m trying to be helpful,” he grumbled. “You have no idea.”

Perrin turned to Deck, who had come from the washroom. “You brought your parents’ letters with you, right?”

He nodded as he patted his shirt and unbuttoned a few buttons.

“And my father’s journal.” He extracted a thick book that reduced the size of his chest and stomach by several inches. “I hope it’s not too large for Jothan’s pack.”

“I thought Deck looked a bit beefier tonight,” Peto said. But in his mind he was shouting, *You too, Deck? You’re really buying into all of this as well? It’s madness!*

Perrin nodded to Deck. “We’ll make sure Cambozola’s journal goes with us, along with Hycymum’s recipe collection. She’d be furious if we left that behind for just *anyone* to find.” He turned to Peto. “Do you have anything to bring?”

“Nothing for the pack. I think you have all the family records.”

“Your mother has a few things she said she’s carrying in her pockets,” Perrin nodded. “I suppose that’s everything then.”

It was all Peto could do to not massage his head in aggravation. Like trusting little lambs, all of them. Willing to follow the guard dog Shem, who was most likely a wolf. And not an injured one, either. A cunning, healthy wolf *lying* in wait.

None of this was going to end well, none of it. But so far, Peto didn’t know yet how to stop it.



Never before had dinner been over so quickly, Mahrree thought, as they cleaned up the dishes. Everything she did, she realized, was for the last time. Wiping the work table. Sweeping the floor. Putting away the mugs. Never before had tidying up felt so important.

That’s why she continued into the gathering room, straightening books and folding blankets.

“Why?” Perrin asked. “Whoever searches the house tomorrow won’t be taking notes on how well you kept it up.”

She smacked him with a pillow she was fluffing before she set it down next to him on the sofa. “Because . . . well, this sounds silly, but I bought this house twenty-five years ago, and it’s been very good to me, and . . . I want to say goodbye to it properly.”

Peto rolled his eyes.

“And is that why Jaytsy,” Deck spoke up, “is in the washing room wiping down the sink?”

Mahrree shrugged. “That, or the nesting instinct is really taking over. She was using the scrub brush. I didn’t think it was that dirty.”

“Oh, I’m trying to be helpful.”

Through the kitchen door came Jaytsy, brush in hand and surprise on her face, because she wasn’t alone. Slipping in silently behind her was a small, dark woman, dressed like the night.

“I didn’t even hear her come in!” Jaytsy exclaimed. “Suddenly, there she was in the kitchen!”

Perrin was already on his feet, nodding to the woman. “Everyone, this is Asrar. She was here last night. Wait a minute—there are two soldiers posted in the back garden. How’d you get past them?”

Asrar beamed with delight, her black eyes nearly glowing. “The Creator gives us gifts and talents,” she said. “Mine, it seems, is becoming invisible when I need to be.”

“Asrar,” Mahrree said, “that must have been a wonderful trick when you were the mother of six young children.”

“Six!” Peto whispered.

“So Shem told me. Sorry,” Perrin said to Asrar, “but I demanded some details and shared them with my family.”

She smiled broadly. “And tonight I’ll answer nearly any question you ask me, in the limited time we have.”

“I’ve got one,” Peto said. “Where’s this place Salem?”

Asrar patted him on the arm. “I said *nearly* any question. Shem warned me about you.”

“Oh, he *did*? Not surprising.”

Mahrree cleared her throat. “I’m sorry, Asrar. I’m not sure why my son is so unpleasant tonight.” She jabbed him in the ribs.

“Trust me, Mother,” Jaytsy said. “It’s not just tonight.”

But Asrar was busy fumbling with something under the large black cloak she wore. She produced a bundle wrapped in cloth.

“What’s this?” Mahrree asked.

“Your disguises. You’ll be easy to see,” she aimed her nod at Jaytsy, “should anyone be looking for you, especially in that orange.”

Jaytsy shrugged in agreement as she glanced down at her billowy top and ample skirt.

“These clothes are far better for traveling,” Asrar explained as she handed out a tight bundle to each of them. “If you could put them on now, I can make any modifications if needed. I also happen to be gifted with a needle,” she added modestly.

Peto was the slowest to accept his, but Deck was already undoing the string holding his bundle together, smiling curiously at it.

“Jaytsy and I will change upstairs,” Mahrree said. “You boys can change in Peto’s bedroom.”

“And I’ll need what you’re changing out of,” Asrar told them.

Mahrree, who was already on the stairs, stopped and turned, and noticed that Perrin had paused on his way to Peto’s bedroom.

“Why?” he asked, full of suspicion.

Asrar’s gaze darted between both of them. “I was told not to tell you, but I can see already that you won’t agree unless I do. We’re dressing decoys for you.”

Perrin tilted his head. “For all of us?”

“As a precaution. In case anyone notices you’re missing, we’ll have some of our scouts dressed as your family in the same clothing that you were seen in earlier. If complications arise—” and something in her tone made the hair on Mahrree’s neck prickle, “—the decoys can lead the soldiers on false trails.”

Jaytsy paled. “You won’t have a pregnant woman for my decoy, will you?”

“No, a middle-aged man with a bit of a pot belly, I’m afraid,” Asrar smiled. “If it makes you feel better,” she added when she saw Jaytsy’s face screw up into dismay, “he’s not entirely thrilled about it either. Especially when his wife made him a black ponytail wig from a real pony’s tail.”

It was only the second time that day that Mahrree had heard Peto laugh. She asked Asrar, “Is there another middle-aged man for me?”

“Actually, a short, slender scout in his mid-twenties,” Asrar said. “His wife is most anxious to see him in a dress, so he just may have to try to bring some of it back for her.”

Now Deck was trying not to snicker, and even Perrin cracked a smile, but Mahrree wondered why only *some of it*.

“And what about a decoy for me?” Perrin asked.

“You were a bit harder,” Asrar admitted. “But we found someone who could pass for you, in the dark, and from a distance. We’re most blessed that we’re moving you on a moons-less night. The darkness works in our favor. Usually,” she added.

Perrin heard her hesitancy. “What’s wrong?”

“It’s just that we haven’t used decoys in a very long time. There’s a bit of concern, that’s all.”

“What,” Peto said, still sniggering, “that someone will realize Guardsers like to dress up as women in their spare time?”

“No,” Asrar said. “That one of them may not return to Salem. Soldiers tend to panic in situations like this and act rashly when they realize they’ve been deceived.”

“Oh, I’m trying to be helpful.”

Peto’s expression had never before sobered so quickly. “You’re for real, aren’t you? All of this?”

Mahrree frowned at her son’s strange questions.

Asrar fixed on a radiant smile, although she blinked at Peto. “Yes? Every man out here tonight is a willing and eager volunteer. It will be, no doubt, the most memorable move since the first guards smuggled away Guide Pax. So please don’t worry! Now go and get dressed. We have less than an hour.”

Up in her bedroom Mahrree opened the bundle and held up the first item: a simple brown tunic which gave her a twinge of guilt. While her dresses were never as elaborate as Joriana’s Idumean creations, or even Hycymum’s imports from Scrub, Mahrree’s clothes were far more fancy than this. But the stitching was strong, the design practical, and the brown, rough weave reminded her of soil.

“I like it,” Jaytsy decided. She opened her bundle and pulled out her top. It was a similar style, but looser and in dark mottled green. “Plenty of room for my belly, but it doesn’t look fat. I already like these people.”

Mahrree chuckled and pulled out the skirt. But it wasn’t a skirt. She exchanged alarmed looks with Jaytsy before opening the door. “Asrar?” she called.

Asrar came quietly up the stairs.

“Is this right?” Mahrree asked. “Trousers?”

Chuckling, Asrar said, “Only *men* wear *trousers*, Mahrree. Women wear ‘breeches’ when traveling. Does that make you feel better?” She gestured to her own which, until that moment, Mahrree had assumed was a skirt.

“Yes, thank you!” Mahrree laughed.

Jaytsy was already evaluating her ‘breeches.’ “Look how much more room I have to grow in these,” she giggled as she demonstrated the adjustable waistband.

Mahrree slipped off her dress, the light blue linen that Joriana had purchased for her in Idumea, soon to be worn by some poor young man. She pulled on the tunic and the breeches, and immediately she was gripped with an unexpected sense of lightness, of—there it was again—joy. She glanced at herself in the mirror and saw a completely different Mahrree. She grinned.

Jaytsy twirled in her flowing green. “This feels really nice. I wonder what Deck will say to my ‘breeches’.” She looked at her outfit on the bed. “That orange really *is* rather garish.” She bundled it

under her arm, as Mahrree was doing with the blue linen.

But they both found themselves staring at the red and blue plaid bedding, chosen by Hycymum and put on their bed after the room was rebuilt after the land tremor.

“Goodbye, Mother,” Mahrree murmured, running her hand along it. “You and Father and the Shins will watch over us tonight, won’t you?”

“And the Briters, too,” Jaytsy sniffled as she fingered the ruffle on the matching curtains. “We take all of them with us.”

A moment later Mahrree and Jaytsy came out of the upstairs bedroom, wiping their noses, and handed their clothing to Asrar. They followed her down the stairs to find the men dressed and waiting.

They each seemed a bit embarrassed yet lighter-hearted in their new apparel. Deck’s light blue work shirt was replaced by a dark green tunic and trousers which matched his wife’s. Peto fidgeted with his loose brown shirt that matched his trousers, and Perrin was dressed in nearly pure black. His eyebrows lifted in surprise at his wife’s breeches.

Mahrree posed. “Do you think they’ll ever become popular around here?”

“I’ve seen women in some ridiculous outfits,” Perrin said tonelessly, “with skirts up past their knees and necklines down to where no honest man should be looking, but women in *trousers*?”

“Breeches!” the three women said together and chuckled at Perrin’s vigorous head shaking.

But Deck was eyeing his wife. “Oh, I don’t know, Perrin. Tell me, Asrar, do all women dress this way in Salem?”

Jaytsy put her hands on her hips. “Why do you want to know? You already have a wife.”

“No,” Asrar told him, “most women wear dresses most of the time. This is just for practical purposes.”

Deck nodded. “I have always appreciated practical women.”

Jaytsy stared at him, bemused.

Asrar gathered the men’s bundles and slipped all of the clothing under her roomy cloak, exchanging them for yet another bundle.

Mahrree wondered just how much woman there was under there. She was likely the diameter of a stick, filled out only by all she carried.

Asrar unwrapped the new bundle to reveal dull black cloth. She unfurled one and it turned out to be a heavy cloak with sleeves.

“Oh, I’m trying to be helpful.”

“The more you can look like the night, the easier it is to move you.” She pulled out three more cloaks and handed them to everyone but Perrin. “You’ll find these are quite warm.”

Perrin held out his hand.

She smiled. “Former Colonel Shin, please go get your uniform jacket. You still have it, I assume?”

“What?”

“Your uniform jacket. Please go get it.”

“But the medals and ribbons will show up almost as much as Jaysy’s large orange belly would have,” he deadpanned.

“Father! I’m still in the room, can’t you see?”

“Of course we can see,” Peto said. “In fact, we can barely see around you.”

But Perrin was already up the stairs and returned a moment later with his jacket in hand.

“Now please turn it inside out,” Asrar said.

“Inside out?” As he pulled the first sleeve wrong side out he began to smile. Quickly he reversed the entire jacket to reveal a dull black coat, matching his new tunic and trousers perfectly.

“Shem’s been doing that for years, whenever he came to the forest,” Asrar explained. “We thought you’d like to take the jacket with you. Many people in Salem owe their lives to you wearing it.”

“Rather symbolic and ironic,” he said, his voice growing gruff. “I just need to reverse all I ever did, become what I chased—”

Mahrree smiled. “Perrin, you never looked better in that jacket.”

Asrar turned to her. “Oh dear. Mahrree, please come upstairs with me. I see a loose seam already, but we have time to fix that.”

Mahrree twisted to see her shoulders, but Asrar was already leading her up the stairs.

“I don’t see anything,” Mahrree said, as they went into the bedroom.

“I’m sorry, but I needed an excuse to get you up here alone. Mahrree, Shem’s told me that in your bottom drawer you have *something*,” Asrar raised her eyebrows meaningfully, “that will help us get your family past the guards posted around your home.”

Mahrree’s mouth dropped open but she snapped it shut. “I was wondering how we would get past them. Not all of us have your invisible talent. But yes, I do.” She pulled out the bottom drawer, and from beneath her underclothing she withdrew the dark bottle. “I don’t know how potent it is anymore. It’s a couple of years old.”

“We need it to work for only a short while,” Asrar said, gingerly taking the half-full bottle of sedation. “From what we’ve been able to gather, sedation grows more *unstable* the older it gets.” In a murmur she added, “Rather surprising that this bottle is still intact—”

“What was that? Unstable? What happens?”

“Oh, nothing to worry about, nothing to worry about! However, the sooner I get it away, the better.”

If there was nothing to worry about, Mahrree privately wondered, then why was she cautiously wrapping the bottle in raw cotton before sliding it into a pocket?

“My husband was prepared to do something more drastic to eliminate the guards,” Asrar said as she fastened a hidden button on the pocket, “but I hope this will keep him from having to do so.”

Mahrree stared at the bulge that virtually disappeared on the woman’s thigh. “This day is full of irony. I tried many times to throw that bottle away, but each time I thought, ‘No, we’ll need it again.’ Now sedation from Idumea just may be our means of escape from it.”

“The Creator works in mysterious ways, Mahrree,” Asrar agreed. “He thinks of everything, and plans well in advance.”

Asrar left the house a few minutes later, slipping past the guards in the dark who didn’t even notice her.

And then the Shins waited.

They told stories and reminisced—carefully, so as to not cause Mahrree or Jaytsy to break into weeping again—about annoyances and people they’d never have to deal with again. By midnight they were convinced nowhere was worse than Edge. Good riddance.

Before Jothan arrived, Mahrree made one last sweep of the house, patting everything in the dark. The candles had been blown out, hopefully sending a signal to the soldiers that the Shins had gone to bed, and that the Briters were staying there for the night.

Mahrree sighed as she wandered the house that she had so loved, that had sheltered her for so long—

She expected to be more emotional about leaving it, but instead was surprised that she was so composed. It was just a house, but it deserved a proper goodbye.

It was in the study, while patting part of her father’s book collection, that her hand stopped on one book. She’d begun reading it a couple of years ago during one of Perrin’s bad nights. It was a tale from the Great War about a woman whose parents and sisters were discovered to be Guarders. The woman’s husband was an officer

“Oh, I’m trying to be helpful.”

tasked to find and bring back his wife’s family. Mahrree had been mildly intrigued by the angry daughter who wanted her family to be captured and tried for their crimes; her husband who began to question the intentions of the Guardians—perhaps suspecting they were innocent people merely trying to run away, Mahrree mused now; his sergeant, eager for the king’s reward gold, who pushed the officer as hard as his wife had.

But she never finished the story, and now she realized she never would. She began to pull the book from the shelf, hoping in her final minutes to find out what happened—

“My darling wife, there’s no time.” Perrin’s large hand came over hers. “It’s simply too late.”

Reluctantly she nodded to the book whose ending she’d never know. “Sometimes it just hits me how much I’m leaving behind.”

“Remember, it’s only things. What you’re really attached to are the people who lived here, and they’re going with you.”

“True.” Another thought struck Mahrree. “Perrin, what about The Cat?”

He sighed. “Shem will try to get him to live at the fort. I haven’t even seen The Cat since midday meal. He was taking care of a mouse over at the Briters’. In any case, he’ll eat fine.”

“Are you going to miss him?”

“I think I will. When we get to Salem I guess we’ll have to find another kitten.”

But The Cat was the least of Perrin’s worries right now. He was feeling more antsy and eager as each minute slipped by. Genev and his guards and carriages were on their way, arriving in Edge by dawn. If Mahrree had known that, she wouldn’t have been so sentimental right now. She’d be clawing at the door to get it out of her way.

Peto’s voice came from the dark doorway. He had been spending his last few moments bouncing Relf’s kickball against his bedroom walls which, until yesterday, was against the rules. “Someone’s here. I guess it’s Jothan.”

Together, Perrin and Mahrree took deep breaths.

“This is it,” Perrin said, squeezing her arm. “The ending of everything, the beginning of everything—”

“Well then,” Mahrree said as brightly as possible, “let’s go.”

In the kitchen, where a small candle was burning, they found Jothan already greeting Jaytsy and Deck.

Peto stopped abruptly. "Father, he's huge!" he whispered.

"I know. Good thing he's on our side, isn't it?" Perrin whispered back. "I'm not sure I could take him."

Jothan heard him. "I wondered that myself last night," he grinned. "And you must be Peto," he said extending his hand. Peto took it warily. "Don't worry, I *am* on your side."

"Uh-huh," said Peto, with great reservation.

Perrin caught Jothan's eye. "I spoke with Shem last night, about a *great many things*." He hesitated. Jothan had saved his body on one occasion, and saved his mind on another. Perrin owed him his life already twice, and now he was handing it over a third time.

Not knowing what else to say, Perrin extended his hand, hoping Jothan would understand that his handshake was more than just a show of faith. It was a sign of immense gratitude.

Almost sheepishly, Jothan shook his hand.

But Perrin was also curious. Still gripping it, he turned Jothan's hand to see a thin white scar on his dark brown skin.

It was Perrin's blade that had made that scar, seventeen years ago, when he blindly thrust his long knife behind him in a vain attempt to stab in the face the Guarder who was attacking him in the snowy forest. Perrin had been sent an anonymous note warning him there were twelve Guarders sent to kill his wife and daughter, but there'd been fourteen, instead. Salem knew that, and sent Perrin help in the form of dozens of men.

While Perrin didn't know that, he'd suspected someone was helping him when he couldn't eliminate the threat by himself. Someone had taken out that massive Guarder who had been choking Perrin at the end. There had been a shallow slice on the man's face, but now it was obvious that Jothan had taken the brunt of Perrin's slash in his hand. And then, without a groan of pain, Jothan stabbed Perrin's Guarder in the throat and ran off.

Mahrree peered over to see in the faint light the scar Perrin had told her about earlier. "Dear Creator, it really was him!"

Peto glanced over as well. "Interesting," was all he whispered.

Looking up into Jothan's eyes, Perrin hoping he could convey enough admiration and appreciation.

Jothan just nodded once. "Now that *that's* out of the way," he said to the others, prying his hand from Perrin's grip before he could

“Oh, I’m trying to be helpful.”

say anything more about it, “let me tell you what’s next.”

Perrin grinned at the quick change of topic.

“I’ve taken care of the soldiers guarding the house,” Jothan said. “There were eight tonight—”

Perrin’s grin vanished. “What did you do?” It wasn’t as if they were still *his* soldiers, but he did know most of them.

“Sedation,” Jothan assured him. “Shem stole some from the surgeon. They each dropped quietly, but we’re not sure for how long.”

Perrin nodded in approval and wondered why Mahrree suddenly grew so fidgety.

“We’ll first go east to the canals at the far side of Edge. It’s important that we move very quietly,” Jothan explained. “Jaytsy, you best take care of your needs now. You won’t have the opportunity to do so again for some time.”

Jaytsy giggled. “I already did, ten minutes ago.”

Jothan tilted his head patiently. “Jaytsy, my wife was expecting six times. I’ve been moving women in your condition for five years. I know that ten minutes ago would be like eight hours to your husband. One more time. Please.”

Jaytsy nodded and rushed to the washing room.

“Sir,” Deckett said to Jothan, “my confidence in you just went up significantly. You know what you’re doing, don’t you?”

Jothan patted Deck on the back. “I do.”

But Peto folded his arms. “So . . . what exactly is it that you do?”

“Uh, Peto?” said Deck. “He just told us.”

“Yes, but is that *all* he does? *Move people?*”

“Just what are you getting at?”

Perrin cleared his throat. “That’s what I’m wondering, too, son.”

“I’m *gathering information*. Isn’t that what you should do before you start on some big change in life? Gather information about it?”

“Jothan,” Mahrree said, “may I apologize for my son? He’s been a bit . . .” She bobbed her head.

“I’ve been a bit . . .!” and Peto snapped his head back and forth.

But Jothan only smiled. “It’s been an unusual day for everyone, I’m sure.”

Jaytsy reappeared in the kitchen, and Jothan said to her, “Your journey on foot will be of a bit of a distance, but then you’ll have a comfortable ride the rest of the way,” he promised. “Let me know if you start having any kind of pains. But first, we pray.”

The Shins and Briters stared at each other as Jothan, without hesitation, dropped to his knees as if it were an everyday occurrence to announce a prayer and immediately begin one.

Quickly everyone else joined him, and Jothan said to Perrin, “This is your home, but do you mind if I offer it?”

Perrin shrugged his agreement.

“Dear Creator,” Jothan began before anyone could close their eyes, “we’re here, and we’re ready. We’ve done all we could to prepare, and now we turn it all over to Your hands. The culmination of many years’ work is coming together tonight, and dear Creator? It’s going to be messy, isn’t it!”

Mahrree was tempted to peek to see if the Creator were actually there, because Jothan’s tone was so convivial, as if he were good friends with the Creator.

Then again, Mahrree thought, shouldn’t we all be?

“—So if You could please help all of us keep our minds clear, our hearts open, and our stamina going, we’d be ever so grateful. And dear Creator,” Jothan continued, “if possible, would you please tell my grandfather that . . .”

Mahrree’s eyes popped open to see why Jothan had hesitated.

He was looking up at the ceiling and grinning broadly. “Tell my grandfather, ‘*We’ve got them!*’”

Perrin’s eyes flew open at that.

Peto murmured, “*I knew it!*”

Jothan chuckled—actually chuckled!—as he ended the prayer with, “Please help us to not mess any of this up. Thank you, sir, for this marvelous opportunity. Amen.”

“Amen,” was the quiet yet confused chorus from the Shins and Briters, who had never heard a prayer quite like that before.

“And now,” Jothan said, getting to his feet, “no more noise as we leave. No sound until we reach the safety of the forest.”

Peto gave his father a penetrating stare that he didn’t know what to do with, but there was no time to think but to follow Jothan, who noiselessly slipped out of the door to the back garden where four soldiers lay sprawled in the weeds.

Perrin quietly shut the door behind him and ran his hand along it. As soon as he let go of it, that would be the end—

He felt Mahrree squeeze his other hand, and she reached back and touched the door as well. “I’m sure they have oak doors in Salem,” she whispered.

“Oh, I’m trying to be helpful.”

Their children were already following Jothan out of the garden, stepping cautiously over two more soldiers. Mahrree let her hand slide down the door.

And Perrin removed his, clasping it into a fist. He gripped her hand tightly as he whispered in her ear, “Come Mrs. Terryp. Let’s find our new world.”

And neither of them looked back.

Chapter 3--“Shem told me you were conveniently gullible.”

They headed east out of the alley, passed two more snoring soldiers, crossed the main road that led to the fort, then ducked down another alley using the shadows to dart across dark roads.

Jothan lead the way with Peto behind him, Jaytsy and Deckett following, and Mahrree and Perrin bringing up the rear.

At one point Mahrree breathed to her husband, “I feel I should be saying goodbye to all of our neighbo—”

A dog barking in the distance hushed her before Perrin could. Jothan automatically crouched to the ground, and everyone followed suit. After a moment he slowly stood up, beckoned, and the Shins and Briters continued to practice their Guarder sneak to the east of Edge.

Mahrree tried not to notice in what part of Edge she was in. To keep her mind occupied, she instead imagined her new home. Asrar had told her it was completed, but Mahrree didn't dare ask about which way it faced, or what else it might look like, just in case the description didn't match the image from her dreams. But that didn't matter; the thought of a new home was overwhelming. Asrar explained that every family coming to Salem had a house built for them, and the Briters' would be finished next week.

Even Perrin was speechless when he heard that hundreds of people, formerly of the world, had come to put up a board or donate furnishings for Colonel Shin's new home.

Those thoughts made leaving their village, which ignored them for the past few weeks, easier. But Mahrree was still disappointed that Perrin hadn't heard anything from the other forts. Not even Karna had

“Shem told me you were conveniently gullible.”

sent them a message. Shem had told Perrin last night that he'd stopped in Mountseen to talk to Yordin, but Gari wasn't at the fort, and his wife told him he was out. At least, that's what she claimed.

When she ran through her mind the names and faces of all they knew, Mahrree concluded that they really weren't leaving anyone who would miss them. Maybe The Cat. And they'd see Shem again.

She clutched her husband's hand. He didn't need it now for drawing a sword. His old one was left behind. All weapons were.

Perrin squeezed her hand back as he scanned the neighborhoods. He had done it hundreds of times before, but always looking for people in black, never *being* one of them. He felt the odd mixture of relief and displeasure that none of the soldiers he trained so thoroughly noticed six people sneaking out of Edge.

Then again, Shem had told him they'd had some close calls in the past. When the soldiers should have seen something, it was if the Creator had turned their heads at the right moment, or distracted them long enough to slip a frightened child or a slow-moving mother into a pocket of trees.

Maybe, just maybe, Perrin *had* done a good enough job.

It's just that the Creator was sneakier.

He looked ahead at his daughter and wondered how well he could run if he carried her. Perhaps the Strongest Soldier race should have included hefting expecting women. He and Deck should be able to get her to safety if someone spotted them.

The thought made him nervous, and he picked up the rate of his perimeter scanning.

Jaytsy did her best to keep up behind Jothan, who timed his pace by her waddle. Only a few weeks earlier she could have hustled more quickly, but two days ago it was as if her belly fell forward, straining every muscle it was attached to. While grateful for the strong arm of her husband around her, her awkward gait kept throwing him off of his. After the fifth time of him whispering to ask if she was all right, she whispered back, “Assume that I am, unless you hear otherwise!”

More than once she contemplated heading back to take the journey another time. She wasn't the one in danger—it was her parents. *They* needed to leave now. She and Deck could sneak away with their baby at the end of the season, when she could run again. But her father had been adamant: no one stays behind.

Naturally they felt obligated to drag her along, even though she slowed them down. She didn't even look up as they passed her old school building. She just wanted out of Edge, and to not be the reason her family didn't escape.

But she knew she would be.

Deck wished he knew what was going on in his wife's mind. He wondered if he could carry her, but last week he tried to romantically whisk her up the stairs to their bedroom. It wasn't that she was too heavy, but that she was laughing so hard at his attempts to cradle her. Once he finally got her upstairs she rushed back down them to relieve herself in the washing room.

But by the severely determined look on her face tonight, there'd be no giggling. Twice she asked him if he really thought they were doing the right thing. And twice he told her he didn't want her birthing anywhere but Salem.

Deck tried not to think about his uncle Holling, aunt Lilla, and cousin Atlee. He'd been torn up all day imagining what losing another family member would do to them, and when Perrin asked him about that earlier this morning, Deck didn't dare admit that his family's response worried him. But he meant what he said: Jaytsy and their baby were his family now. Perhaps the Mountseen Briters would take comfort that Deck was "lost" with his wife.

Over a year ago, when he told his uncle about Jaytsy and asked what his father would think if he asked Jaytsy to marry him, Uncle Holling said, "Do whatever you need to have a family again. Follow her and her parents to Idumea if you must. Cambo and Suzie would be thrilled. I'm certainly relieved to see that spark back in your eyes."

Deck hoped Uncle Holling would remember those words. Leaving his father's family and a herd of expecting cattle wasn't as difficult as the thought of disappointing his new family. If worse came to worst, he was sure he and Perrin could carry Jaytsy to safety. As long as she didn't giggle.

“Shem told me you were conveniently gullible.”

Peto watched the long strides taken by Jothan in front of him, and planned.

He'd already memorized a description of Asrar and Jothan, and paid close attention to the route they took, slotting away in his mind every detail he could for when he'd need to pull it out again to reveal whatever he needed to, to whomever would listen.

Grandfather Relf, he thought, keeping an open line of communication with him, *please let me know what and when and how. We'll get your son out of whatever trap he's about to walk into. Any kind of sign will do. A bat swooping, an odd noise somewhere—I don't know, just make it obvious, all right?*

Peto searched the dark around him, genuinely confused as to whether he wanted a soldier to spot them or not. *It's kind of hard to know who the bad guys are tonight, Relf. And should Shem suddenly appear?* Peto exhaled under his breath.

I really don't know what to think of him. Just . . . help me save this family.

Six people in black reached the end of the alleys of Edge. From there they took a dirt road past quiet farms to the canals which ran along the furthest eastern farms. Beyond the canals the land sloped significantly downward to the east for several hundred paces, where it flattened out to swampy marshes which extended a few more miles to the sea.

Everyone halted when they saw Jothan head down that slope.

Sensing his party wasn't following, he turned around. “I assure you, it's not through the marshes. Come down here and you'll see how we can travel without being spotted by soldiers or farmers.”

Perrin gestured for Peto to continue on, and Peto grumbled under his breath, “There's a reason no one goes down here. The buzzing, the blood sucking, the smacking . . .”

Mahrree was ready to smack him herself, but Peto stopped his complaining before she got within hitting distance.

Cautiously they made their way down the dark slope, holding on

to each other for support. A quiet “oof!” signaled that Peto had crashed into Jothan, who likely could have held back all of them from going too far.

“There’s a path here,” Jothan told them barely above a whisper. “If you look back up the slope, you’ll see that our heads are much lower than the farmland. The way it drops here, a soldier on horseback riding near the edge won’t notice us. Soldiers always looked further into the marshes. They rarely looked straight down.”

Even in the dark Mahrree could tell Perrin had his mouth pursed. “Never saw a reason for it,” he murmured.

“But teenagers hide out here,” Jaytsy said, sounding winded. “There’s that rise, where the mosquitoes weren’t as prevalent in the middle of Weeding Seaso—” Her breath ran out.

“I know,” Perrin sighed. “We could spot them from here. But I never noticed this path.”

“Neither did those teenagers,” Jothan said. “They were too busy whining to notice pregnant women and families creeping along just a few hundred paces away from them. Then again, the reeds do grow quite tall.”

“Jothan,” Jaytsy panted, “could we rest for a moment?”

“Of course.”

Jaytsy slumped to the ground, and her worried husband crouched nearby.

Perrin slid over to Jothan. “I haven’t seen any patrols.”

“That’s because Shem detected movement near Moorland,” Jothan explained. “Seems to be villagers sneaking over there hoping to find a shortcut to Terry’s ruins. There have already been a few cases of people trying to leave the world.”

“Really?” Perrin said.

Jothan’s mouth turned up into the smallest of smiles. “Shem told me you were conveniently gullible.”

Perrin groaned. “I have no idea when to believe him anymore!”

Jothan patted his shoulder. “Actually, there *have* been a few cases of people in Sands trying to head west, and patrols have increased at the border. But there *is* a rumor of another path that may lead to the western passage, starting in the forests near Moorland.”

“Let me guess,” Perrin folded his arms, “Shem started that?”

“Gives him a reason to send soldiers to the west. Shem’s a master rumor starter, so our way should be clear tonight. Jaytsy, I’m sorry, but it’s a little less than a mile until we reach the forest. We need to

“Shem told me you were conveniently gullible.”

be moving. While we’re relatively concealed, we’re not yet safe.”

“I understand,” she said, getting up with Deck’s help. “Let’s go.”

Mahrree cringed with worry for Jaytsy. She did seem to be waddling more. Even Peto looked back to check on her.

Perrin put his hand against Mahrree’s back to gently push her on. “The sooner we reach the forest, the better I’ll feel about all of this,” he whispered. “It’s almost *too* quiet. There should have been at least two soldiers on the last road.”

“Perrin, it’s a blessing.”

“I hope so.”

“Well, hello gorgeous!”

Everyone in the trees chuckled quietly, except for the middle-aged man in the orange tunic, skirt, and black pony tail made from a real pony’s tail. The severity of his glare, however, was lost in the darkness.

“I’m still the professor of advanced mathematics,” he warned the young scout. “And I’ll be grading your test next week. Don’t think I won’t remember this.”

“Yes, Mr. Archedes,” the scout tried not to snigger. “*I’ll* definitely remember this.”

Another young man, dressed as Mr. Briter, smiled amiably and held out his arm. “Shall we, *my dear*?”

Archedes stiffened. “No one said anything about play acting!”

“The Briters were seen leaving to the Shins,” said another scout, materializing suddenly from the trees. “We need to ‘walk them back’ so the fort thinks they’re home. The more we can misdirect, the better chances the real Shins and Briters have tonight.” The man in his late thirties folded his arms sternly. “We’ve never had a riskier moving, and we don’t have time for nonsense or stage fright!”

“Sorry, Dormin,” several of the dozen men mumbled.

Archedes obediently took the arm of the younger man. “Let’s go,” he said darkly. “Once around that farm there, beyond the clearing, then into the back door. Shall we, *dearest*?” he said as he pulled the younger man along. “This horse hair’s getting itchy.”

In another section of the woods, the youngest scout ever allowed on a moving was hurriedly getting dressed. “Hey, they fit perfectly!”

“Good, *Peto*,” said the scout helping ‘Mrs. Shin’ with the buttons on the blue linen.

The man wearing the dress dropped his hands helplessly. “Just how many buttons does one dress need?”

“Apparently,” said the man helping him to unbutton the previous eight, once he realized they’d skipped yet another one, “at least forty.”

“Oh dear,” said a fourth man, attempting to put on Perrin Shin’s trousers. “I’m not as tall as him. Good around the middle, but the length?”

‘Peto’ for the night skipped over to him. “Just roll up the bottoms,” he said cheerfully. “See? No problem! Come on, come on—we should be getting out there by now.”

The man chuckled. “Woodson, I think you’re just a bit too excited about all of this. And no, we don’t go until we get the signal that we’re needed. So far everything’s quiet. If it stays that way, we won’t even be called for—”

“What?” Woodson wailed in a whisper. “After all I had to do to convince my parents to let me come?”

Deciding that a couple of skipped buttons wouldn’t be noticed in the dark, the man helping to dress ‘Mrs. Shin’ gave up and turned to Woodson. “Keep it down! You really don’t want to be caught now. Should Thorne discover you—or worse, Genev—do you realize what Guardsers are supposed to do to themselves when they’re caught?”

Woodson gulped. “Wait . . . we’re not going to, to . . .”

“Ease up on the boy,” ‘Perrin’ said, buttoning the real Perrin’s shirt over his chest that didn’t fill it out quite as fully. “No, Woodson. No suicides tonight. But you’ll have to run as if a mountain lion is on your tail should you become separated from us. Head straight—”

“I know, I know,” Woodson intoned. “Head straight for the trees and run, run, run.”

“One question,” ‘Mrs. Shin’ asked, looking down at ‘her’ skirt. “How am I supposed to run in this?”

The scout helping them pulled out his long knife—he was one of the few authorized to carry one—and slashed the side seam from the thigh to the ground.

Aghast, ‘Mrs. Shin’ stared at the rip. “Do you have any idea how much this dress is probably worth? And now my leg’s showing!”

“Shem told me you were conveniently gullible.”

The scout blinked at him. “And it’s not even worth looking at. Get a grip, man! We’re tearing these clothes to shreds later anyway. This will add believability. Now, wait behind that boulder until you hear the signal. And remember, all you need to do is—”

“I know, I know,” Woodson said, eyeing the long knife with the ardor only a fifteen-year-old could possess. “Run.”

“Are you sleeping on the job?” Lieutenant Radan exclaimed as he kicked the soldier he’d just tripped over. “What, a bad bottle of mead? Drinking on duty as well? I’m writing that up, don’t you think I’m not,” he said, officiously pulling out a little notebook. He’d purchased it shortly after Thorne became commander, and in the past three weeks he’d been invaluable as Thorne’s Second in Command, dutifully finding as many things wrong with the soldiers as possible. That was his job, after all: making everyone else know who to fear. No wonder so many were trying to leave the fort for somewhere easier and lazier.

“So dark out here I can hardly find my slagging charcoal.”

That was another change: Thorne didn’t care if men cussed, so Radan took advantage of that and liberally sprinkled his sentences with manly cursings, like pickled relish flavoring every conversational meal. Sometimes it didn’t always fit, but that wasn’t the point.

“Ah, here it is. Now, what son of a sow do we have here?” Radan squatted next to the body. “A new transfer, I see. Sergeant Clot. Well, my dear Sergeant Clot, when you come out of your drunken stupor, Thorne will have a few choice words for you, and so will I.” He stood up, took another step, and fell flat on his face. Again.

“What the slag is going on here?” he demanded, wiping himself off as he fumbled around the ground for his notebook. He found it, under a bush, and on top of—

“Another body? What, drinking with your buddy, here? Disgraceful!” Radan whipped out his charcoal again. “Another Sergeant, is it? Fergio?” He got to his feet, tsk-tsking the entire time. “The most important night to keep an eye on our prisoners, with Administrator Genev coming, and you men . . .”

It had been growing for the past few seconds, the notion that *maybe* something wasn’t *quite right*.

Radan began to realize that what he was dealing with was more

serious than mead mixed with boredom.

Three seconds later full panic hit him like a thrown cat, and he rushed from the fort road over to the Shins' house two doors down. He tripped on two more bodies in the alley, lost his notebook for good that time, and stared at the unconscious face just inches from his.

"Slagging son of a sow . . . Shin's killed them!" he gasped.

The man beneath him snored.

"Or maybe not," Radan said, scrambling off the body. On his knees, he looked around at the bodies littering the yard. His gaze rose to the back door and instinctively knew that the house was empty.

"Oh slag. We're going to be in so much trouble."

Halfway to the forest Jaytsy slowed considerably. Jothan, who had been turning to check on her frequently, stopped.

"Do you need to rest?"

Jaytsy only nodded, held her belly, and slid to the ground again. Jothan climbed up the slope on his hands and knees, and peered over the edge to the flat farmland. Perrin followed and watched the quiet terrain with him.

Mahrree crouched next to Jaytsy, with Deck on the other side, while Peto stared out into the blank darkness.

"How are you?" Mahrree asked Jaytsy.

"My legs ache. I just need a few minutes, I promise," Jaytsy said with as much determination as she could muster.

Deck kissed her on her head and wrapped an arm around her.

Shem Zenos mounted up and waved to his ten soldiers to follow him. He was surprised that his hand trembled as he did so, but in the dark none of the young men noticed.

He'd done this dozens of times, taking soldiers out on diversions while behind him far more activity than anyone suspected was taking place. But tonight was different.

Tonight, it was the Shins.

After all these years and effort, it was finally ending, and his feelings about that were as mixed as . . . well, as two smashed pies.

“Shem told me you were conveniently gullible.”

Shem had considered that the two lives he led was like holding a different pie in each hand. Usually he could keep them separate and balanced, but on nights like this, they came dangerously close to colliding with each other as he tried to juggle his identities.

At the fresh water spring where he paused to let his ten men water their horses, he glanced up at the cloudy sky, and was startled to see a familiar face in the branches just a few feet above him, wagging his eyebrows.

Suddenly Shem knew the two pies he held were about to smash together, and everyone would see just what he'd been doing all these years, and would stare in astonishment at the mess he'd created.

Shem also realized that he shouldn't try to come up with metaphors when he was hungry.

The fort was in complete pandemonium as every soldier was frantically forced into duty, saddling horses, grabbing supplies, and forming groups of ten.

Captain Lemuel Thorne had been shouting orders, but now he let Radan complete that task.

Lieutenant Offra sauntered leisurely from his quarters and sent Thorne the same look of disdain he had been for the past three weeks.

Thorne didn't have time to deal with Offra's silent disobedience. He'd be leading his own group of ten as soon as Lemuel forced him. No, right now he needed more authority on the field of treachery. And he knew exactly where to find it.

He stomped up the stairs of the command tower, feeling the power he was in search of reaching down to him. *It* wanted to be used.

Ignoring the glances of two nervous privates placed on duty to keep their eyes on the desks to make sure no more files went missing, Lemuel headed into the command office and went to the corner.

There it was, wrapped in worsted wool, and waiting to be returned to Idumea: the sword of Relf Shin.

It was a general's sword, after all. And Perrin Shin had relinquished it, realizing that he didn't have ability to wield it properly.

But Lemuel, who was now unwrapping it on his desk, knew how to wield power. He gripped the ornate hilt and gave the sword an experimental swipe. Without any thought, Lemuel removed his own sword, given to him by his father, and dropped it on the floor with a

clank. Still admiring the gleaming steel of a High General's weapon, Lemuel sheathed it, reveling in its muffled singing as it found its new home at his side.

Properly armed for battle with traitors, Captain Lemuel Thorne trotted down the stairs, shouting for his horse Streak to be brought to him at once.

Chapter 4--“We have no chance, do we?”

Jothan and Perrin slid back down the bank to the Shins waiting on the trail.

“Some movement,” Perrin whispered. “On the road, still far away, but the soldiers were running. The towers aren’t lit yet—”

“Soldiers don’t normally run unless there’s a reason,” Jothan said, watching Jaytsy for her response to their update.

But Deck answered with, “Do you force all expecting women to walk until they collapse?” It was the most rancor Mahrree had ever heard from her son-in-law.

“No,” Jothan said apologetically. “We usually give them a comfortable ride in the back of a hay wagon to about this point, where we disgorge our secret load out of sight. Most women need to walk only a few hundred paces to the forest from here. We can’t exactly drive the hay wagon all of the way to the forest’s edge. Nor could we run a hay wagon in the middle of the night from your house.”

“Hay’s not as comfortable as it may seem,” Jaytsy murmured. “Pokes your skin. Deck and I once went into the hay loft to try—”

Deck’s frantic throat clearing stopped her.

Mahrree looked away to smirk at her husband, whose eyebrows had gone up.

“It’s comfortable the way we make it,” Jothan told Jaytsy, generously ignoring Jaytsy’s earlier suggestion. “While on the outside it looks like an overstuffed wagon of hay, it’s mostly an enclosed crate with pillows and blankets and even a trap door so women can relieve themselves along the way.”

Peto smiled at that.

“There’s access to the crate below the driver’s seat so children can go back and nap with their mothers, and messages and food can be passed. On the driver’s seat is one of our scouts, and posing as a

sister or mother, depending upon her age, is a midwife. The wagon's quite roomy and comfortable."

"I've seen that wagon," Perrin said. "Never knew where it was going, or why it turned around here. I just thought it was lost."

"So it worked as we planned," said Jothan.

"Well, there's no wagon for me right now," Jaytsy looked up at them. "We need to get to the trees then, don't we?"

"I can guarantee your safety there."

"Then let's go," she grunted, struggling to her feet. "My legs will catch up later. And no, Deck—I don't need to be carried!"

Mahrree patted her arm and let Deck follow her, behind Peto and Jothan. Jaytsy soon began to waddle slower, but when Jothan offered to let her stop again, she shook her head.

The tree line loomed closer, the slope shifting as it rose up to meet the edge of the forest. Mahrree realize the path was putting them in view of the farmlands and even the patrols who normally rode along the edge.

Jothan stopped before the disappearing path came level with the farmlands, and crouched to huddle the family around him.

"This is the only tricky part. We have to run about thirty paces to reach the trees. Deckett, you and I will be on either side of Jaytsy, and when I whisper 'now,' we'll rush her into the forest. Jaytsy, don't worry about keeping up—we can drag you at a good pace. Perrin, help Mahrree. Peto, stay near them. Should something happen, you catch up to me and let me know."

Mahrree squeezed Perrin's hand, and he squeezed it back, a bit too tightly.

"Jaytsy, are you ready?" Jothan whispered.

"I'm not getting any skinnier."

Jothan took her left side, while Deckett took her right, then everyone watched the west and held their collective breath.

There was nothing to see or hear.

Finally Jothan whispered, "Now." He and Deck stood up and sprinted awkwardly to the forest, dragging Jaytsy between them like an overstuffed scarecrow. Mahrree almost forgot to run herself until Perrin yanked her along, Peto running by his side.

Soon they dove into the woods, and for a moment Mahrree marveled how upside down her life had become. Fifteen years ago she ran into here, terrified; now she ran into there, relieved.

They found Deck and Jothan helping Jaytsy sit down behind a

“We have no chance, do we?”

massive boulder about forty paces in.

“Put your feet up,” Jothan was instructing her. “On the rock. You need to get your feet above the height of your heart.”

“What’s wrong?” Mahrree asked, coming over.

“I can’t feel my legs,” Jaytsy whispered.

Mahrree touched her ankle that was no longer there. “Yes, you’re swelling up.”

“What does that mean?” Peto sounded genuinely concerned.

“It’s usually not too serious,” Mahrree told him, hoping that was true, “but the best thing to do is rest with her feet up.”

Jaytsy pulled her leg away. “Well, that’s not possible, is it?” She slid off the boulder and struggled to stand back up like an ant heaving an unwilling watermelon. “We’re going to make it over that mountain and whatever else we need to do! Jothan, what’s next? Jothan?”

There was no answer.

There was no Jothan.

Perrin shot Mahrree a look which chilled her. She put her finger to her lips and gently pushed Jaytsy behind the rock and crouched next to it. Deck shielded Jaytsy on the other side, but from what, they didn’t know.

“I knew it!” Peto whispered furiously as he stepped behind a tree.

Before Mahrree could panic, or wonder what Peto thought he knew, she heard faintly in the distance the snort of a horse.

Perrin slipped behind a shrub, and Mahrree’s heart thumped madly.

“Mother!” Jaytsy whispered urgently. “Deck!”

“What’s wrong?” Deck whisper back, panicked.

Jaytsy gasped, squirmed, and gasped again. “When I crouched behind this boulder, I felt . . . oh, ow!”

Mahrree’s mind sent up a frantic prayer. “What’s happening?”

“I need to relieve myself again!” Jaytsy whimpered. “This is unbearable! What should I do? I’m going to wet myself!”

Deck’s head quietly thudded the boulder in relief, and Mahrree sent a follow-up, *Never mind* prayer. “I honestly don’t know, Jaytsy. Of all things . . . you sound like a six year-old!”

“I can’t help it! Oh, this was a bad idea. I know I should have waited to go to Salem later—”

“Shhh!” whispered Deck. “No more of that talk! Just do your thing right here.”

“What?! I’m in breeches, and that’s disgusting!”

“No it’s not. I do it all the time in the field.”

“Out in the open?”

“No one cares! You think you’re going to find a forest washing room nearby?”

“Hush, you two!” Mahrree hissed. “Jaytsy, just hold it for a minute.”

“A minute? I’ll be drenched in a minute!”

Perrin, who had been frantically waving at them to be quiet, stood up cautiously and started to creep toward the forest’s edge.

Mahrree wished Peto was closer. He kept moving behind the tree at different angles, and, because he probably no longer knew which spot actually constituted ‘behind,’ he was backing around the tree in a slow, perpetual circle.

A few moments later Perrin bounded back to them, with Jothan. Perrin ran past Peto and pulled his dizzy son behind the rock where the others hid.

“Horses,” Perrin whispered. “At least two, moving parallel to us. There’s a lot of activity in the distance. Jothan thinks we may have been found out.”

“So what’s the plan?” Deck asked.

“Jothan’s going to try to—”

But muffled hoof beats coming from the opposite direction stopped him, and Mahrree froze in terror.

Jothan appeared by Perrin. “Up now. Move!” he whispered.

Mahrree and Deck hoisted Jaytsy up by her arms, but found themselves face to face with a large black draft horse. As the beast snuffed into Mahrree’s hair, she decided she needed a forest wash-room as well. She wondered if Jaytsy still had a problem.

A second black horse appeared just as suddenly, trapping Peto against the boulder next to them.

“I knew it!” he whispered.

Jaytsy whimpered as two figures quickly slid off their mounts and rushed toward her with a large, thick fishing net.

“No!” Mahrree exclaimed. “You can’t—”

Jothan’s hand quickly covered her mouth. “Stay quiet,” he whispered. “This is our help.”

Mahrree couldn’t have spoken if she wanted to, because there were suddenly bodies—dozens of them—pouring out of the forest above them like a rock fall. Wild-eyed, she glanced over to Perrin who had taken a defensive stance and looked vulnerable without

“We have no chance, do we?”

sharpened steel in his hands.

Peto cowered behind him, mumbling, “This is it, this is it—”

That was because the men who surrounded them weren’t dressed in mottled clothing like Jothan; they were dressed in all black.

They were dressed as Guardians.

“Jothan?” said Perrin, his voice tinged with panic.

“This is our help,” Jothan repeated, patting Mahrree comfortably on the back.

“That’s right!” a young man near Perrin said, oddly cheerful. “We’re here to kill you!”

“What?” Peto gasped. “I knew it! Father, you have to listen to me now—”

But he stopped, because even in the dark everyone could see that Perrin was breaking into a grin.

Jaytsy, however, squirmed in a painful dance against her bladder while Deckett kept a firm hold on her.

Jothan sighed at their ‘killer.’

“Woodson, we appreciate your enthusiasm, but if you forget your training on your first mission, it’s not going to look good on my report.”

Woodson shrugged apologetically.

“Wait a minute,” Peto said, peering closer at Woodson in the darkness. “You’re wearing my clothes!”

“Yep! I’m playing you tonight.”

Mahrree noticed he was roughly the same age as her son, and her belly twisted in worry. He was young, far too young.

Perrin grinned wider. “I believe I know what’s about to happen. The Guardians are making a return. Am I right, Jothan?”

“Spoken like a man of the forest, as we’ve always known you were.”

Then Mahrree understood. “Just like Guide Pax! Everyone thought he was dead, so no one bothered to look for him. The men with him killed a deer, put the blood on their hands, and told King Querul they had killed Pax.”

“Very good, Mrs. Shin,” said a tall man next to her. “We took down an old doe not too long ago. When we’re finished with your clothes—” and Mahrree realized that he was wearing Perrin’s shirt and trousers, “—we’ll splash the doe’s blood on them and tear them up. The story will be that Colonel Shin didn’t kill all the Guardians in Moorland—although rest assured, we’re quite sure he did—but that

a few dozen remained. We are those ‘Guarders’ tonight. Once you’re safely to the boulders, we’ll make a bit of commotion at the edge of the forest and throw out your bloodied clothing. This is the Guarders’ revenge, you see: the death of the Shins and Briters.”

“Normally we just slip people away,” Jothan explained, “but the entire world would be looking for Perrin Shin and his family if they went missing. But if it’s obvious that the Shins and Briters were killed, then that’s the end and the forests are secure once again. I’m sorry,” he said in a gentler tone. “While it will come as quite a shock to the world, we couldn’t think of any other alternative besides ‘killing’ you all.”

Jaytsy whimpered, but not because of the news.

“And why are two dozen men keeping this poor thing trapped here?” The voice came from next to Jaytsy, and was surprisingly female. “Come here, Mrs. Briter. Out of sight of these men who should know better about expecting women’s needs.”

“Sorry, Barb,” several men whispered. “And Mrs. Briter,” a few more added.

“Barb’s our midwife for the evening,” Jothan explained to Mahrree, staring after her daughter who had disappeared behind a more secluded boulder. “And a woman with a small bladder herself. Jaytsy’s in the best possible hands, now.”

Deckett sighed in relief. “Now maybe I can find a tree to water.”

Another man in green mottled clothing appeared next to Jothan. Mahrree blinked, wondering where he came from.

“What are all of you doing here, chatting up a storm?” he chided. “You all get to meet the Shins later. Right now we’ve got a problem.”

Perrin stared hard at the man.

He turned to Perrin. “Sir, the entire fort is on alert. You three,” the man pointed at Woodson, the man dressed in Perrin’s clothes, and—Mahrree caught only a passing glimpse of him—the unfortunate soul traipsing around in her blue linen dress, “Plan D. Move it!”

The three of them took off without another word, with half a dozen men in black in pursuit.

The Guarders were chasing the Shins.

Mahrree didn’t know whether to laugh at them or pray for them.

The man in mottled green had already turned back to Perrin. “And sir, some of your former soldiers look as if they’re about to enter the forests. Obviously they know you’re gone, and they’re desperate. Thorne’s hovering near the trees with ten men.”

“We have no chance, do we?”

Perrin gaped. “He’s going *in*?”

Someone let out a low whistle.

“Contingency two, already,” Jothan announced to the remaining men in black, now anxious to get moving. “Find the other groups and tell them if they haven’t figured it out yet. Don’t worry, Perrin,” Jothan told him as the men around them dispersed as quickly as fog on a hot day.

But Perrin caught hold of the man in mottled green.

“We knew this might happen,” Jothan assured him. “We didn’t think it would happen *so early* in the night, though.”

Perrin was still studying the man in green whose bicep he gripped. “Do I know you?”

“In a way,” the man said softly.

“Your voice,” Perrin pointed at him, “I know I’ve heard that voice before. But it feels like it was long time ago.”

“It wasn’t my voice, but my father’s,” the man said. “I’ve been told I sound just like him, and look like him, too—”

“Oh *no*,” Perrin released his arm and took a step back.

Mahrree turned to the man who didn’t seem familiar at all.

“Look,” the man said, “it’ll take a lot longer than we have to explain everything. We have to get you moved and ‘killed.’ We’ll talk later. But I’m glad you’re finally in the forest with us where you’ve always belonged. And know this: all is forgiven.” He slapped Perrin on the back, and then he was gone.

Perrin rubbed his forehead.

“*All is forgiven?*” Mahrree frowned.

“Who was that?” Deck asked, returning from his tree watering.

“I . . . can’t believe it,” Perrin said. “I—”

Jaytsy and the midwife’s return halted Perrin’s stammering.

“Are you all right?” Deck asked his wife.

“Yes, much better!” Jaytsy whispered, her tone now as light as her bladder.

But before the mystery of the green man could be explained, Jothan nudged Perrin. “Two riders, by the tree line.”

Perrin squinted into the darkness. “How can you see that far?”

“Years of practice. I’ll show you how we distract soldiers.”

“Be right back. I want to see this,” Perrin whispered to his family, and headed after Jothan.

“Well, how do you like that?” Barb said as Perrin trotted after

Jothan. “Left us already. Going to be one of *those* nights. Everything’s going to happen quickly, and so should we.” She slapped Deck on the back. “Time to work. Husband and Grandmother—”

Mahrree, stunned that every minute brought a new turn of events, looked around before she realized she was “grandmother.”

“—right over here,” Barb commanded in a whisper. It wasn’t until then that Mahrree realized another large man in black was by one of the horses, turning the massive beast around.

Barb took Deck’s arm and led him to a pack on the front horse. She handed him several long wooden staffs which were strapped to the saddle, and showed him how to connect them into a long pole.

“You,” the midwife pointed at Peto. “The uncle I assume? Hold the lead horse in place until we finish.”

Peto, surprised by the label of “uncle,” obediently went to hold the bridle of the horse in front.

The man in black ruffled Peto’s hair as if he were seven years old before he jogged over to the second horse.

The midwife took the net of ropes and unfolded it to reveal that it was large enough to hold a person. She looped one narrowed end on to the pole, and Deck fastened the pole to a ring on the lead horse’s saddle.

“Grandmother, run the other half of the net litter through the end of the pole,” Barb held it up for Mahrree. “Our mother will sit in it.”

Jaytsy giggled quietly. “She called you ‘Grandmother’!”

“And you ‘Our mother’!”

Mahrree was shaking as she tried to work, but because of what she wasn’t sure: that the soldiers were looking for them, the sudden arrival of the men and horses, or the word ‘grandmother.’

“Call me Mahrree, please,” she said, but that didn’t make her feel calmer yet.

The midwife took up the other end of the pole and attached it to a ring on the rear horse, suspending the net litter between them while Mahrree fumbled to open it.

The bulky man in black stepped over to Jaytsy and whispered, “Really, the litter’s quite comfortable. Unless you want my mount? I’m sure you’d enjoy some jostling right now.”

“Shem!” Jaytsy cried in a whisper. She caught his arm and kissed his cheek as he and Deck helped her into the net.

Peto and Mahrree spun to see the man they didn’t recognize before.

“We have no chance, do we?”

He was wearing a dull black jacket.

Peto rested his head against the horse and sighed.

Deck patted Shem on the back. “We’ve missed you!”

“Likewise!” Shem adjusted the netting on the long pole.

“Shem, am I happy to see you!” Mahrree said, giving him a big hug from behind so as to not impede his adjustments.

Shem chuckled softly at the awkward embrace. “Mahrree, I have something to say to you,” he said as he tightened a few straps. “Years ago in the forest, not too far from this very spot, a woman said to you, ‘Someday *will* come for you. There will be a day when you will be ready to leave it all behind and embrace the truth . . .’”

Shem turned around to face her, and she could just make out that his expression was a mixture of amusement and sorrow.

“I planned for years to be the one to repeat to you Mrs. Yung’s speech. I’m so sorry I missed it. So often I wanted to—”

She put a finger on his lips. “It’s all right, Shem. The point is that we’re here now.”

“At least I can now tell you that I’m the one who set Barker on you that night. I wanted you to have a guard on your way home.”

Peto scowled at Shem talking to his mother.

And Shem noticed. “But we’ll talk about all of this later.”

“This really is quite comfortable!” Jaytsy whispered from the net as she gently swayed, cradled between the two black horses.

Perrin emerged from the darkness. “Never realized how a carefully thrown rock at the canal can unnerve soldiers. Shem, is that really you? Something’s gone wrong?”

“I left with ten soldiers to check on movements to the west, but Thorne was very paranoid today. He hasn’t been able to find *something*,” Shem emphasized. “While I was out, Kiren, Barb’s usual riding companion, signaled me from the fresh spring. I sent the soldiers ahead and stayed behind. Kiren told me Thorne had just sent out soldiers everywhere. He’s probably emptied the fort. The sedation must have worn off early, or someone went by the house and noticed the guards unconscious. Perrin, they know you’re missing.”

Mahrree saw the bleak expressions on Deck and Peto’s faces, and that Jaytsy was nervously biting her lip.

“If no one else will say what we’re all thinking,” she said, “then I will: we have no chance, do we?”

“Mahrree, we have every chance!” Shem declared, trying too

hard to sound confident. “No one’s ever followed us through this forest successfully, and tonight will be no different. Kiren has already diverted my soldiers into a marsh. The horses will sink up to their withers this time of year.”

“Which still leaves well over a hundred soldiers,” Perrin mumbled.

“And *we* have nearly two hundred, Perrin, scattered throughout the forest and running into Edge. Tonight’s going to be messy. Killing someone always is,” Shem smiled wryly. “But we can handle messy.”

Jothan joined them. “The decoys are heading into Edge. That’ll send the majority of the soldiers searching the village. Our ‘Guarders’ will lead them on wild turkey chases, and our men in the forests will confuse any who try to sneak in. Don’t worry. We’ll divert them all.”

Still Perrin rubbed his forehead. “I’d be lying if I didn’t say I’m not entirely sure that your so-called Guarders can handle the soldiers. Except for,” he added, as if he just remembered, “that man in green. Why did I recognize his voice?”

Shem smiled slightly. “Who did he sound like?”

“Oh, but it doesn’t make *any sense*,” Perrin said. “Why, he’s been gone for—”

“*He* may be gone,” Shem said enigmatically, “but not his *son*.”

Perrin exhaled. “He sounded like King Oren!”

Mahrree rounded on him. “Oren’s dead!”

“I know,” said Perrin dully. “It was my father who ordered his execution, remember?”

“I do,” Peto mumbled.

“Oh,” Deck said. “If that was *Oren’s son*, and *your* father killed *his* father . . . that’s a little awkward.”

“And *there it is*,” Peto added darkly.

Shem put his hands on his hips and stared at Peto, who glared back. Shem opened his mouth to say something, thought better of it, then turned to Perrin instead.

“Yes, that was Dormin, son of Oren. The Yungs brought him to Salem years ago. Dormin’s become one of our best scouts, and quite a convincing face and voice for those who still struggle to accept our truths. Everyone *knows* King Oren’s sons died years ago.”

“Amazing!” Perrin twisted to see where the king’s last son had disappeared.

“Perrin, if we can get Dormin out—and that was another very messy night—we can get all of you out as well.”

“We have no chance, do we?”

“But my grandfather killed his father!” Peto exclaimed. “Father, listen to me!” he grabbed Perrin’s arm. “Think about this clearly—how can we be sure Dormin’s not waiting to take his revenge on us?”

Mahrree’s mouth dropped open at the suggestion, but seeing the earnestness of her son, she had to consider that maybe he had a point.

But Barb simply scoffed at that. “Dormin was convinced of the uselessness of the kings long before he met the Yungs,” she said as she adjusted her riding gloves. “And if he wanted to kill you, he would’ve done it years ago. Besides, didn’t you hear what his last words were?”

“*All is forgiven*,” Mahrree sighed. “How remarkable.”

“That he is,” Barb said, mounting her horse. “And as he also said, we need to get moving! Shem, we’re all ready.”

Perrin gently pried Peto’s hand loose. “It’ll be all right, son.”

Peto whispered back, “Because these strangers say so? How do you know this isn’t a trap?”

Mahrree overheard, and her eyes met Perrin’s.

“I don’t,” Perrin whispered, “but this is one of those times I guess I just have to have faith.”

“In who?!” Peto hissed.

“Not necessarily in these people, Peto,” Perrin whispered, “but in the Creator who told me to follow them.”

Pleadingly, Peto turned to Mahrree.

She nodded her agreement, and Peto threw up his hands in aggravation.

Something was up with their son, that was clear. But what that was, she had no idea. Looking for suggestions, she turned to Shem, but he was with Deck and Jaytsy.

“These horses have brought up many women over the years, with no losses,” he told them as Deck eyed the netting and Jaytsy squeezed his hand. “They know how precious their load is.”

Deck nodded, but he rubbed his eyes as he crouched by his wife to share a few last words.

Shem turned to Jothan. “You’ll need to take Kiren’s place with Barb. We’ll all meet you at the First Resting Station.”

“Shem, what do you mean?”

“I think I’ve just given my resignation, too. I was hoping that by abandoning my horse it would look like I had been taken or got lost.” He turned to Perrin. “I’m fairly confident Thorne may be soon look-

ing for me as well. On my bunk after dinner were transfer notice papers. I never bothered to open them.”

Perrin gripped Shem’s shoulder. “Transfer to Salem? Excellent idea!” He pulled Shem into a quick hug.

Mahrree grinned.

Peto glared.

Jothan patted Shem’s back. “Your father’s going to be one happy man. Now don’t disappoint him and fail to show up,” he warned as he mounted the other draft horse.

Deck saw his time was up and he kissed Jaytsy. “I’ll be right behind you, I promise,” he said, squeezing her hand.

“I know you will be,” Jaytsy said.

Deck released her as the horses were kicked into a walk. Her body lurched, then rocked gently as her waving form was carried away into the dark woods.

Perrin clapped a comforting hand on his son-in-law’s shoulder, and Mahrree tearfully returned her daughter’s wave. “How do they know where to go?” she whispered. “Don’t the trees get in the way?”

“The rings on the saddles pivot,” Shem explained, “and we cut irregular paths for cover. And notice that their bridles make no noise? We pad everything with black lambs’ wool.”

“She’ll be all right, Mother,” Peto said worriedly, and glanced over at Shem. “Safer than us, I think.”

Shem folded his arms. “Peto, you all right?”

“Oh, I’m *just fine*,” Peto said sardonically. “No problems.”

“You *are* safe, now,” Shem told him. “If I wasn’t confident all of you will reach Salem, I wouldn’t be doing this tonight.”

“Oh, really?” Peto said with so much animosity that his parents stared at him.

Shem took a deep breath. “I get it. You don’t trust me y—”

“You haven’t given me much reason to!”

Perrin raised his eyebrows, and Mahrree exclaimed, “Peto!”

Shem held up his hand but kept his eyes on Peto. “No Mahrree, it’s all right. Dormin felt the same way the night we moved him. I had killed his brother Sonoforen, after all. But Dormin and I reached an understanding, and we’ve been good friends ever since. And Mahrree,” he turned to her. “That boy, Woodson, who’s playing Peto and was so eager to ‘kill’ your family? He was born in this forest, part of that same group as Dormin. All of that happened on the same night you decided to march into here and find out what was going on.”

“We have no chance, do we?”

“Oh dear!” she chuckled apologetically. “That was a messy night, wasn’t it?”

“At first Mrs. Yung thought you were Dormin,” Shem explained. “But everyone got sorted in the end, and the group of thirteen that entered the forest was fourteen with newborn Woodson.

“I can’t make any guarantees about tonight,” Shem continued, catching Peto’s skeptical gaze. “And I don’t have time to win your trust right now. We’ve tried to prepare for every possible outcome, which means we’re going to miss something. But all of us want your family to reach Salem safely, because you’re so important to us.”

“And why is that?” Perrin asked.

Peto raised a questioning eyebrow.

“Because every person is important, Perrin.”

Mahrree was about to point out that line sounded a little too pat, but Shem suddenly held up his hand.

Perrin nodded. There were more horses, their bridles jangling as they trotted along the edge of the forest. The soldiers usually only walked their horses, but tonight they were in a hurry.

Shem twitched a complicated signal to Perrin who immediately pushed Mahrree to him. Mahrree barely caught the unfamiliar signal Perrin winked back to Shem, and Shem grasped her hand tightly while Perrin took her other hand. Perrin then reached back and took Peto’s hand, nodding to Deck to hold on to Peto.

“You’re just going to have to trust me. Whatever you do,” Shem whispered to them, “*don’t let go of anyone!*”

“But—” Peto protested before being dragged into the forest.

Shem darted off to the northwest, pulling everyone behind him.

Mahrree struggled to keep up with his pace, stumbling over fallen tree branches and tripping over the occasional rock. Shem kept a firm hold on her as he led them through the forest, and she clung on to Perrin’s hand behind her. Occasionally she glanced back to see her son and son-in-law holding tight to their chain of people.

They weaved in and out of trees, behind bushes, around rocks, and between more trees until Mahrree was sure even the foliage was confused. They rushed behind a loud steam vent, then dashed around a foul smelling spring. Shem moved so quickly that before Mahrree could realize they should be alarmed by what they had just passed, they encountered another bizarre and violent manifestation of nature.

It must have been the fastest tour of the forest in history.

In any other circumstance she would have been exhausted by the

pace and the late hour, but every inch of her was filled with so much anxiety it propelled her onward.

“Over there! Someone . . . over there!”

Radan gripped the reins of his horse and shouted to the ten following him. “Movement behind the gristmill! After them!”

His soldiers raced ahead of Radan as his mount impatiently stomped the ground of the marketplace.

Second-in-commands don’t put themselves in danger. That’s what enlisted men are for.

Behind Radan five more soldiers went shouting, and there—

Oh slag, there *they* were—

Guarders! All in black, shouting and whooping like irate owls. Radan wasn’t sure who was chasing who. More soldiers, more men in black, all yelling and running—

“We found her!” one of his ten called, rushing back. “Mrs. Briter!”

Radan kicked his horse and rounded the mill. At the commotion of soldiers, he slid off his mount and strode over to them. With so many soldiers, surely those clusters of Guarders wouldn’t stop here.

Radan spied the orange dress right off in the sea of blue uniforms, the wearer of it hiding her face and trembling.

Well, Radan thought, at least Thorne will have Jaytsy Shin. Obviously he wanted the baby as his son, but how long did he expect to keep Jaytsy?

“Mr. Briter,” Radan said to her nervous husband, held by two soldiers, “why have you brought your wife into such a dangerous situation? One might argue you don’t deserve such a woman.”

He gingerly took Jaytsy’s arm and—

“Well hello, handsome,” Jaytsy Briter said in the most grotesque and gravelly voice Radan had ever heard.

He yelped and released the creature’s arm, and the face—that craggy face with a bulbous nose and a scruffy beard . . . *a beard?*—laughed at Radan’s expression.

“So I guess that *is* an appropriate opening line. Little message here, from the Guarders,” said the man—yes, it was a man, and he was hideous. “We’re back and out for revenge. And by my calcula-

“We have no chance, do we?”

tions,” he sized up the crowd of uniforms, “this won’t take much effort at all. Boys?”

And just that quickly Radan and his men were surrounded by two dozen more in black, or maybe a hundred, and what happened next Radan wasn’t quite sure, except that he ended up flat on his back, someone’s fist having placed itself well on his nose, and there was shouting and laughter, and by the time he was able to shake the fog from his brain and struggle to his knees, all of his soldiers were also slowly getting up from the ground, dazed and bloodied from the fastest, most lopsided fist fight Edge had ever seen.

The fact that none of them were killed seemed little consolation, and Radan, as he warily climbed back on to his horse, wondered what happened to Mrs. Briter that such a repulsive man now had her clothes and was running away with Mr. Briter.

About ten minutes later Radan and his men stumbled to the southwest gates of the fort. Radan wanted nothing more than to collapse on a cot in the surgery to let his nose stop bleeding.

But when he saw Offra, mounted with his ten and blocking the gate, he knew that wasn’t about to happen.

“Thorne wants you at the forest’s edge, five minutes ago.”

“But we’ve been punched by Guards!” Radan exclaimed, ignoring how lame that sounded. “My soldiers need attending to—”

“Thorne thinks he’s found Shin, that they went into the forest.”

Radan’s shoulders dropped. “So he’s gone, then?”

Offra shook his head. “Thorne wants to pursue him. If we’re not there in the next few minutes, he’ll demote us.”

“To what?” Radan cried, prodding his horse back to the road. “This is madness!”

Offra sighed in agreement, and Radan realized it was the first thing they had agreed on in weeks.

“Apparently Shin headed into the forests on a couple of occasions,” Offra told him, “and Thorne’s eager to prove he’s as capable. Or as stupid.”

“So,” Radan said with a hint of triumph as their twenty men reluctantly followed them, “your little hero worship of Perrin Shin is finally coming to an end?”

“Of course not,” Offra said, scanning the darkness before him. “I hope he escapes. But where will he escape *to*?”

Radan scoffed at that. “There is no escape. He’ll come running out of that forest, terrified. Where’s Zenos, anyway?”

“In the forest.”

“So it’s confirmed?” Radan released a low whistle. “What the slag does he think he’s doing?”

“I don’t know,” Offra said. “I wish I did. But Thorne said something odd when he got the news. He said, ‘Slagging Zenos really was *one of them*.’”

Radan scowled. “One of *them*? What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I was hoping you’d know,” Offra grumbled. “Realize this, Radan: Thorne’s been keeping things from us. From *you*. When all of this shakes down, and when Genev arrives, we’ll have to explain what happened. Some of this will shake down on *us* unless we can prove Thorne didn’t tell us all he knew. Our only hope to retaining our commissions is to drop it all on Thorne, whose leadership—or lack thereof—has led to six more soldiers deserting just this evening, and contributed directly to the loss of the Shins and Briters.”

“Oh, no, no. I know where the Briters are! At least, Mr. Briter. He was running away with the ugliest cross-dresser I’ve ever met. Who knew, right? Proves you just can’t always tell with some men.”

Offra stared at him. “Had you ever met Mr. Briter?”

“I recognized his clothes from the descriptions—”

“Decoys, Radan! They were decoys!”

Radan considered the possibility. “Oh.”

“Which leaves the more disturbing question of, *where are the real Briters*? But don’t tell Thorne about that just yet. Look,” Offra whispered, seeing that Thorne and his ten were less than a hundred paces away, “I don’t like you, and you don’t like me. But I hate Thorne even more. He’ll drag us down with him unless we claw our way out of this together. Thorne’s not going to be in any position to do you any favors after tonight. Understand?”

“I think so.”

“But if both of us come out of this looking better than him, either one or both of us may get promoted and get out of here.”

Radan blinked. “When did you become so scheming?”

“The last three weeks have been the longest of my life,” said Offra. “Considering some of the weeks I’ve had, that’s saying a lot.”

They were now at the edge of the forest where Thorne was glowering at Radan. “What happened to you?”

Radan rubbed at his nose again, inadvertently spreading some of the still-leaking blood around. “Ambushed, sir. By Guarders. Said they’re back and wanting revenge.”

“We have no chance, do we?”

Thorne’s shoulder twitched. “Any sign of the Briters?”

“Some?” Radan said, inventing wildly. “They were running back in the direction of their house,” which was somewhat true.

“Good,” said Thorne. “The Shins are in there,” he cocked his head to the trees behind them. “I’m sure of it, although I have sixty men conducting a house-to-house search as we speak. Men, tonight we’re going to conquer that forest, retrieve the Shins, and become legends in our own time!”

Offra’s fake cough sounded like, “*Right.*”

Thorne sent him a warning glare before turning to Radan. “Because I have the most confidence in *you*, Radan—”

Offra let his gaze wander up to the stars peeking through patches of clouds.

“—you’ll take the pack horse carrying the incarceration chains with your group.” Thorne gestured to a horse that jangled noisily. “My group will flush the Shins over to you, and we’ll box them in. Chain up each Shin until Genev can retrieve them. Offra,” Thorne turned to him, and Offra was purposely slow about meeting his eyes. “Don’t think you’re getting out of any of this! Your reluctance is being documented in your permanent file every day!”

“Thank you,” Offra said. “I’ll need that kind of evidence.”

“You’re so useless, Offra. Another note I’ll add to your file! Take your ten and enter the forest two hundred paces to the west. Your group will make sure the Shins don’t escape. We don’t want these Guarders snatching them away from us. Remarkable coincidence that they chose tonight to stage their return—”

“Because of Zenos?” interrupted Offra, and every man of the thirty stared at him. “Tell them what you said earlier, Thorne,” Offra challenged. “You said, ‘Zenos really is one of them.’ Why didn’t you let any of us know there was a traitor among us?”

Now thirty eyes swiveled in alarm back to their commander.

Thorne sat taller. “You misheard, Offra. Had I known Zenos was a spy, you really think I wouldn’t have done something about it?”

“I really don’t know what to think tonight, Thorne. Let’s just get this latest bad plan of yours over with.”

Shem led them over a hill that felt alarmingly hot under their boots, and down a ridge into a gully where caves on either side

groaned and coughed out hot water. Mahrree felt splashes on her face as they weaved between them, and she used her shoulder to brush the water of her cheeks. In some areas the ground sounded inexplicably hollow, and often she smelled sulfur yet couldn't discern its source.

She was grateful she held the hands of two strong men. They diminished her terror and filled her with borrowed bravery.

After many more frenetic minutes of winding through brush and trees, Mahrree heard soft snorting again. She stopped, but Shem continued to pull her along, with Perrin pushing from behind.

"But Shem, I heard—"

"—the horses we've hidden for you."

They emerged in a small clearing where five horses stood tethered to trees. Mahrree would have sighed in relief if she wasn't panting so hard to catch her breath. Perrin did sigh, however, but Peto's and Deck's eyes were wide and terrified.

Shem noticed their expressions. "I'm sure you'll be happy to hear this is the end of your walking on this journey."

"If you want to call what we just did *walking*," Peto said. "I'd call it dragging, running, yanking, pulling, stumbling—"

Perrin elbowed him before putting an arm around Mahrree. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, but a little shaky," she confessed. "I imagine it's not as scary in the daytime, right Shem?"

"Actually, it's worse when you can see the bottomless caverns you run between. Many people freeze up and can't take another step."

Mahrree was sure her heart stopped beating for a moment. "We ran between *bottomless caverns*?"

The traumatized, and now slightly amused, looks on her son and son-in-law told her they had.

"On that steaming hillside," Shem said. "We've tossed rocks in them and never heard them land." To Perrin he murmured theatrically, "I see now how she walked right past Jothan last night without seeing him. But Mahrree, the worst of the forest is now behind you."

"I'm not so sure about that," Perrin said. He gently pivoted Mahrree to face a horse.

She stared at it for a moment, glanced at her husband, then back at the animal which grew taller each moment.

"Breeches," Perrin reminded her, taking a pinch of the cloth covering her hip. "Not just the latest Salemite fashion."

Before she knew what was happening, Perrin picked her up and

“We have no chance, do we?”

hefted her on to the horse.

“Oh, I don’t know about this . . .” She fumbled for the reins.

“Now, Shem, where do we go from here?” Perrin asked.

Shem tilted his head. “Don’t you want to see your mount first?”

“What do you mean?” Perrin peered into the darkness at the other large forms.

“Right over there.”

Perrin squinted, then gasped. “Clark!?”

Shem chuckled. “He’s *your* horse, Perrin. Not the fort’s. I was there when Gari Yordin gave him to *you*. Jon Offra had been taking care of him, but he’s been pining for you.”

Clark was already pulling at his reins secured to a tree. Perrin jogged over and loosed him. “I thought I’d never see you again!” He pressed his forehead against Clark’s and rubbed his neck vigorously.

As disturbed as she was to be sitting on a horse, Mahrree was even more dismayed at the affection between man and horse. No wonder Perrin often came home smelling like horse sweat.

“Your disappearance may have been what set the fort looking for us,” Perrin said to Clark who snuffed happily, or so Mahrree assumed. She wrinkled her nose and worried about horse snot on her husband’s face. The face she frequently kissed, or used to.

“Nope,” Shem told him. “I took him out this morning, telling the stable hands that I was sending him back to Yordin. Instead, I snuck him over to Dormin waiting at the tree line, who tethered him up here. We can always use new breeding stock in Salem. Clark will be one happy stud there.”

Perrin chuckled as his large black horse nuzzled him. “Shem, thank you!”

“Well, at least someone’s happy with his mode of travel,” Mahrree murmured.

Shem climbed atop his horse and saluted Mahrree with a grin.

She returned a grimace.

“Straight north,” Shem said. “If I should lose you, you keep north.”

Peto, eyeing the horse closest to him, whispered to Deck. “*Straight north*. How can we tell which way’s north?”

“Just go uphill,” Shem told him. “Now get on your horse, Peto, before your father decides to help *you*.”

Peto shrugged and took two tries to get himself up, after surreptitiously watching to see how Deck mounted.

For some reason Perrin picked up a stick before mounting Clark. Mahrree eyed her horse. “Shem, this is a *nice* animal, right? Doesn’t *move strangely*?”

“Mahrree, just hold on tight.”

She was just about to ask for suggestions how when a distinct horse whinny in the distance caught their attention.

“That’s not one of ours!” Shem whispered.

In a low voice, Perrin ordered, “Deck, head straight up the slope. Mahrree and Peto, stay close behind. Shem and I will bring up the rear.”

Deck nodded and kicked his horse. Peto shot a doubtful glance at his father before he reluctantly kicked his horse to follow Deck.

Mahrree couldn’t look more pitifully at her husband, she was sure. But he just raised the stick and jabbed the horse’s rump. Mahrree’s horse took off in a fast gallop into the trees.

West.

“North!” Shem whispered frantically as her horse disappeared. “I said *north!*”

“Ease up on the reigns!” Perrin whispered loudly, although he knew it was hopeless. Deck’s horse cut hard to the west to catch Mahrree’s, and Peto followed, vanishing into the night.

“No, no, no!” Perrin whispered. He glared at Shem. “Yes, I said it *three times!*”

Shem gripped his arm. “She’ll be all right. That horse always knows how to find a meal, and I left one up at the next clearing about a quarter of a mile up. Now, it *might* take him a while to get there, seeing as how they’re taking a circuitous route—”

The sound of approaching horses shut them up.

They shared a series of complex facial tics, then crept down the hillside onto a rock outcropping for a better look, leaving Clark and Shem’s horse above them.

Eleven soldiers were slowing picking their way through the trees, their bodies twitching nervously in the unfamiliar terrain. In the lead was a tense soldier in a captain’s jacket.

Perrin and Shem stared at each other in amazement.

Lemuel Thorne was in the forest.

Chapter 5--“How will we know when we’re safe?”

Mahrree’s world became a jostling blur of black shadows as her mount cantered in a direction she hoped was somewhat north. She did her best to not cry out as the horse leaped over something and darted around another thing in its maddened run. Mahrree clung to the animal with her legs, knees, and hands, and would have used her teeth had she known where to bite.

Perrin! she cried in her mind. It was both a plea for his help and a curse at his stick. I could have started it myself! Maybe!

Soon quiet calls behind her told her she was not alone, and she hoped it was her boys. Another bob and weave left Mahrree breathless. She glanced around trying to see anyone else, but the wind swept past her eyes, and the tears it pulled from them left her unable to focus on anything. Thoughts filled her mind of some random king’s daughter, riding terrified in the forest, being chased by Guardians.

She listened as carefully as she could above the sound of snapping twigs and shifting ground, hoping to hear another horse, another voice, any sign she was doing the right thing. All she could do was pray in her fast-beating heart. “Dear Creator, I’m not in the best position for praying, but please, bless this family to reach safety!”

Perrin, still gripping his stick as if it were a sword, nodded to Shem with a squint, a twitch, and a head tip before leaving his side. He crept along the rock line to the east where another approaching sound had caught his attention.

Shem picked up a small rock and started a crouching walk to the west, toward a group of soldiers crashing loudly through the trees.

“Thorne!” Lieutenant Offra called.

Shem’s heart sank. *Oh Jon, why are you here? And with . . . eight soldiers?*

“Shhh!” Thorne shushed angrily.

“But we shouldn’t be here!” Offra said more quietly, but still panicked. “We just lost two men and horses to thin ground near a mud volcano! I couldn’t save them!”

Shem moved noiselessly along the rock line above them, only thirty feet beyond the jittery men. He could smell their sweat.

“They’re here!” Thorne whispered loudly. “Zenos’s men saw him head in this direction. He’s going to betray the Shins to the Guarders, and it’s up to us to rescue them!” he announced heroically.

Yes, of course Thorne would cast it in that light, Shem winced. He shook off his carelessness at allowing someone to see him leave, and counted the heads below him. Then he counted the stones available around him.

Offra’s voice was trembling when he said, “You have no idea what you’re talking about, Thorne! And we need to get out of here before we lose more men!”

Shem tried to make out the expressions of the soldiers. Offra’s men weren’t used to seeing death, and their horror was evident, even in the gloom. Two of their companions had already been swallowed by the ground. Further in could only mean further losses.

Shem would make sure Jon got out again. He picked up another rock.

“We keep going!” Thorne insisted.

Shem’s arm arced and silently released his first large stone.

“We move slowly and methodically—”

Something crashing in a bush below the soldiers made them jump simultaneously in their saddles. Shem grinned at their coordinated hops, and weighed the next rock in his hand.

Because the soldiers were distracted by whatever was rolling noisily away from them to the south, they didn’t notice the next rock come flying at them from the north. But Offra’s horse noticed because it hit the already-spooked animal squarely on the rump. The gelding reared with a startled whinny, and eight men and horses turned in sheer terror, riding hard to the fort. Lieutenant Offra didn’t fight his horse’s desire to follow the others out of the forest.

“Go, Jon!” Shem whispered.

“OFFRA!” Thorne yelled at his retreating officer and soldiers.

“How will we know when we’re safe?”

He spun in his saddle to face his trembling ten. “Don’t move! Stay where you are!” His voice cracked in terror.

Shem rolled away and bit his hand to stifle his sniggers. He loved playing Guarder. That he got to spend his last night in the world with Lemuel as his victim? That was a gift from above.

Perrin heard Thorne’s yelling and looked behind. While he saw nothing, he heard horses crashing through the brush. He smiled at Shem’s success and continued in his silent creep to spy on ten soldiers coming from the east, with an edgy Lieutenant Radan in the lead.

The soldiers looked ahead, to the left, to the right, behind, and all around them.

But I always told you to look up as well, Perrin thought. And where is the grand return of the Guarders? There’s supposed to be a slew of Salemite ‘Guarders’ coming to help.

The soldiers neared the rock ridge where he crouched, his dull black jacket and trousers blending into the stones around him. They turned to ride directly below him, barely fifteen paces away. Had any of them chanced to look up, they would have caught his glare.

Instinctively Perrin patted his hip where he used to keep his blades, but stopped. Instead, he firmed his grip on the stick that he wished was a sword, and picked his target: a pack horse with three sets of jangling confinement chains. He waited until it passed before he took his aim and threw.

The sharp stick sailed true to send its second horse of the evening into a panic. It reared and yanked its reins away from the private who was holding them.

The anxious soldiers twisted in their saddles to see what spooked the pack horse, and watched it take off in a desperate run, the clanging chains announcing its arrival to everyone within a mile radius.

As if the forest sensed a way to further heighten the drama, a vent spewed a shot of steam into the middle of the stunned soldiers.

That was all they needed.

“The forest’s evil!” someone cried, and kicked his horse to follow the pack horse barreling through the trees.

Perrin grinned as his formerly well-trained soldiers moved as one to follow the pack horse out of the forest, Radan kicking his horse more urgently than anyone else.

Perrin saluted them a sloppy farewell. Maybe he didn't need any men in black to help him. Maybe he had Salemite-Guarder blood in him after all.

He scampered back to the rock where he and Shem had first spotted Thorne. The captain was now standing in his stirrups looking to the east where the latest group of soldiers was heard retreating, and he swore after them.

Perrin found Shem behind the large rock. They exchanged grins, and started up the hill for the horses.

"The noise will have alerted Dormin and the others," Shem whispered as they mounted the horses. "I suspect most of our men ran into the village as diversions. We had a contingency for maybe a soldier or two coming into the trees, but we never imagined thirty-three! Thorne must be beyond desperate."

"Agreed," Perrin whispered. "What I think we should do until help arrives is—"

The distant *thwap* of bowstring cut through the night. Perrin and Shem stared at each other, and Shem's horse stumbled.

"Captain, I'm sure I just hit something over there!" cried an excited voice behind a thick stand of trees, parallel to Perrin and Shem about forty paces away.

Shem's horse slumped to the ground with a soft grunt. Perrin gasped when he saw the arrow protruding from the mare's chest.

"Private, we're not here to go bear hunting!" Thorne hollered. "Get back down here immediately!"

"But Captain, you said to take out threats," the voice complained as it made its way to the main body of soldiers.

"Perrin, go!" Shem whispered as he freed himself from the dying horse. "Find Mahrree! Head straight up the hill from here."

Perrin opened his mouth to protest but Shem stood up. "I'll take care of Thorne. I just spotted Dormin in the trees. Now go!" Shem jabbed Clark, and he took off in a fast gallop. Perrin wanted to return to Shem, but he heard the command in his head.

Don't follow the wrong path, my boy.

"Dear Creator," he whispered as he tried to ignore the awful reality that he just abandoned Shem and Dormin to deal with Thorne alone, "please help me find Mahrree!"

“How will we know when we’re safe?”

Mahrree’s horse raced through the trees, causing the branches to whip her face with vexing frequency. Not able to figure out how to shield her face and keep a hold of the horse at the same time, she elected to duck. But as they rode into a grassy section, she noticed something keeping pace with her on the right. A hand extended, belonging to a large man on a massive horse. With no small amount of relief she gave him the reins.

He jerked on them to bring both of their horses to a stop.

“Perrin, I—” she tried to speak as he tossed her back the reins, but her horse lurched suddenly and continued on again.

“Pull the reins!” Perrin called quietly after her.

Mahrree *was* pulling the reins, but to no avail. The horse was determined to reach another small clearing, and stopped on its own to sniff the ground. Behind her, Deck and Peto were shaking their heads as Perrin and Clark joined her.

“Where’s Shem?” she asked him.

Peto and Deck looked anxiously around.

“His horse was hit by an arrow,” Perrin said. “He’ll catch up to us. Dormin was coming to help him. Mahrree, we saw Thorne.”

“How did he dare enter the trees?” Deck asked, astounded.

“I don’t know. He must be so desperate that he’ll do anything. And he wasn’t alone. We scared off Offra and Radan, and their tens, but Thorne wasn’t giving up so quickly.”

“But we’re so far into the forest!” Mahrree whimpered.

“I’m afraid not,” Perrin sighed. “These horses were tethered north of the fort, only three hundred paces in.”

Peto slapped his forehead. “We walked probably four miles, and we’re only half a mile from home?” he wailed. “Who planned this stupid route?”

Perrin gave him a glare that told him to be quiet, yet also agreed with his frustration. “It’s not like we could march past the fort now, is it?”

“And we had to get Jaytsy to the midwife and horses,” Deck pointed out. “Doing a large circle around the fort, then backtracking into the woods would lose anyone trying to follow. We’re miles away from Jaytsy now, and she’s safe.”

“That’s true, Deck,” Perrin said. “You could have been a planning officer. Not like Thorne, that is,” he added.

“I’m just good at playing Track the Stray Bull. Or rather, *cow*.”

“Better than the soldiers, then,” Perrin said. “We scared them off

easily. They're all terrified."

Mahrree decided now wasn't the best time to tell him she was terrified, too.

"How did you catch up to us so fast?" Peto asked his father.

"You didn't exactly go in a straight line," Perrin said. "Mahrree's horse took a circular route, and the two of you followed. I don't think those were my orders, but it worked well enough."

"You're not the colonel anymore," Peto reminded him.

"But I'm still *your father*," said Perrin sternly.

"So you're issuing orders again?"

"Yes!"

Oddly, Peto smiled at that. "That's more like it. What now, sir?"

Perrin exhaled. "Just . . . make the best of the present situation, all right?"

Peto fired off a snappy salute.

"Perrin," Mahrree said, "how will Shem ever find us?"

Her horse had been rooting around the ground, and jerked as it found something. The other horses joined hers and nuzzled the dirt.

Perrin slid off of Clark, who wasn't about to be left out, and squatted to investigate.

"Shem will know exactly where to find us, because these horses knew where to go. Now, I'm no farmer, but I'm sure oats don't grow in leather bags half buried in the ground in the forest. So we just sit quietly and wait."

Perrin mounted Clark again and shifted him to stand next to Mahrree's horse while the animals snacked. Just in case, Perrin leaned over and took Mahrree's horse's reins again.

And there they sat in the darkened trees, waiting.

"Get back to the Shins," Dormin whispered to Shem as they huddled under a brush watching Thorne and his men move slower than snails. "I've got this."

"Dormin, I don't want to leave you—"

"I appreciate the thought, Shem, but I can take care of a few men. I've done it before, you know. Backup's on the way. Seems some messages got crossed and *everyone* headed into the village, but twenty should be here momentarily."

"By the way, Perrin figured out who you are. Gave him quite the

“How will we know when we’re safe?”

jolt.”

“I knew he’d piece it together,” Dormin said, stretching to get a better view. “That’s why I told him all was forgiven, so he could breathe easier. Now go find him so he’ll survive this night!”

Shem patted Dormin on the back and took off in a low jog.

“And now, Captain Thorne,” Dormin whispered as he watched the soldiers shift direction, “how has your family enjoyed living in my mansion? My brother Sonoforen wanted that eyesore back, but he never again saw the inside. Neither did I. What about you?”

He stood up cautiously and trotted along a ridge to be above where Thorne would soon arrive.

“We used to play hide and seek in that mansion, Lemuel,” Dormin murmured. “Sonoforen always cheated. He’d arm himself with a bow and arrow. Was a terrible shot, fortunately. How about you?”

He threw a large rock behind Thorne, and it spooked the horses behind him.

“Just too easy.”

Mahrree hated waiting.

Sitting in the stillness, not knowing what turn her life might take in the next few minutes, was far worse than jostling from a horse. A knot twisted in her gut, and she looked to her husband for comfort.

But he only stared out into the forest, scanning the dark shadows.

Mahrree turned to Peto and Deck, who were also watching Perrin and waiting for some kind of reassurance. Peto met Mahrree’s eyes and she forced herself to smile. Peto returned an equally strained one.

The gloom was unbearable, smothering Mahrree’s mind like a hot blanket and forcing her to think of only how to shake it off. She squirmed uncomfortably on her saddle.

She *had* wished she could think about something else besides impending doom, but the meaning of ‘saddle sore’ wasn’t it.

“My . . . eye . . . can . . . spy . . . something . . . *black*.”

Mahrree nearly laughed out loud. Instead she snorted at Peto, whose expression was ridiculously earnest.

Perrin twisted to glare at his son.

“I’m just following your orders, Father. Make the best of the situation?”

Deck muffled a quiet laugh. “Hmm. Tough one, Peto. Something

black . . . something black . . . Is it that speck of dirt under the bush?”

“Amazing!” Peto whispered in nearly genuine awe. “You’re really good at this. Now it’s your turn.”

Perrin’s eyebrows furrowed in disapproval of whispering in the ranks, but Mahrree shook her head at him.

“This is serious!” he snarled at her. “Not a time for games!”

“Peto, this is hard,” Deck whispered in childlike sincerity. “So many things to choose from. My eye can spy something . . . *black*.”

“You really don’t think they know this is serious?” Mahrree said to Perrin. “One just left his entire life behind him, and the other just watched his future be carried away. They’re not soldiers, Perrin. They’re *your sons!*”

“Something black,” Peto murmured. “Tough one. Is it the dark smudge on the cloud we passed a few minutes ago?”

“*Amazing!* You’re really good at this game, too, Peto!”

“All right, Deck. My eye can spy something . . . *black*.”

Perrin’s face lost some of his tension. He looked briefly at his wife, then went back to scanning. “All of this would be easier if they *were* soldiers, trained to deal with monotonous suspense.”

“Something black, something black . . . Is it the angry look your father’s been giving us?” Deck guessed.

Mahrree fought another snort.

“*Amazing!* You are really good at this, Deck. Your turn.”

Mahrree leaned over to Perrin. “And how much training have these boys received? Last I checked you were still working on *Stop Smirking When Your Father Calls You Soldiers*.”

Perrin sat stock still, only his eyes surveying the darkness.

Mahrree realized that the colonel was back. Even with his jacket inside out, instinct had taken over. His hand patted where his sword used to be, and he groaned softly in frustration that it wasn’t there.

“Perrin, you don’t have to be the colonel anymore,” Mahrree assured him. “Just be my husband and their father. That’s all we want.”

“ . . . Something black . . . is it the tree?”

“Close, try again.”

“That tree?”

“Almost.”

“That tree.”

“*That* tree?”

“Yes, that tree.”

“Amazing! You’re really good!”

“How will we know when we’re safe?”

Mahrree smiled, but her husband still showed nothing other than growing irritation.

“You know,” she whispered to him, “when I heard three weeks ago that a general would be living in my house, I had a flash of my future. It was full of protocol and inspections. You can’t imagine the relief I felt when he vanished as quickly as he arrived.”

Perrin shifted slightly. “I didn’t think you were going to let him live there.”

“I wasn’t. I was planning to throw his things out into the alley. But not his pillows.”

Perrin’s shoulders twitched. It used to mean that he was about to laugh.

He glanced at his wife. “What kind of inspections?”

“That’s not a question the captain would have asked,” said Mahrree coyly. “From what I remember, Captain Shin’s idea of ‘personal inspections’ was far more *personal* than the Army of Idumea ever had in mind.” She gave him a sidelong glance.

A corner of his mouth twitched upwards.

“Something *black* . . . the rock?”

“The big rock or the little rock?”

“The rock in between the two rocks.”

“The one in the shadow?”

“Yes, that one.”

“*Amazing!* You are so good at this.”

“Thank you. I know. I’ve been practicing all night.”

Perrin’s shoulders started to shake.

Worried, Mahrree whispered, “Perrin?”

Struggling to hide the laugh that was fighting to escape, he whispered, “It’s just so stupid . . . ‘something black!’”

Mahrree grinned.

After he composed himself, he said, “I’ve been thinking about ‘the colonel’ for the past few weeks. And the general, the lieutenant colonel, the major, and the captain.” He paused to scan the perimeter while Mahrree waited for him to continue.

“There were days when I had to really fight them, to not let them into the house with me. Not always successfully, I know. But the further we travel, the more the officers fade.” He sighed. “Except for right now. Mahrree, it’s like cutting off my arm! I was a soldier before I was a husband and a father. I grew up in the army. I don’t know any other kind of life. I don’t think I can ever get rid of it.”

“You were born *Perrin*, not a soldier,” Mahrree told him. “You’re not the uniform. Perrin is much more than any general could be. Perrin is all we need. All *I* need. The army is your arm? Then cut it off. I’d be happy with a one-armed husband.”

Perrin sighed. “I’m doing my best to lose all the officers in the forest.”

Mahrree reached over and squeezed his hand.

“All right, Peto, get ready for a hard one: my eye can spy—”

A quiet noise in the brush startled them all, and Shem appeared in the clearing. “Something black? We played that all the time,” he stole a look at Perrin, “but never in front of the colonel, so you’re brave young men. I see the horses got you here safely.” He patted Peto’s mount on the rump, then patted Peto’s rump. “You’re going to be sore, boy.”

Peto’s glare was fixed and immediate.

“Shem, once again am I glad to see you!” Mahrree breathed. “I was getting worried.”

“You’re playing in my garden now, Mahrree. Thorne and his men are currently running into a blind corner, and Dormin will keep them there until help arrives. Now that the horses are finished with their snack, I recommend we continue on. Perrin, I think Mahrree should double up with you. I don’t feel like walking all the way, and that horse doesn’t consider her his master.”

Mahrree knew why her husband burst into a grin as he eagerly got off of Clark, helped Mahrree off her mount, and hefted her on to the big black horse.

“So it seems you finally have to ride with me, Mrs. Shin,” he chuckled softly as he mounted up behind her.

She hadn’t realized how terrified she was until she felt his solid chest behind her and his strong arms around her.

“Thank you,” she whispered. “I know I once said those stories of army captains rescuing the king’s daughters from the Guardians were ridiculous, but right now . . . yes, I think I want to be rescued.”

He kissed her cheek. “And I know I told you once that if I were an army captain assigned to rescue you, I would have just let you babble at the Guardians until they gave up. But I would have rescued you no matter how irritating you became.”

She laughed, quietly and nervously.

Until something in the air . . . *changed*.

It was as if something cold suddenly surrounded them, not to be

“How will we know when we’re safe?”

easily shaken off. It came with angry heaviness and stilled even the random cricket to silent apprehension.

Shem looked around briefly and nodded to Perrin. He felt it, too.

Perrin firmed his grip around Mahrree, for which she was grateful, even if it left her breathless. She hadn’t felt such foreboding since Perrin had his sleepless nights.

Shem took the lead, with Deck behind him. Perrin gently clucked Clark to follow Peto.

“Perrin, how do you stand this? Not knowing what’s behind the next shadow?” she asked. “How will we know when we’re safe?”

“You’re safe *now*, Mahrree,” he said in her ear. “I’m never letting you go off alone again.”

She almost believed him.

He released his grip on her only momentarily to adjust something on his right hip, and Mahrree realized that was where he usually hid his long knife.

Except that he was supposed to leave all his weapons back in Edge.

The problem with blind corners is that everyone is blind in them. Even Dormin.

“Captain? Captain! I got something here!”

I’m so stupid, Dormin thought to himself. Look behind, look behind. How many times had that been drilled into his head?

And now he felt the steel against his back, and stared into the faces of four eager and terrified soldiers, with blades drawn.

Thorne’s horse arrived seconds later. “You Radan’s men? Excellent! I’ll have you each put in for a medal! How did you find him?”

“Well, we lost our horses, so we were hiding—”

One of his companions poked him.

“—*waiting*, sir, waiting for what to do next, when we saw this man here sneaking back and well, here we are!”

Dormin hung his head. How did he get so careless? In all his years . . . But he knew this night would come. There was a reason for this. There were reasons for everything.

He was ready for it.

“Follow me!” Thorne said. “I know what to do with him!”

Shem was leading them up a slope when a noise caused them to pause. The second time, it was clearly a shout, the cloud cover carrying it unnaturally far. They froze when they recognized the voice.

“SHIN!”

Shem turned to look at Perrin.

Perrin nodded.

Shem led Deck and Peto back down the trail to huddle the horses.

The voice, filled with rage, came again. “SHIN! You are trapped! This is useless! Give yourself up!”

Mahrree whimpered.

It was Captain Thorne.

Peto began to plot and fret in his mind. *Grandfather, who's the enemy right now? If I get to Thorne, I could get to Karna—*

“We know you are there, my former Colonel,” sang the sneering voice. “I and *my* one hundred men have come all this way to bring you home!”

Panicked, Mahrree stared at Shem.

“He has only ten here,” Shem assured them. “*I thought* I had sent them successfully toward Dormin, but Thorne probably got confused and lucky at the same time and ended up following us instead.”

Grandfather, tell me now—who do I follow? Who do I follow?

“But Thorne doesn’t know where we are,” Shem told them. “Keep silent. I’ve seen him playing Dices. He’s never been good at bluffing.”

Mahrree felt as if the world were lifting off her shoulders—

“But that’s still eleven *armed* men, and twice as many as us,” Perrin reminded him.

—and the world fell back down on her again.

But Shem was never one to be easily discouraged. “I know these forests. He barely knows the back of his horse Streak—”

“PERRIN SHIN!” the shout drifted up to them. “I have an old friend of yours. We found his horse at the spring and we just captured him. Zenos is here waiting for you, my dear colonel!”

Deck critically eyed Shem up and down.

Shem grinned at Mahrree. “What’d I tell you about his bluffing?”

Grandfather, now I'm faced with choosing between two liars—

Mahrree smiled as Perrin leaned over to Shem. “I hope they’re treating you well, *my old friend.*”

“How will we know when we’re safe?”

“They’re not. Food’s terrible. Has been for seventeen years.”

“You have one minute, SHIN!” Thorne’s insistent call rose up.
“If you do not surrender, Zenos will suffer for it!”

“That’s all right,” Shem whispered stoically. “I’m ready for it.”

Despite himself, Peto couldn’t help but join with his family’s nervous sniggers.

“PERRIN!”

Perrin’s eyebrows lifted at Thorne’s casual use of his first name.

“Why let your wife and son suffer needlessly in this forest? What will Jaytsy and her husband think when they learn you’re missing?”

Deck looked at his in-laws in feigned alarm. “I didn’t realize you were missing. Did you know you’re missing?”

Relf, what do I do? Is this it?

They stifled nervous snorts like misbehaving children in the back of a classroom, hoping the teacher wouldn’t hear them.

In the distant west, thunder rumbled.

Mahrree twisted in the saddle to look at Perrin. “Rain?”

“It would be the best thing right now,” Perrin whispered. “Remember, we *are* leaving tracks. As soon as dawn comes, even Lemuel could follow us.”

Or is that a sign? Relf, help me!

“PERRIN!” Thorne shouted again. “Your time is nearly up! Zenos does *not* want to die.”

“Ah,” Shem said, “he’s finally got something right tonight.”

“But he will if you won’t reveal yourself!” Thorne’s threat bounced around the black trees. “I will count to ten. One! Two—”

“If he skips a number, does Shem live?” Mahrree whispered.

More muffled snorts.

As if to add weight to Thorne’s counting, thunder rumbled over his shouted, “Three!”

So do I decide for myself? Based upon what?

When Thorne cried, “Four,” he sounded closer, so much so that Shem and Perrin exchanged glances that Mahrree couldn’t interpret. Maybe it was just that the air was growing heavier around them, trapping his voice in the swelling humidity—

“Five! . . . Six! . . . Seven! . . .”

The four horses began to shift, as if they could count as well.

“Eight! . . . Nine! . . .”

Thorne wasn’t any closer, yet still it felt as if he hovered right over them.

“Ten!”

Grandfather, I've noticed that I haven't shouted out to give away our position. I can't explain why—

“Nothing, Shin?! . . . Well, then.”

The distinct sound of metal slicing reverberated around the forest, followed by astonished silence.

Mahrree stiffened in worry, until Deck whispered, “My guess is a sapling, and it didn't look anything like Shem.”

“SHIN!” Thorne's voice came to them again, and Mahrree thought she heard a tremble in his tone as he proclaimed, “Satisfied? Zenos is *dead!*”

Mahrree leaned over to him. “I hope it wasn't too painful.”

“Quiet, please,” Shem whispered back. “I'm still trying to die here. I'll let you know when it's over.”

Deck nearly fell off his horse, convulsing, and Peto had to smile.

But Perrin wasn't amused. He cleared his throat at Shem, and Shem's expression suddenly sobered.

Mahrree twisted to look at her husband, and noticed his dreadful expression. That's when she remembered that metal makes unique sounds as it hits different objects. Those attuned to it can recognize when a blade hits an object or slices through it. Thorne didn't slash asunder a tree. He hit something with a softer exterior.

And the owner of a sword knows the ring of his own blade. Perrin had heard that sound several times during the offensive at Moorland.

It could only mean that Thorne was using High General Shin's sword, and with it, he just ended someone's life—

“PERRIN!” Thorne's voice came closer now, and it wasn't just a trick of the clouds. “Dawn is upon us. Look to the east. Soon we will see you!”

Undaunted, Shem clung to his optimism. “Dawn's still at least an hour away.”

“But we can't sit here any longer,” Perrin whispered. “I think Thorne's actually closing in.”

“But if we leave,” said Mahrree, “won't he be able to follow the sound of our horses?”

All right, Relf. Suddenly that sounds like a bad thing—

Shem sighed as a distant whinny reached them. “Yes, he's close enough now that he can. It's time to ask the Creator for a solution.”

“What kind of solution?” Peto asked, full of doubt.

“Isn't it obvious? Noise to cover our escape! Rain to erase our

tracks! Let’s pray for that storm to visit us. Ask for a miracle, Peto!”

“You think I haven’t been?”

“We prayed before we left tonight,” Mahrree told Shem.

“And one prayer’s enough?”

“I haven’t quit praying, actually.”

“So what part of the horse do I kick to get him to kneel?” Peto asked cynically.

“The Creator knows our plight, Peto. He’s used to the sitting-on-horse position,” and immediately Shem bowed his head.

Mahrree, Deck, Perrin, and Peto glanced at each other to see who would be the first to follow Shem’s lead. Simultaneously, and a bit guiltily, they bowed their heads.

Despite everything, Mahrree almost felt like chuckling. Shem and his confidence astonished her as she thought the words, *Dear Creator, there’s already a storm. Could you nudge it our—*

“PERRIN!” boomed the voice, sounding as if it were now just beyond the clearing.

All their heads snapped.

From the west, a faint breeze began.

Shem grinned and nodded at Peto. He pointed to the sky, then to the west, and wagged his eyebrows.

Peto’s scowl relayed he was unconvinced.

More thunder rumbled, louder and nearer.

Perrin nodded at Shem and gave him a signal. Mahrree saw Shem return a look. Perrin was working on a plan—

“SHIN! If you come out now, I can assure you no one will visit your daughter and son-in-law today.”

Mahrree was appalled. He would dare terrorize an expecting mother? Or maybe he wasn’t planning to frighten her . . .

Furious, Deck twisted the reins around his hand.

A twig snapped behind them, followed by the sounds of horses snorting and bridles jangling, maybe only fifty paces away.

We have to go now, Mahrree thought urgently. “Perrin,” she said, “Whatever you’re planning, we need to know now—”

Her hair flipping into her face stopped her words, and she realized that the breeze had become a full-blown wind.

Before she could point that out, thunder boomed, echoing between the low cloud cover and the wooded slope.

Behind her, Perrin whispered softly, “Yes, of course!” He leaned over to the others. “Soon there’ll be a lightning bolt behind us and a

loud thunderclap. That'll be our signal to go. Thorne and his men will have trouble controlling their horses when the lightning strikes. Turn your mounts to face up the hill, now!"

It didn't occur to Mahrree to question him, and Peto, Deck, and Shem quickly lined up their horse to match Clark, who was already headed in the right direction and shifting eagerly.

Somehow, miraculously, Mahrree thought, the horses missed every twig that could have snapped to give away their position.

"SHIN? It's enough!" Captain Thorne's voice came from just behind them.

"Captain! Possible sighting!" That voice came from the left of them, nearest to Peto whose head snapped to the voice.

Then everything was illuminated, but only for a moment as lightning raced through the clouds. Peto could make out the soldier a few dozen paces away who had turned to call downhill, but the distracted soldier didn't notice him during the brief flash. The following thunder wasn't very ambitious, but enough that the four horses shifted and stepped nervously.

More lightning flashed above them, slicing the sky with white. Perrin twisted in time to see Captain Thorne in the distance behind him, merely a stone's throw away.

And Lemuel saw Perrin.

Their eyes locked.

Thorne's mouth worked frantically, surprised to have actually found his prey. "THERE!" he cried as everything fell dark again.

Everyone heard the clang as Thorne hastily drew General Shin's sword, the steel singing louder than the thunder above them—

Then the world became a blinding blaze of white.

None of the riders had a chance to kick their horses. The lightning striking between them and Thorne sent the four terrified horses into a frantic gallop straight up the slope. The thunder blasted Mahrree's ears and overwhelmed her mind. She probably screamed but wasn't sure because she couldn't hear anything except the deafening sound of suffocating blackness. As Clark lurched, she gripped the horn of the saddle and prayed Perrin could hang on to her. She glimpsed Peto's horse darting erratically, then continue on in a frenzied run. Deck was behind Peto, and Shem was to their right.

Mahrree realized she could hear again when, far behind them, rose up the scream of someone in agonizing pain. She couldn't give it any thought, because another lightning bolt seared the air. Perrin's

grip around her waist was so tight that she couldn’t catch her breath.

Rain began to fall, first in drops, then in a sudden downpour causing the horses to lose traction. For a full ten minutes, although it felt like ten hours, the horses galloped madly, slipping and sliding through the woods up the incline.

Mahrree whispered prayer after prayer. They must be getting past danger! How could anyone follow? They were heading in the right direction, they had to be!

The angle of Clark shifted severely as the slope steepened. Despite Clark’s strength, he struggled under his burden as he fought up the muddy hill. Perrin’s heavy breathing in Mahrree’s ear slid away, along with the rest of him, and she was sure there’d be bruises later around her ribs where he clung to her. She gripped the saddle horn tighter and closed her eyes in a prayer that consisted only of, *Please, please, please, please!*

Clark pitched unexpectedly and Mahrree nearly flew forward, with Perrin right behind her again as the horse leveled out.

Perrin exhaled loudly and whispered, “Thank you!”

She knew that ‘thank you’ wasn’t for her, and she changed her prayer to *Thank you, thank you, thank you!* Perrin pressed his face against her back, and she was sure that he kissed her.

The galloping horse broke past the tree line in the full downpour, and Mahrree and Perrin heard Shem’s whistle. Ahead of them was a muddy field, and three horses at the end of it, waiting at the base of enormous boulders. Peto’s shoulders sank in relief and Deck broke into a grin.

Perrin urged Clark on to meet them, while Mahrree hoped that everything was somehow over.

“I thought we were going to lose you down there!” Shem called as they neared. “Bit of a weight for that poor animal.”

“But it should have been enough rain to wash away the tracks, right?” Deck asked. “And wash away Thorne?”

“Nearly washed *me* away,” Peto grumbled, trying to wipe off the mud on his black cloak which the rain was diluting for him.

Shem scanned the wet forest for any signs as Clark snuffed to a panting halt next to the other three horses. Perrin and Mahrree also looked behind them into the thick and dripping brush.

Slowly a smile spread across Shem’s face. “No tracks. No followers. We’re clear! I think we did it!”

With tears sliding down her face, Mahrree slumped against Perin behind her. He kissed her on the neck, wrapping his arms around her even tighter. “Whew!” was all he could say.

Peto and Deck patted each other on the back, harder and harder to see who would wince first.

“I can’t believe it!” Mahrree murmured. “I just can’t believe it!”

“Mahrree, where’s your faith?” Shem said. “All right, I have to be honest—I was worried for a few seconds there, too. But *that* was the most exciting moving we’ve ever had. I’m so glad I resigned.”

Chapter 6--“Remarkable return the Guarders have made, isn’t it?”

Administrator Genev sat by the large window of the forward command office sipping his morning drink: tea spiced with ale. But there was so much ale in it that any bits of tea felt out of place in the mug.

From his vantage point, the stocky and squat Administrator of Loyalty could see up into the forest. The sudden rainstorm was already dissipating, and the coming dawn dimly illuminated the muddy horses and ragged men emerging from the trees. His lips twitched as he silently counted.

“Four more, private,” he said flatly, and the nervous soldier seated in the corner scribbled quickly.

“Horses or men, sir?”

“Both,” he answered. “What’s the total so far?”

The private cleared his throat. “Did you want the number of the men that went out last night, or the number of the rescue party we sent this morning?”

“Do have separate numbers for each?”

“Uh no, sir?”

“Then why the inane question?!”

The private swallowed and quickly read off, “Sixteen. We initially sent in thirty-three after the Shins in the forest, then you assigned fifty for the rescue party—”

“Yes, *I know*, Private.” He’d arrived several hours earlier than the fort had expected, to see them at their worst instead of their prepared best. And the worst, he discovered in the middle of the night when his three coaches rumbled in and he found soldiers and men in black racing through the village, was worse than he’d anticipated.

He set down his mug and continued to scan the forest’s edge, waiting for the captain. The tension of the soldiers was thick, even

before Genev drove through the gates. He was skilled at picking up anxiety, and the levels were as high as the command tower. When the first soldiers came back yelling about marshy traps set by hundreds of Guarders, Genev knew Thorne had lost control. Ever since Shin had abruptly resigned, the soldiers had been fretting like lost children who couldn't find their father. Thorne was nowhere near to filling that position.

Genev wondered if the one hundred reinforcements he ordered from Idumea would be enough. The fort needed an influx of new men who had not been influenced by either Shin or Thorne.

But more concerning was the changing situation. Genev was still in control of it, although the players were shifting *slightly* in their positions. It was still observable. His efforts would still impress Nicko Mal, he was sure.

The Administrator stood up and straightened his suit. The white ruffles of his collar and sleeves felt ridiculous among the soldiers' simple jackets, but he had his own uniform to wear. Already he had conveniently lost the new vest with stripes. And, since the day looked like it may warm up, he'd have to remove the red jacket and find a way for the long coat tails to be accidently trampled by a horse.

Genev spied five more men, without horses, running from the forest further east. They dropped onto the grassy field in what he interpreted to be exhaustion mingled with terror. Genev sighed as two rider-less horses bounded out from the trees and continued in a fast gallop to the village.

"Five more men, two more horses," he said in disgust, and scritchng noises told him the tally was updated.

Genev turned to the large cabinet. He knew what he wanted wasn't there, but the urge to search again for the Shin file, started by his predecessor Gadiman, nearly overwhelmed him.

That file had been guarded for years and then, on the eve of the Shins' extradition to Idumea, it vanished. How Thorne could allow such an important document to be lost was beyond comprehension.

But Genev had his suspicions. During his interrogations that night, several soldiers admitted to seeing Sergeant Major Zenos leaving the office late the evening before.

The Quiet Man should have been under closer scrutiny since he'd been identified; no one was sure exactly where his loyalties were. Zenos himself probably didn't know whose side he was on today.

And to have allowed a duplicitous Guarder spy to remain in the

“Remarkable return the Guardians have made, isn’t it?”

fort for so long wasn’t completely Captain Thorne’s fault. It was his father’s. Genev would deal with High General Thorne later.

At least Genev still had the duplicate records of the captain’s messages. He congratulated himself again for his prescience in making those copies and keeping them in two different locations. There was still enough evidence to convict the Shin woman ten times over.

And now making a case against the former colonel was greatly simplified since the Administrators adopted the Ideas and Association Laws.

Genev glanced at the murky sky. He’d hoped to be on his way to Idumea by now, but at least the trials couldn’t start without them.

Shouts below him from the fort’s compound signaled a new development. He glanced down at the men, then up to the forest.

A cluster of blue uniforms on horseback were riding hard for the fort. He couldn’t make out the individuals, but it was apparent by the way he rode that one of the riders was injured and not wearing a uniform.

If it was only *one* of the Shins, who would I want? Genev mused. The boy would be most disappointing. The woman had irritated his predecessor and himself with her sedition for years, but the rejection of the army by its new High General also burned on his mind.

Genev took another sip of his tea-less ale, straightened his hated ruffle, and decided that either one of the older Shins would be a pleasure to meet right now, especially writhing in pain.

“Private!” he barked.

The young man jumped in his seat.

“Sit here and keep track of the numbers as they come in. Add nine more horses and as many riders.”

Genev strode to the stairs. He smoothed what hair was left on the sides of his head, and made sure his boots pounded menacingly as he stomped down to the reception area. The soldiers milling there stopped their whispers as Genev bellowed, “See to the horses coming in! Some look lamed. Get to work!”

The soldiers fled out the doors as Genev marched into the compound as quickly as his short, thick legs would allow while still looking dignified. He reached the gates just as the party of horses and wounded came through them.

Shouts for the surgeon brought him from the hospital wing, still wiping his hands on a towel. “What are they bringing in now?” Dr. Frenulum intoned. “More nervous soldiers with bloodied noses?”

Genev focused on the group, trying to recognize faces. His lips pressed into a tight line when he saw the injured man. “Slag!”

“It’s the captain!” cried one of his accompanying soldiers.

“Slagging idiot!”

The horses came to a halt in the compound, and two men helped Captain Thorne, whose right arm was wrapped in his jacket. His white undershirt was muddied, ripped, and—oddly—scorched.

Genev was perplexed, and disappointed, to see no evidence of blood.

As the men carefully laid Captain Thorne on a waiting litter, his face twisted in pain.

Frenulum, staring in horror at Thorne’s wrapped arm, cried, “Bring him in immediately!” and he raced for the hospital wing. As the soldiers whisked Thorne away, Genev strode over to Thorne’s horse and took the reins.

“Lieutenant!” Genev shouted. “What happened here?”

A tall lieutenant with a name badge reading OFFRA stood at attention. “We were ambushed, sir. My men fled the forest, but I returned to retrieve the captain. We encountered unknown amounts—”

“What happened to *Thorne*, Lieutenant! His horse looks singed around the ears.”

“Lightning, sir. They were about to apprehend the colonel—”

Genev shot him a look.

“—I mean, *Mr. Shin*. I arrived as the captain drew his sword and was struck by lightning, sir.”

Genev stared at him. “He drew his *sword* in a *lightning storm* in the *forest*,” he reiterated slowly to make sure the lieutenant understood the stupidity of the act.

“Yes, sir,” Offra answered unsteadily. “Shin and the others remain, at this moment, unaccounted for.”

Something in Offra’s tone suggested he may have been happy about that, but Genev was sure it was only anxiety for having to deal with such an important administrator. He tossed the reins to Offra and strode to the hospital wing, pushing past filthy soldiers who were peering through the treatment door to see the captain’s injuries.

“You have jobs to do and Guarders to chase!” Genev shouted. “Make sure no more are out there!”

He spun around to face Thorne and was unprepared for the sight. What first struck him was the stench of burnt flesh and hair. Thorne

“Remarkable return the Guardians have made, isn’t it?”

was biting down on a wooden dowel trying not to thrash as the surgeon poured together several colored liquids in a bottle.

The surgeon’s assistant rushed in with dripping wet towels and gently placed them on Thorne’s right hand and arm. The limb was nearly unrecognizable, covered in charred flesh.

Remembering something, Genev fished around in one of his pockets, the only reason he still wore the red coat, and pulled out a small bottle which he handed to the surgeon.

“Add it to your mixture. It’s a new formula which increases the state of relaxation. The Administrator over Health and Wellness gave me several samples. Give Thorne all of this one.”

Dr. Frenulum nodded his thanks, added it to his mixture, shook it up quickly, and dashed it over to the captain. He helped Thorne to sit up so he could guzzle down the liquid.

“In just a few moments you’ll feel nearly nothing,” Frenulum assured him. “And in less than half an hour you will be in a deep sleep. This is supposed to be more effective than sedation. We’ll work on your injury when you’re unconscious.”

Thorne began breathe more steadily as he lay back down.

Frenulum’s face was grave as he gingerly replaced a wet towel on the blackened arm. “Administrator,” he said, “whatever you have to say should be said now before the captain loses consciousness.”

Thorne hadn’t noticed Genev’s presence until then, and he flicked him only a glance. “My written report will have to wait.”

Genev had little sympathy for incompetence. “Where are Shin and that woman?”

“Up on the mountain, if they survived, which I doubt. The forest’s full of lethal traps. You’re welcome to go find out for yourself.”

“So you’ve lost them, then.”

“I can get them back. I’ve already sent soldiers to bring their daughter here. She’s ready to birth at any moment, and I have no doubt she’ll be willing to help us find her parents.”

“What about Sergeant Major Zenos?”

“Dead,” Thorne said. “Killed him myself. He was a traitor, just as I suspected.” He cringed in pain. “All of this was his doing, I’m sure of it. His and *that woman’s*! The colonel was just so blind!”

Genev felt his first sense of satisfaction for the day. This wasn’t exactly to plan, but still within his control. “Where’s Zenos’s body?”

“Up in the forest,” Thorne said, grimacing in pain. “Again, you’re welcome to go retrieve it. His head rolled some distance, but

you might find it near a poisoned pond.”

Not entirely confident that the captain was capable of decapitation, Genev said, “Show me his blood on your sword.”

“You’ll see nothing on that useless piece of steel.”

Genev noticed a sword, or what had been one, on the floor. He picked up the bent and charred metal. The hilt remained mostly intact, but a blown section above it suggested an exit route for the lightning bolt. He tossed it on the floor where it clanged dully.

“It’s a miracle you survived the strike,” the surgeon said. “I’m surprised the charge didn’t continue through your body.”

“Miracle?” Genev scoffed. “I assure you, there were no miracles last night. There may be chance, there may be luck, but everything can be attributed to planning, execution, and timing. Or lack thereof,” he added bitterly.

Thorne didn’t respond.

Two soldiers came to the door. “Captain Thorne, sir?”

Thorne’s eyes popped open and he attempted to sit up. “Well?”

The soldiers hesitated. “We regret to inform you that Shin’s daughter and her husband are nowhere to be found.”

Thorne’s mouth dropped open in dismay. “But Radan saw them running back . . . she may be birthing! Send someone to the village’s Office of Family—”

“Already did,” one of the soldiers said. “No one’s seen the Briters since last night. But the searches are continuing throughout the village, sir.” He paused before he let drop what he’d been holding back. “Guarders *were* seen wearing their clothes. Likely decoys, and probably who Lieutenant Radan thought he saw. A few Guarders were discovered leaving their house during the night . . .” He trailed off when he saw the devastation in the captain’s face.

“No!” he whimpered, and a drop of water slipped from his eye.

Genev noticed. He pivoted to hover over the captain, whose blond hair was blackened in patches, and disintegrating.

“You had over one hundred men who could not find an *expecting girl* shuffling through the village?”

Thorne was not to be humiliated. “There were Guarders everywhere in the village, and even more in the forest. And her house?” He shook his head, the effects of the surgeon’s mixture beginning to confuse his thoughts. “After I killed Zenos. After the lightning . . . there were dozens, everywhere. They trapped us. Marshes. Steam vents. Mud volcanoes. This . . . this hole, this cavern . . . said they’d push

“Remarkable return the Guardians have made, isn’t it?”

us in. We got away. They let us get away—”

“What did they look like?” Genev interrupted.

“Black! All black,” Thorne’s words slurred slightly.

The surgeon, his assistants, and the two soldiers who delivered the bad news about the Briters listened in.

“They knew the forest. We were . . . so lost,” Thorne struggled with the words. “But I’ll learn more. I’ll train the soldiers. Idumea will be impressed. With their new major.”

“We’ll see about that,” Genev said, his upper lip curling. “Remarkable return the Guardians have made, isn’t it? And they came to take the Shins, naturally. For revenge about Moorland, I’ve heard?” He walked around the captain slowly. “I’ve discovered you had a relationship with . . . *Jaytsy*, was it?”

Thorne’s eyes widened at that.

“Administrator,” Dr. Frenulum said steadily, “the captain’s compromised right now. You can see how his eyes are glassy. Perhaps this isn’t the best time—”

Genev shifted his flinty glare to the surgeon. “I do my best work when my *guests* are *compromised*. Otherwise, they’d never confess. The bottle of relaxation I had you include helps people loosen their tongues and remember their thoughts. Would you like to try some? Every doctor should be familiar with what he administers, after all.”

Dr. Frenulum took a step back and cast an almost sympathetic look at Captain Thorne.

Genev continued his slow pace around Thorne’s cot. “You keep very thorough *personal* records, Captain. You are to be commended. You also should be more careful with what you record. Tell me, why did Jaytsy Shin marry a farmer while you were away at The Dinner last year?”

Thorne lay in brooding silence until the words burbled up all on their own. “Zenos said she loved him.”

“I’ve not yet been able to figure out that turn of events,” Genev continued. “It would’ve been such an advantage to be wedded to the colonel’s daughter. But you already knew that, from what I read. You see,” he circled the cot like a patient vulture, “I wonder if your affection for this girl, and maybe even *the baby* she’s carrying,” Genev paused to give Thorne a thin smile, “affected your judgment last night? Did the Shin family escape because of your past *attachment*?”

Thorne’s chin trembled, as if to hold back the words that dribbled out. “I tried. I tried. The soldiers surrounding the Shins’ house . . .

sedated. Radan discovered them. Everything fell apart. Must have been the work of the Guardians. But I wanted to deliver the Shins. The Administrators . . .” He tried to regain himself. “The Shins got away . . . because the Administrators took too long.”

Genev was unmoved. “The Administrators do nothing but with great care. Many provisions had to be just right in order to pass the laws that could destroy them. Our timing was impeccable. Yours, however, was not. So, the girl. Was she ever yours?”

Thorne paused before he shook his head in humiliation.

Genev nodded, satisfied. He’d have to tell the Administrator of Health and Wellness that he’d perfected the dosage. “And so you can’t claim the baby then?”

“No,” Thorne whispered wretchedly. “But. But . . . was going. Going to take him as my own.”

“Pass off another man’s son as your own? That *is* desperate.”

“Perrin’s . . . grandson.”

“Ah. Perhaps something to that, but still—not of *your* blood. Tsk, tsk, Captain Thorne. So many missed opportunities.” He took a deep breath. “One of the Administrative provisions, to assign commandants to forts where the Administrators feel extra attention is needed, appears quite prescient. Since I have no reason to return to Idumea this morning, I’ll be staying on to provide that extra attention, to bring this fort back into order, and to inform High General Thorne and Chairman Mal when *I* feel you’re ready to become Major Thorne. But I have a feeling that will take a very, *very* long time.”

The devastation on Thorne’s face was worthy of a portrait. But enough, Genev decided. He took a step back and said in a tone he assumed expressed kindness, “Because your sword is destroyed we will replace it with former Colonel Shin’s.”

Thorne scoffed a slurred laugh. “That *was* Shin’s sword! High General Relf. Took it to finish the job. On Mrs. Shin. Because he wouldn’t . . .” His lips kept moving as his eyes slowly shut, and the surgeon’s mixture took its full effect.

Genev looked down at the mangled steel. Come to think of it, he’d seen that ornate hilt years ago, strapped to the side of General Relf Shin. He kicked it away as he left the hospital wing. Out in the compound he observed another group of soldiers come running in, this time from Edge.

“No sign of them in the south western quadrant, sir.”

But before Genev could respond, another group of soldiers came

“Remarkable return the Guardians have made, isn’t it?”

hurrying in on horseback, shrieking and shouting, and waving cloth.

“What’s going on?” Genev demanded.

“It’s the Shins!” one of the soldiers cried out. He waved a torn piece of dark cloth. “They said this was his! He’s dead!”

“Who said what?” Genev snatched the cloth from the man’s hand and held it up for inspection. It was a piece of a work shirt, torn and bloodied. He looked up to the other soldiers who also held cloth in similar condition.

A lieutenant rushed over and wrenched the cloth out of Genev’s hands. Ignoring Genev’s affronted, “Hey!” Offra whimpered, “It *is* his! Dear Creator, I saw him yesterday, wearing a shirt just like this.”

The lieutenant began to sway as if he’d fall over, but a nearby sergeant steadied him as Genev grabbed the cloth back.

“Where is he? Where’s Shin?”

“They said his body is lost,” another soldier told him shakily. “In a crevice. Bottomless. All of them are gone.”

“According to whom?!”

“Guarders, sir,” the soldier trembled. “Their revenge for Moorland.” The two soldiers with him shook as if they were about to burst into childish tears.

“With me! Now!” Genev shouted, and the three men dismounted and followed Genev into the reception area of the command tower, while the rest of the soldiers stood stunned in the compound.

“What more did the so-called Guardians say?”

The men looked nervously at each other. “That all of them died. All of them are gone,” one of them volunteered. “They had some other clothes, torn and bloodied. Something blue linen, something orange, some other work clothes. A few of them were laughing,” and he focused on the floor under his boots.

Genev pondered this turn of events. It was out of his control. Things should never be out of his control. Nicko Mal’s experiments were all about the Shins.

Genev began to feel edgy. The village was aptly named. *He* was supposed to be calling the shots, not some trumped up Guardians—

And where the slag did they come from anyway?! All of the Guardians *were* destroyed in the forests above Moorland. Genev had looked for survivors himself. So where did these dozens—maybe even hundreds—of men in black suddenly come from?

Maddening, that’s what it was. And worst of all, it wasn’t fair. Shin wasn’t supposed to be destroyed by Guardians with a strange

sense of entrepreneurialism. That was Genev's job!

No, Genev thought as the soldiers in front of him began to quake from silent tears. This was still his project. Guarders or no Guarders, Genev was still in charge.

A new story was forming, because he'd spent much of the night reading a *curious* letter that Shin had left for Zenos upon his death, from something the private in the office called "the death drawer."

"The three of you—follow me back outside."

Obediently the soldiers trailed after Genev who found a ready and silent audience, waiting.

"It's confirmed," Genev announced loudly, standing to his full height, for what it was worth. "Details will be forthcoming, once Captain Thorne can continue his briefing after he's recovered, but I can inform you that Sergeant Major Zenos was a Guarder spy, killed in the very act by Captain Thorne!"

Several soldiers sat hard on the ground in a shocked stupor.

Genev held back a smile as the new truth unfolded in his mind. "Zenos was also working closely with Mrs. Shin," he declared. "It seems there was a *relationship* there."

Genev knew he was on the correct path when he heard gasps and even a mumbled, "No *wonder* Sarge was always at their house!"

"Poor Colonel Shin. He deserved so much better," another soldier whispered behind Genev.

Genev waited until all eyes were back on him again, and he knew the tragic end of The Hero of Edge.

"Mrs. Shin, in her despair that her *companion* was executed by Captain Thorne, held a soldier hostage at knife point. It is still unclear, but it seems she was felled by several arrows. Her body tumbled into a crevice, and our dear former Colonel Shin, still devoted to his unfaithful wife, attempted to rescue her. He, too, was lost. Here you can see the remains of his shirt, stained with her blood, and caught and torn on a bush as he fell after her."

"No!"

"That can't be!"

"It's not true!"

"Colonel!"

Genev nodded gravely. "Their bodies are, sadly, irretrievable."

Some of the soldiers began to openly weep. Others hid their faces in their hands. One soldier punched the timbers behind him. Still others shook their heads in disbelief.

“Remarkable return the Guarders have made, isn’t it?”

Especially Lieutenant Offra, who stood openmouthed.

Genev caught his eye. “We also have evidence that the Guarders took the Shins’ son and the Briters as some sort of retribution. We have torn bits of their clothing, stained with blood, and the Guarders’ claims that they have killed them all.”

A few soldiers who had remained stoic began to sag and crumble.

“Today you’ll hear many versions of what happened last night,” Genev continued, focusing on Offra. “It’ll take time to sort all the details and clarify what *exactly* happened. Lieutenant!”

Offra’s mouth clapped shut and he stood at attention.

“As of this moment,” Genev announced, “I am now in charge of Fort Shin. I will remain as commandant until Thorne recovers. Offra, recall the soldiers sent out to search Edge. Once that other lieutenant has returned, I want him brought to me for briefing. Radan, wasn’t it? And make sure the message is received by soldier and citizen alike: The Shin family is *officially gone*.”

Jon Offra could only nod dumbly, return some sort of semblance of a salute—was he supposed to salute a commandant?—then head out of the fort in a half stupor to retrieve Radan and whatever soldiers were still searching houses.

But Jon found himself staring at the sky. He couldn’t get out his mind the man the soldiers had captured, the one in the mottled green clothing. He had told them to look at the sky, that it wasn’t blue.

The man had been right, Jon realized as he stopped in the middle of the road. He had glanced up when the man had first said that, seeing between the trees that the sky was black, and yet still he automatically thought of it as blue.

And now, now there were *far* too many colors, with the rising sun bouncing off the drifting clouds to generate nearly every other hue possible, and then . . .

Oh, of course. Now a rainbow.

Jon couldn’t decide if the sky was taunting him or trying to prove a point. He was too overcome with exhaustion and confusion to decide. It was, however, definitely *not* just blue.

It would take days to sort out all he saw, but he knew one thing for certain that horrible morning: the sky would never look the same again.

Chapter 7--“Do you still trust me?”

“Amazing!” Perrin said once the sun broke through the clouds, a little after sunrise.

“Listen, Deck,” Peto said to his brother-in-law with childlike innocence, “Father’s trying to play ‘My eye can spy.’ I bet he can see something big and rocky.”

Perrin chuckled as Clark negotiated a large stone. “No, what I mean is, even if we had dared to venture this far up the mountain, I can’t imagine how we would’ve navigated the rock.”

The boulders on either side of the narrow trail stood as high as the horses, and lay on top of each other in piles, as if the mountain range had once been more majestic but allowed some of its height to tumble down to where the weather was milder. Shem had led them into the maze which rose several hundred paces up the mountain side. In the trail between the boulders they were concealed nearly completely. Perrin stood up once in the stirrups, his head just higher than the rock, and reported that he could barely see Edge.

“Shem, how do we get around this?” he called up to the lead horse.

Narrower trails branched off into the rock, but Shem didn’t follow any of them. He turned around in his saddle and grinned. “We don’t go around the boulders—we go through!”

“How?” asked an astonished Deck.

“You’ll see. In the meantime, enjoy the views.”

“Of what?” Peto grouched. “First views of black, now views of house-sized boulders. Scenic, Shem, very scenic.”

But Mahrree shook her head in amazement. Or *mazement*, perhaps. From her home she had seen this swath of rock which ran above the tree line along the base of the mountain range, but rarely thought much of it. Yet today she understood what an ant must experience trying to pick its way through a rocky river bed.

“Do you still trust me?”

As if to compensate for their suspenseful forest travel, the ride was mercifully dull. The horses had been hidden far to the west, so they plodded east again into a bright sun which dried both cloaks and beasts. While grateful for the light and warmth, Mahrree learned that the odor of wet horses was worse than the sulfur pits. It didn't help that drifts of steam rose from Clark and headed straight up her nose.

Despite it all, Mahrree felt herself falling in and out of sleep as Perrin guided Clark. But it was impossible to rest. Each time her eyelids drooped, she thought she heard a newborn crying in the distance.

Her head snapped up for good when she heard Shem call out, “Here's the path. We're still west of where we left Jaytsy, so they'll catch up to us in a while. It took our ancestors a full season of exploration to find a route horses could travel. But when we found it, we didn't need to move any rock or excavate any dirt. Miraculously, the Creator had already made a way to escape. We just had to find it.”

Peto, behind Shem, muttered, “Yes, this is very *convenient*.”

Shem twisted to consider Peto, then, without a word, turned back in his saddle, prodded his horse up into the boulders, and disappeared.

Peto looked back at his parents in alarm as his horse automatically followed Shem's. Deck went next, and finally Mahrree and Perrin made the left turn into another narrow route.

It was if the boulders, each several hands higher than the horses' heads, had been deliberately placed to allow passage for the width of a horse and rider. The path rose steeply through the rock, turning and twisting at intervals with alternate routes branching off to ends they couldn't see. Only a crack of sky was visible above the narrows.

“Even if we had ever chased someone up here,” Perrin whispered in Mahrree's ear—it seemed inappropriate to speak any louder—“we would have lost them after the first few paces. We could wander in here for days and never find the route up and out.”

After several more turns, the constricted path opened into a surprisingly large cavern, big enough to hold forty horses, and the temperature was cool and comfortable. Off the main cavern were several smaller chambers, all dimly lit by sunlight which slipped through the cracks. One chamber held wrapped bundles of supplies. Another looked like a makeshift stable. Still another had hanging from the rock several net litters like Jaytsy's.

Shem slid off his horse and spread open his arms. “Welcome to the First Resting Station!”

His four followers just sat on their horses, stunned at the view

that had suddenly opened up to them.

“Where exactly are we?” Perrin asked.

“About halfway up the rock line,” Shem told them proudly. “It’s impossible to see any of this from Edge. I’ve tried, many times, even with your scope. Now, by my estimation we have a few minutes before Jaytsy arrives. Then we’ll eat, nap, and continue on our journey after the sun’s dried everything up. Any objections?”

Peto perked up. “Did you say *eat*?”

“Yes he did!” Asrar said from an unnoticed corner. “Potatoes, the first berries of the season, ham, and biscuits made fresh last night. If you would like to join me in the eating room?” She smiled as she gestured to a large flat rock set for a meal.

Mahrree felt like crying for joy. She slid off of Clark and then just felt like crying, stuck in a permanently hunched position.

“Oh Asrar, could you bring some of that, ow, ow, over here? My legs can’t remember how to move without a horse under them.”

Peto chuckled at his mother, until he slid off his horse. “Ow, ow, ow, ow!” and he slumped to the floor. “Now I’m *conveniently* disabled. Couldn’t run away if I tried,” he murmured.

Perrin shook his head. “Boy, I tried to get you to ride at the fort, but you always said, ‘No, I’m not going to be a soldier.’” He dismounted, stretched easily and with great emphasis, then scooped his son under his arms and dragged him to the rock table. “Never laugh at your mother,” he said, dropping Peto on the dirt floor.

Peto looked up at him and fluttered his eyes. “Whatever you order, sir.” He whimpered at the platters, full and waiting.

Perrin sauntered over to Mahrree who wore her best pathetic expression. “But you, my poor darling wife . . .” Perrin scooped her up tenderly and carried her to the rock table. He sat her on a makeshift stone chair, and immediately she realized that was a mistake.

“We have something to rub on your backside to help,” Asrar said as she saw Mahrree’s discomfort. “And I am sure there’s enough for Peto, too.”

Deck remained on his horse, focused on the entrance to the cavern. “Shem? Maybe I could just go out and look . . .”

“You’ll never find your way out or back,” Shem told him, “But I promise you, she’s safe. I feel it.”

“I know,” Deck said quietly. “I feel it too. I just hate her not knowing that we’re safe. Why isn’t she here yet?”

“The horses take it slow and easy with the expecting mothers,”

“Do you still trust me?”

Shem said. Seeing that wasn't enough for Deck, he offered, “Come eat, and then the two of us can do a little scouting for her.”

“She's all right, Deck,” Mahrree told him. “I'm sure of it.”

Deck sent another fleeting look down the shadowy paths before reluctantly dismounting.

Throughout breakfast, which they agreed tasted better than anything anywhere, Deck kept his eye on the narrows. He was the first to hear a faint sound of a horse snorting and leaped to his feet, breaking into a run across the cavern. At the entrance he waited to see which path would produce his wife.

Finally a large black draft horse emerged, with Jothan in the lead. He smiled at Deck and said, “She is well.”

The swinging litter came through next, with Jaytsy. The mid-wife's horse soon appeared and they stopped in the cavern.

Mahrree did her best to stand up, and waddled even more ridiculously than her daughter. “Jaytsy!” she called, but Deck spun around to shush her. “She's asleep?” Mahrree whispered loudly. Not that an expecting mother didn't deserve a good sleep, but it didn't seem fair.

“She dozed off soon after we left you,” Barb said, dismounting. “The poor thing was so exhausted.”

“*She* was exhausted!?” Peto said from the ground near the table. He wasn't about to leap for his feet for anything except more biscuits.

Jothan dismounted, made a quick assessment of his sleeping charge, then strode over to Asrar who handed him a plate of breakfast. But he set it down and hugged her instead.

Mahrree felt a stab of guilt that she'd forgotten there was another husband and wife deeply worried about each other all night.

Jaytsy stretched in her litter and sighed, her eyes still shut. “That was the most pleasant night I've had in a season.” She opened her eyes. “What a cozy little place here. Hi, Deck!” she said breezily.

Deck's mouth fell open. He glanced back at an equally surprised Mahrree, then to his wife again, not knowing how to react.

“Is there anything to eat?” she asked. “I'm a bit hungry. I guess traveling all that way works up an appetite. Mother, you look terrible! Have you even seen your hair?”

Mahrree stared at her, astonished.

Jaytsy attempted to untangle herself from the net, and Deck helped her out so that he could catch her in a hug. “That's all you have to say? ‘I'm hungry’? ‘Do you need a brush?’”

Barb chuckled. “Yes, Jaytsy, there's breakfast.”

Deck gently shook Jaytsy's shoulders. "I was so worried about you! With the storm and Thorne's men and—"

"Wait," Jaytsy said, stepping out of his embrace. "Storm? And what men?"

"You didn't know about the storm? How could you not know about the storm?" Deck nearly shouted, but he shook that off. "Thorne didn't even know we were up here." His eyes became steely as he added, "He was planning to visit us today, but for what reason . . . well, I've chosen not to think about it."

"Wait a minute. You spoke to Lemuel?" Jaytsy paled.

"No," Deck said. "That was what he was yelling at us."

"What?" Jaytsy was more befuddled than her husband. "He was yelling at you, but you didn't *speak* to him?"

Deck squinted. "We didn't see him until the end."

"So why would he be yelling at you? This makes no sense!"

Peto sighed in exasperation from the stone where he was inhaling another plate of potatoes. "You two are ridiculous. Jayts, he was yelling at us when he was killing Shem."

Jaytsy's eyes widened. "NO! *Uncle Shem!*"

"Is right here, right here!" Shem rushed to her side. "Honestly, you two," he said as Jaytsy embraced him, "your marriage will be better if you learn to communicate more clearly."

"Said the man who never married," announced Perrin. "Jaytsy, come sit and eat, and we can explain everything. Or at least try."

Barb grinned at the plate Asrar handed her. "You always manage to create the most amazing meals in the middle of the rocks. I didn't inherit that trait, unfortunately."

Asrar, who first had made sure that Jaytsy had more food than three expecting women could eat, blushed a deeper brown at the compliment before she took her own breakfast.

Peto frowned. "You're related?"

"Everyone is, Peto." Barb sat down at a nearby rock table. "The first line of The Writings is, 'We are all family.' But I know what you mean, and yes—we share the same great-grandmother, on our mothers' sides."

Peto squinted at her, then at Asrar.

"Don't let the colors fool you," Barb told him. "Our great-grandmother was apparently a brown right in the middle of us, and a marvelous cook. But because I can't even flip a pancake, I became a midwife instead. Babies don't need frequent flipping."

“Do you still trust me?”

Asrar chuckled and sat by her cousin and husband. “Thank you for bringing back Jothan today, Barb. I didn’t expect to see him until this evening. What happened to Kiren?”

“Long story. But he’ll be back up by midday meal with the others, I assume. My sister will be quite put out if he gets into trouble.”

Peto, listening in, said, “So is Kiren related as well?”

“My nephew,” Barb said. “My usual medical assistant, but a wanna-be scout. He sneaks off whenever he can.”

Peto turned back to his own table to mull that over, but soon he groaned quietly about his view.

Deck was sitting by his wife who was gobbling biscuits as if she hadn’t eaten in weeks. But he didn’t notice the crumbs on her chin or the honey on her fingers. He just kept a hand on her belly and sighed.

“It really is a miracle, isn’t it?” he said. “This night, what we experienced, what you didn’t experience?”

Peto was growing nauseated, not from Asrar’s cooking, but from Deck fawning over his sister. How could a solid, logical man be so sappy? Sure, Peto was glad his sister was safe. But now Deck was wrapping her long braid around his hand and kissing it?

It was getting to him. *Everything* was getting to him. His eyes burned with fatigue and frustration.

“Oh please.” He slumped on the dirt floor near Shem’s rock chair. “I’ll tell you what a real miracle would have been: being plucked up by two giant fingers from our house and set down wherever we’re going. I would call *that* a miracle.”

“Peto, that’s *it!*” Shem exclaimed. He pivoted on his rock and planted his hands on his knees. “What’s up? You’ve had this . . . this *attitude* ever since I found you all in the forest. Something’s up with you, Peto. Come on. Let’s get it all out.”

Peto steeled himself. Something was up with him? That’s was the year’s understatement! Dragged all over the forest and then through the rock . . . he was still trying to categorize every detail his foggy brain could still suck in, just in case . . . just in case . . .

His spirits dropped to the bottom of his sore bottom. There was no way he could find his way back to Edge now. It was obvious their entire journey was designed to confuse and disorient them. *Yes, well done Shem and Salem-Guarder people.* I’m imprisoned here with everyone else, and headed to who knows where. And my parents sit there thinking that all is great and wonderful, along with my dopey brother-in-law and my clueless sister. This is a better trap than any

incarceration cell, and Shem has the nerve to wonder what's up?

Peto was sure some of his acrimony was revealed in his eyes, and Shem recoiled under his stare.

"All right," he said slowly. "I think I see what's going on here. Tell me, Peto: do you trust me?"

Oh, he could answer that. Most definitely he could answer that!

"Of course not! Why should I? I mean, I've known you my whole life—" Peto was fully aware that his startled parents were trying to slip in a word, but he ignored them, "—and yesterday I learned that you've always led a double life. Since then I've found myself questioning everything you *ever* did, everything you ever *said*. Something's up? Something's been up with you, for seventeen years!"

"Peto!" Mahrree exclaimed, and Perrin cleared his throat in warning, while Deck and Jaytsy reeled at Peto's forwardness.

Shem just held Peto's gaze.

Barb let out a low whistle and glanced over at the Hifadhis.

Asrar coughed politely. "I think we can afford young Mr. Shin his skepticism. After all, the many weeks we usually spend teaching about our ways was condensed into a couple of hours, and Peto heard it only second-hand from his parents."

As reluctant as Peto was to trust these people, he nodded once at Asrar for her recognition that all of this had been a bit much to take.

"For all we know," Peto railed onward, "this is the whole of Salem, right in front of us!"

"But there were hundreds in the forest—" Mahrree began.

"We saw only a dozen, Mother! They've been telling you all kinds of things, but without any evidence!"

Perrin jumped in with, "The slash on Jothan's hand, Peto. I caused that years ago when I was attacked—"

"Or so you think. He could have got that scar from anything, and conveniently let you believe whatever you needed to in order to follow them into this . . . *this trap!*"

There! He'd said it!

Now what would they do to him for revealing their secrets? It didn't matter. He'd stay brave and strong, in the face of their denial.

Everyone stared at him, stunned into silence.

"You're right, Asrar," Shem eventually said. "In his eyes, we haven't done anything to earn his trust."

"That's right, you haven't!" Peto said. "Still won't even tell us where we're going? Or how far?"

“Do you still trust me?”

“Peto,” Perrin cut in, “they have their reasons—”

“Oh, I’m sure they do!” he wailed. “I’ve heard that a few times already. ‘We have our reasons. And they’re good!’ Do we even know *why* they want us in Salem?”

“Why—How—Peto,” Mahrree spluttered, “after all they’ve done for us, how can you—”

“Demand answers?” All of his frustration from the long day and even longer night gushed out. “Why shouldn’t I? I mean, why do they want us? Maybe they need more laborers. Ever think of that? Or maybe they’re using us like Clark!”

Perrin scowled. “Like Clark?”

“I heard Shem in the forest!” Peto was unstoppable, ideas and fears flowing out of him like one of the rancid pools they passed in the night. “He said to take Clark to Salem because they needed fresh blood in the herds. All of these people are related,” he gestured madly to the Hifadhis and Barb, who looked more amused than alarmed. “Maybe they need new human breeding stock!”

Barb burst out laughing at that, and the Hifadhis gently chuckled.

Peto twitched in annoyance as Shem tried not to snort. “Oh, Peto. You have no idea, just no idea at all. Actually, you have *lots* of ideas, and all of them insane. You’re overly tired, I understand—”

“Oh, no you don’t!” Peto insisted, trying to stifle a yawn. “It’s you who don’t understand—”

Barb, who was still laughing, wiped a tear from her eyes. “You’re right, Shem. He’s hilarious! Except right now he doesn’t mean to be, I’m sure. Sorry that I’m laughing but . . . really, Peto? We’re taking your family as breeding stock? Your mother can’t have more children, your sister is already expecting, your father and brother-in-law have been spoken for, so the only one who we would be taking to Salem for breeding stock would be *you*. Trust me, Peto,” she looked him up and down critically, “we’re not that desperate!”

Peto fumed as everyone in the cavern howled in laughter, even his parents. He sank further on to the floor and rubbed his head, fatigued, irritated, and now slightly humiliated.

“All right, all right,” Shem said, gesturing to quiet everyone down. “Peto, I’m sorry. And you’re absolutely right. Not about wanting you for labor, or as a stud for Salemite women—”

Someone snorted, likely Deck.

“—but you’re right in that you have no reason to trust me. I’ve deceived you,” Shem admitted. “And you have every right to wonder

about everything I've ever said and done. So tell me this: do you trust your father?"

Peto sighed. "Is this a trick question? A Salem deception?"

"No tricks, no deceptions. Do you trust your father?"

"Yes, when he's thinking clear-headedly."

Perrin tilted his head. "And you think I'm *not*."

"Not recently, no," Peto admitted.

Barb definitely whistled at that, and Mahrree stared, stunned.

Peto sent his mother a look that said, as kindly as possible, that she hadn't been very clear-headed lately, either.

Shem turned to Perrin. "My friend and brother—and I call you that, because not even a real brother could be closer to me—I *have* deceived you for seventeen years. That's true."

Shem's earnestness was unnerving, and Peto shifted uncomfortably. Stupid saddle sores.

"But I never did anything that I didn't think you wouldn't approve of," Shem said. "I deceived you to save lives, and to keep you from taking any innocent life. Do you still trust me?"

Perrin didn't hesitate. "Completely. I always knew that I could trust you with anything. My brother has never failed me."

"Thank you," he whispered. "So," he turned again to Peto. "If you trust your father, and he trusts me, it can be concluded that *you* can trust me."

"Oh no," Peto moaned. "This is going to be a debate, isn't it? Now that we've left the reach of Idumea, the debating begins—"

"Peto."

Shem's seriousness caused Peto to meet his eyes, and once again he was startled by a Shem Zenos he didn't quite know.

"You're too old to be cynical anymore. Your sarcasm is chipping away at what you claim to believe. Soon you'll have nothing left. Peto, people in Idumea believe the purpose of life is to indulge yourself until you die. But I promise you that the purpose of life is to pass the Test the Creator has set. You must believe me."

"I know all that. I've been taught about the Test," he bobbed his head to his parents who watched him intently, "and I've even read The Writings on my own."

"But you don't believe it," said Shem flatly.

"Yes, I do."

"No, Peto. You don't really *believe* it. In here." Shem placed his hand on Peto's chest. The immense weight of it pressed him into the

rock behind him.

“If you *really* believed it, Peto, you would humbly accept what you experienced last night, and you wouldn’t be fighting the need to roll your eyes at me. I see that twitching, right there. Everything that’s come out of your mouth since I found you has been bitter and caustic, and you have no faith in me, nor maybe in anything. But I’m telling you, if you *choose* not to believe what you know deep down to be true, you’ll be as callous as everyone we left behind.”

“I believe,” Peto defended quietly. “But I just didn’t see any miracles last night.”

Shem removed his hand. “So what did you see?”

“You and your *friends* there manipulating situations,” he said. “Saying the right things, making my family believe this was their only choice, and still you won’t tell us why. And we got lucky, you’ve got to admit it. Thorne got washed away by a stray storm.”

Perrin cleared his throat again, but Shem held up a finger. “If I may, Perrin?”

Turning back to Peto, Shem said, “Quite a list you’ve been working on there. Manipulation? Saying the right things? And luck? That’s not what I saw last night.”

“What a surprise,” Peto said dully. “So what did you see?”

“Miracles, Peto. More than you realize, obviously. And I’ll tell you why we took you last night, and why we’ve said all the right things. But are you willing to hear me out?”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Are you willing to listen? Are you willing to suspend your cynicism for ten minutes and *really listen* to my side of the story?”

Peto scoffed. “Oh, I’ve been *waiting* to hear your side of the story!”

Shem rubbed his hands on his trousers. “I’ve never seen you quite like this before.”

“Nor I you,” Peto said coldly. “I guess we’re both seeing things we’ve never seen before.”

“Peto, please!” Mahrree exclaimed, but Shem held up his hand.

“No, Mahrree. It’s all right. I’ve got this.”

“*I’m sure you do*,” Peto said, making sure his every word dripped all the contempt he could wring out.

But Shem wasn’t about to be deterred. “I get it, Peto. You think I’ve done something horribly wrong here, and I also suspect you’re trying to find a way out of all of this. I’m guessing,” he continued,

“that you’ve . . . been looking for a way to rescue your family from *my* rescue of your family. That you think I’ve twisted situations and words to get them all the way up here, where anything could happen to them and no one in Edge or Idumea would ever know.”

Peto’s cheeks twitched from the effort to not make them move.

“What?” exclaimed Mahrree.

But Shem nodded once to Peto, who knew that something on his face gave him away anyway. “Glad we got that out of the way. Maybe once you finish listening to me, you’ll see things differently.

“I told you that I saw miracles,” Shem continued in a tone that made Peto’s skin want to break out in goose bumps. “The Creator’s hand was in every incident last night, but some people will always refuse to see it. Two giant fingers could have flicked Thorne off his horse like a fly off of pie, and Lemuel would still find a way to explain it away as some ‘coincidence.’ Do you know *why* we came to take you last night, and not some other night?”

“No,” Peto said shortly. “Astonish me.”

“Challenge accepted. Peto, we planned this escape the very night your mother made Mr. Kori realize he was mistaken that public speaking would be a good career move. When she tried three weeks ago to debate the Administrators’ assistant about Terryp’s land being poisoned, and then she declared to all of Edge that the findings were a lie, we knew she was going to be in trouble. Then when your father resigned from the army that night, instead of becoming High General Shin, we realized it was time to get all of you out. We chose yesterday’s date only because I would have returned from my leave in time to make sure the eastern route was clear. But I went to Idumea instead of home, in order to spy for you. Your father didn’t tell you what I learned there, because he wanted all of you to be calm.”

“Why?” Mahrree asked, her voice no longer calm.

“Because by now,” Shem said to her, “Administrator Genev is in Edge with three coaches.”

Mahrree’s eyes grew big and Perrin squeezed her hand. “And why three?” she asked.

“One for Perrin, one for you, and one for Peto.”

Mahrree turned gray.

Deck wrapped a supportive arm around Jaytsy, who had gone pale as she nibbled a berry.

Peto felt as if he’d been punched in the gut. Forgetting to doubt Shem’s account, he asked, “Why were they sending coaches for us?”

“Do you still trust me?”

“Because after two and a half weeks of arguing, the Administrators finally passed the Ideas and Association Law, wherein a person could be tried for sedition based not on any act or crime, but based solely upon their vocal and obvious disagreement with the Administrators. Peto, the law was designed specifically to punish her.” Shem pointed at Mahrree but kept his gaze on Peto.

Mahrree withered. “Dear Creator!”

“And him.” Shem pointed at Perrin who closed his eyes.

“And you,” he pointed finally at Peto, who felt as if his finger were a long knife aimed at him. “Because you lived in their house during the past year, and were subject to the influence of their ideas: guilty of their ideas by association.”

Something deep inside told Peto it was true, all of it. He had no other evidence besides the swelling in his gut, the heat in his chest, and the impression in his mind, but he *felt* it: he and his parents were in grave danger.

Shem put a heavy hand on his shoulder. “The law went into effect last night at midnight. This morning at dawn, you and your parents would have been taken, each in your own coach, and each in chains, to Idumea for trial.” He ignored the quiet weeping of Mahrree. “You would have been found guilty, Peto, and most likely incarcerated at the garrison for the rest of your life, a place much nastier than this cozy cavern. Perrin may have been given the same punishment, we’re not sure. But your mother? Gadiman started a file on her years ago when you were just a baby, simply because she wrote a letter. It escalated from there. Genev and General Thorne want her dead.”

Shem turned when he heard the gasp.

“I’m sorry, Mahrree. I didn’t put that too delicately, did I?”

Mahrree had buried her face in her husband’s chest, and Perrin wrapped his arms around her.

If Peto weren’t already on the ground, he would have been. Stupid fourth plate of potatoes, making him feel sick.

“There *is* something to say about upholding the law and all that,” Shem seemed to think he should mention. “And I pledged as a soldier to uphold the decrees of the Administrators, but only to the benefit of the world as a whole. I didn’t think executing your mother would be good for everyone involved, so . . . we essentially took the law into our own hands.”

Jaytsy sniffed, and Shem said to her, “You would have been spared. Thorne was trying to work something out. I’m not sure of his

intentions for you, but I suspect Deck wasn't part of it."

Jaytsy nodded sadly.

Shem continued, "Jaytsy, when I heard you were feeling pains a couple of days ago, I began a fast asking that the Creator would stop the pains and allow you to come with us."

Peto heard that strange word and, despite everything, he had to ask, "What's a fast?"

Shem glanced back at him. "Going without food and water for a day and night to show the Creator one's sincerity about a request."

"Oh," was all he could say, feeling guilty about the fifth biscuit.

"I knew we couldn't leave you behind," Shem said to Jaytsy, "not when Thorne could have access to you."

"And I prayed so hard to let the baby come!" Jaytsy said softly. "I couldn't imagine why He wouldn't give me what I wanted."

"And yet I knew it was *not* the right thing," Deck said. "I guess I prayed against you, Jayts. Sorry."

Shem turned back to Peto, who was startled to find he was again the center of Shem's lecture. "And so, for the first time in any official action since Captain Shin forced a terrified Lieutenant Karna to follow him, the army entered the forest in pursuit of a new organization of traitors."

Perrin kissed the top of Mahrree's head. "And I suppose the chairman of that new organization is you!"

Even Peto could tell his father's timing was rotten.

"Oh Perrin," Mahrree wailed. "I had no idea! I know my mouth has got me into trouble before, but nothing like this! I am so sorry. Gadiman really had a file about me?"

Perrin increased his wife-rocking. "Mahrree, Mahrree! Don't fret and don't worry about that file. Shem stole it and we buried it in Deck's barn two nights ago."

Deck smiled slyly. "I knew you must have done more than just sit in the straw and talk. You misplaced my shovels."

Perrin shrugged his apology and said to his wife, "You did nothing wrong. You spoke the truth. Your mouth didn't get us into trouble, Idumea did. In fact, it's because of your mouth we're finally going in the right direction, away from the world. You've done us a favor," he decided.

Mahrree nodded, but was clearly unconvinced.

"Peto, there have been many miracles," Shem said, because obviously there was still more to the lecture. "Had Jaytsy's baby been

“Do you still trust me?”

born two days ago, she wouldn't have been able to walk the many miles she did. And a newborn's cries would have given away our position. Consider the cloud cover last night. Under two full moons you can sometimes see nearly half a mile into that forest. Last night you could see barely ten paces. We chose a night with just slivers of moons, but the Creator sent cloud cover to hide all light.”

Peto was looking down at his hands, unable to face Shem, or the quality in his voice that made his chest burn.

“Consider the marshes. Usually they're low because the canals drain them. But because we had such a heavy snowpack this year, the marshes are deeper than usual. Twenty soldiers were caught when, in a normal year, their horses could have easily waded through.

Jaytsy had pulled away from Deck's shoulder and listened in fascination. “How many men did the captain send out?”

“Nearly everyone, and even though he was down to about one-hundred-sixty, that still a lot,” Shem told her, and Jaytsy silently mouthed the number. He turned back to Peto. “Consider the fear of the men. Your father has trained them to ignore their fear. But on unfamiliar territory, with an angry commander they didn't trust, they fell apart. I have no doubt that if your father were at the head of those men, they would have stood firm, found their courage, and found their victims.”

Perrin winced at the word.

“Lastly, Peto, consider the storm—”

Peto couldn't meet Shem's eyes for the pressure building in his own.

“—Storms don't move from west to east here. They go north to south in a westerly way. We prayed for its assistance, and it came with enough violence so that your father and I had to use none.”

“That's what I prayed for when you asked us to,” Perrin said quietly. “To escape without my family witnessing violence by my hand, or suffering violence by the hand of others.”

“Think of the horses,” Shem continued. “What do horses do in a storm? Do they calmly stand in a line?”

Peto shook his head, not trusting his voice.

“And when lightning strikes?” Shem asked. “Do horses patiently wait, or do they whinny and buck and rear? You don't have to answer that, because you may not know,” he added. “But I have never seen those horses so well-behaved. The Creator can *cause* all things, and He can *calm* all things. And lastly, consider that Jaytsy experienced

none of the storm.”

“It was behind us the entire way,” Jothan spoke up.

Barb nodded. “Almost overtaking us, but it never did. Instead, it washed away our tracks. Just what *we* prayed for.”

Shem turned to the Shins and Briters. “Deck, you prayed for that storm, right?”

Deck look embarrassed. “I prayed to see Jaytsy again.”

“Shem, didn’t *you* pray for the storm?” asked Perrin.

Shem threw up his arms. “I was praying to know what was up with Peto! I could tell he was furious, but I didn’t know why.”

Mahrree raised her hand. “Well, *I* prayed for the storm.”

“Ah, there we go!” Shem said. “Thank your mother for that one.”

Peto almost smiled. Almost. He hadn’t prayed at all.

“There’s one thing more,” Perrin said, so quietly that Peto almost missed it. “About that storm, son. As we listened to Thorne bellow in the dark, I heard another voice.” He paused, and Peto looked up to see him genuinely unsure.

But Shem nodded. “Go ahead. I think we all need to hear this.”

Perrin cleared his throat. “It was a quiet and calm voice, but with enormous power, and it seemed to come from inside of me. It said that the storm was moving in and that there’d be a strike of lightning behind us to separate us from danger. I was told to line up the horses so they’d run in the correct direction. It was a simple solution, but it wasn’t mine. I was planning a scenario far more complex.”

Peto noticed a level of emotion not normally associated with the former colonel.

“That was the Creator I heard, wasn’t it, Shem?” Perrin asked.

Shem smiled, a tear trickling down his cheek. “Not for the first time do I find myself envying you, Perrin.”

Peto knew Shem was addressing him again, but he couldn’t focus on anything else except a crack in a rock, and that had gone runny.

“Peto, in Salem no one will force you to believe anything. You can doubt all you want. But it’ll be very hard for you to deny or imagine away what you’re feeling right now. That tightness in your chest, those tears in your eyes—yes, I see them, no sense pretending they’re not there—are the Creator’s ways of smacking you upside the head. You can still choose to be cynical and see only coincidences. But *I* choose to see miracles. And I’d much rather live in a world full of miracles than in one filled with random chances.”

Shem crouched next to him and placed his hand on Peto’s chest

“Do you still trust me?”

again, flooding him with heat. “Right there, you feel it. Don’t ever forget what the Creator has done for you—for *you*—today.”

“I won’t,” was all Peto could whisper.

“This wasn’t your plan, was it?” Shem said.

Startled, Peto looked up at him.

“You had another plan, and that’s what made you so frustrated. You couldn’t see it through. Knowing you, it was noble, intent on saving your parents and restoring everything as it was.”

Peto’s chin wobbled.

“You may have even been a hero,” Shem suggested, “which is the end goal of every teenage boy, I think. But Peto, it wasn’t the Creator’s plan. He wants something even more for you. And when you find out what it is, you’ll look back on this day with relief and gratitude. Do you believe me? Do you trust me?”

The air was so thick with . . . well, Peto wasn’t entirely sure, but it was nearly palpable.

And it was also Relf Shin, sitting again beside him.

Later a remnant of cynicism in his brain would say, Oh, *of course* Grandfather waited until the last moment to show up.

But Relf’s message was undeniable: *You’re in the right place, son, going to the right place. And you’re traveling with all of us.*

The best Peto could manage was a whispered, “I’m trying to trust you.”

“Trying is enough,” Shem whispered back.

Eventually a quiet voice broke the reverent silence, and Jaytsy sounded apologetic as she asked, “Shem, exactly when did Thorne kill you? I think I missed that part.”

Chapter 8--“Of knowing the world will never find you again.”

When they finished eating, Asrar brought to Mahrree a grubby piece of parchment. She glanced first at Shem, who nodded.

“Absolutely. It’s for her, after all.”

Mahrree took it gingerly, recognizing that it was old.

“She wrote it the night she came here,” Asrar told her softly. “She wouldn’t speak to anyone until she had it all written down. She told me later that she didn’t want to risk forgetting anything, and had hoped she might be the one to deliver it. But since she passed away almost five years ago now . . .”

Mahrree read the words scrawled hastily on the parchment.

Someday will come for you. There will be a day when you will be ready to leave it all behind and embrace the truth. But not for many years still, I suspect. Until then, think of this night never again. Should your mind ever find itself surprised by this memory, tell yourself it was just a vivid dream, for that’s all it really is. You can practice looking at the world in different ways, preparing your mind to realize you know really nothing at all, looking at the sky and realizing it changes minute by second, but until that someday comes, nothing will ever quite make sense. That’s all right. But when that day does come, everything will hit you with such finality and power you will never again be able to forget it or deny it. You will find the truth and run to it.

~For you, Mrs. Shin. Until we meet again. So that we will remember together. ~G. Yung

“She frightened me so much that night,” Mahrree smiled sadly. “I realize she did it on purpose. I wasn’t ready and she knew that. She saw right through me.”

“Of knowing the world will never find you again.”

Asrar put a hand gently on Mahrree’s shoulder. “But she knew you would run here someday.”

“What was her first name?”

“Galena,” Asrar said. “Galena Yung.”

“Wish I’d known her as well as I know her husband.”

“Someday in Paradise you will,” Asrar said as surely as she knew the sun would rise. “That parchment’s never left this resting station. Shem, a couple others, and I have memorized it in order to tell it to you. Now, it’s yours to keep. Galena always intended for you to take it with you.”

“I’ll take it to Salem, where we all belong.” Mahrree said as she put it in her pocket next to the family lines no one knew she had.

After breakfast Asrar showed them to the chamber with the net slings like Jaytsy had ridden in, suspended on overhangs of the boulders. The area was darkened and cooled by the surrounding rock, spacious enough for up to fifty people to sleep.

“You’ll find these provide the best napping options on the rock,” she told them.

As Perrin helped Mahrree into a higher net he said to Shem, “I’ll take the first watch, then will you take the second?”

Shem shook his head. “You haven’t slept more than a handful of hours in the past two nights. Neither have I,” he reminded him. “We both sleep. We’re perfectly safe here.”

Perrin looked at him dubiously. “Are you absolutely . . .” his voice trailed off as Shem gave him a meaningful look. “I will trust you. This place is safe.”

Shem smiled, climbed expertly into his litter and stretched out.

But Peto struggled to get into his. First he tried a higher one, then decided to climb into a lower one. Moving his stiffening leg upward didn’t seem to be something he could do yet, even with the herb rub for his saddle soreness.

Shem slipped out of his litter. “Like this,” he said as he stretched open the litter to let him crawl in.

“Thanks,” Peto whispered, rolling away from him.

“Hey,” Shem tipped the sling to force Peto back to him. “I realize you’re still trying to figure out how to think of me, and that’s all right. Since yesterday morning your whole world has been spinning, and it

still hasn't stopped, has it? I'm sorry I was rough on you earlier, but I promise Salem will be worth it."

Peto nodded wearily and warily.

"You were looking for a sign or message last night, weren't you?" Shem said, as if reading Peto's soul. "It never works the way you expect it to," Shem told him. "But the Creator sends us signs every day, wanting us to see things as He sees them, not as we want to see them. It's up to us to recognize His messages to us for what they are."

Peto knew he was seeing one right now.

Shem put his hand on Peto's chest, on top of the envelope. "You brought them, didn't you? Your grandparents? I felt Relf come by to check on you. He and the others were never far from us."

Before Peto could ask what Shem meant by 'the others' and how 'far' they were, Shem said, "Now rest, boy. Your new life is just around the corner. And over the mountain. And through some fields, and . . . well, your backside really doesn't want to know right now." Shem patted him and went back to his net.

Peto put a hand on his chest and tried to slow his thumping heart.

Perrin climbed into his net under Mahrree with a weary grunt. "I'll just rest my eyes," he murmured. "Because I don't see how I can sleep until we're out of view of Edge."

Mahrree smiled down at him and nodded. She lay back in the sling and stretched out to feel it support her completely. Before she could sigh in relaxation, she heard a familiar snore under her.

"Ah, just *great!*" Peto mumbled from his net. "With Father snoring no one will . . ." and suddenly he was silent.

Shem chuckled quietly. "Good boy, Peto. He was always easy to get night-night."

"Asrar didn't put anything in those biscuits to put them to sleep, did she?" Mahrree asked.

Asrar, retrieving supplies from the nearby cavern to prepare mid-day meal, uttered a quiet but affronted, "Oh! Of course not!"

"Just kidding, Asrar," Mahrree said, waving her hand. "Take it as a compliment that my family hasn't been this exhausted or this contented in a very long time."

“Of knowing the world will never find you again.”

“If she did have something to put people to sleep,” Jothan rumbled quietly from his net sling, his eyes already closed, “I would have insisted she put it in our four sons’ dinners each night.”

“It’s the sleep of peace,” Barb said drowsily, on the other side of Mahrree. “Of knowing the world will never find you again.”

Mahrree grinned and glanced at Jaytsy lying in her litter above Deck. She looked like she could never sleep again, but preferred to just watch her already dozing husband as she held his limp hand in hers.

“I’ll keep watch,” Jaytsy assured her mother. “I’m quite rested. Although I don’t know what I’m watching for!”

The students of Upper School #3, sitting outside on the benches, watched yet another group of soldiers run by. Two paused in front of a cluster of teenage boys, and Chommy said, “No, we haven’t seen the Shins or the Briters. That’s what we told the last seven groups of soldiers who asked.”

The soldiers darted off in another direction as Chommy casually saluted them away. His friends sitting with him chuckled.

“Why did we even come to school today?” one of them asked.

“Because old Hegek would come by each of our houses again begging us to come if we didn’t,” said Chommy. “He has to fill the seats, you know. Really, this is pathetic, them racing after nothing.”

“Not *nothing*,” Lannard said defensively. “There was noise during the night, and shouting and running and—”

Chommy waved that off. “Hours ago. I heard they weren’t even real Guarders. My father said that when they attacked years ago they actually killed people. But these Guarders? They just let loose a few chickens and shouted ‘Can’t catch me!’ like it was a game. But the soldiers are panicked as if half of them were massacred last night.”

“Well,” Lannard began, his shoulders twitching in loyalty to the army he hoped join, “they didn’t know that. Maybe there *are* dead soldiers somewhere.”

Chommy rolled his eyes. “The sooner all of this nonsense is over with, the better. Hegek’s lectures are so dull I’m bored to tears. It’ll be interesting to hear Mrs. Shin’s take on all of this.”

Lannard was stunned. “What, you want Mrs. Shin back?”

“Of course!” said another boy next to him. “She’s the only

teacher who doesn't read the scripts. Chommy," he said knowingly to his friend, "I don't think Lannard's ever *caught on*."

"Caught on?" Lannard asked, looking at the six boys around him. "Caught on to what?"

Chommy patted him on the shoulder. "How well did you do on the End of Year exam?"

Lannard smiled proudly. "Good enough to get out of Mrs. Shin's class next—" He stopped when he saw Chommy shaking his head.

"You're doomed. Now you'll have to take the regular classes, full of Administrative drudgery and Departmental dullness. You passed yourself out of a real education."

"What are you talking about?"

"Lannard," another boy patted him on the head like a dog, "we've all thrown the tests. You know, failed them on purpose? So that we could be in Mrs. Shin's class."

"I worked out the math a few years ago," another boy told him.

Lannard was shocked. "You know math?!"

"Of course. You see, if we fail fifty-four percent of the test, which, according to the matrices established by the Department of Instruction, which matrices I steal from Hegek's office each year so that I can run the numbers—"

"*You know math!*"

"How else can I tell the others how many questions to get wrong to statistically keep us in her class—"

"You know math on purpose? And do badly on purpose?"

"You, Lannard," said Chommy slowly as if talking to a stupid goat, "are one of the few who really belongs there. At least half of us are there on purpose, because she's the only teacher who actually teaches. She's also the only one who listens. Next year we'll all take our final exams and pass them *astoundingly well* with the highest marks possible. It's not that hard, really. Students have been failing on purpose for years to get into Mrs. Shin's class, then passing with nearly perfect grades at the very end to go on to a university. You're one of the rare dumb ones to get in naturally. You didn't even have to steal anything like I did and allow yourself to get caught in order to be considered a 'special case'. Congratulations!"

Lannard's shoulders sagged as the boys around him laughed. "You really liked her as a teacher?"

"You didn't?"

"Well, I . . . I don't know. It's not like she was mean or anything,

“Of knowing the world will never find you again.”

just kind of . . .”

“Oh, Lannard, Lannard, Lannard. When you have to sit in the ‘regular’ classes next year, you’ll realize what you gave up.”

“But she . . . she . . . didn’t teach to the test,” Lannard said, suddenly feeling confused and stupid.

“Yeah, we know,” Chommy said. “Thank the Creator, right?”

Lannard’s head snapped up. “You believe in the Creator, too? He was made up! The Administrators said that—”

Chommy sighed loudly. “Lannard, you really believe everything the Administrators claim? Someday you’ll make a great addition to the Army of Idumea. Maybe even an Administrator’s aide.”

Just as Lannard was about to round on them for their *unsupportive attitudes*, he noticed Mr. Hegek coming through the gate of the school grounds. Clusters of students stopped their gossiping and stared at Edge’s director of schools, who was shaking and pale. His gaze drifted from one group to another until they finally rested on Lannard, Chommy, and the rest of Mrs. Shin’s “Special Cases.”

“Everyone,” he said in a trembling voice. “Please step inside—”

“We’re supposed to stay outside,” one girl informed him. “In case Guarders are still hiding in there.”

“The Guarders are gone. It seems that they had one goal, and they accomplished it early this morning.” His trembling increased. “Please, get inside and I’ll tell you about it.”

Chommy was already on his feet. “Is it about the Shins? Mr. Hegek, what about Mrs. Shin?”

“Just please get inside, Chommy. I’ll tell you everything if you just *get inside!*”

Chommy glanced back to his peers whose bleak expressions reflected his own.

The news was bad. In another minute, Lannard would come to that conclusion as well, but maybe *after* Hegek told them what it was.

“Come on, boys,” said Chommy somberly. “I have a feeling we won’t be hearing Mrs. Shin’s side of this. Ever.”

When Asrar woke everyone up about four hours later, Jaytsy was smiling at her mother from her sling.

“Now I know what I needed to watch for.” She pointed to her father. Asrar hadn’t woken him yet, but at Jaytsy’s request had waited

for everyone else to be up to see his reaction.

“I don’t believe it!” Mahrree whispered.

Peto grinned. “Now *that’s* a miracle!”

“I have to agree, Peto.” Shem smiled.

“He’ll never get rid of it, will he?” Deck chuckled.

“Perrin?” Mahrree said softly, reaching down to touch his arm.

“Perrin, it’s time to put out The Cat.”

“Hmm?” With eyes still closed, he automatically petted The Cat.

The Cat purred.

Perrin’s his eyes flew open and he looked at his chest. “The Cat!”

The Cat meowed wearily at him.

“How did . . . What are . . . *What?!?*”

His family laughed.

“He wandered in about an hour ago,” Jaytsy told them. “His feet are pretty roughed up.”

Perrin struggled to sit up in his sling and lifted the limp animal to inspect him.

“Oh, you’ve had a hard night, haven’t you, boy?” Perrin said when he saw his bloody paws. “How in the world did you find us?”

“It’s not the first pet to follow us to Salem,” Jothan said. “He can come all the way. Jaytsy, he could ride with you.”

“Of course!” Jaytsy squealed.

Half an hour later, as they prepared to start on the trail again, well rested and well fed—including The Cat who took care of the leftover ham—a jovial young man in mottled green clothing emerged from one of the gaps in the rock.

“It’s about time!” his aunt Barb sighed in relief.

“Kiren,” Shem called. “How’s everything in the world?”

Kiren beamed. “I’m pleased to report that the fort’s falling apart and soldiers are weeping in terror at the edge of the forest! Or, uh,” he looked over at Perrin. “I’m sorry, sir, it’s just that—”

Perrin nodded to the scout. “Understood. Actually, I’m rather glad to hear that news myself.”

Kiren relaxed. “I can’t believe it—the Shin family is here! So good to meet all of you!” He eagerly pumped Perrin’s hand. “Oh, Asrar, I almost forgot. Half of the scouts should be here soon, and they’ll be starving.” To Perrin he said, “That was the message they sent me up here to deliver. Wow. I just said that to Perrin Shin! And that’s Mahrree Shin!” he pointed at her.

She snorted in response, and her children chuckled.

“Of knowing the world will never find you again.”

“So it was messy?” Asrar asked, trying to keep Kiren focused.

“Still haven’t accounted for all of our men yet,” Kiren said, snatching a biscuit remaining from breakfast. “But we’re pretty sure everyone got out of Edge, and we’re making sure all of the soldiers are out of the forest. They lost at least six men in there, and a few horses. And that’s Peto, isn’t it!”

But Perrin ignored his son’s sniggering and massaged his forehead. “Kiren, do you know if Offra got out?”

“Yes sir, he did. And may I make the first of many apologies? We didn’t expect any of the soldiers to actually enter the forest. Hi, Briters! Wow, they’re all here! Sorry, sorry—I know. Report. Dormin sent most of our ‘Guarders’ into the village to startle chickens, hoping to attract the soldiers, but then Thorne ordered those groups into the trees. Well, that was unexpectedly brave and stupid.”

“That about sums up Thorne,” Perrin sighed.

“Good one!” Kiren pointed at him. “Hey, he’s funny! Who would’ve thought—” When he caught Shem’s glare, he cleared his throat and said, “We’ve been playing catch up ever since, trying to make the chaos work for us. Something we learned from you, Mr. Shin, during Moorland.”

Perrin frowned. “Chaos?”

“The explosions in Moorland, sir? No one anticipated that. But together we made the best of the chaos, taking out every last Guarder. Dormin alone flushed out about a dozen that were hiding further west and *took care of*,” he raised his eyebrows meaningfully, “most of them until we got him assistance. He may be even more fearsome than you, sir!”

Perrin smiled wanly. “So Dormin’s in charge of all of this?”

“Part of it,” Shem said. “We each had our responsibilities. Jothan’s was to get you out and escort you up here, Barb and Kiren’s was to deliver Jaytsy, and I was supposed to keep the soldiers out of the way. Come to think of it,” he scratched his head, “Dormin was the only one doing his original task—directing the ‘Guarders’.”

Perrin chuckled. “Since I’m a man who frequently was the only one doing what he was supposed to—”

He ignored Shem’s loud scoff.

“—I look forward to chatting with Dormin about what *should* have happened last night.”

“May have to wait,” Kiren said. “He hasn’t reported in yet, but he’s probably making a last sweep of the area. He’s very thorough.”

“Cousin Dormin knows the forest better than anyone,” Asrar said.

“*Cousin* Dormin?” Peto said, raising an eyebrow.

“We share the same ancestor,” Asrar smiled. “The second King Querul. And besides, we are all family.”

“About half of Salem has claimed Dormin as a cousin,” Jothan explained. “He never married or had children.”

“How sad,” Jaytsy said.

“No,” Jothan corrected her, “how deliberate. He was worried that if he had children, one of them might discover his ancestry and want to come to the world and become king. Dormin wanted to make sure the reign of kings died with him.”

“I’ve heard him call himself the gatekeeper,” Barb said.

“The gatekeeper between what his ancestors created, and the people who freed him from it. He rarely comes to Salem,” Asrar explained. “While he knows none of us hold him accountable for what his ancestors have done, still he feels a sense of guilt. Salem loves him—many of us have tried to give him our last names—but he’d rather stay in the forests to keep us secure.”

“Now I really do want to talk with the man,” Perrin said. “He’s done more good than all of the kings put together.”

Jothan nodded. “That’s what Rector Yung has told him, many times. When Dormin comes to Salem, he either stays with us or with Yung. I know they had plans for dinner tomorrow night.”

“Uh,” Peto began hesitantly, “did Woodson get out all right?”

Kiren beamed. “Yes, and quite unhappily too.”

“Something go wrong?”

“No,” Kiren chuckled. “That’s the problem. We didn’t need to use him. He ran around and got some soldiers to chase him, but we never needed him to play Peto Shin.”

“Well, I’m glad he’s all right,” Peto said.

“Kiren,” Perrin said, “you and the other Salemites have risked so much to get us out. If we were any other family—”

“We’d still do it!” Kiren exclaimed. “That was the most exciting move we’ve ever had. We’ll be talking about it for years. And it’s great to finally meet you, sir!” He pumped Perrin’s hand again.

“Well then,” Perrin said, smiling at the man’s infectious grin, “I’m glad we could provide you some entertainment.”

Turning to Jothan, Kiren said, “I can finish taking the Shins up to Salem so you can stay here with your wife.”

“Of knowing the world will never find you again.”

But Jothan shook his head. “You haven’t slept since yesterday, have you? I just had a good nap. I know you’re eager to spend some time with the former colonel, but falling asleep on the horse carrying his daughter won’t impress him much.”

Kiren blushed and Shem laughed.

Jothan put a large hand on the young man’s shoulder. “Remember, he’s coming to Salem *to stay*. You’ll have plenty of opportunities to overwhelm him with your questions.”

“I’m intrigued to hear about your system,” Perrin assured Kiren. “I’ll have questions for you as well.”

Kiren nodded eagerly. “Great! I hope by the time I get there everyone else hasn’t already talked your ear off.”

Perrin squinted. “*Everyone else?*”

Shem cleared his throat at Kiren. “Aren’t you supposed to be getting something to eat and then a nap?”

“Of course, of course.” Kiren grabbed Perrin’s hand one more time. “Again, so great to meet you! All of you!”

Barb came over and took her nephew by the arm.

“Really, you’re going to love Salem!” Kiren called as his aunt dragged him away. He waved vigorously at the Shins and Briters, who couldn’t help but grin back at him.

Asrar pushed him firmly onto a rock, set a plate of food on his lap, and Barb shoved a sandwich into his mouth.

“You’ll have to forgive Kiren,” Shem said. “He gets a bit excited. That’s why he isn’t part of the scouting corps. His enthusiasm is perfect for dealing with the wounded or encouraging a mother, though.”

Perrin folded his arms. “What was he talking about, ‘everyone else’ waiting to meet me?”

Shem smiled easily. “Perrin, a *few* stories have gotten around. Remember, we’ve moved thousands of people to Salem over the years. A *few* people knew of you and your father and grandfather. Now,” he said, eager to shift the topic, “we need to get you there!”

Perrin looked dubiously at his wife. “A *few* people?”

Mahrree patted his arm. “After the first days,” she whispered to him, “the excitement will wear off and I’m sure no one else will remember us. We’ll be able to live that quiet, anonymous life you’ve never experienced.”

“I hope you’re right,” he grumbled back. “Shem and his stories,” he murmured as he went to retrieve Peto’s horse and Clark.

Mahrree and Peto stared at the approaching animals, then exchanged miserable glances.

“Mother, how far do you think it is to Salem?”

“As far as my behind is concerned, it’s already too far.”

Perrin returned and smirked. “It’s time, my darling wife. I *am* very sorry.” But the quiver around his lips suggested otherwise. “You could try side saddle for a while.”

“Or she could use this,” said Barb, bringing her an overly thick sheepskin.

“Bless you, Barb!” Mahrree cried.

“Can I bless you, too?” Peto asked.

“I suppose I can spare another for the future stud of Salem.”

Deck secured Jaytsy in her sling between the pack horses, The Cat lounging around her belly, while Jothan and Barb checked all the connections.

“So Shem,” Deck tried to say coolly, “just how far is it?”

“I don’t think I should tell you yet,” Shem said, adjusting a stirrup on his horse. “It would spoil the surprise.”

Mahrree glared at him from atop Clark, still uncomfortable even with her new padding.

“Come on, Shem, you can tell us now,” Perrin said.

Shem put on a thoughtful expression as he mounted his horse. “It’s not *too* far. How’s that?”

“Not good enough,” Perrin growled.

“It’ll have to be,” Shem said, and he nudged his mount out of the chamber. He led them through twisting rock passageways for several minutes until the tunnel emerged at the top of the wide boulder field. Between the boulder field and the slope of the mountain was a narrow channel, wide enough for a couple of horses to ride side by side. The height of the rock was just above the heads of the horses, allowing riders to see over the edge if they stood in the stirrups.

They continued east until they reached a canyon which Mahrree never gave more than a passing thought. Shem paused at the mouth of it, turned around his horse, and gestured to the distance.

“Your last clear view of Edge. No one can see us up here, even if the spyglass in the office is trained precisely. The angle of this channel between the rocks and mountain slope obscures the horses.”

Jaytsy, lounging in the sling, shook her head. “It’s not home anymore, Shem.”

Deck nodded.

“Of knowing the world will never find you again.”

Peto looked toward the south. “Is that the fort at Mountseen?”

“Good eyes, Peto,” Shem said. “After a storm blows through the views are quite clear. The smudge beyond that is Rivers. And when the angle of the sun is just right, you can see distant flashes of light. It’s sunlight bouncing off of a large bank of windows in Vines.”

Perrin twisted in surprise. “Vines?!”

“When the conditions are perfect,” Shem said, “you can just make out the tallest buildings in Idumea. Eighty miles really isn’t that far, Perrin. In the next few weeks you’ll realize just how short a distance it is.”

Mahrree winced. A few *weeks*? She’d be part of the horse in a few weeks!

“No one in the world understands how small *the world*, as you called it, really is,” Shem told them.

Perrin looked down at Edge, his eyes hopping from one tower to another. “No banners flying,” he murmured to Mahrree. “Edge looks quiet. They must have given up trying to find us.”

From that distance it didn’t even look like Edge, but some sleepy little village they’d never met and didn’t care to know.

“I’ve seen enough, Shem,” Mahrree said.

She felt Perrin nod behind her.

But seeing that Peto was still staring at the plain below him, Shem said, “Peto? Everything all right?”

“Just strange to think that from here you can see Rivers. There’s the fort, to the side. And somewhere in there are soldiers and horses and even Colonel Karna.”

Perrin sighed. “Brillen won’t know yet. About us, I mean. But he will soon.”

“He will.” His son exhaled. “He’ll hear from others that . . .”

“That we’re gone,” Perrin said dully. “I’m sorry, Brillen. And Gari and Graeson. It’ll come as a shock, but—”

“But so would hearing that Genev is arresting you and trying you for sedition,” Shem reminded them. “Are we . . . *are we* good to go now?” He said that to Peto, who gave him a reluctant nod.

Shem grinned. “Then let’s go exploring!” He nudged his horse to head into the mouth of the canyon which was narrower than Mahrree expected, barely wide enough for the rushing river on one side, and a narrow, faint trail on the other.

“Here’s the Edge River,” Shem announced. “Ever wonder where it came from?”

Perrin shrugged. “Not really, although I should have. I just never questioned it.”

“Me neither,” Mahrree admitted. “Never occurred to me that it actually started somewhere.”

“But the river comes out of the forest west of Edge, and we’re east,” Perrin pointed out.

“That’s because the river,” Shem called loudly to be heard over the slopping of the water, “goes under the boulder field. Look downstream and you’ll see where it vanishes into a cavern. Our scientists speculate that the river probably pours into a underground lake—that’s a very large pond, by the way—below the boulders, then overflows to make the river again on the western side.”

Mahrree didn’t know how to process any of that. “I never even considered . . . an underground lake?”

“I didn’t understand all of that,” Perrin confessed in her ear. “Suddenly I feel very stupid, and just a few days ago I told you I knew everything.”

The faint trail went up to the left, switching back and forth and climbing rapidly. Mahrree now understood why the horses needed time to rest, even more than their riders. As they rode up the mountainside at a surprisingly rapid rate, Mahrree took in the scenery. It was all that she had imagined—

No, she never imagined *this*. Her mind was simply too . . . simple.

So instead she decided that the world beyond Edge was everything that she had hoped—

No, that wasn’t true either. How could she have hoped that trees—pines taller and straighter than anything in Idumea—grew all the way to meet the rocky cliffs at the top? What did they call the top of a mountain, anyway? And *those* trees, what were those, with white bark and twists and turns in the trunks? And there were grasses, thick and bright green, forcing their way through the melting snows. And jagged rocks, jutting out here and there, and the only way Mahrree could figure why they didn’t roll down the slope was because they were part of the mountain itself, some skeleton of rocks connected with extended fingers, then covered with dirt and growing things.

“It feels like it’s alive!” she breathed.

She didn’t know she said that so loudly until Shem, two horses ahead, turned in his saddle. He gave her a quizzical smile, and said, “The mountain? Oh, most definitely. *Everything’s* alive, Mahrree.”

She didn’t know whether to be comforted by that or disturbed.

“Of knowing the world will never find you again.”

But because there was a smile on her face, she chose the former.

“It’s beautiful,” she decided as they came around a bend. “I’ve always thought so, down in Edge. But seeing the mountains at these angles it’s . . .” She didn’t have the words to describe the tightness of excitement in her chest that made her hands grip the saddle horn to keep them from shaking. She needed names and descriptions, but all she could come up with was the hopelessly vague, “Beautiful!”

Some fanciful part of her hoped the mountain heard her, accepted the compliment, and allowed them to pass in peace. While *beautiful*, it was all a bit strange and threatening, especially when they had to duck under an overhanging rock.

It didn’t help that Perrin reached up, snapped off a bit of the edge, and showed it to Mahrree as they passed underneath.

“Could crumble away at any moment,” he whispered. “Or maybe not. What do I know? I’m still not entirely sure what a ‘lake’ is.”

Mahrree examined the splinter of rock, worried that the mountain had felt her husband snap off one of its cuticles. “I don’t think you should do that. You might wake it up.”

“I might *what*?”

She chuckled at herself. “Never mind. Stop breaking the scenery. We’re new here.”

“I always thought of the mountains as a hostile place,” Deck admitted behind them as he evaluated the emerging grasses. “Maybe because I could never figure out how you could plant potatoes up here. But you could let cattle wander and graze.”

“That’s my husband—it’s beautiful as long as it is practical.” Jaytsy laughed.

Peto spun around in his saddle, his eyes ready.

“Peto, don’t say it,” Jaytsy warned.

“I was just going to say that . . . it’s so wonderful that the two of you managed to get together. Now what was wrong with that?”

Shem laughed. “Very tactful, Peto. And Deck? At the end of Planting, we do bring up the cattle to graze here until Harvest.”

“Amazing!” Deck said. “Oh, sorry. That’s Perrin’s word. How about, how practical!”

The Shins chuckled, until a strange cry far above them caused Mahrree to look up into the clear sky.

Behind her, Perrin’s head also snapped up. “I see it,” he breathed.

“What is it?” Jaytsy asked, shielding her eyes to spot what had captured her parents’ attention.

“Ah,” Jothan said, pointing nearly straight up for Jaytsy’s benefit. “It’s enjoying the thermals rising from the canyon. Many birds of prey will coast along in tight circles, riding the columns of warm air that rise as the canyon heats up. My father, a biologist who specializes in ornithology, speculates that they’re simply having fun.”

Mahrree leaned to see Jothan behind her, who had become unexpectedly talkative. “Your father’s a what who specializes in what?”

Barb chuckled. “A scientist, Mahrree. We’ll teach you all of our extra words when we get to Salem. There’s a book.”

“Yes, sorry about that,” Jothan said, suddenly animated. “Forgot that you don’t know our terminology.”

Before Mahrree could work out the meaning of *that* word, Jothan continued. “My father’s always been fascinated by birds and flight. He spent many Weeding Seasons in this canyon gauging temperatures and recording behavior. I helped carry his equipment when I was a boy, and became a bit of a birder myself.”

“So what is it?” Jaytsy asked again, as she spotted the bird drifting higher without any effort except to tip its wings.

It cried again, its long screech echoing in the canyon.

No, *cheered* is more like it, Mahrree decided.

Behind her, Perrin sighed happily. “It’s a falcon, Jays. Soaring free and far away!” His voice grew gruff. “No barns in sight to keep him trapped.”

Mahrree leaned back and rested her head against his chest. “Absolutely! That’s a falcon which is—”

“*Actually*,” Jothan’s voice carried up to them, “that’s a larger bird, likely a hawk. It’s a common mistake,” he launched into a lecture worthy of his father. “But you can tell by the wing span and the configuration of the tips. Falcons are smaller birds, although people tend to think otherwise, but the fact is—”

“Hey, Jothan?” Shem interrupted him from the front of the line. He’d noticed that Perrin was still watching the whatever-bird with a combination of longing and joy. “For today, let’s just call it a falcon.”

“Uh, all right. It’s a *falcon*,” Jothan said with much less zeal.

But Perrin didn’t notice. He didn’t notice anything but the bird soaring higher, effortlessly, and cheering every once in a while for no particular reason except that it could.

Chapter 9--“Amazing!”

Something on the other side of the canyon caught Peto’s eye. In a vertical crevice of stone, white water rushed between the trees, bouncing and falling in the narrow channel down to the river, now half a mile below them.

“Shem,” he called. “What’s that where the water is falling?”

Shem turned in his saddle. “Get ready for this: it’s called a waterfall.”

“A waterfall? No, seriously. What’s it called?”

Barb laughed behind him. “It’s true, Peto. It’s called a waterfall. It’s also in that book I mentioned, called a dictionary. It even has pictures, and one will be waiting at your new home.”

“*Dictionary*. The bizarre words these people come up with,” Peto muttered. “*Waterfall*. What else new are we going to see?”

“Well,” Shem called back, “we follow these switchbacks until we’re three and a half miles into the canyon, then we reach a high meadow in the saddle between those two peaks.” He pointed north in the direction of two craggy, snow-covered peaks.

“Meh-doe?”

“You’ll see, Peto,” Shem promised.

“Meadow!” Perrin exclaimed. “I remember Beneff saying that word during our planning meeting about the attack on Moorland.”

“That’s right,” Shem said. “There’s your proof that he was from Salem. No one in the world has a word like that, because there are no meadows in the world.”

“Amazing!” Perrin breathed.

“We don’t go *over* the peaks, do we?” asked Deck nervously.

“No, just between them.”

“Mahrree,” Barb called up to her, “you should come back here in Weeding Season. Wildflowers cover the grasses all the way to the trees. Your daughter told me you recently took up gardening.”

“You know, *wildflowers* sound interesting,” Mahrree said. “They don’t require any straight rows or weeding, right?”

A little ways down the trail Shem slowed his horse and turned in the saddle. An odd smile was on his face.

“Uh-oh,” Perrin said as their horses neared. “He’s going to confess another lie he’s told, and the next words out of his mouth will be, ‘Remember that one time . . .’”

Everyone chuckled as Shem bobbed his head sheepishly. “Well, at least you noticed the warning. Perrin, remember that one time—”

Now everyone laughed, even though Shem put a finger to his lips to shush them. He craned his neck to peer into an area behind the trees they couldn’t yet see, then waved at them to quiet down.

“Anyway,” Shem said, “Perrin, the night that Edge turned on itself and burned and looted until the middle of the night, you and I sat talking in your office for a while.”

“Yes . . .” Perrin said slowly.

“At one point you started musing on the possibility of some of Terry’s mythical animals being real.”

“Go on . . .”

“You mentioned wapiti, zebras, and I think elephants that night. I suggested that they were very far away. Well, I lied about *one* of them being very far away.” He beckoned to them to follow.

Perrin couldn’t kick Clark fast enough, and when he reached a clearing, he reined his horse to a sharp halt.

Mahrree gasped. “A . . . a . . .” was all she could stammer.

At least Perrin was able to get out, “Shem! Is that a . . . a . . .”

Shem grinned as Peto, Deck, and Jaytsy, between Barb and Jothan, reached the view.

“It’s called an elk,” Shem said in low tones so as to not alarm the animal that fed less than twenty paces away. “That one’s a bull. Too bad you’re not seeing him with his full antlers. He recently shed them. It took the first Salemites a few moons to realize that the large deer that they named elk were actually Terry’s—”

“Wapiti!” Perrin cried, and the elk lifted his head to look at him. “Shh, shh, I know!” he shushed himself, but not very quietly.

“They’re real!” Mahrree would have squealed if she wasn’t breathless.

Peto cocked his head. “It’s *pretty* big,” he said as the animal took another mouthful of grasses and chewed casually, already bored with his audience. “But not as big as Terry suggested. How many people

can ride it?”

Shem chuckled. “None! Terryp took a few creative measures in his stories.”

“He’s beautiful, though,” Jaytsy said, keeping a heavy hand on The Cat whose ears pricked with interest.

“And delicious,” Shem said.

Deck’s mouth fell open. “You *eat* them? Aren’t they rare?”

“Hardly. I’m sorry you missed the herd. There’s a meadow past that canyon where about a thousand of them come to feed on the grasses in Raining Season. Warm springs in the area keep the snow melted.”

“Wapiti!” Perrin whispered again, and Mahrree felt like crying.

Jothan had dismounted and was looking around on the ground. “Saw them when I came down a few weeks ago . . . ah, here we are.” He pulled up a large branch. Except it wasn’t a branch.

Perrin emitted a tiny, excited whimper.

Jothan held up the branch, as tall as him. “Now, that’s what I call a rack.” He bent down and picked up its match.

Deck squinted. “What exactly *is* that?”

“The antlers,” Jothan announced. His massive arms twisted the antlers into proper position and held them suspended behind his head to show how they would have been on the bull.

“Whoa,” Peto whispered. “Changed my mind. That is big. And you couldn’t ride it without being gored.”

Mahrree and Jaytsy could only nod.

Perrin shook his head in appreciation. “I grew up loving the stories of the wapiti, like giant deer. And they’re real! Amazing! I think that’s going to be my most used word today. But I don’t think you could use the antlers to steer,” he added in a faraway tone.

Surprised by that strange theory, Mahrree twisted around to look at him, but Perrin just smiled in contentment at the elk chewing lazily.

Jothan set the antlers back on the ground. “Some people like to use these in their houses to hang coats on.”

“Hang coats on!” Perrin breathed.

Shem clucked his horse. “Still quite a ways to go, and more animals to see, I’m sure.”

The Shins reluctantly followed Shem, and the bull elk merely glanced their way as he pulled up more grasses.

“Shem,” Perrin called up to him. “If wapiti are real . . .”

Mahrree knew what he was wondering. Often Perrin had reflected with longing about certain of Terryp's mythological animals. Which, obviously, weren't *all* mythological—

“If wapiti are real,” she repeated, “then . . .”

Shem turned in his saddle. “I know where you're going with this. That night I mentioned, Perrin also speculated about zebras. And so you'll want to know—does Salem have zebras?”

Perrin nodded with the enthusiasm of an eight-year-old.

“No, I'm sorry. No zebras.”

“Shem!” Jothan called curtly. “Tell him what you *do* know.”

“No, *we* won't see zebras, but Perrin,” he raised his eyebrows, “they do exist.”

“And elephants?” Mahrree cried.

Shem laughed. “And elephants, and monkeys, and gazelles, and lions, and apes, and a few other animals you don't even know about and Terryp couldn't imagine either!”

“In Salem?” Peto asked eagerly.

“No, much further away,” Shem said. “But in Salem we have drawings and paintings of them—full color.”

Jothan, the scientist's son, spoke up. “Some years ago we sent an expedition to the far west and south, well beyond Terryp's ruins. It took them two full seasons to travel, but they found enormous lands filled with all those animals. Our artists made detailed paintings, and our scientists recorded their behavior. Those who created Terryp's ruins must have sent their own scouts to the far southwest as well. Then our scouts continued on and came to another sea.”

“That's incredible!” Deck gasped.

Mahrree was speechless.

“So, this land . . . another sea . . . is there, is there . . .” Perrin faltered, too stunned to know how to continue.

“Yes?” Shem encouraged cheerfully. “Spit it out.”

Perrin could only shake his stunned head.

“So Jothan, your scouts weren't like ours, sitting on the edges of the unknown, making up stories, then coming back terrified?” Jaytsy asked.

“Not at all,” Jothan said, “We don't fear the unknown. We go out and shake its hand and ask it all the questions we can think of.”

“A map!” Perrin finally got it out. “Is there a map?”

“We'll get you one,” Jothan promised. “Several, even. The world is far, far larger than anyone in Idumea ever imagined.”

“Amazing!”

“What color were they?” Perrin burst out. “Shem, the zebras?”

“Black and white!” Shem told him.

“I knew it!” Perrin squeezed his wife happily. “*Brown and beige*, was what you thought. Ha!”

Mahrree giggled. “Well how was I supposed to know?”

Shem released a huge sigh. “Oh, I’ve been waiting to tell you that one for a while. That night I wanted so much to tell you—” He stopped, and Mahrree, feeling Perrin tense up, suspected that they’d had a quiet discussion which shouldn’t be shouted about right now.

“I wanted to tell you that all of those animals were real,” Shem tried again. “And you were right about zebras being black and white. Perrin, you’ve been right about so many things but you just didn’t know it.”

“I know *now*,” he smiled. “Did any of your scouts try riding the zebras?”

“Not successfully,” Shem said. “They’re smaller than our horses, behaved more like donkeys, and were quite alarmed that these strange, two-legged creatures tried to climb on their backs. You’d have an easier time on a wapiti. The elephants, on the other hand, may have been possible to ride, but they didn’t dare try to climb any.”

Mahrree twisted to look behind Perrin. “Jothan, that other sea you mentioned—is it the same as the one we have to the east? Did your scouts go all around the world?”

“Is that possible?” Peto asked.

Jothan shrugged. “We don’t know—*yet*. We’re planning another expedition to find out. They’re looking for men and women to go all the way to the western shore, build boats, then sail on to who knows what end.”

Mahrree could feel Perrin’s breathing become faster in her ear.

She twisted in the saddle again. “No! Don’t even think it.”

But Perrin was looking past her to Peto.

Mahrree turned to him. “And not you either, Peto Shin!”

“Another sea . . . I never even saw *our* sea,” Peto said.

“Perrin,” said Jothan gently, “you wouldn’t be allowed to go.”

“Why not? I’m in as good shape as—”

“No married men are allowed to go,” Jothan said. “Only single men and women whose families don’t require their support. Our leaders expect the expedition to be gone as long as three years.”

“Peto, please get that look off your face,” Mahrree insisted.

“I don’t think I’m brave enough to go, Mother, so don’t worry,”

Peto said. “Still, it’s incredible to think about, isn’t it?”

Deck nodded.

Jaytsy looked up at him. “Would you have wanted to go?”

“No way. I think becoming a father will be adventure enough.”

“Shem,” Perrin called up to him. “What about you?”

“I’ve had enough excitement away from Salem for a lifetime. I’m hoping for another kind of adventure.” He glanced at Deck.

They rode again in silence, lost in thought—

Well, Mahrree knew what Perrin’s thoughts were, because every now and then he’d murmur, “*Wapiti!*” and “*Black and white!*” and “*Amazing!*”

At one point he whispered into her ear, “Mahrree, I have no idea what’s ahead of us, or how long this journey may be, or what may be at the end of it, but this I do know: today, I have seen a real wapiti! Today, I don’t care if the Salemites *have* stolen us away to be slaves in their fields, or that they really *are* so desperate for their daughters that they want to use our son as a stud—”

Mahrree snickered so loudly that Peto turned around in his saddle and frowned at them in worry.

“—because Mahrree,” Perrin chuckled in her ear, “*today* I’ve seen wapiti, and I know that others have seen zebras and elephants!”

After a while the path rose again and leveled out at a large field.

Peto asked, “What happened to all the trees?”

“This is the meadow I mentioned,” Shem explained. “Very few trees. Just grasses. And a glacial lake. And wildflowers in Weeding Season. Ah, Peto—so much to show you!”

Again Mahrree was at a loss for descriptive enough words. They’d entered a new little world, dropped on top of the mountains.

“A glacier carved this, a very long time ago,” Jothan explained, which was the worst explanation the Shins had ever heard, because it didn’t explain anything whatsoever.

“A glay-shur?” Perrin wondered.

“It’ll be in that word book, right?” Mahrree guessed.

Barb laughed. “It will be. Jothan, you didn’t give them four weeks of lessons, so quit confusing these poor people.”

“Sorry, sorry,” he chuckled apologetically.

The gently curved little valley sat nestled in between several peaks, a swath of bright green poking up through the melting snows in between the gray and brown rock. Scattered within the meadow

“Amazing!”

were clumps of trees and boulders. The entire area was barely a quarter of a mile in width and maybe half a mile long, but it felt like an enormous haven.

“Do you think a glay-shur is a giant animal?” Mahrree whispered to Perrin, trying to imagine what cut this out of the mountain.

“Don’t ask me,” he whispered back. “I’ve lost the ability to think properly. Must be the air. Feels thinner up here. I think we’re running out of it.”

“Probably the glay-shur ate it,” Mahrree murmured, and the two of them giggled like children.

“Along with the trail,” Perrin whispered. “I’ve lost it. How does Shem know where to go?”

“What are you two whispering about up there?” Jaytsy called up.

“We have no idea,” Mahrree called back, “about anything!”

Suddenly two men appeared ahead of Shem.

Perrin gripped Mahrree’s waist tighter, until he realized that they were dressed like Jothan.

“Shem Zenos!” called one of the men. “What are you doing here? I know some people who are going to be very surprised to see *you* on the trail.”

“Change of plans, Winter. I’m coming home,” he announced.

The two men—and Mahrree was surprised to realize that they were middle-aged—broke into smiles.

Perrin’s grip on Mahrree relaxed, but behind her he still tensed.

“Have they finally found you out?” asked the other man.

“Actually, Varteeya, they have,” Shem said soberly, and the men’s smiles vanished. “It was as messy as we feared,” Shem reined his horse to a halt, “but so far everyone seems to be safe.”

“Gleace has been worried,” Winter said. “We heard from the forward scout about your night. But,” he paused and quickly counted the riders behind him, “it looks like we were successful. Welcome to *our* fort, Colonel Shin and family! I mean, *Mr.* Shin.”

“Fort?” Perrin asked, glancing around at nothing but trees, boulders, and stretches of snow.

Varteeya beamed. “I was hoping I would be on duty when you arrived. I wanted to get your opinion on what we’ve created here. In case any Idumeans are ever successful in making it this far, we wanted to be sure to see them first and send word ahead.”

Winter beckoned, his grin just as eager. “We’ll get you fresh horses. It’s a good thing we have an extra horse on hand.” He winced

at Clark, who was beginning to show his exhaustion.

“Where are we going?” Mahrree whispered to Perrin. With a sudden pang of regret she realized that they were getting her a horse, and she’d no longer be able to whisper silly nothings with her husband. It took her nineteen years of marriage to realize that yes, she actually did like riding with him.

He held her tighter and whispered, “Maybe they’re leading us into the glay-shur?”

The men stepped to the right and led them to . . . a stand of trees?

It wasn’t until they neared that Mahrree realized the trees were part of the oddest shaped building she had ever seen. The small fort was constructed of vertical logs, and throughout the walls were growing real trees and bushes to hide it almost completely.

“Now *that* is amazing!” Peto declared. “What do you call it?”

“Camouflage,” said the Varteeya.

“Camouflage?” Peto repeated. “Strange name. Camo Flage?”

Varteeya blinked at him, then understood the confusion. “No, camouflage is what we *did* to the fort.”

“Yes, Peto,” Barb called, “it’ll be in the dictionary.”

“We looked at animals in nature,” Varteeya explained, “and saw how they hide themselves. We decided we could do the same with our fort and our clothing. Blend into the forest.”

Perrin grinned in appreciation. “Amazing!”

“His favorite word,” Shem said to the men.

Mahrree felt a little better that Perrin, normally a man of many words, was also having a hard time finding specific enough ones to sum up his day.

It was a beautifully amazing day, she thought to herself.

Peto was impressed by the fort as well. “Shem, why didn’t you ever tell my father about this?”

It took only a moment for him to comprehend the looks of Shem and his father.

“Oh. Right.” Peto rolled his eyes. “Why tell the enemy how to hide better. It’s kind of hard to remember what side I’m on now. There seem to be so many.”

Winter patted him on the back as he slid off the horse. “You’ll get it all straight soon enough, young Mr. Shin. Come see the inside.”

Perrin nearly forgot to help Mahrree off of Clark, so eager was he to inspect the oddest fort ever built. The Cat stretched outside and scratched the bark off of a tree while the family took the tour.

“Amazing!”

Instead of making the fort’s walls conform to a some random rectangle, it instead matched the natural flow of the small woods it stood in, causing the narrow building to angle and twist like a crooked branch, one room following another.

The first room was a combination reception and lookout, with a tall ladder extending up and out of the roof, climbing unnoticed to nearly the top of a large pine tree. When Mahrree peered up the ladder into the massive tree, she was startled to see a distant hand waving down to her.

“The views must be remarkable up there!” Perrin said as he waved to the invisible man.

“They are,” Varteeya said. “We spied you twenty minutes ago.”

Shem stayed in the reception and lookout area to update Winter, while the Shins and Briters moved on to the next room which contained supplies stacked neatly on shelves for people and horses. Mahrree was impressed to see not only clothing and shoes for all sizes of people, but also a wide variety of toys for weary and frightened children.

But she stopped when she noticed an unusual chair in the corner.

She raised her eyebrows at Jaytsy, who frowned in confusion and elbowed Deck to look at it. His eyes grew wide.

Before they could ask about the chair, Varteeya led them into the next section—another extended, narrow room.

“That’s one long table,” Peto noticed.

“It is,” Varteeya said. “Either for eating or surgery, whichever is in need at the moment.”

Peto laughed, until he realized Varteeya wasn’t.

“You’ve done . . . you’ve done surgery in here?! On that?”

“No, of course not,” Varteeya said, and Peto’s shoulders sagged in relief. “I’m a builder. Winter—*he’s* the surgeon. Need something stitched up?” Varteeya grinned as Peto paled.

Barb and Jothan chuckled as they sat down to the table, set for a snack of nuts and dried fruits, with no surgery implements in sight.

The next room, longer than the others, was obviously for sleeping as it held net litters hanging from above, with cots underneath. Stacks of blankets and pillows were stowed neatly under the cots, enough for twenty people. A door behind that room led to a large washing station, and beyond that, at the end of a narrow path between thick foliage, was another building which hid stabled horses.

“You’re prepared for every contingency here, aren’t you?” Perrin asked as they wandered back to the main building.

“And we’ve faced nearly every contingency, too,” said Varteeya, “since we completed this nearly four years ago.”

“Even the birthing chair?” Mahrree asked incredulously. By now they’d reached the eating/surgery table, and Jaytsy and Deck ducked back up to the supply room to gawk at it.

“I’d read about those being used by our ancestors,” Mahrree told them as she followed the Briters who were slightly stunned and disturbed, with Barb in tow. “I hadn’t realized you still use them.”

“We use everything possible,” Barb said. “There are many positions for birthing babies, and several women prefer the chairs. It seems reasonable to let nature do some of the work. We’ve had seven babies born here since the fort was completed. By the look on Jaytsy’s face, we won’t be having number eight.”

“I feel nothing!” Jaytsy said quickly. “Truly!”

“That’s good,” Barb said. “We still have a long trek in front of us. The paths widens considerably so you, your mother, Deck, and I can ride next to each other and talk about the Salem way of birthing. I’m sure our discussion will pass the time.”

Deck’s eyebrows furrowed. “There are plenty of midwives now. Do I really need to be involved?”

Peto and Perrin had come to the door, almost in a manner of daring the other to look at the birthing chair. They now watched Barb, worried about what her answer would mean for Deck.

“Of course,” Barb told him. “In Salem, fathers are an important part of the birthing process. You were there at the beginning—”

Deck blushed violently.

“—and you should be there at the end. Don’t worry,” Barb assured him. “You’ll do just fine.”

Wretchedly, Deck said “So I *am* to reach in and—”

“She’s not a cow, Deck! There’ll be no ‘reaching’.”

“Whew,” said Peto.

“Because if Jaytsy chooses to use a chair, you’ll be standing behind your wife and supporting her as she pushes,” Barb gestured to the chair with a noticeably large hole where the seat should be. “But there are many other positions Jaytsy can try. There’s the squat without the chair, there’s on her knees—”

Deck’s color faded rapidly from a bright red to a sickening gray, and he began to slump.

“Amazing!”

“Sweetie?” Jaytsy said, and Perrin dove to catch Deck’s head before it banged on the ground.

“Oh, poor Deckett!” Mahrree cried as Perrin gingerly laid the rest of him down, but Barb only tilted her head.

“Ah,” she said casually, regarding his unconscious body splayed on the floor. “A fainter.”

“Need any help, Barb?” Jothan called from the table.

“I’ve got it, thanks. Don’t worry, Jaytsy; we have a few weeks still to get him ready.” Barb reached into a deep pocket on her breeches, pulled out a small bottle, and knelt by Deck. She uncorked the bottle, waved it under Deck’s nose, and his glazed eyes opened.

“Let’s get you something to eat before we discuss this further.” She hoisted him up expertly and Mahrree rushed to help lead him back to the eating table, casting a *Give me a hand!* glance at Perrin.

But he and Peto, standing uselessly in the doorway with their mouths hanging open, didn’t see it. Nor could they seem to remember how to help as a stumbling Deck was led past them, and Jothan stood up to get Deck into a chair.

Barb propped him up by his arms and elbows, and Deck held his woozy head in his hands as Jothan slid plates of food in his direction.

Perrin still couldn’t do much but gesture and say, “Mahrree, put a damp cloth on his neck. That seems to help him when he faints.”

Jaytsy sat down across from her shaking husband. “You all right? Deck? Sweetie?”

Varteeya, who had brought a wet cloth to Mahrree, placed his hands on Perrin and Peto’s shoulders.

“Right now he looks like the bravest man in the world, doesn’t he?” he chuckled. “Won’t be as brave as his wife will be in a few weeks, but don’t worry. He’ll get used to it and find his legs when he needs to. So will you, young man,” he squeezed Peto’s shoulder.

“Oh, no, no, no!” Peto exclaimed. “I’m not getting married, and I’m not fathering children!”

Barb chuckled from her spot by Deck where she held his wrist to check his pulse. “Varteeya, ask him about his feelings on *studding*.”

“Please don’t,” Peto said.

Varteeya squeezed Peto’s shoulder again. “I predict no more than five years. You’ll be holding your own baby by then. Maybe even your second.”

Peto twisted to stare at him.

“It’s a wonderful experience,” Varteeya went on. “The first birth

was a bit rough and shocking, I'll admit. I don't know how she endured it. The noise, the fluids, the . . ." He held out his hands and did some kind of strange motions that Peto and Perrin couldn't help but stare at in horror. "But by the sixth baby we didn't call the midwife. My wife and I handled it just fine with our oldest daughter's help."

Mahrree watched with amusement as the looks on her husband's and son's faces progressed into dismay. Too many things Varteeya had said in the last minute bounced around in their minds smashing everything they knew about women and childbirth.

Granted, Mahrree thought as she handed her son-in-law a glass of water, there wasn't much to smash.

"How, how, how," Perrin stammered before shook himself, "how many children do you have?"

"Only ten," Varteeya said nonchalantly, but watched for the Shins' response. "One of my sisters has fifteen, but that's with three sets of twins. She cheats. Our two oldest daughters enjoyed playing midwife with me."

Perrin tried to shake the image from his head.

Peto hadn't moved, except to cringe.

Varteeya thoroughly enjoyed it. "Our oldest is now a midwife herself. But come, we have other things to discuss. You have yet to tell me what you think of our fort, sir!"

Relieved for a change in topic, Perrin snapped his mind back. "Impressive!" he declared. "Even the irregular pitch of the roof mimics a tree line. Amazing! Who came up with this idea?"

Varteeya beamed. "Several of us in the scouting corps felt we needed an emergency station. Many in Salem contributed, but the best ideas came from Shem."

Perrin looked down the fort through two open doors at Shem who overheard and shrugged apologetically.

"You haven't been giving me your all over the years," Perrin called. "If I could still promote you, I wouldn't."

"Thank you!"

After Deck was no longer changing colors and the horses were changed—the scouts promising to bring Clark to Salem after he had rested—the party headed out to their new mounts. The Cat noticed Jaysy being helped into the litter and jumped in to join her.

Before Perrin helped Mahrree on to her new horse, one that Winter promised was the gentlest and dullest animal they had, they saw a lone rider at the end of the meadow heading up to the saddle between

“Amazing!”

the two peaks.

“Who’s that?” Mahrree asked Varteeya and Winter who were holding the reins of their horses.

“One of our messengers,” Winter told her. “We’ve sent him ahead to let Salem know of your progress.”

Perrin eyed him suspiciously. “Just how many more men do you have hiding in the trees?”

“As many as we need, sir,” Winter grinned. “We had many more last night to help with your moving. Today we still have ten here.”

They turned and looked around, but saw only mountains, rocks, and clusters of trees. But it was from those that they heard, scattered around the fort, “Nice to meet you!”

“Have a good trip!”

“Wish you could see your faces right now.”

“We’re watching out for you,” Varteeya assured. “You still have a few more hours’ before the next resting station, so you best go.”

The one good thing about Deck’s unstable condition was that he had Mahrree so concerned as she rode next to him that she didn’t have time to lament that she was no longer with Perrin. He, Deck, and Peto rode ahead so as to not hear any of Barb’s detailed explanations about Salem birthing traditions.

And Mahrree was just fine with Perrin’s distance.

You would think, she thought disappointedly, that a man so accustomed to violence, blood, and yelling wouldn’t be so cowardly about child birthing.

It was an easy ride to the end of the valley where the bases of the two peaks met. Shem, Perrin, and Peto rode side by side in the lead discussing the terrain and foliage.

Perrin wanted to make sure none of them heard anything they really didn’t need to. He’d caught Mahrree’s slightly nasty glances, but come on, he thought defensively: he’d fought in many battles, killed dozens of men, faced countless threats—did he *really* have to be involved in childbirth as well? Didn’t women get to deal with some of the sickening and terrifying aspects of life and death themselves? He was man enough already! He’d changed his babies’ cloths, many of them brown and leaking!

Never mind that Jothan was now explaining to Deck some finer

points, and that Perrin expended every bit of energy to not to accidentally eavesdrop.

When he'd learned that Jothan—the strongest scout in their corps and the man in charge when he was on duty—was also a fully trained and experienced midwife assistant, the only thought that rushed through his mind was, *That's so wrong! That's so, so wrong!*

But Perrin would freely admit it: Jothan Hifadhi was even more manly than Perrin. Was that what Mahrree wanted hear? Fine! He admitted it! Why would he want to witness the cries and pain and suffering of those he loved? He'd seen that hundreds of times in his nightmares, heard the shouts of agony of his family, seen their bodies unconscious and worse, sprawled on the floor—

That was what sent Perrin into his current brooding.

It was all behind him, literally miles, the world and its misery. Yet still he remembered the nightmares, and in brief, horrifying moments, lived them.

While he'd 'saved' Deck from concussing on the floor, he still had to lay down his heavy, unconscious body. Never mind that Deck was up a few moments later, dazed and pale; Perrin still felt that he'd somehow disappointed Cambozola and Suzie Briter.

In spite of himself, he felt immense comfort, as if the Briters were on either side of him chuckling and saying, *Just a fainting spell! He did that the first time he helped a cow birth!*

Perrin struggled to cast away his dread that he couldn't protect them all of the time. There'd always be pain, and always suffering—

--And also always relief, and also always joy. That's the trial of life, son, and it all works for our good. But it will always end in joy, Perrin. Every story has a happy ending, if you wait long enough.

He was only vaguely aware that Shem and Peto were bickering next to him about what constituted a shrub, because the words that filled his mind so completely also completely baffled him.

He'd heard that line before, about happy endings.

Who was it—?

Mahrree. She'd said those were her father's last words to her.

Perrin had never met Cephas Peto before, until that day. His eyes grew wet, and his chest swelled with heat. Only after he'd regained control again did he look behind, hoping to catch Mahrree's eye.

She was focused on her son-in-law, who valiantly did his best to stay upright in his saddle, pushed gently back by Mahrree when he drifted in her direction. She glanced over at Perrin, then, seeing the

intent expression in his face, tilted her head in question.

All he could do was smile at her, while his chin trembled, because he felt in every fiber of his soul that they were on the path to that happy ending.

“Shem, you called that last one a fir tree. How can that be?”

Peto’s complaint pulled Perrin out of his thoughts, but still he had the impression that the Briters and Cephas Peto, and likely Hycymum and his own parents, and even Hogal and Tabbitt Densal were enjoying the scenery as well.

“This tree ahead is clearly a different kind, Shem. Look how far up the trunk goes before it begins branching. The other ‘fir tree’ had branches all the way to the ground.”

Perrin smiled to realize that Peto was much his old self again with his “uncle.”

Shem gave him a sidelong glance. “Look, it’s a tree that stays green all Snowing Season, smells nice, and has cones. Fir trees. All of them.”

“But they can’t all be the same. You said these trees are marked for when the snows are high and the trail’s covered, so how do riders know which tree to look for? Surely there’s a name for each kind—”

“Douglas.”

“Douglas?”

“Yes. That tree’s named Douglas . . . Fir,” Shem decided. “That one over there is . . . Myrtle. The scrubby little one behind it is . . . Scrubby Oak. The whole forest likes to be called . . . Sheerwoods.”

Peto’s face contorted in doubt. “A tree named *Myrtle*?”

“She’s very sensitive about it. Don’t make her feel bad.”

“What kinds of names are those?! *Sherwood*—”

“*Sheerwoods!*” Shem grinned. “I’m glad to see you’ve found something to interest you, Peto. When we reach Salem I’ll have to introduce you to someone who knows all about trees. Maybe female, seventeen years old, and who wants at least ten children.”

Even Perrin chuckled at that, although his heart sank to think of some poor girl suffering ten times . . .

Well, if she married Peto, she’d be suffering a *lot* more frequently than that.

Perrin found himself grinning. Despite his worries and dread, the joy just wasn’t going to be held down. Today—*today*, was glorious.

He’d seen wapiti, he was riding in terrain that was indescribably intriguing, their entire family—here and in Paradise—were riding

with them, and they were off to Salem, wherever it may be.

It was enough to make him laugh.



But there was no laughing in the party behind them. On the outside horse sat Jothan wearing an sympathetic smile. Next to him was Barb, with Jaytsy suspended between them, the horses side by side. Deck rode next to Barb, with Mahrree on the other side.

At least she had a mellow horse, Mahrree thought to herself, so that she could focus on Deck. Barb was giving him the explanations Mrs. Braxhicks would have, had she not been forced to Idumea for retraining where she was hoping to instead retrain *them*.

Deck swooned as Barb described in explicit detail what Jaytsy would be experiencing, and how Deck could help.

Jaytsy was as pale as her husband. Mrs. Braxhicks had already told her all of this, but now that her time was closer, every aspect was unnervingly real.

At first Mahrree worried that the discussion might be uncomfortable for Jothan, who frequently chimed in with further explanations. But he just said dismissively, “Four sons, two daughters, and assisted many births along this trail. It’s just a part of life.”

By the time they reached the end of the valley, Deck was gray again, and Mahrree was sure her color wasn’t much better. There was some forgetfulness in child birthing which sweetens the memory, until someone reminds you vividly of the bitter details.

But Barb’s easy smile and laid-back manner made Mahrree confident that later Jaytsy, too, would recall the event as a happy one, especially when that scrunched up, screaming infant with a misshapen head splattered with blood would be placed in her arms, and she’d think it the most beautiful creature in the world.

Mahrree just wasn’t sure how Deck would remember the day.

Shem stopped the horses at the mouth of the narrow canyon and looked back at Deck with pity.

Perrin exhaled. “I’m glad my days for that are over.”

Peto only gulped.

Shem gave Perrin half a smile. “One Salem birthing tradition is that the first arms to hold the baby are the father’s, for him to realize the magnitude of his responsibility. The child and the mother will rely on him for safety and love, and fathers need to understand that from

“Amazing!”

the very beginning. The baby is eventually held by all the male members of the family so that they recognize their roles in caring for the newest family member and to feel an early connection to the baby.

“*But*,” Shem continued, and Perrin shifted his gaze to Shem, suspicious of his tone, “when the father’s not available, a *grandfather* is expected to step in. Because really, it’s also a practical tradition, as everything in Salem is. You see, *someone* has to hold the newborn while they take care of the mother. So Perrin, in case Deck’s elsewhere, you should start practicing catching wet, slippery things.”

Perrin paled whiter than the patches of snow. “Uh, wait—”

Shem laughed at his horrified expression. “Don’t worry, the midwife does the catching and wraps up the baby before handing it to the father or grandfather.” Shem called to the approaching midwife party. “Barb, no more! Deck’s had enough. The canyon gets rugged, and we don’t need him falling off his horse and down a ravine.”

Barb waved off his concern. “We just finished tying off the cord anyway. He’s ready.”

Deck blinked at the men. “Cows are . . . different.”

Jaytsy’s ride shifted again as the draft horses were adjusted to follow one after the other to enter the canyon, and Perrin squinted nervously at the steep sides. After living his entire life in open plains, this was a bit claustrophobic. The dim trail they followed hugged another rapid river, and was so narrow there was barely enough room for the riders without being knocked off by overhanging tree branches. Every few hundred paces another twisting canyon split off, each with its own faint trail.

“Shem,” Perrin called, feeling better that there was some alternative to the confining canyon, “where do these other trails lead to?”

“Nowhere interesting,” Shem answered, to Perrin’s disappointment. “Cattle follow those trails to grazing pastures, but the trails are also useful to confuse anyone who may find their way unguided into Salem. If we can lose *unexpected visitors* in the canyons, we have more time to prepare for them. Can get very disorienting, especially for the wrong kind of people.”

“Meaning people from the world?” Perrin asked.

Shem’s glance back confirmed his suspicion.

Perrin looked around, and a moment later he chuckled.

“What is it?” Mahrree called from her horse behind him.

“I was just thinking about people from the world coming here.”

Peto twisted to look at his father. “And that’s funny?”

“It would be if they ran into a block wall!”

Shem turned around now. “What?”

“Most of these canyons are narrow. I think it would be funny if some soldiers came running through here and found themselves face to face with a block wall to keep them out.”

Shem shook his head. “Sometimes you have the strangest ideas.”

“Do they even build with block in Salem?” Jaytsy asked.

“No,” Shem said. “Stone, logs, planking, but no block.”

Now Peto began to chuckle. “If they ran into a block wall, Father, they’d think they’re back in school, would look around for a cramped desk to sit in, then wait for a teacher to help them recite their oaths of loyalty to the Administrators and starve to death while waiting.”

Perrin and Peto laughed, but Mahrree shook her head. “You two *are* odd. Why would there be a block wall in the middle of nowhere?”

“That’s the point!”

Over the course of the next two hours the canyon widened, narrowed, twisted, widened again into a large meadow, then turned again and narrowed so often that Perrin couldn’t imagine any strangers could find their way easily. Deer along the river that rushed below them occasionally looked up from feeding on newly sprouted leaves to see who was passing. A large bull moose watched them lazily from a marsh, giving the Shins another animal to stare at in astonishment. The scenery was almost serene.

But Perrin was growing anxious.

Judging by the shadows cast by the mountain peaks, they had maybe only an hour of sunlight in the canyon. He scanned the impossible slopes looking for a suitable place to camp, knowing full well they didn’t have any supplies. The air was already beginning to chill, and there would most likely be frost that night.

Perrin turned and sent Mahrree *a look*.

Whatever happy thought she had been entertaining vanished, replaced by shared worry.

Facing forward again, Perrin was about to ask about the next resting station when Shem glanced back.

Perrin recognized the look. “Oh, Shem. What are you plan—”

But Shem again sent him the eye twitch, dug his heels into the horse’s sides, and it took off cantering down the trail.

“Amazing!”

Peto looked back at his parents in questioning.

“What’s he doing?” Jaytsy called from behind.

“Being Shem,” Perrin said. “That’s his, ‘Can’t catch me, Colonel!’ face. He perfected it during one of the Strongest Soldier races. I’m not in the mood, Sergeant!” he yelled after him.

Shem stopped at the mouth of the canyon which had narrowed to the width of just two horses. Before it was a severe gully, into which the horses and riders were now entering, the animals skidding and sliding before having to climb up the facing bank.

Perrin, who had overtaken Peto, was now glaring at Shem as his horse struggled up the slope.

But Shem had his back turned, surveying the scene above and beyond the party.

“The Second Resting Station can be seen from here,” he called down cheerfully. Smirking at Perrin’s struggling horse, not used to its rider’s weight, Shem said, “Sorry. You can see now why I spurred mine into a run. Horses appreciate a running start up that bank.”

“Thanks for the belated advice,” Perrin growled.

Mahrree’s horse hopped down in three jerky jumps.

“You need to climb back up here,” Shem said. “Or Jaytsy’s horses will have no chance of getting over.”

Deck’s mount lead the way, loping down the slope and taking the opposite bank in a few well-placed jumps. He reined his horse on the other side, still down the slope from Shem, who stood as if on guard.

While Perrin’s, Peto’s, and Mahrree’s horse scrambled awkwardly up the other side, Jothan and Barb simply let their well-trained horses skirt around the gully on the side, gently swinging Jaytsy between the steep slope and the drop off.

“Or,” Shem said, not nearly as apologetic as he pretended to be, “you could have led your horses around the entire problem—”

“Shem,” Perrin said, growing impatient, “Let’s just get to that resting station already.”

“Eager to see it?”

“If you’d step your horse aside, yes!”

“I’m starving,” Peto announced.

“I’m starting to lose all feeling to my legs,” Mahrree murmured.

“Well then,” Shem winked at Jothan as he backed up his horse. “Welcome to the Second Resting Station.”

Perrin’s horse started automatically up the slope, but when he

caught a view of what Shem had been concealing, he slid off. Astonished, he fell to his knees, the only appropriate thing to do.

A moment later Mahrree fell next to him, grabbing his arm for support, and nearly pulling him down.

Behind him, someone else also fell off a horse in surprise—maybe Peto, maybe Deck . . . maybe it was a herd of zebras, but Perrin couldn't pry his eyes away from what opened up before them.

“Or maybe,” Shem said, with a mischievous smile when he realized none of the Shins would be able to utter a word, “I should have said, *Welcome to Salem.*”

Chapter 10--“So what do you think, Colonel? Can we take them?”

Barb and Jothan laughed gently at the Shins. There should have been indentations in the ground for as often as newcomers fell to their knees right there in flabbergasted surprise.

Shem slid off his horse, his grin permanent, and said to Barb and Jothan, “I’ve been waiting *for years* to do this to him.” He crept over to Perrin who still kneeled in an attitude of worshipful amazement. Shem crouched next to him, after propping up a sagging Mahrree.

“So what do you think, Colonel? Can we take them?”

Perrin shook his head. “So close,” he mumbled. “All this time. So . . . so close. Just a day’s ride?”

“Less than that, actually. I can make it in three hours if the conditions are ideal and the horse feels like racing,” Shem said, reveling in his friend’s pale and stony face. “And an easy day’s hike.”

“And . . . and so huge,” Mahrree finally found her voice, but it was dull and toneless. She waved aimlessly, as if giving a swarm of gnats directions. “I never . . . I never would have imagined . . .”

“I just don’t believe it,” Perrin whispered.

Peto and Deck behind them just gaped, as did Jaytsy who now had a clear view from the net litter.

Shem poked Peto, who nearly fell over. “Do you see more than a dozen now?”

Peto had no answer.

“It’s . . . it’s . . .” Perrin gestured to the scene below them.

There was a trail, and it sloped gradually from the canyon down to a meadow, leveling out after a quarter of a mile. In the meadow was a flock of sheep, and next to it was a large parcel of land with bright green new growth.

Next to that was a large house and a barn. Then a farm, an orchard, another house, cattle, some horses, more farms, herds of sheep,

pastures of horses, goats, chickens, vineyards, more orchards, more houses . . . all ringed by immense mountains on the east, south, and west.

And it went on and on and on.

There was no end of the farms and houses to the north; further than any of them could see was life teeming and growing. Toward the center of the valley, about ten miles away, was a city with large buildings that could be discerned even from the canyon.

“How . . . how . . . how big is it, Shem?” Perrin finally whispered.

“We’ve settled almost forty miles from south to north,” Shem said, “and the valley averages about ten miles east to west. This is the narrowest point. Some sections are up to eighteen miles wide. And this is only the main valley of Salem. There’s more, beyond the mountains to the northwest. Several additional settlements.”

“Northwest!” Perrin muttered, his hand over his mouth as if he were uttering secrets. “I pictured maybe a few farms—”

“How many people, Shem?” Mahrree whispered, desperately trying to remember the calculations she made years ago. There had been twenty-one-hundred people who had vanished after the Great War, and here they had started a new civilization. Families as large as they wanted to be, with new people escaping from the world every year. There had to be tens of thousands of them by now.

“Last count two years ago,” Shem told her, “put us at just over one-hundred-twenty-thousand.”

Perrin twisted to face Shem. “Did I hear you right? One-hundred-twenty-*thousand*?”

“More than a dozen,” Peto managed to mumble.

Shem smiled broadly. “Our army is outnumbered, my friend. Now, if all of Idumea and the world with its one million—”

“But still, no one knows how many are *here*,” Perrin cut Shem off before he could say anything more of the place they left. Clumsily, Perrin sat down to a more comfortable position to gawk.

Mahrree leaned against him and stared. The entire valley had been laid out in a grid of farms and homes, with two rivers draining out of the canyons and meanderingly from one end to the other. The glint of the lowering sun showed canals dug to channel the water to farms, like strings of silver crisscrossing Salem.

“How many came, Shem?” Mahrree asked, still running numbers in her head. “At the beginning? Running away from King Querul?”

“We started with two-thousand, eight-hundred-twelve men,

“So what do you think, Colonel? Can we take them?”

women, and children, Mahrree,” Shem said. “Each of them recorded their names in The Writings. Our version is a bit larger than yours. We never stopped writing down the miracles the Creator has done for us.”

“But,” Mahrree frowned, “how could you continue writing? Only the guide is supposed to write—”

She stopped.

Guide Pax hadn’t been killed, as the world had thought.

That meant there would have been more assistants, and . . .

“*You* have a guide,” she whispered.

Shem smiled. “We have a guide. Always have.”

“Oh Shem!” Mahrree breathed. Just when she thought the day couldn’t have been any more remarkable—“Can I meet him? Or is that not allowed, or, or . . .”

She really didn’t know what a guide did, apart from telling everyone what the Creator wanted them to know. Beyond that, for some reason she thought guide-ing involved wearing a thin tunic on top of the mountain in a snowfield. Without meaning to, she glanced around at the mountain peaks.

“Well, he’s really quite busy you know,” Shem said, with a hint of his usual teasing. “It’s calving season after all.”

Mahrree frowned. “Calving season?”

“Yes, that’s when the cows have calves—”

“I know what calving season is, Shem Zenos!” Mahrree was nearly bursting. “What does that have to do with the guide?”

Deck stumbled over to them. “Shem, the guide isn’t a . . . a farmer, is he?”

“No! Don’t be ridiculous, Deckett. Of course not.” Shem paused before adding, “He was a rancher, like you.”

Deck’s eyebrows shot upwards and his head fell forward.

“Wait,” said Perrin. “The *Guide* of the *Creator* is a *rancher*?”

“Retired now, so he can work full time as the guide,” Shem explained nonchalantly, his eyes twinkling. “Some of his sons have taken over his herds, but when it’s calving season and your cow’s in distress, who better to call than the guide?”

Seeing that they really couldn’t understand, Shem said, “Our guide *was* a rancher. The one before him was a teacher,” he smiled at Mahrree. “The one before him managed a granary. The one before him was a stone cutter. The one before him was a farmer. They’re just ordinary men who live as best they can. Then the Creator chooses

them to be His spokesmen, and they become *extraordinary* men. You'll meet the guide. He's usually here waiting to greet our newcomers, so I've been stalling for him, but as I said, calving seas—"The sound of approaching horses turned Shem.

Coming up the hillside were two riders and horses, galloping.

"Then again . . ." and Shem gestured to the distance.

Although Mahrree saw another cloud of dust approaching from about half a mile away, her attention was drawn to the two riders coming up the rise.

Perrin was already getting to his feet, and Mahrree grabbed his arm for a free ride. Perrin nearly yanked Peto up, and Deck helped Jaysy disentangle herself from the net sling just as the two horses reined to a stop.

Immediately an older man slid off his horse, a wide smile on his face as he fairly ran to the Shins and Briters, his arms outstretched.

"Oh, I am so grateful you made it! Welcome to Salem!"

As he eagerly grabbed Perrin's hand, Mahrree blinked in surprise. The white hair, she expected. But the floppy straw hat, which he removed and tucked under his arm as if he just remembered he still had it—no, definitely not typical guide attire. Then again, what did she know? Maybe the hat was some kind of designation, like his simple gray jacket over his black work trousers and work shirt which looked suspiciously like the Guarder clothes the other scouts wore. Still, at over seventy years old he was clearly too old for such work, even though he was slender and apparently in good health.

And then there was his smile. For some reason, whenever Mahrree read The Writings and the warnings of Guide Pax or Guide Hierum, she never pictured them as happy. Or tanned. Wrinkled, yes—she'd imagined wrinkles, but eyes like those? Never had she seen a person's eyes so open, so active, so warm.

"I'm Hew Gleace, and I'm sorry I wasn't here earlier." He shook Perrin's hand and gripped Perrin's shoulder with his other. He beamed at all of them and Mahrree couldn't help but smile back.

Guide Gleace glanced behind Perrin to see Jaysy. "Are you well, young lady? We've been so worried about you."

Jaysy was as tongue-tied as Mahrree, and could only nod.

"She's well, Guide," Barb answered for her. "But we reached them with no time to spare. The army came looking for them sooner than we'd expected. You were right in sending us out when you did."

The guide nodded briefly and Mahrree marveled that somehow

“So what do you think, Colonel? Can we take them?”

his face became clearer. “Well done in acting so quickly, all of you.” He turned to Jothan. “I’ve received a few reports so far about your night, and it sounds like there were some close calls.”

He must have felt Mahrree staring at him, although she tried not to. He smiled at her. “Mahrree Shin, I presume? After all these years, what an honor!” As she wondered what that meant, he took her hand and became lighthearted again. “I apologize for my appearance. Usually I don’t wear my worst jacket and old clothes to greet our newest refugees, but—”

“It’s calving season,” Perrin finally found some words to utter, even if they weren’t very profound, and rather obvious.

The guide turned back to him, once again his face becoming clearer, and something changed, or brightened, in his countenance.

“Colonel Perrin Shin,” he said steadily, “that’s the last time you’ll hear that title in Salem, because you are now, and always have been, our brother Perrin. You’ve been very conflicted these past few years,” the guide said, not as a question, but as a statement. “And you’ve overcome a great deal. I promise that here you’ll find peace.”

Mahrree believed him, entirely. The power with which he softly said those words wouldn’t allow for any other alternative.

Perrin felt it too, judging by his chin’s quivering.

“You’re needed here, Perrin. I want to meet with you, as soon as possible. My assistant,” he motioned to a man who had been standing quietly behind him, “will check my schedule and find a time for us to talk.” He turned to the man who was already pulling out some paper from a leather folder. “Tomorrow, dinner?”

“Your wife has already written in, ‘Dinner with Shin and Briter families.’”

Guide Gleace smiled. “She’s always one step ahead.” He nodded to Mahrree to confirm dinner, and she wondered where the Gleaces might live, and if it weren’t on the top of some mountain they’d have to find tomorrow.

The guide turned to Peto, who seemed startled to find himself next. “We’ll find a place for you as well, young man. You’ll find your calling here.”

Mahrree wasn’t sure why that struck with Peto with such force, but something caught in Peto’s throat as he glanced at Shem.

Lastly, Gleace turned to Deck, and his face became lighter again. “You look like someone who knows a thing or two about cattle. Maybe when things get settled, we could find you some of your

own?”

Deck grinned. “Yes, sir!”

Only later did Mahrree realize that the least verbose of their family was the first to give an appropriate response.

The guide grinned back, and Mahrree decided cattle men just knew how to relate to each other. “But we’ll make sure you’re available when your wife’s time comes.” When Deck paled, the guide slapped him on the back. “The first one’s always the toughest, son.”

Mahrree would have thought him just an ordinary grandfather, except that there was such depth to his expressions, such clarity in his eyes, and such joy in his countenance. She’d never before seen someone exude so much gentle power and love. It was a strange and wonderful combination.

A rumbling behind them caused Mahrree to pause her study of the guide. The dust cloud she’d seen earlier was nearly on top of them, generated by horses and riders.

Guide Gleace elbowed Shem—*actually elbowed him!* Mahrree marveled, nudging Shem like a school boy.

“I believe,” Gleace said to Shem, “this is for you.”

Shem merely nodded and, to Mahrree’s further astonishment, for once was at a loss for words.

The horses came to an abrupt stop, and as the cloud settled it revealed a plump, balding older man surrounded by six women in their forties, along with what appeared to be some of their children, on over two dozen horses.

“Shem Zenos!” called the older man. “Where have you been? Left me alone with all these women! Waited ten years for my boy, and then you leave me? What do you have to say for yourself?” His tone was angry but his eyes were anything but.

“Sorry, Papa,” Shem said with great contrition, “but their talking drove me away. Rather live in the world than with all those sisters.”

“All of *our* talking?” cried one of the women who looked to be the oldest. She slid off her horse with an angry harrumph, put her hands on her hips, and strode over to Shem. “You’ve had us worried for three weeks! Now, come here,” and she caught him in a rib-crushing hug. That was the signal for the rest of the family to dismount and rush, like bees attacking a bear, but with much less stinging.

Mahrree chuckled as she slid out of the way of the crowd and over to Jaytsy, while Peto gamely tried to count the heads.

Deck leaned over to Perrin, who had made his way around the

“So what do you think, Colonel? Can we take them?”

crowd as well. “Did you know he had such a big family?”

“Until two nights ago all I knew was that he had one sister, two nieces, and a father,” Perrin told them.

Still the older man sat upon his horse, watching in delight as his daughters and grandchildren smothered Shem. Eventually he slid off with a grunt and slowly walked to the swarm, peeling off women and children until he reached his son. Mahrree’s eyes were so blurry that she could barely make out Shem embracing his father, the older man’s head not quite reaching Shem’s shoulders.

The guide laughed quietly next to Mahrree as he watched the scene. She hadn’t even realized he was standing next to her.

“Guide,” she said, stumbling on the title which astonished her that it still existed, “how long has it been since Shem’s been home?”

“Oh, he’s back a few times each year,” Guide Gleace assured her. “That routine is their standard ‘Zenos Greeting’. But when he didn’t show up for his scheduled leave, all of us became nervous.”

Perrin said, “He spent his leave in Idumea, spying for us.”

Guide Gleace’s eyebrows rose. “Really? In the city itself? Oh dear, oh dear,” he said, eyeing Shem’s father. “Someone’s not going to be too happy about that. Now,” he said, replacing his hat which was entirely deformed from being squished under his arm, “if you’ll excuse me, I have some pressing business nearby. I don’t normally rush off like this, but we have some beautiful animals that I hate to see suffer. Deckett Briter understands, I’m sure. But I’ll check on you later, and we’ll talk more tomorrow.”

“Are you,” Jaytsy began haltingly, “going to . . . heal the cattle?”

Gleace smiled warmly. “I’m going to roll up my sleeves and get to work. A great deal of healing is accomplished by getting involved. But yes, I’ll be praying too. I always pray when my arm’s in up to the shoulder. Now, tonight you’ll all stay at the Second Resting Station, then in the morning we’ll take you to your new home. Again, so happy to have you here!” He waved a quick goodbye, mounted his horse with his assistant behind him, and hurried down the trail before Mahrree could even say, “Good to meet you . . .”

But that was all right, because she felt a pair of beefy arms wrapping around her, belonging to a tall woman around her age. Mahrree knew by her light brown hair and blue eyes that she must have been one of Shem’s sisters.

“So here’s the famous Shin family!”

Perrin’s arched an eyebrow at *famous*.

“And you must be Mahrree!” The woman’s hug squeezed nearly all of the air out of her lungs. “I’m Yudit, Shem’s oldest sister and the one who can tell you everything you may have ever wanted to know. And I’m sure I can enlist your help in keeping my brother here. I believe you tried for a time to find him a wife in Edge?”

Mahrree laughed. “He told you that?”

“He tells us everything. Your family is our family.”

At that, Perrin folded his arms, and Mahrree knew he was feeling a bit too exposed.

“But I’m afraid I know nothing of you,” said Mahrree.

“Well, of course you don’t. But that’ll change,” Yudit said. “Your home’s not far from ours. My husband and brothers-in-law are putting the finishing touches on it right now, and the Briters’ house will be ready before that baby comes. And you,” she said to Perrin, just as easily as if she’d known him for years, “must be Perrin. You and my brother have gotten yourselves into a few tight squeezes, and I look forward to hearing *your* side of the stories.”

“As I look forward to hearing what he’s told your family,” Perrin said, cracking into a smile as Yudit flashed him a Shem-like grin. “Tells you *everything*, does he?”

“All of it good, I promise.”

“Yes.” Perrin folded his arms tighter. “I’m sure it is.” His attention, however, was drawn to the older Mr. Zenos who had pushed his way through grandchildren now mauling their uncle.

The man hesitantly approached Perrin, as if drawing nearer to a large dog he wasn’t quite sure was as harmless as everyone claimed.

Perrin put on his most engaging smile that Mahrree used to make him practice, and held out his hand.

“Colonel Shin,” Mr. Zenos began, not yet daring to take his hand. “Oh dear, that’s not right anymore. So sorry. What I mean is—”

“Just call me Perrin, sir,” he said as he gripped and shook Mr. Zenos’s hand.

Flattered, the older man relaxed, but only a little. “And please call me Boskos. In many ways I’ve worried about you as if you were my own son, but more especially because you were *over* my son. I never would have agreed to let him stay if he’d been assigned to anyone other than you. Thank you,” Boskos Zenos’s chin waggled and his voice broke, “for bringing him home to me.”

“It’s I who should thank you for him. I once called him my guide, before I even knew there were still guides. He’s saved our family, on

“So what do you think, Colonel? Can we take them?”

more than one occasion. You can be very proud of him.”

Mahrree noticed where Shem got his crybaby tendencies, because tears rolled down Mr. Zenos’s face. “I am proud of him! Who could ask for a better son?”

Shem, seeing their conversation, broke through the crush of nieces and nephews. “Here I was supposed to introduce Boskos Zenos and Perrin Shin, and you’re already doing it? Nothing I’ve planned for is happening as I expected it!”

“Yes, there a few things none of us expected,” his father said, suddenly stern. “What did I tell you about Idumea? The messenger who came by the house said you’ve been *in Idumea!* Again?!”

“Yes, I was, Papa,” Shem said soberly. “I know I promised you I’d never go back, but I had to know what was happening after the Administrators declared Terryp’s land poisoned, and Mahrree publicly *disagreed*,” he put it tactfully.

The entire Zenos clan hushed, as if Shem’s stories were an event.

“While I was there I learned that the Shins were to be taken to Idumea and tried for sedition.”

All of the Zenoses gasped in unison, and Yudit grabbed Mahrree’s arm as if she was in a tug-of-war with the world over Mahrree.

Yudit would have won, Mahrree decided, and she wondered how big the bruise would be.

Shem continued, “Mahrree likely would have been executed.”

Yudit’s mouth dropped open as she gripped Mahrree even tighter. Mahrree appreciated the sentiment, but she was going to need that arm in working order later.

“Perrin may have met the same fate, or have been incarcerated for life so that General Thorne could enjoy visiting him,” Shem said.

“Never liked those Thornes, the general or the captain,” said one of the teenage nephews.

Peto blinked at him. “You know about the Thornes?”

“Of course. Lemuel, Qayin, his wife—what was her name?”

Several voices chimed in with, “Versula.”

“Oh, yeah,” the nephew said. “All of them rotten.”

Perrin glared at Shem, who had the decency to blush.

“They want to know what I’m doing away from home, so I tell them the news. That’s all,” Shem defended. “Really, that’s *all*.”

Mr. Zenos tugged on his son’s inside-out jacket. “So are you back to stay now?”

“I’ve been discovered, Papa. Captain Thorne was going to transfer me, and they know I was with the Shins in the forest.”

Several of his sisters grabbed his arm in the blood-flow-stopping manner of Yudit.

“Then you’re not going back!” one of them insisted.

“Oh, it’s all right,” Peto said. “He’s already dead. Captain Thorne killed him.”

Shem’s nephew stared at him. “Thorne did *what?*”

“It’s a great story,” Shem grinned, “and I’d love to tell it to you all at the Second Resting Station! I’m sure there’s a big dinner waiting for us, so mount up, and I’ll give you the latest installment of the Tales from the World after dinner.”

Deck helped Jaytsy into her litter, and Perrin and Mahrree waited along the side of the trail while the Zenos clan put themselves in order to follow Shem.

“Unbelievable,” Mahrree leaned over to Perrin. “Could you ever have imagined Shem had such a family? And he stayed away from them just to be with us? We must have been kind of a let-down. And we haven’t even met his brothers-in-law yet.”

Perrin chuckled. “Good thing we brought him home, then, isn’t it. Amazing. Yes, I know I said it again.”

Two more women with Shem hair, eye, and skin coloring nodded to Perrin and Mahrree as they rode by.

“You best get in line,” one of the women said. “You’re part of this family too, you know.”

That was all Mahrree could take. She knew tears were trickling down her cheeks as she said, “We could use a family right now.”

The other sister smiled. “We are *all* family, Mahrree! Always have been.”

Peto was already talking with one of Shem’s nephews who, by the expression on Peto’s face, seemed to be revealing a few unknown details about Uncle Shem. Another sister rode next to Jaytsy and Deck telling them about her daughter who was expecting soon, too.

Mahrree sighed. She felt so full of . . . She didn’t know how to describe it, but she was about to overflow. Already it was coming out her eyes in a steady stream, her chest constricted with heat and tension, and her mind was positively dancing to come out her ears.

But in a good way, if losing one’s brain out of one’s ears could be considered good. And tension could be happy. And tears merry.

She knew that didn’t make a lot of sense, and that she’d probably

“So what do you think, Colonel? Can we take them?”

keel over in dead joy in another minute.

Instead, she leaned over to her husband and said, “So this is what it feels like to come home.”

They didn’t officially ‘come home’ until the next morning. But the night couldn’t have been better. The Second Resting Station, it turned out, was only a few hundred paces away from the entrance to the canyon: a large building that looked like a typical barn from the outside, and was the Shins’ home for the night.

The Station was half the size of the mansion in Idumea. A massive gathering area held several simple but comfortable sofas and chairs, and two large fireplaces to warm weary travelers and many visitors. Attached was a large eating room with an long table, and next to that was a large kitchen stocked with supplies to take care of dozens of people for seasons. Mahrree was told the cellar underneath was filled with even more, should she be in want of anything.

Off the gathering room, stairs led to a second level that held a dozen private rooms with cozy beds and supplies such as clothing and boots and shoes in various sizes.

The Cat thoroughly inspected the Station before discovering which bed Perrin and Mahrree would be sharing, and curled up to go to sleep on it before the Shins, Briters, and Zenoses finished dinner.

Each Zenos was a variation on a Shem theme, Mahrree realized, and at one point the laughter around the table was so loud that her ears rang. The evening lasted well into the night as the rest of the Zenos family joined them after sundown to hear the story of the escape, complete with Shem acting out scenes using his brothers-in-law and nephews as stand-ins for soldiers. Perrin finally got up to correct Shem’s details, and when the two of them started arguing about exactly how Shem had dragged them through the forest, everyone was laughing. Mahrree decided that life in Salem was going to be near to perfect.

When the Shins and Briters finally retired for the night, Peto was still chuckling about stories Shem’s nephews had shared about him.

Perrin stopped him the hall. “So you’re glad you came?”

“Been a while since I’ve had friends,” Peto said. “Nice to have a few already.”

Shem, who was staying at the Resting Station for the night in

case the Shins needed anything, overheard. “You have *no idea* how many friends you have in Salem.”

Perrin eyed him worriedly as Shem laughed and shut his bedroom door behind him.

The next morning Mahrree woke up, a bit confused as to where she was, but soon found herself grinning.

Today she was going to her new home!

Cheerfully she dressed, wondered where Perrin was, and fairly skipped down the stairs.

She stopped before she reached the bottom, recognizing that the solemn murmuring between Shem, Perrin, Jothan, and Asrar wasn't a good sign.

The four of them looked up at her, and she slowly made her way down the rest of the steps. “What's gone wrong?”

Asrar's chin trembled. “Dormin.”

Jon Offra hadn't slept at all that night. The rumors of the Shins “death” had been spread throughout Edge and would be traveling on its way to the other villages and Idumea.

The problem was that Jon didn't know *how* to think. He knew the *official* story, which Genev required him to memorize and repeat, along with Radan, and they realized that no promotions would be coming. But Jon knew what he had witnessed, and he couldn't ignore the truth, because it gave him so much comfort: the Shins were alive!

Still, he had to forward Genev's story because revealing the truth would not only end his career, but likely his life.

This morning he found himself staring at the color of the sky, which he'd been taught was blue.

But all night long it had been black, with more cloud cover.

He had lain on his bed all night, staring out the window. A man's face formed itself in the night, a face that goaded Thorne into killing him.

“So what do you think, Colonel? Can we take them?”

They'd brought him to Thorne in the forest, just before the captain found the Shins. The man, in his late thirties or early forties, was dressed in unusual green and brown mottled clothing. It wasn't black, as the Guarders were wont to wear. It was far more subtle.

The man was also in excellent physical condition; it took three soldiers to keep him under control, even with the ropes they used to tie his hands behind his back. They prodded him to the captain and forced him to his knees, but the man didn't beg for mercy or weep in despair. He instead looked up confidently and smiled.

“Been a long time since I faced a man in a blue uniform,” he said casually as if meeting someone on a stroll.

Captain Thorne had slid off his horse and drew a sword—General Shin's sword.

“Been a long time since I've seen that, too,” the man nodded at the weapon. “Doesn't belong to you, Captain.”

Thorne's lips parted in surprise, but he pointed the blade at the man. “Who are you? What are you doing in the forest?”

The man said nothing.

“Answer me! Or I'll kill you!” Thorne snarled.

“You'll kill me anyway,” said the man simply. “But I have no problem with that. Death holds no fear for me. But judging by the sweat trickling down your face on this rather cold night, you, Captain, are terrified of it.”

Jon, along with the other soldiers—fourteen at that time—immediately looked at Thorne.

He *was* sweating. But then he bellowed, “SHIN!”

“Oh, he won't come help you,” the man chuckled coldly.

Thorne seethed in fury. “SHIN! You are trapped! This is useless! Give yourself up!”

“Ah,” the man nodded, “now I see the direction this is going—”

“Shut up!” Thorne hissed.

“Or what? You'll kill me? You'll kill me anyway, remember? What a tragedy. So much that I know, that I could share with you, but that's not your style, is it, Captain? So narrow-minded . . .”

The man's demeanor astounded Jon. He was kneeling in the freezing mud, with his hands tied behind his back, and a sword at his chest, yet he spoke as if he was merely stuck at a dull dinner. Jon wished he had a fragment of the man's composure.

“You know nothing!” Thorne whispered furiously. “You're full of lies, like everyone else in the world.”

“But I’m no longer *in the world*,” the man said enigmatically.

Thorne shook off that odd statement. “We know you are there, my former Colonel,” he sang out. “I and my one hundred men have come all this way to bring you home!”

The man in green snorted. “*One hundred men*. As if Shin will believe that—”

“Shut up!”

“Or you’ll kill me, I know,” the man sounded bored. “Just do it already, Captain. I’m ready to face my Creator. I’ve learned of His test, and I’ve done all I can to live according to His will. I’m rather eager to see what my final score is. Go on—send me along.”

“I will!” Thorne promised.

Jon noticed Thorne was growing more unsure of himself. He was the man with the weapon who was supposed to be calling the shots, not this prisoner kneeling before him.

“PERRIN SHIN!” he shouted, desperate to sound in control of the situation. “I have an old friend of yours. We found his horse at the spring and we just captured him. Zenos is waiting for you, my dear colonel!”

The man in green smiled. “Well, I’ve been promoted to Shem then, have I? Or is that demoted?”

Jon wondered if any of the other soldiers standing around nervously were curious as to how the man knew Shem’s first name. For that matter, how did he know the officer in blue standing before him was a captain? The night was so dark that the patches and insignias were barely readable. And where had he seen the general’s sword before that he recognized it?

“Oh, the things I could show you,” the man sighed. “All of you boys. You have no idea what the world really is, do you? But here, before you, is one who could reveal to you truths that would astonish, but you prefer to kill him instead. The truth is frightening, isn’t it Captain? So much easier to twist and distort and even ignore it. That’s what you’re doing right now, telling a lie. You’ll tell so many in your future you won’t even remember your own name. Tell me, Thorne: what color is the sky?” The man could tell he was enraging the captain, and he seemed to be enjoying it.

“Why don’t you just shut up already?”

“Because I have yet to receive a good reason for shutting up,” the man replied, almost sweetly. “And you think the sky’s blue, don’t you? Good old Idumean indoctrination—”

“So what do you think, Colonel? Can we take them?”

Thorne faced the hillside again. “You have one minute, SHIN! If you do not surrender yourself, Zenos will suffer for it!” He turned to the man. “One minute, you slagging piece of filth!”

“Ah, swearing. I forgot men like you think cursing gives you power. But it’s only a cover up, showing how weak you truly are—”

“Shut up!”

“—and unimaginative,” he added, suddenly looking over at Jon. He winked at him before glaring again at Thorne. “But I’m warning you right now: if you take an innocent man’s life, it’ll be the beginning of a very long end for you. Once you turn down this path, there’s no going back. Murder isn’t something you can easily forget. Everything will change for you tonight, in the worst of all possible ways.”

“Shut up!” Thorne hissed. “PERRIN!” he bellowed, his patience spent. “Why let your wife and son suffer needlessly in this forest? What will Jaytsy and her husband think when they discover you’re missing?”

“Daring,” the man observed. “Assuming that Jaytsy and Deckett don’t already know.”

Jon’s mouth had dropped open at that, realizing that surely the Briters must have been in the forest as well, and that the man somehow knew that. And knew their names!

Again the man in green clothing winked in Jon’s direction.

Thorne didn’t pick up on any of that, though. “I’ve had it with you!” he pointed the sword at him. “PERRIN!” he shouted again, “Your time is nearly up! Zenos does *not* want to die!”

“I already told you,” said the man wearily, “I *am* ready to die. Are *you* ready to commit murder, Captain Thorne?”

“But he will if you will not reveal yourself!” Thorne announced. “I will count to ten. One! Two! . . .”

“He’s not going to reveal himself,” the man told him. “He knows you’re bluffing. Shem knows I’m willing to give my life. You’re just wasting your breath and your bravado. You’ll regret this day, I’m warning you. Look at the sky, Thorne!”

“Three!”

“Listen to that distant thunder!”

“Four! . . . Five!”

“Tell me, Thorne, do you think taking power will make you powerful? It won’t. I know that for a fact.”

“Six! . . . Seven!”

“How does your family sleep in that mansion, Thorne?”

“Eight!”

“Do they sleep on the main floor, or up the grand staircase on the second level, where the gold bedroom is?”

Jon’s eyes couldn’t have been wider. How did the man know about the High General’s mansion? Or that a bedroom had recently been redecorated in all gold?

“Nine!”

Jon thought he saw more sweat trickling down Thorne’s face.

“You’ll never sleep easily in *my mansion*, Lemuel,” the man said cryptically. “You don’t deserve to sleep easily, ever.”

Jon stared at Thorne whose outstretched arm was now trembling. There was nowhere on his uniform that revealed his first name was Lemuel. And who in the world would dare suggest the mansion used to be his?

“Ten!”

“You want to know, don’t you?” the man prodded. “It’s tormenting you that I know so much, but your pride will never allow you to ask me why that is. You’d rather kill me. But listen to me first, Lemuel: the sky’s not blue. As desperately as you hope it is, no matter how much you convince yourself of a lie, *it’s still a lie*. Blue is just an illusion. It’s really black.”

If Jon hadn’t been stunned speechless, he would have cried out to save the man’s life.

Thorne trembled more violently. Worry and rage fought to take control. Something his stance suggested he wanted to look up to the sky to see the color, but rage finally won.

“Nothing, Shin?!” he shouted to the quiet forest, refusing to check the sky. He raised his sword arm as Jon cringed. “Well, then.”

“Black,” the man in green calmly reminded him.

It was his last word.

Thorne brought down his arm with greater power and fury than Jon had ever witnessed. The man’s head was sliced cleanly from his body, and Jon gaped in horror to see it roll past him. He was vomiting into the bushes even before the man’s kneeling body fell. Over his sounds of being sick, and the retching of other shocked soldiers around him, he heard Thorne shout again.

“SHIN!” The word quavered with Thorne’s own surprise of what he just did. “Satisfied? Zenos is *dead!*”

And that’s how the story was born, just that difficultly. An unknown man was killed, but suddenly it was Shem Zenos. And the

“So what do you think, Colonel? Can we take them?”

entire fort believed it, even the dozen soldiers who witnessed it had convinced themselves they saw something different. Genev’s intense drilling helped that along.

And suddenly Jon Offra hadn’t the foggiest idea of what to do with the truth. A brave man had faced his death alone, surrounded by the enemy, yet completely calm. He said he was ready to meet the Creator. He also said something about a test. But it was what he said about the sky that most troubled Offra.

It wasn’t blue, it was black.

And it was, all night long, as Jon tried to keep Genev’s story from mixing inappropriately with what he witnessed. He saw the bolt of lightning. He saw Perrin and Mahrree together on Clark, and Peto and Deckett and Shem, but no Jaytsy.

And then they were gone. With tears in his eyes he watched their horses break into a run, and all he could do, despite Lemuel screaming in pain next to him, was to whisper, “Ride! Ride! Go! *Ride!*”

He clung to that memory. The world could believe whatever it wanted to, but Jon knew the sky was completely black that night, broken only by lightning as jagged as a dagger.

It was how to live with that knowledge that kept Jon up all night.

Chapter II—“A few people might wave as we drive by.”

Mahrree sank on the sofa, as if all the wind had been let out of her. “Oh, poor Dormin—”

Perrin slowly shook his head. “It was Thorne, with my father’s sword. I heard it ring, and I just knew.” He paled as he covered his mouth, and Mahrree thought he might actually become ill.

“Don’t think about taking any of this upon yourselves,” Jothan said, kneeling in front of them. “Dormin was the most dedicated man we ever had. And I think it’s fitting that he died saving you.”

“How?” asked Perrin wretchedly. “It was my father who ordered the execution squad to kill his father, then Relf’s sword took Dormin’s life? I’m struggling to see how this is fitting! And I was going to apologize to Dormin, for everything . . .”

Asrar wiped away her copious tears. “Dormin felt no anger toward you or your father, Perrin. He only regretted that he was the only member of his family to do anything useful for the world. The Creator reserved him for this day, I’m sure. Feel no regret for him. He passed The Test, most admirably. And you will have your time to chat with him about everything, just later on the other side.”

“I still feel so awful,” Perrin murmured.

Shem sat down next to him. “Dormin wasn’t afraid to die. He told me on more than one occasion that he fully expected to go earlier rather than later. I can’t help but think this closed some sort of circle. I imagine he went out with bold words and kingly confidence.”

Asrar smiled at that. “But in a good way. He really did have a presence about him. He tried to hide it, but some things you just can’t deny.”

Jothan sniffed, surprising them all. “I’ll go and let Rector Yung know. The scouts who found Dormin buried him in the woods, where he loved to be. Yung will find that appropriate. I’m sure Guide Gleace

“A few people might wave as we drive by.”

will want to conduct a memorial service.” Jothan clapped a hand on Perrin’s knee. “I can’t help but feel a sense of peace about it all. While I won’t know until the next life how he went, I do know he went astonishingly well. And I also know he’s still with us.”

Mahrree stared as Jothan’s eyes bubbled over, but he darted out the front door before she could offer him a handkerchief.

“I’ve never seen him so shaken up,” Asrar said. “Well!” she turned to Perrin and Mahrree, clapping her hands and ignoring her tears. “So sorry to bring such dreary news this morning, when today—ah, today will be so wonderful for you.”

“Maybe we should wait a day or two, out of respect—” Perrin began, but the rapid head shaking of Asrar stopped him.

“Oh, there’s no way. Today’s the day! Get your children up, breakfast’s already been made by a neighbor, and your ride will be here soon to take you home.”

As somber as they felt during breakfast, Mahrree couldn’t help but feel unwanted giddiness. It seemed wrong to feel such sublime anticipation when a man had died to deliver her to it.

But then again, wouldn’t he have been disappointed if the Shins and Briters didn’t feel joy today?

After they said a prayer thanking the Creator for Dormin’s sacrifice, they heard a wagon pull up. As Shem went out to greet it, Perrin said to his family, “Some people expect us to be happy today. We’d best oblige them.”

Through the front door came Yudit with her husband Noch. He grinned broadly and said, “That magnificent beast tethered to the fence—is that Clark? Can I someday take him for a ride?”

“Show me where my new home is,” Perrin said, “and you can play with my pony all you like.”

Mahrree’s smile was genuine as Perrin helped her climb on the bench in Noch’s wagon behind him and Yudit. Both Noch and Deck assisted Jaytsy on to the third row, while Peto made himself comfortable in the wagon bed where he could keep an eye on Clark, tethered to the wagon. The Cat made himself comfortable on Peto’s lap.

As Shem on horseback led them out, he called, “Prepare to meet a few more friends, Peto!”

“What does he mean by that?” Mahrree asked as Perrin growled.

Yudit, sitting in front of them, turned around. “You might as well know, you’re rather well-known in Salem. Shem’s reports got around. *A few people might wave as we drive by.*”

Noch chuckled as he slapped the horses.

Perrin and Mahrree exchanged nervous glances.

Since the Second Resting Station was less than a hundred paces off the main cobblestone road, they were soon on it and heading north. Quite quickly Yudit's prediction of a 'few people' came true. As the Shins rode by, people waved from their fields and barns, came to their porches to shout hello, and soon they realized that a child running alongside the wagon for a time wasn't to be an anomaly.

As they reached the more populated areas of Salem, where the farms and orchards ended and the houses were closer together, it was a parade. Mahrree was so embarrassed by the amount of people who lined the road to cheer, she was sure that her face was red.

Perrin nudged her as the crowds thickened. "Don't worry—they've all turned out for Shem. I think he knows everyone here."

Shem was pointing at people and calling their names as he passed, waving happily and promising to "Come by later."

"We'll never see him again," Perrin commented. "He has about sixty invitations to make good on so far, and it's still another five miles to our new house, according to Noch."

Yudit turned to Perrin. "Everyone's out to see Shem? You keep telling yourself that, if it makes you feel better. But they're not watching Shem as much as you think. Everyone wants to see the Hero of Edge and his family. Word went out that you left the world, chased by soldiers, to come to us instead."

Mahrree had already noticed that people's eyes greeted Shem, then went immediately to her husband and lingered there. She nudged him gently. "Yudit's right."

Perrin groaned. "I thought we could just melt into the background here and have a nice quiet life."

Noch laughed. "Give it a few weeks and the excitement will die down. In the meantime, enjoy the tradition. We welcome all lost families to Salem this way. Although I don't ever recall *such* a crowd."

"I feel like we should be throwing them sweets or something," Jaytsy murmured as she waved.

Deck checked on Peto behind him. There were plenty of young women, all meeting Perrin's modesty standards, waving to Peto in the back of the wagon. He smiled slyly back and practiced a nonchalant wave that ended in a pointing gesture. He'd be adding a wink next.

Deck chuckled. "Looking for a practical girl, Peto?"

"I think they're prettier here, Deck," Peto said airily. "Sorry you

“A few people might wave as we drive by.”

had to settle for what they had to offer in Edge.”

“Peto!” Mahrree said.

Deck put his arm around his insulted wife. “I got the last perfect woman in Edge.”

Peto rolled his eyes and turned back to enjoy the view.

Perrin scanned the crowd nervously. There were thousands, *tens of thousands*, of adults and children lining the road for the next few miles. In some places they stood four and five deep, and seemed to regard him with too much respect and awe.

He glanced up at Shem who also seemed embarrassed about the attention, even though he kept up the pointing and greeting. What everyone in Salem knew about Perrin came from Shem. It wasn't that Shem wasn't honest—he was, to a fault, when he wasn't hiding information. And last night he relayed everything to his family accurately; it was just that Perrin wanted to adjust the color Shem used. Perrin came out too vivid and bright. He couldn't imagine what kinds of pictures Shem had been painting for Salem all these years.

Perrin was dragged out of thoughts by an older man saluting him as they passed, and Perrin automatically saluted back. The movement felt odd after several weeks of neglect.

Yudit noticed. “That was Mr. Kamaz. He was one of our scouts serving under your father as a young man, stationed at a fort in Pools, I think, for two years while your grandfather was High General. He told me he once gave you a ride on his horse when you were seven.”

Perrin spun back around to look at the slightly stooped man who was still watching, even though the crowd behind was dispersing to go home. Mr. Kamaz nodded and smiled.

Perrin nodded back and turned around.

“I don't remember him,” he said to Mahrree. “But I do remember riding with soldiers occasionally.”

“Maybe he can tell you about your father and grandfather,” Mahrree suggested. “It'd be fascinating to hear what he remembers.”

Perrin peered at Yudit. “How many more people here know me that I don't know about?”

Yudit shrugged. “I'm not sure. We've had several dozen scouts over the years join the army. None stayed as long as Shem, but all of them knew about your family. I suspect over the next little while

they'll seek you out to tell you what they remember.”

“I'd like that,” Perrin said. “Still, this is a bit uncomfortable.”

Noch leaned back to talk to Perrin. “I understand that in the world there's a tradition for burying a fallen soldier. As many men as possible take turns carrying the coffin to the gravesite. Well, at least that's what *usually* happens,” he added.

Perrin sighed, remembering his parents' burial. “Shem told you about that?”

Noch raised his eyebrows in a *What doesn't he tell us?* manner. “The sentiment, from what I understand, is for everyone to escort the deceased home.”

“Yes, that's the idea.”

“This also is an ‘escort home.’ We line the road as a welcome to everyone who's made it to Salem, because *this* is where you've always belonged. A guide many years ago suggested something similar happens in Paradise. When we finally make it to our true home again, we'll be greeted and escorted by thousands, if not millions, who have been eagerly waiting and cheering for us, and we never knew it.”

Perrin and Mahrree couldn't respond, nor did Noch expect them to as he said, just above the din of the calling crowd, “We've all been cheering you, for years. Finally you can see how many on this side have been eagerly waiting for you to come home.”

“This is so different,” Mahrree eventually whispered, “from the world who no longer wanted us.”

“Rejected by the world?” Noch smiled. “That's precisely why we want you.”



It was another minute before Mahrree could compose herself. She'd need another handkerchief soon, and was glad she didn't have the opportunity to offer Jothan hers.

She returned the waves of countless Salemites, smiling and blubbering at the same time. “And here I thought we'd be strangers.”

“Not at all,” Yudit told them. “Mahrree, there are a lot of teachers who want to meet you. Our history of the world is in pieces. But you can give them the whole picture. Maybe even write it down?”

Mahrree's eyebrows went up. “Write a book?”

Jaytsy poked her from behind. “Of course! How often did you

“A few people might wave as we drive by.”

complain about the dullness of the Administrators’ texts? Here’s your chance to do better.”

“Not a bad idea, Mother,” Peto added from the wagon bed. “And I can be your critic.”

“Oh, that’s far too much help,” Mahrree said. “But it’s an intriguing thought . . .”

“Well, it seems you’ve found *your* purpose in Salem,” said Perrin with a hint of friendly jealousy.

Their short parade traveled near the center of Salem before turning west. Yudit promised the Shins they’d have a full tour next week, but in the meantime she pointed out some of the bigger buildings. The most striking was an enclosed arena that held thirty thousand people.

When Perrin heard that Shem had given frequent updates about the world there, and to packed audiences, he groaned.

“He probably even put on a one-man version of ‘The Midnight Ride of Perrin Shin,’” he murmured to Mahrree.

The arena, Yudit told them, also hosted combined congregation meetings, concerts, plays, and even debates. Mahrree smiled at that.

Another large building, three levels high, was one of the several surplus storage buildings in Salem. Yudit explained that whatever crops, goods, or supplies people in Salem had in excess was brought for those who needed them.

“Just how much can people here do without?” Perrin wondered. “All that the citizens of Edge would donate wouldn’t even fill my old bedroom wardrobe.”

There was also Salem’s university, with several sprawling buildings, and a huge library: a stone structure which held copies of every book Salem produced, as well as many from the world which Shem and others had brought home over the years. The most fantastic part was that anyone could borrow a book and return it later.

When Mahrree heard that, she thought she’d died and gone to Paradise. The library would be the first place she’d race to next week.

The seat of Salem’s government, however, was a surprisingly small building, not much larger than a house.

When Perrin asked why it was so small, Noch told him, “Because it’s needed only once a week, for a few hours. When people govern themselves, there’s little need for mediation. But when people won’t, someone bigger and meaner steps in to do it. Folks in the world are selfish and childish, so they need laws to dictate every little aspect of their lives. The more government there is, the less freedom people

have. We treasure our freedom.”

When Shem turned west to their new house, waving people still lined the road. He called back to the Shins, “Less than a mile down here, and you’ll be home!”

Mahrree didn’t realize she was holding her breath in anticipation, until Perrin whispered into her ear. “You’ll pass out before we even get there. Remember, it was just built. The wood won’t weather to a gray for several years yet.”

Startled, she whispered, “You remember?”

“The dreams of the most dangerous woman in the world are hard to forget,” he whispered back. “My original plan was to build your dream house near Terryp’s ruins. I wasn’t sure how to supply the garden you dreamed you were weeding, but I think Salem can do that for us. And I promise you, if this house doesn’t have window boxes, I’ll add some. Oh, now don’t start crying! You won’t be able to see it clearly.”

“I didn’t think you remembered!” she sobbed softly.

Her children, surprised at her tears, glanced at each other.

“After all this time, you still remember?” Mahrree murmured.

Perrin put his arm around her. “I’ll have to figure out how to fill it with children,” he said softly. “But even without The Drink, at forty-seven we’re not exactly young anymore, Mahrree.”

Peto poked his sister. “What are they talking about?”

Jaytsy shrugged. “I don’t know. I can’t hear them.”

“Shush!” said Deck, straining to eavesdrop on their conversation.

Mahrree grabbed her husband’s arm in sudden understanding. “Perrin,” she whispered. “Maybe the house wasn’t filled with our *children*. It was our—”

“Grandchildren?”

The word heated her completely, yet sent a chill down her arms. “Yes, that must be it! Perrin, *that’s it!*”

“So who’s going to tell the three behind us that they’ll produce a dozen children?” he whispered.

Perrin and Mahrree turned to look at the confused faces which were trying to figure out what their parents’ conversation was about.

Perrin and Mahrree exchanged a look.

Jaytsy sighed in frustration and Peto groaned.

Their parents burst out laughing.

“That can’t be a good sign,” said Peto.

“A few people might wave as we drive by.”

“I have got to start learning that stupid face game of theirs!” Jaytsy said, folding her arms.

But Deck shook his head. “I have a feeling this is one look we don’t want to know the meaning of.”

Perrin pointed at Deck. “It can wait a few years.”

He put his arm around Mahrree and they wiped their tears just in time to hear Shem announce, “There it is! Home!”

A row of tall trees along the road obscured their view for a moment, then as the wagon continued onward, there it was.

Mahrree gasped.

And flapped her arms as if being attacked by kissing bees.

She would have screamed if she remembered how to breathe.

She *did* jump up and down, though, on the bench until Perrin caught her before she tumbled out of the wagon.

It only needed window boxes.

The sun was hitting it at the correct angle, too, as they pulled up. The pine planking was yellow and pristine, but in a few years it would weather to a light gray. And there were mountains—such mountains!—exactly as in her dreams. The house sat at the end of the road on the edge of Salem, hills rising up behind it and growing into fantastic peaks. Mahrree already knew their curves from the glimpses she’d had over the years.

She was scarcely aware that Perrin helped her out of the wagon, but if he hadn’t, her awkward leaping from it probably would have landed her face-first into the dirt. Sobbing and laughing she rushed to the front yard and dropped to her knees, overwhelmed and overjoyed.

Behind her followed Perrin, chuckling and wiping his eyes.

But back in the wagon, everyone else watched, openmouthed.

Yudit and Shem exchanged questioning looks.

Jaytsy whispered, “She’s . . . gone . . . loopy!”

Yudit frowned in concern. “Usually people are *little excited* to get a new house, but . . . Shem? Is she all right?”

Shem only shook his head in astonishment as Mahrree clawed at her husband for his help to stand up so she could burst through the front door—yes, it was made out of oak!—to enter the house of her dreams.

It was simple in construction, well laid out, much larger than their home in Edge, and lacking for nothing.

Everyone else soon joined Mahrree in the large gathering room where she giggled and gasped and squealed and sighed. Together they

tested the *two* long sofas—plain, sturdy, yet beautiful—and marveled at the separate eating room with a well-crafted table and chairs that could seat a dozen people, then stared at the spacious kitchen with a large work table and numerous cabinets already stocked with dishes and food.

They wandered up the stairs to find three large furnished bedrooms—one for Peto, one temporarily for the Briters that would later be a study, and one for Mahrree and Perrin.

In their room Mahrree guffawed when she saw their bed: evidently Shem had sent the measurements of Perrin’s massive timber bed in Edge so that Salemites could make a similar one, complete with a down and straw mattress, and topped with blankets of carefully cut and pieced cloth, resulting in remarkable designs.

Mahrree marveled how ordinary cloth could become a work of art. Indeed, everything in the house, from their new clothes to the pattern engraved on their clay dishes, was artful in its simplicity.

The morning was spent in staring in wonder, touching furniture and books in gratitude, and marveling at the workmanship and generosity. They gazed out at their enormous piece of property, the ends of which The Cat was inspecting for mice, and were speechless.

Deckett was in tears when he realized the house next door, nearly identical in design and size to the Shins’, came with eighty acres leading up to the hillside and mountains beyond: Deck’s new ranch. When Guide Gleace had told him they would get him a ‘some cattle,’ he meant one hundred head, and Deck would travel next week to various ranches selecting his herd.

Jaytsy bounced, as much as she could without hurting herself, in delight to see the team of men working to complete her home. A large barn sat behind and between the two houses, and was ample enough for birthing cows and housing the two horses and wagon provided for both families’ use, with plenty of room for Clark.

As Mahrree gazed out onto her own back garden, Yudit explained. “Every family has garden space big enough to grow what they may need for the coming year. The farms and orchards surrounding the city grow grains, fruit and grapes, but most families like to raise their own produce, or have a few fruit trees, berries, and their own chickens. My sister Nan has a clutch of chicks she’s raising for your families to share. They’ll be here and ready to lay in a few weeks, right after you’ve finished planting.”

Jaytsy squeezed her arm. “Don’t worry, Mother. I know what to

“A few people might wave as we drive by.”

plant. Look—our gardens meet at that big boulder.”

“We initially thought we should try to drag that out of here,” Yudit gestured to the gray-white boulder taller than Perrin. “But when my husband climbed on top of it, he realized it was good for looking for missing children or wandering cattle. So we decided to leave it. Unless you’d like it moved?” A quality in her tone suggested that she hoped the answer would be ‘no,’ because it *was* an enormous rock.

Mahrree shook her head. “Not at all! I rather like it. It reminds me of the boulders we passed through to get here. So the boulder designates the boundaries between our properties?”

“Not exactly. You see, you don’t *own* this property.”

“Figures,” whispered a still slightly cynical Peto.

Yudit, whose large posterity had trained her to develop keen hearing to always be on top of whatever mischief they were concocting, heard him. “No one owns property here, Peto. Instead, recognize that this is the land to which you have been given stewardship. It is yours to maintain, to use, to care for, but never to own. None of us have a greater right than another to land. It’s the Creator’s. He shared it freely with us, so we share it freely with others.”

Peto nodded in meek agreement.

Yudit winked forgivingly. “Stewardships change, too. This used to be our father’s, but he quit cattle some years ago. Since then others have cared for this area by grazing animals here to make sure it wasn’t overrun by weeds. If you don’t want to be responsible for so much land, we’ll assign portions to someone else. Occasionally you may be asked to help care for someone else’s stewardship for a time. For example, we have a family in our congregation who just added triplets to their family. Only a year ago, they had twins.”

Mahrree gasped, and Jaytsy clutched her belly.

“Yep,” Yudit chuckled at their expressions. “Five babies, all under age two. Their farm is now the entire rectory’s stewardship, and the young parents have three assistants in their house at all times helping to care for the babies, milk the goats, and wash the changing cloths. Even families can become everyone’s stewardship, if needed.”

“That’s a lot of free help,” snapped Peto, and immediately looked like he regretted it.

“You think they won’t be ‘paid back,’ is it?” Yudit squinted.

Peto bobbed his head.

“Think about this, Peto: in fifteen years that family will have five teenagers who may be tasked to take care of an elderly couple’s farm

while the husband tends to his dying wife. He won't need to worry about anything but making her comfortable. They'll contribute back, in time. Just as you will." She raised an eyebrow at him.

He squished his lips into another apology.

"Freely given, freely shared," Mahrree marveled. "Just like it was at the beginning. What Guide Hierum died trying to preserve."

"It's amazing," said Perrin again. "All of it. The concept, the barn, the boulder, the house . . ." he gestured indiscriminately as he slowly turned to take it all in. "I'm nearly speechless."

"I knew you'd like it," Shem grinned. "That house down there," he pointed to a weathered house a few hundred paces down a wagon-tracked lane, "is my father's and, starting today, mine again as well. We're neighbors! A few years ago I suggested to Gleace that we set this land aside for you, and it's been waiting ever since. I thought you'd appreciate how the roads end here, for a bit of privacy. The unoccupied hillsides behind the Briters is perfect for grazing cattle."

Deck nodded. "I'll be able to see the cattle from the kitchen."

"That's why your house was built at an angle," Shem said.

"That was my idea," Yudit elbowed him. "When you sit on your front porches, both families will have views of the roads and of each other's front doors. That will come in handy when you're trying to see whose house the grandchildren are running to."

Jaytsy smiled. "You've thought of everything."

"We've been doing this for a while," Yudit said. "There's something else," she said, a little uncomfortably. She glanced at her brother who nodded for her to continue. "You see, Perrin and Mahrree, this isn't intended to be only *your* house. It's customary in Salem that when the parents see the last of their children marry and have a family, they step down into a smaller home, or have a smaller section built for them on the house. The large house is then passed on to . . ." She looked at Peto to see if he understood.

"On to who?" Peto asked.

Mahrree caught on. "It's a lovely idea! Why would the two of us need such a large home when it's only us? It makes sense to give the bigger space to the growing family." She beamed at Peto.

Peto looked at her in complete and worried confusion.

Perrin nodded. "I'll even make the addition when it's time."

"When it's time for what?!" Peto demanded.

Deck put an arm around him and squeezed his cheeks. "When it's time for *you* to be a papa."

“A few people might wave as we drive by.”

“Whoa! Whoa!” Peto said pulling out of Deck’s grip. “Who said anything about that?”

“Peto, we’re happy to keep this house for many more years,” Mahrree assured him. “No one’s in a rush.”

“That’s right!” He shook out his shoulders. “I need time to evaluate all the *practical women* around here.” A half smile came across his face. “Now that I look at this house properly as *my* future home, when it’s time, Mother, you and Father can have the barn.”

Jaytsy put her hands on her hips. “Peto, just how long have you been interested in *practical women*?”

“Uh . . . I don’t know. It just kind of snuck up on me.”

Shem pointed at him. “Remember, you promised once that you wouldn’t get married before me.”

“Well then,” Yudit said taking Mahrree by the arm, “we best get working on him.”

“I don’t need your help!” Shem said, now pointing at the giggling women. “Nor yours,” his finger was now directed dangerously at Perrin. “Nor any of yours,” he gestured at the others.

“Stay back, everyone,” Perrin said. “He’s an agitated man, and I’m unarmed.”

Shem held up his hands as the family laughed. “I just don’t need everyone jumping me, all right? I’ve been home less than one full day, and already two of my sisters have been trying to get me to meet some of their *friends*.”

“The most adventurous bachelor in Salem has finally returned for good. Shem, you better get used to meeting all kinds of new female *friends*,” his sister warned.

“And I *want* to meet them,” he promised her. “But at *my* own rate and in my own way, all right? *All right?*”

“Once you’re settled,” Yudit nudged Mahrree, “we’ll get to work on him.”

Chapter 12--“So does everyone know us?”

They weren't going to get settled that first day, because, as Yudit had predicted, a *few* people stopped by. After Shem had gone home, and Yudit and Noch went next door to help with Jaytsy and Deck's house, Mahrree had hoped for a few quiet minutes to lock herself in her new pantry to tell the Creator that she *finally* understood what He'd been trying to show her for so many years, and that she was overwhelmed by the enormity of His gift. That she ever entertained the thought of being mistress of the mansion in Idumea seemed preposterous compared to the beautiful valley, tall wood home, and enormous gardens they had today.

But the Creator wasn't finished yet. Soon after the Zenoses left, Salemmites streamed to the house by the dozens. Mahrree met teachers, Jaytsy met new mothers, Deck met ranchers, and Peto met new foods in the eating room where everyone dropped off something for the family to 'get by on.' They had enough that half of Edge could 'get by' for several days. Peto sat happily at the broad table sampling Salem's cooking. His newest favorite was a kind of cake made out of a soft cheese.

"Shem was right," he said after another helping loaded with preserved berries, "this place *is* Paradise."

Perrin spent the day meeting people who had passed through Edge on their way to Salem. He even became acquainted with the family from Quake, the couple with two little boys that Fadh's wife had mourned over just before the attack on Moorland.

"She was the only person who greeted us when we moved in at Quake," the mother said. "The only one who showed any interest in us. I feel awful that she mourned our loss. We even named our daughter after her. I hope someday she might know we're fine."

Perrin only nodded, knowing Mrs. Fadh would likely never know that a little girl in Salem was named Shaleea.

The visitors poured in all day with welcomes and thanks and stories about how they left the world. An older man who was friends with Yordin’s grandparents verified Jothan’s story. King Querul the Third had been threatening Gari Yordin’s grandfather, and was just days away from stealing young Gari to hold him hostage until his grandfather figured out what metals would blend into gold. The elder Yordins vanished to Salem just in time.

Over the years they had received updates from scouts about their family. When Gari went to Command School, his grandfather was furious to realize his grandson would be pledging allegiance to the son of the king he escaped. But he was also proud of his grandson’s accomplishments, and just before Grandfather Yordin passed away, he learned about Gari being appointed as commander of the fort at Mountseen.

Perrin also met men who had served under Pere and Relf Shin. He asked them to write down their memories so he could compile them for the generals’ descendants. When Perrin and Mahrree stood on their wide front porch waving goodbye to a great-grandfather who worked for the garrison’s surgeon when Perrin was eleven—and helped set Perrin’s finger that he dislocated after he jumped off the garrison wall trying to make a point to a young Versula Cush—Perrin whispered, “I feel like I’m at a reunion for a family we didn’t know we had. Amazing!”

Even Rector Yung dropped by with a very apologetic Rector Chame who, once more, told Perrin how sorry he was for causing that wagon jam in Edge before the offensive at Moorland.

But Yung, his eyes twinkling merrily, hugged Perrin and said, “I told you we would meet again sometime. See why I was traveling light when I stopped by to say farewell? Everything I need is here!”

Mahrree teared up as he approached her. “Mrs. Shin, I have something to say to you. ‘There will be a day when you *will* be ready to leave it all behind and embrace the truth. Until then, think of this night never again. Should your mind ever find itself surprised by this memory . . .’”

Mahrree laughed through her tears as she hugged their rector. “To think, I met your wife all those years ago.”

Rector Yung chuckled as he pulled out of her embrace. “I memorized her speech for you. She gave me a copy the morning after she met you. I think she knew—” he stopped to clear his throat. In a softer voice he said, “I think she knew she’d be watching this development

from the other side. But she knows you're here," he said with tears in his eyes. "And she's thrilled you made it to Salem! The reunion that she and Dormin must be having . . . I like to think they're over there at that boulder, chatting and laughing and watching us—"

Neither Mahrree nor Rector Yung could speak anymore. They just put their arms around each other and wept in joyful misery.

"So does everyone know us?" Peto asked later that day, breaking away from the table to watch his family wave goodbye to yet another man whose grandfather served under General Pere Shin. Peto chewed on a chicken leg, not noticing the young mother who was talking with his sister.

"Yes, as a matter of fact, we do," she said. She was in her late twenties and had two quiet children holding on to her cotton skirt. "You are Peto, and you love to eat."

"Well, that was easy to guess," Peto said, unimpressed as he tore off another piece of meat from the bone.

"My name's Anne, and it's also right here." She pulled a piece of thin folded paper from her skirt pocket. "Yesterday's news update. All of you are in it."

Perrin groaned. "Let me see that, please. I had a suspicion." He took the paper from Anne, unfolded it, and his family huddled around to read. It was an unusual document, with yesterday's date on the top, and several columns of information below. In prominence was, "Shin Family Escapes to Salem—Arrival in the Morning."

"What exactly is this?" Mahrree asked.

"Newspaper," Anne said. "My husband is working on tomorrow's edition, or he'd be here to meet you. He was hoping he could schedule some time to do a proper interview?"

The Shins shrugged in reluctant agreement, unsure of what that meant but not feeling they should disappoint anyone today.

"He'll come by to ask you questions," Anne explained. "This is how we get news to everyone in Salem. Don't worry—every refugee from the world is interviewed."

Perrin was shaking his head. "This makes us sound like some kind of . . . *heroes* or something."

"You are," said Anne. "Everyone who escapes from the world is. But Mr. Shin, your family means everything to Salem." Her voice quieted, and Perrin looked up from the paper to see why. "We've known your trials over the years, and what you've done for us, too, albeit unintentionally. And we know what you will become for us."

“So does everyone know us?”

Perrin squinted suspiciously.

Anne continued. “We’ve even prayed for your family, and when you resigned from the army, all of Salem fasted for you to ask the Creator to keep you and your family safe from the Administrators.”

Perrin swallowed and looked down at the newspaper. There was an update about improving sheep health that seemed interesting.

“Fasted?” Peto said. “Shem mentioned he did that, too.”

Anne nodded. “We all went without food while we prayed for all of you, for a full day and night.”

Peto guiltily analyzed the chicken leg in his hands.

“But don’t worry, we’re not fasting today,” Anne assured him.

“Glad to hear it,” Deck said, as uncomfortable as Perrin, and equally as grateful. “Thank you.”

“Yes,” Mahrree whispered. “Maybe your husband can write that for the paper? That we’re overwhelmed with all you’ve done for us?”

Perrin cleared his throat in agreement.

“I’ll make sure it gets in,” she promised. “While he writes the column, I’m the local editor. Nothing gets printed from our section of Salem until I approve it. Then it goes to be typeset.”

Perrin looked closer at the paper. “This isn’t woodcut? Of course not,” he answered his own question.

“We have thousands of letters and even short words already set in lead, which holds up much longer than the woodcuts used in the world,” Anne explained. “We have typesetters who can lay out a sheet of news quite quickly. Then we ink the letters, press down the paper, and distribute to Salem three times a week. You may keep that copy, if you wish. We have all the back copies bound in the library. You can read what we printed about you in the past.”

Jaytsy giggled at the pained expressions on her parents. “You mean there’s more about us?”

Anne nodded, almost apologetically. “You’ve become our best story. If you don’t want that copy, turn it back to the news deliverer when she drops off the next one. We shred the old copies into new pulp and into newspapers again.”

Perrin turned over the paper in his hands. “So this has been around before?”

“Segments of that paper may have been around for years,” Anne told him. “Since when we first began to write about the Shin family.”

Perrin just rubbed his forehead.

Once the press of visitors died down, Mahrree finally paid attention to a man she'd noticed hanging around for the past several hours, usually sitting under a tree, and with a stack of papers and a box of charcoal. Frequently visitors stopped to talk to him, stood in front of him for a few minutes, then went on their way.

Perrin had been eyeing him too, and before he could march over to find out what the man was up to, he had gathered his supplies and came up to their porch.

"It seems it's now my turn to introduce myself. My name's Davinch, and I'm a portrait artist."

Perrin folded his arms. "A what?"

But Davinch was already making his way to their sofas, since the table was full of food, and he laid out the pages.

"Oh . . . my," was all Mahrree could say to the striking images that fairly leaped at them.

"That's me!" Peto exclaimed as he examined a sketch of him sitting at the table and happily gorging himself. "So that was you peering through the windows?"

Davinch chuckled. "I try to draw people in action. We want to help you commemorate your first day in Salem, so one of us in our artists' group spends the day drawing those who come visit you, as well as your reactions."

Perrin gingerly picked up a larger, detailed picture of him and Mahrree standing on the porch. She was cheerfully waving to someone, and he had his arm around her.

And he was smiling, Mahrree noted. His real smile, not The Dinner smile or any other practiced turn of his mouth. His real, devastating smile which, even on the page, made her knees go weak.

"That's my favorite," Davinch said. "I'll be taking that back with me for a few weeks so I can reference it for a painting."

Perrin looked up, surprised. "A painting?"

"I know in the world paintings are for only the wealthiest or highest ranked, but here in Salem everyone has a painting of themselves, often at different ages, for the walls." Davinch gestured to theirs. "Look a bit bare, don't they? All of these are yours," he nodded to a drawing Jaytsy was holding which showed her and Deck surveying their new lands. "But if you don't mind, I'll bring them to my brother who's a framer, first. We don't want the charcoal to smear."

"A framer?" Deck asked, looking at a sketch of him talking with Boskos Zenos, who had dropped by to show Deck around the ranch.

“So does everyone know us?”

“You’ll see,” Davinch assured them. “You’ll have them all back in a few days.”

“Remarkable,” Mahrree breathed, admiring a hasty yet lifelike sketch of Perrin chatting with a couple while Mahrree was shaking hands with their new rector. “How do you do this?”

“It’s a gift,” he said humbly. “One which I spend hours each day improving. I’ll do a painting of each of you—”

“This one,” Perrin said, picking up another of Peto. “But without him ready to shove that pie into his face? Can you do that?”

Davinch nodded at the detailed drawing of Peto sitting on the front porch railing. “Not a problem.”

“Good,” Perrin said, grinning. “These are excellent. Did you know there was a portrait of my grandfather down in Idumea? But the proportions were a bit off.”

“Was he more slender?” Mahrree asked.

“Oh, no. Not one bit. The only thing that artist got right were his eyes. But these? I feel like I’m looking into a mirror that reflects only blacks and whites.”

Davinch blushed with modest pride. “Then you’ll love the full color paintings even more. Mr. and Mrs. Briter? Which one do you want as a painting of you two? And Mrs. Briter, it’s up to you if you want your full belly in it or not.”

Jaytsy decided on a portrait from the shoulders up, and Davinch agreed to come back in several moons to do a drawing of their baby. He labeled the dozens of drawings he’d made with the names of those who had visited, then carefully gathered them back to bring them to his brother’s for framing, whatever that meant.

There was another visitor waiting on their front porch, with a broad grin focused on Mahrree. “You’re the woman I’ve been eager to meet for many years!” he exclaimed as he walked into the house.

Mahrree was taken aback. So far most everyone had wanted to meet her husband.

Perrin watched the man, about his age, who gazed fondly upon his wife. Tucked under his arm was a large bound book.

Mahrree eyed it as he held it out to her.

“Is this what I think it is?” Mahrree asked, hoping it was a new edition of *The Writings*.

“Probably not,” the man said. “Allow me to introduce myself. I’m Professor Kopersee, and I’m the director of World History at the

university. And this,” he waved the book, “is a pathetic and incomplete piece of writing, authored by yours truly. I do my best to cobble together what we know of the world into some kind of text for our students. But you, my *dear Mrs. Shin*—”

It was only because his ardor was so wholly academic that Perrin silently sniggered instead of becoming worried that this balding, portly man was after his wife.

“—you, YOU lived it all! Shem told me of your library loaded with history books, and that there was no one who knew the world like you do. And so I’m here to ask you—no, to plead with you: will you write our next history text?”

The man swayed, as if he were about to fall to his knees right there in front of her, and Mahrree chuckled nervously at his earnestness, until he added, “My wife won’t let me back into the house until you agree. She doesn’t want me trying to write another book. Ever.”

Mahrree laughed. “Well, of course! I mean, I’ll try my best, but I doubt my version of history will be too objective. At the end, *we* created the history.”

“The most compelling versions of history must come from the victims of it,” Professor Kopersee declared. “Don’t you think?”

Mahrree shrugged and held her hands out for the text. “May I see what you’ve already put together?”

“Of course. Everything from Chapters 10 to 23 is my rubbish. Before that is history that we believe is fairly accurate, from when our ancestors were still in the world.”

Mahrree thumbed through the pages. “Salem! The beginning of it! Now there’s something I know nothing about.”

“You don’t?” Kopersee said. “That’s right, you were given the brief, ‘You’re coming to Salem tomorrow’ lecture. You probably don’t even know what Salem means.”

Perrin frowned. “What Salem *means*? I thought it was just a name Guide Pax came up with.”

Kopersee grinned. “Not at all. Salem is an acronym.”

“A what?”

“You know, taking a string of words and reducing it to a representative word? Originally it was a code. ‘Salem’ was one of several words we devised, back when King Querul was on the hunt for the followers of The Writings—”

“Wait a minute,” Perrin said. “Querul actively hunted followers of The Writings?”

“So does everyone know us?”

“Of course,” Kopersee said. “Why do you think our ancestors ran away? That’ll be your first reading assignment, Mr. Shin. I’ll write you up a study plan.” Ignoring Perrin’s astonished expression that he’d just been given homework, Kopersee went on. “I’ll give you the abbreviated version. Querul and Pax had been arguing. Pax tried to convince Querul that the Great War was primarily Querul’s fault, and Pax wanted nothing more to do with him. Querul knew Pax wanted to leave the world, and take his followers with him, but Querul couldn’t allow so many people to leave. Who’d be his laborers if part of the population up and left?”

“So Pax started sending out scouts in secret, looking for ways to leave the world to somewhere Querul would never find them. Pax and his twelve assistants had a few theories where they could go, and created codes for those places. The code for Salem was, Safety Assured Leaving East of Medicetti.”

Perrin scowled. “East? But we went north! And who was Medicetti? And *your* ancestors came up with the first codes? We thought it was Querul, and then the Guarders!”

Kopersee grinned. “You’ll love Chapter 9, Mr. Shin. Write up a summary for me, and I can check it next week to make sure you didn’t miss anything good. Anyway,” he turned back to Mahrree who tried to keep a straight face. “There were four routes suggested. To Terry’s land in the west, to the far southwest, to the east on the sea, and to the north,” he nodded to Perrin. “In case there were any spies among Pax’s followers, Pax mixed up the codes even more. He shifted direction headings, so that north became east. Anyone reading ‘east’ would know that he really meant ‘north,’ and ‘north’ became ‘west’ and so forth—”

Mahrree knew the first person who would read the chapter would be her, because Kopersee was obviously skipping details.

“—Pax also scrambled up the names of the areas he suggested fleeing to. He suspected that behind Mt. Deceit would be a good area, so he scrambled up its letters to become Medicetti.”

“No, no, no,” Perrin said. “I know a bit about history as well, and Mt. Deceit didn’t get its name until *after* Querul ‘lost’ Pax in there. It was called Deceit because Pax was betrayed and *deceived* there by his men who killed him . . .”

Perrin’s voice trailed off as he realized that the history he knew had been heavily influenced by Querul.

“Just never mind,” he added. “I don’t know what to believe anymore. Maybe I should read Chapter 8 as well?”

“You should. That’s where you’ll learn that Deceit was given that name a few decades *before* the Great War, when it rumbled and spewed out smoke and ash for a few days. Everyone started saying that for a mountain, it was deceitful. Begin with Chapter 7, though, Mr. Shin.”

Perrin dutifully nodded.

“So,” Kopersee turned back to Mahrree, “word went out among our people, along with portions of the reward gold Querul had given his guards who had ‘killed’ Pax, not realizing that those same guards were followers who had saved Pax, not eliminated him for Querul as he had insisted—”

Mahrree wondered if Kopersee’s book was as clipped and rapid as the man who authored it.

“—now it was those guards, remember, who slipped out among the world in secret, passing along the code to those ready to follow Pax. And all they said, as they handed over slips of gold to allow them to buy supplies, was *Salem*.”

“Did Querul never catch on to the code word?” Perrin wondered, and immediately regretted opening his mouth.

Kopersee tapped the book again. “In Chapter 9, sir. Quiz next week. But yes, he did, near the end. He sent soldiers to every eastern village looking for someone named Medicetti. Even had soldiers poking around Edge for a while which, for some families, was a trailhead to Salem. But most everyone slipped out by Moorland or above Sands in the west. Soldiers made lists of everyone’s names, looking for Medicetti. That’s when people started changing their names, especially those whose families had already fled to Salem. Lopped off a few letters at the beginning or the end—”

“Wait, people changed their names?” Perrin asked, then nodded. “I know—read Chapter 9, summary and quiz to follow.”

“—quiz to follow, yes. Of course they did,” Kopersee said. “Many in the world have last names that are shorter than they originally were. And I doubt any of them know that. Querul took all of the family lines, you know, claiming to want to combine and distribute them, but he was really just trying to destroy their history. Then he could create his own. *His*-story, if you will. He who controls the world controls its perception of it.” He grinned. “That was my preface to the latest edition.” The grin faded. “A little trite, though, now that

“So does everyone know us?”

I hear it out loud. Mrs. Shin? Please help?”

“Will I be quizzed on all of this?” she tried not to smile.

“Of course not. I trust *you* completely.”

Perrin cleared his throat, offended, but bursting with a question. “But the letters in Mt. Deceit—they don’t add up to create ‘Medicetti.’ There’s an extra ‘i’.”

Kopersee regarded him with renewed interest. “So you’re more than just a blustering officer? You’ve got some brains, too, do you?”

Behind his father, Peto was covering his mouth in an attempt to muffle his laughter.

“You’re correct, sir,” Kopersee said. “Does that happen often for you? Pax added the extra ‘i’ just in case Querul figured out it was a code and tried to decipher it. Throw in extra letters for extra confusion.”

He turned to Mahrree. “Here’s my office number at the university,” he handed her a slip of paper, “and please let me know how I can help. We should begin planning your writing schedule, and—”

As much as Mahrree wanted to write the history, planning it on the first day in Salem was more than she was ready for.

She was thrilled to spy a teenage boy at the open door, knocking on the frame and saying, “Excuse me, but I’ve been sent to fetch the Shin and Briter families. My great-grandma Gleace is almost finished making dinner.”

Professor Kopersee enthusiastically shook all of their hands. “My cue to head home. Mrs. Shin, I’ll be in contact. Mr. Shin, Chapter 9,” he reminded Perrin.

“What about the rest of my family,” he said, only half in jest. “Don’t they get a homework assignment?”

The professor shrugged. “Sure, if they want it, but it’s *you*, sir, who most needs these chapters.”

Ignoring the chuckling of his family, Perrin asked, “Why me?”

“Because of who you are, sir!” Kopersee declared. He nodded a farewell to Mahrree, and as he headed out the door he called, “And welcome to Salem, where your safety is assured! With an extra ‘I!’”

“Well, how do you like that!” Perrin exclaimed as the man trotted to the road. “*Because of who I am?* What’s that supposed to mean?”

Gleace’s great-grandson said, “Did he assign you an essay?”

“No, but a summary and a quiz.”

“You got off pretty easy then, Mr. Shin. But I’ve heard from my aunt that his quizzes are tough, so take notes.”

Ignoring Perrin's scoff, Mahrree turned to the Gleace's great-grandson. "How should we dress for dinner?"

He frowned at the question as if it were the strangest thing he'd heard in years. "Probably in clothes?"

Mahrree chuckled. "Sorry, but in the world having dinner with someone important requires a change of clothing."

The boy's frown deepened. "Why?"

"Good question!" Peto said.

"Maybe we should change out of our breeches?" Jaysy said.

"Do you have cow muck on you?" the boy wondered. "Granny Gleace doesn't like people smelling like cow muck at the table."

"Neither do I," Jaysy chuckled. "No muck, but I'll feel better in a clean skirt."

She and Mahrree headed upstairs, and Mahrree remembered The Dinner, and how none of her new plain clothing would have been worthy of even the stables—

That's when she realized she hadn't even noticed what their visitors wore that day, because she noticed the people, not their clothes.

As the Briters and Shins walked with the Gleace's great-grandson to a property a mile and a half to the southwest, Mahrree surveyed the neighborhoods, expecting to come closer to an area of splendor, akin to the mansion district of Idumea. The Creator's Guide surely would live in the grandest home, in keeping with his position: the Creator's Chairman, so to speak, with his own set of twelve administrators, called Assistants.

After a mile she realized that every neighborhood was the same: large gardens with ample space around homes, all kept in good repair. No house was impoverished, or even a bit disheveled like their place in Edge. Perhaps those were in a different section of Salem—

Or perhaps, the thought struck her, they didn't exist at all.

Mahrree didn't have time to ponder that because their guide for the guide announced their arrival.

But . . . *no*. Surely, not *that*—

Between two ranches with sprawling houses sat a tiny cottage.

The young man bid them farewell and headed to one of the houses, and the Shins and Briters hesitantly continued on to the tidy little house.

The plain door flew open, and warmth poured out.

"Welcome, welcome!" cried Mrs. Gleace. Her white hair was pulled into a loose bun and she wore a pale yellow dress, looking like

sunshine personified. “You have no idea how long we’ve waited for you! I mean, not tonight of course, but for these past many years.” Her eyes were as kind as her husband’s, and she caught Mahrree in a hug. “I can’t believe I’m able to finally greet Mrs. Shin herself.”

“It’s Mahrree, please.”

Mrs. Gleace turned to Perrin with the playful expression of one who was going to get her way, even if she had to sweetly guilt someone into it. “I suspect you’re not one for being hugged by strangers, but may I anyway? I feel like you’re my long lost son.”

Perrin was too smart to say anything else but, “How can I possibly say no to that?”

She was hugging Peto, after Jaytsy and Deck, when Guide Gleace came to the door, wiping his hands on a cloth as if he had just changed and washed up. Considering his occupation, Mahrree was sure he’d been smelling like cow muck quite recently.

“Dearest, these poor people will starve before you finish telling them how happy you are they arrived.”

“No chance of that, sir,” Peto said, “this place has kept us well stocked.”

“True. One thing you won’t do in Salem is starve,” the guide smiled as he led them into the gathering room.

If it were big enough to be called a room. Mahrree was struck by how the cheery house was just the right size for two people.

Hycymum Peto would have had a difficult time living here, Mahrree thought with a brief and sad smile.

“I understand many houses in the world are far larger,” Mrs. Gleace explained as she saw Mahrree take in her surroundings: four rooms and little else. “But we don’t need things that just sit and do nothing. If we keep our home small, we keep our desires small as well. If I have a dozen people to dinner, I use my daughter’s eating room instead,” she gestured in the direction of one of the houses they passed. “It may take a little getting used to, our simpler way of life,” she continued. “But in time you’ll find it easier. I imagine this house seems quite dull compared to, well, you see, we’ve heard about the High General’s mansion—”

“Which I gladly turned down,” Perrin said to her. “No man should live like a king. And that’s what it was: a house for a king.”

“*Actually*,” Peto began with a smirk, “it was originally a house for the king’s mistress—”

“Not now, Peto!” Mahrree cut him off.

Mrs. Gleace wasn't as shocked as Mahrree feared she would be. "I know about *that* as well," she nodded. "His mistress was a dreadful woman," she said to Peto in a loud whisper. "One of our scouts worked in the stables before she left Oren. He said she was mean-spirited and looked something like this," and Mrs. Gleace pulled a face that made Peto laugh.

Mahrree was impressed. Very few older women in the world would care about making a teenage boy feel comfortable.

"And Dormin agreed," Mrs. Gleace said, her voice twinged with remorse. "He said his mother wasn't the most pleasant creature. I'm sure he's making peace with her now. I'm sure he's doing all kinds of wonderful things in Paradise."

"He is," Guide Gleace said in the silence that followed, and it seemed to Mahrree that he knew that for a fact.

"We've had people in Idumea for a long time," Guide Gleace explained, gently shifting the topic to lift the mood. "Working in the stables, in the kitchens, as servants, and midwives, and recorders—'invisible' people hear many things. A few had been in the mansion, before and after the king's *acquaintances*."

"Any that I might have met?" Perrin asked.

"Perhaps. We had two working at the mansion when your parents first moved in. But then the excitement shifted to the new Administrative Headquarters, and we pulled them out to work there instead."

"Amazing," Perrin whispered for maybe the fifty-seventh time that day.

"While the mansion was beautiful and grand, I don't know that I ever would have been comfortable in it," Mahrree said. "We were accustomed to our little house. We had the opportunity to buy something bigger, but it never felt right. Maybe because we always felt the need to rebel against whatever anyone told us we should do."

Her husband winked at her in agreement.

"But Mrs. Gleace," Mahrree said, "I must admit that two nights ago I shed a few tears about all that I was leaving behind. But now that it *is* behind, I'm already forgetting what I was sure I could never live without."

"See?" the guide said, "You do belong here. Leaving behind the world was no sacrifice at all. You'll wish you could have done it sooner. Now, speaking of doing things sooner, let's eat. You may be filled, Mr. Peto, but I've been delivering calves since this morning, and calves don't care what time a man gets hungry."

“So does everyone know us?”

“He’s just a regular man, isn’t he?” Jaytsy whispered to her mother as they followed them to their small eating room. “Hew Gleace? Except when I look in his eyes. There’s definitely something more going on in there.”

The guide gestured for them to take their seats, but he caught Peto by the shoulder. “I just want you to know, young Mr. Shin,” he said quietly, “that I’m ready for you.”

Startled, Peto said, “I’m sorry, what?”

“You have a lot of questions, and you’re the kind of person who wants to push something as far as he can. Well, I hereby give you permission to do so. Throw at me all you’ve got. I’m ready.” Gleace smiled and waggled his eyebrows.

Peto glanced worriedly at his parents, who were sitting down and wondering why he wasn’t. “Did Shem or Jothan warn you about me?” he whispered.

“I haven’t spoken to either of them since last night.”

“So . . . who—”

“I just know your type,” Gleace said, giving his arm a friendly squeeze before releasing him. “I’ve been doing this for many years.”

Peto chanced a smile.

“So don’t disappoint me, Peto.”

“Well, then, I won’t, sir!”

Gleace took his seat. “Because it was the Creator who warned me about you,” he said casually.

Peto nearly fell off his chair.

Chapter 13--“Everything has been given to us freely.”

The only thing “fancy” in the Gleaces’ eating room was a massive painting of their family. Mahrree gasped when she noticed it, taking up nearly an entire wall.

“So we’re always eating with the family,” Mrs. Gleace explained as the Shins and Briters stared at the shockingly lifelike portrait.

“That was done by Raffie,” Guide Gleace told them. “I understand one from her portrait group was at your place today? Davinch?”

“Yes,” murmured Perrin, his eyes bouncing from one smiling face to another. “How many in your family?”

Guide Gleace looked at his wife, apologetically, for the number.

“Sixty-two total. But only fifty-four are there. That’s why we have additional portraits on the sides—the latest babies.”

“Amazing!”

Mahrree noticed Peto looking at the younger women in the painting. “She seems *practical* . . .” he whispered.

The dinner was simple—chicken, vegetables, and rolls—and most satisfying, just like everything else in Salem, Mahrree decided. But as they ate, Mahrree felt as if dozens of painted people behind her were watching.

While the Gleaces may have seemed to be ‘regular people,’ there was a gentle power that came from them which was anything but regular. Mahrree often felt as if she were looking into the eyes of the Creator Himself as the guide listened earnestly to Peto’s description of kickball, offered advice to Deck on selecting cattle to start his herd, chuckled at Jaytsy’s explanation of her mother’s first attempt to garden, and laughed at hearing how Perrin became a cat owner. He paid full attention to each of them, as if no one else existed, and what they had to say was the most important thing ever.

“Everything has been given to us freely.”

Mahrree knew there were some people who envisioned the Creator as a great and terrible Being, full of impatient vengeance for the fallibility of His creations.

But Mahrree had always pictured someone else: a perfect Father who wanted to make sure His children knew they were loved and cared about. Only a man close to the Creator could reflect the Creator’s love. Gleace was as near a perfect mirror as any mortal man could be.

And his wife, as she heaped upon them more food and more questions, was as perfect a match. The Shins asked them all kinds of questions about Salem, and the Gleaces were happy to explain.

“We feel badly you’ve had so little time to prepare for our way of life,” Guide Gleace said. “Usually we work with newcomers for several weeks first. That was to have been Shem’s duty, but he was shoveling stalls in Idumea instead. When I knew you were in danger, we had no other choice but to take you immediately.”

Gleace continued, “You see, our idea of why we’re here is different than the world’s. We take care of the necessities such as food, clothing, and housing with as little attention as necessary so that we can get on with the real purpose of life—learning, thinking, and developing our talents. We’re supposed to be enjoying this glorious sphere, not exploiting it. And we’re to prepare ourselves to return to the Creator.

“But in the world everyone is absorbed with the basics. They want more food, more clothing, more housing, and more things to fill their lives with nothing important. Rarely do they discover the real purpose of their lives.”

His dinner guests stared blankly at him.

Guide Gleace smiled in understanding. “Forgive me. I tend to dump too much hay on the calves. Let’s start with how everything began for us. You may not realize this, but the word Salem is what we call an acronym—”

“Oh, we just learned that,” Mahrree chuckled as Perrin’s ears turned red. “Professor Kopersee dropped by.”

“Already?” Gleace exclaimed. “I told him to give you at least a week! I’m sorry. As you likely could tell, he’s a very impatient person without a good sense of timing.”

“And he already gave Father a homework assignment,” Peto chuckled.

The Gleaces exchanged knowing looks.

“Again, my apologies,” Gleace said. “Well, so you know that part, but did he tell you about what happened when the first families came to Salem? Good. I get to tell you. As you know, Pax came to this valley first, with one of his assistants and a guard who used to work for Querul. Pax realized this valley would be perfect for a new home, and sent his guard back to get the word out about Salem.

“Within a week the first four families arrived with only the clothes on their backs and a couple days of food in their packs. One man had a hatchet, and one woman had a butcher knife. And that was all this group of now twenty-one had for survival. Fortunately, it was Planting Season, so the weather was moderate, but it was clear that food and shelter were the priorities. Using the one hatchet, the men took turns chopping down trees to make a covered shelter for everyone to share, and using the one knife, the women butchered pheasants and dug up roots for meals. Within the next few weeks, more and more refugees poured into the valley, some more prepared than others. Someone brought a shovel, another a pick axe, someone else a sewing kit, and so on. But since nearly everyone was literally running away, no one could take with them more than they could carry.

“By early Weeding Season, there were over two thousand refugees here, all needing shelter, food, and clothing. By sharing those few tools and implements, crude long houses were built with several families sharing sections of them, and every meal prepared was for the entire community to eat. Everyone contributed as they could.

“As the last of the refugees made their way to Salem, a few families with great forethought arrived, carrying bags of wheat, corn, and oats, and pockets full of seeds for vegetable gardens, cotton, and flax. They arrived just in time to plant it all, and the Creator was generous in holding back the first snows so that the crops could be gathered in before their first long Snowing Season together.”

“It hadn’t occurred to me before,” said Mahrree, “that they had to do everything from scratch.”

“Nor had it occurred to many of them, either,” Gleace agreed. “It was a struggle, those first few moons. But by the time Snowing Season came, there were nearly three thousand people here, and they had developed a system.

“This is the part of the story that tends to disappoint newcomers. They expect to hear about a terrible season, about raging snows and near-to-starving conditions, and grief and sorrow, but . . .” Gleace held up his hands. “They actually had a wonderful Snowing Season,

“Everything has been given to us freely.”

I’m happy to report.

“You see, they discovered they had a marvelous diversity of talent, skill, labor, and creativity. There was no problem all of them together couldn’t solve. There was no need that went unfulfilled.

“For example, two men were trappers. They taught a dozen more how to set traps, and together they were able to collect enough animals for meat that season. There were a handful of refugees who knew how to turn pelts into coats. They taught a dozen others, and by mid-Snowing Season, everyone had enough furs to keep them warm.

“Every skill was shared freely, and everyone pitched in to save their friends and families from freezing and starving. There were even several musicians who fashioned simple instruments and put on shows for everyone each night before bed. When you read their journals, those early refugees write about the easiness of the days, the joys of working together, the entertainment of the evenings, and the satisfaction they felt with simple yet full lives.

“When Planting Season came around again, and it was time to start building individual houses and gardens, Pax made a recommendation that they would not resort to the ways of the world, each person or family struggling on their own. He asked them to remember how easy and delightful their lives had been by sharing in each other’s labors and burdens, and that they continue.

“Everyone agreed. Houses were built by large groups of highly organized laborers, and were completed often in just a week’s time. Orchards and fields of grain were planted, directed by experienced farmers sharing their talents with everyone else.

“Every last Salemite helped build the granary, the saw mills, and when it was time to establish the forge, everyone went into the mountains looking for sources of ore. They also found gold and silver, but they used those metals for only one purpose. A few refugees snuck back to the world and, under assumed names, they purchased sheep, cattle, pigs, chickens, and a few horses. They brought them back to Salem where everyone shared in taking care of them.

“That’s the only way we use the gold and silver we find when we mine the ore: to purchase animals from the world. No, we don’t steal them like the Guarders used to, but we had to smuggle them into the forests like they did. And Perrin, I have to say we didn’t appreciate you building that cattle fence at the edge of the forest many years ago. Gave us as many problems as it did thieving Guarders.”

Everyone laughed as Perrin said, “I’m genuinely sorry about

that. So you don't use gold or silver here in Salem?"

"We have some, in an unlocked box in the scouts' office, because occasionally they need it in the world, but here? No, we don't buy or sell anything."

"Nothing? At all?"

"Nothing," Gleace grinned. "At all! You see, *no one wanted to*. Everyone could see, as clearly as Pax, that sharing was better. No one starved, no one was without shelter, and no one was without clothing. Everyone was taken care of. Everyone was also expected to work, according to their ability and health, and no one was considered better or worse than someone else. Everyone acted as a family, exactly the way the Creator had established for us at the very beginning.

"Naturally questions needed to be settled as to how much each family or person needed, and there was some discussion as to what was considered fair. Eventually they concluded that each person should have a week's worth of clothing, every family should have a house big enough that no more than two children needed to share a bedroom, and everyone should try to produce extra of what they could: food, blankets, clothing, plows, hammers, whatever. And those items would then be placed in a large storehouse for whomever needed it. Rectors over each congregation would help decide amounts required in each family, according to the guidelines, and then whoever needed a new pair of trousers, or pillows, or a pot, could just go to the storehouse and take it."

"Just take it?" Peto exclaimed. "Like, say I wanted a new pocketknife—"

"You have a new pocketknife," Gleace said knowingly. "It's part of your requisition order for new families, as a teenage boy." He glanced over at Mahrree. "Sorry. Just easier that way, boys being boys. If he were female, he would have been given two hats. Or a knife. Girls like pocketknives, too—"

"But Guide," Peto persisted, in a tone of friendly argument, "if I wanted a *new* knife—"

Gleace sat back with a smile on his face. "I told you earlier that I'm ready for you, so show me your damaged one first."

"Let's say that I lost it."

"Can your parents verify that you lost it?"

"I don't want them to know."

"Honesty is of first and foremost importance in Salem, Peto. Be honest with others, and primarily with yourself. Where's your knife?"

“Everything has been given to us freely.”

“So what you’re saying is,” Peto evaded his question, “I can’t just saunter in and take off the shelf whatever I want.”

“No, you can’t. If, however, you have a need—an honest need that your rector or parents can verify—then yes, you can go to one of the many storehouses in Salem, tell the attendant on duty, and they will help you acquire a new pocketknife.”

Peto tilted his head. “And it really works like that?”

“It really works like that. Just to make me happy, Peto, show me your new knife.”

Peto grinned and pulled it out.

“I want a knife,” Perrin murmured to Mahrree. “Where’d he find that?”

“In my drawer,” Peto said, sliding it back into his trousers’ pocket. “Did you check your drawers?”

Gleace chuckled. “Perrin, you have a knife. Not as impressive as the long knife you left in Edge, but serviceable.”

“Thank you. I’ll be sure to look when we get home. But I have to confess,” Perrin said, “all of this seems a bit too good to be true. Everyone agrees to this?”

“No,” Gleace said simply. “There’s a period of adjustment for those who join us. It takes tremendous faith in the Creator to believe you’ll be taken care of if you share all that you have. Our natural tendency is to jealousy and fear. There are some who leave us because they can’t overcome that fear by faith, or they can’t satiate their appetites to realize how much is enough. We have to educate our appetites. But this lifestyle isn’t forced; it’s by choice.”

“There are some born and raised in Salem who choose to leave,” his wife added.

Gleace nodded. “We have three smaller dissenter colonies of those who have left. Two are northeast and the other is northwest. There are great disparities in their communities because they’ve adopted the ways of the world, with a monetary system and the status that follows it. There’s quite a bit of fluctuation in their populations, and often the very poor among them come back to us. Then the wealthier find it difficult to succeed without their cheap labor, and come recruiting new members with the lure of riches which they, too, will likely never see. They’re in constant turmoil.”

“That must be difficult for their families, to see them leave,” Mahrree said.

“It’s not as if they are shunned,” Gleace assured her. “We trade

with them, they come to visit their families, we visit them; we respect their wishes, so they respect our way of life. To be honest, Perrin and Mahrree, folks like you, with the worldly background and knowledge you have . . .” Gleace’s words slowed, as if he really didn’t want to utter them. “You’d do very well in the dissenter colonies. I have no doubt that by Weeding Season, you’d be the head of all of it.”

Mahrree smiled halfway. “Trying to kick us out of Salem already?”

“Absolutely not!” Gleace exclaimed. “I’d much rather have you here. *Although* with the Shins in charge of the colonies . . .” He bobbed his head thoughtfully. “They just *might* stabilize. For a time.”

But Perrin scowled. “Being in charge of unstable colonies? There’s nothing that sounds appealing about any of that.”

Gleace grinned. “Oh, *good*. I have to be forthcoming with all that we can offer, you see, so that you can make a choice as to where you really want to be. You *could* leave and move up there,” he added, his enthusiasm flagging. “Even visit for a time, just to see . . .?” His tone indicated that was the last thing he wanted to have happen.

Mahrree smiled at him reassuringly. “I can’t imagine anywhere better than here. We were hoping to leave the world, Guide. Not find it again in another form.”

Again Gleace grinned, as if a burden had just been lifted. “I was hoping you’d say that. You know, there are some in the colonies who refuse to even interact with us. They call us backward. Some even wish to return to the world. That’s the only thing I cannot allow,” he said gravely. “It’s too great a risk to our entire civilization if one of them returns. If they say the wrong things to the wrong people, that could be the end of us.”

“Has anyone tried to leave?” asked Perrin.

“Only occasionally. Almost always extended families convince them to remain. We’ve had only four people vanish over the past one hundred years. If they made it to the world, or perished along the way, I don’t know.”

Curious, Perrin asked, “When did the last person vanish?”

For the first time, Guide Gleace seemed hesitant to answer. “Four years ago, a man named Lickiah. Actually, Perrin, you knew him as Walickiah. A lieutenant?”

Perrin squinted as he ran the name over in his mind. “Walickiah . . . wait a minute. Yes! He came to the fort years ago, shortly after the first Guarder attack in Edge. He was there for the first Strongest

“Everything has been given to us freely.”

Soldier race, then resigned abruptly. Wait another minute . . . *why* did he resign?”

Guide Gleace sighed. “He was persuaded by Corporal Zenos.”

“What? How?”

Now the guide looked a little embarrassed. “With the help of six of our men. Walickiah was one of *them*, Perrin. A true Guarder sent to spy on you. We had a lot of men in the trees at that time, and they picked up the message that someone new was coming to the fort to help the ‘Quiet Man.’”

Perrin nodded. “I heard all about the ‘Quiet Man.’”

Gleace noticed the looks of bemusement on the faces of the rest of Shins and Briters. “Shem was known as the ‘Quiet Man’ to the Guarders,” he explained. “When Shem first signed up with Perrin, he dropped a message in the trees for the Guarders telling them that he was keeping a close eye on Captain Shin, and that he wouldn’t communicate with them unless it was an emergency. Shem claimed he would be their insider. It *was* mostly true—he just wasn’t an insider for *their* side.

“Well, it seems someone in the Guarders must have thought Shem was *too* quiet. We could never find a way to let him communicate with the real Guarders without compromising him or Perrin. So our spies watched for clues that someone else was being sent to watch. Shem would bring that new spy out to the forest, and then we took them.”

“I had a few recruits over the years suddenly vanish,” Perrin reminded his family.

“Only one agreed to come to Salem,” Gleace said. “Walickiah. The others took their oaths very seriously and preferred to take their own lives over abandoning their duty,” he told them. “I’m sorry,” he added when he noticed Perrin flinch.

“Shem didn’t tell me *that*. What happened with Walickiah?”

Gleace shrugged. “I’m really not sure. Everything was fine for over ten years. Shem visited him frequently, and they laughed over Shem’s abduction of him. He was doing well, moved up to the north, and was enjoying himself as far as we could tell. His rector said he was interested in a young woman there, but nothing came of it. Then about five years ago in 333 he became agitated and wanted to return to the world. His rector and one of my assistants over that area couldn’t help him see reason. I went a few times to speak with him, but he refused to see me. Eventually one of his neighbors noticed he

was gone. No sign, not trace—nothing. We searched for him for weeks, but . . .” Gleace shrugged again.

“I can’t think of anything that has changed in the world or may have been compromised in that time,” Perrin said.

Gleace nodded. “Shem has a way of hearing just about everything. He searched all over for Lickiah and notified the other scouts to watch for him returning to the world. No one saw or heard from him in the past four years. We assume he died somewhere. Probably for the best,” he acknowledged reluctantly. “He was the first murderer we ever tried to integrate into Salem.”

Mahrree was as astonished as Perrin, who exclaimed, “He was a *what?*”

Gleace sighed sadly. “You probably even know what he did. His first ‘success’ was around the time you arrived in Edge. He was part of that first group of Guardians attacking Grasses—”

“The captain’s parents!” Perrin cried out. “And his sister! He killed them?”

“Yes,” Gleace said heavily. “He bludgeoned the young woman only *nearly* to death so that her dying would be prolonged and agonizing to all around her. Those were his orders.”

Mahrree nearly choked on her shock. “She was supposed to marry the lieutenant, but they had her burial the same day Perrin and I married.”

“I remember,” said Perrin, his tone thick with anger. “You let that . . . *that monster* live in Salem?!”

At any other moment she would have kicked her husband under the table for shouting at the Creator’s Guide, but she was just as livid as he was.

“Not the first time I’ve been yelled at about him,” said Gleace wretchedly.

“He should have been incarcerated,” Perrin declared, “at the very least!”

“But we don’t have incarceration in Salem,” said Gleace. “I wasn’t about to start just for him. Salem is a place of second chances. Always has been.”

Mahrree blinked. “No incarceration?”

“Never been needed. Our people enforce our laws themselves. But if you want to see prisons, they’ve got some elaborate ones in the dissenter colonies.” Gleace tried to smile, but gave up.

Perrin was fuming. “Walickiah should have been executed for

“Everything has been given to us freely.”

those three deaths!”

“Closer to a dozen,” said Gleace quietly. “That’s what he confessed to me.”

“A dozen!”

That’s when Gleace’s gaze shifted abruptly, from contrite to sharp. “We’ve allowed men into Salem who have killed even more than that, Perrin. Most of them were just following orders. And all of them believed they were doing the right thing at the time. *Wouldn’t you agree?*”

Mahrree cringed in dread for her husband, who sat back as if he’d been slapped. He could do nothing but swallow guiltily and stare at his plate.

His tally was much higher than a dozen.

With unexpected warmth, Gleace leaned toward Perrin. “Walickiah thought he was doing the right things for the world. He’d been deceived by the Guardians who had conditioned him for over a year. I’d never met a man whose thinking had been so warped. But we were straightening it out. I never believed that locking away a criminal was the way to help him. Maybe that makes the community feel safer, but it does nothing for the offender. But reclaiming his mind and mending his heart? Not only does that change his life, it makes the entire community stronger. Walickiah *was* changing, Perrin. My best men and women worked with him every week. Until one day . . . well, none of us know what happened. Likely never will.”

Perrin continued to stare at the table. “I made that same argument about Qualipoe Hili. He made much more progress with Shem rebuilding our bedroom in a few days than he ever did during the many moons he spent locked up.”

Gleace nodded once. “So you understand. Already your thinking is improving. You won’t find living in Salem difficult, Perrin Shin. As long as you think before reacting.”

Perrin cracked a smile and dared to look up at the guide. “And here I thought you knew a lot about soldiers.”

Gleace grinned at him.

“People struggle with this kind of life?” Deck spoke up. “Why is it so hard to accept? It’s wonderful!”

“Of course it looks wonderful to you now, Deckett,” Gleace said. “Today you just learned that you’ll visit twenty ranches and choose five cattle from each for your new herd. But when the word reaches you next year that a newlywed young man will be visiting your ranch

to select his five head from you, will you still feel this is a wonderful way of life?"

Deckett thought about that. "I hope so. I hope I never forget how I felt today when I heard the news. I wondered how I could ever repay that generosity."

"You'll repay it by helping the next one in line. You may repay it many times over in your life. When you reach my age you may realize you've given away five hundred cattle. The test is, will you *still* see that as wonderful?"

Deckett thought again. "Who gave us the cattle in the first place?"

The guide sat back in his chair. "The Creator."

"So they're not really mine, or yours, or anyone's, right? They multiply according to His will, not mine. So how can I be bitter about sharing what never was mine to begin with?"

The Guide grinned. "You married an excellent young man, Jaytsy Briter. Well said, Deckett!"

"All shared for free," Peto mumbled. "Unbelievable."

Gleace turned to study him.

Mahrree cleared her throat. "Guide? Peto's had a difficult few days, accepting all of this. A bit cynical, perhaps . . ."

But the guide nodded once to Peto. "I see him as . . . a hopeful duck."

"A *what*?" Peto said, the corners of his mouth tugging.

"Yes, a hopeful duck, who's been bobbing up and down in a sea of cynicism."

Jaytsy giggled. "A sea of cynicism—yes, that's Peto!"

"No," Gleace said slowly, his gaze still intently on Peto, who was beginning to squirm. "He's the duck. He's been in that cynical sea for a long time, and even though it's splashed him quite a bit, he's a duck. The water's not part of him, and deep down he's still warm and dry."

Mrs. Gleace, noticing her guests' mouths wriggling in amusement, said, "My husband's strength is in animals, not metaphors."

But her husband smiled. "Not my metaphor, but Tuma's," he said to his wife.

"Ah," and she smiled.

"Tuma?" Mahrree asked.

"I'll explain who he was later. Tuma was a dear friend and an insightful man. And this young man Peto here—Tuma would have appreciated him. He would have seen his optimism, hidden like his

“Everything has been given to us freely.”

down feathers. He would have noticed his hope, slicking every feather and keeping off the cynical waters that tried to drown him. He may look wet, but he’s anything but. All Peto needs is some time to dry off, so to speak. So, my Hopeful Duck—I can tell you have questions. Ask them.”

“Anything?” Peto asked.

“Anything.”

“All right . . . how many more times are you going to call me a Hopeful Duck?”

Gleace grinned. “About three more, but I’ll try to pace myself.”

Peto smiled at that, but then concern came over him. “If everything’s shared, then . . .”

Gleace noticed that Peto was fingering his new knife in his pocket. “You’re worried that maybe someone will walk into your house, take your new knife, and decide it’s his? That won’t happen. The cattle given to your brother-in-law will be his. His stewardship, his responsibility. In that way, he ‘owns’ them. But if his herd grows to two hundred next year, he simply doesn’t have enough grazing land. He’ll give many away. Maybe another rancher lost several calves to wolves. Maybe another family has growing teenage boys and will need an extra side of beef this season. Deckett then transfers his stewardship to those with the greater need.”

Peto still had worry etched all over his face.

“Go ahead, son,” Gleace encouraged.

“Just seems lopsided,” he confessed. “Just *give* that family another side of beef?”

“Yes. And you know what? That family just may be cobblers. And a few weeks later, the wife will be by to fit you for new boots. And you’ll be walking around in the finest leather and *you* won’t have given up any slips of silver either. Everything balances, Peto. *Everything balances*, when you want to make sure your neighbor is taken care of. That’s the Creator’s way.”

Peto slowly nodded. “It just seems too good to be true. I’m waiting to hear the *other* side. I’m sorry, but—”

“Here’s one of those *other* sides,” Mrs. Gleace said. Her openness was so easy that Mahrree was dumbfounded. “Peto, you told my husband all about kickball. It may surprise you to know that here in Salem, we have no competition.”

Peto squinted. “So . . . no kickball?”

“Not in the way you played it, Peto,” the guide said. “We play,

laugh, and enjoy each other, but we don't taunt or degrade anyone."

"So," Peto leaned forward on the table, "do you keep score?"

"Very sloppily."

Peto was appalled.

"It's true. A score *may* be kept for a time, until one team reaches a set point, then the score is forgotten and the play continues until the sun goes down or someone is injured."

"We understand," said Mrs. Gleace, "that in the world some men devote so much of their lives to kickball that after five years their bodies are nearly worn out."

Peto looked down at the table.

"Seems shortsighted," said the guide, "crippling your body before you're even middle aged, just for a game? I can't imagine what kind of condition those poor men may be in when they're my age. I can still climb a mountain. They might not even be able to climb the stairs. All for a game that will be forgotten when the next champion is named? And Shem told us the fans even erupt into violence when their teams don't win, as if they actually own the teams. And then it starts all over the next year? It's just so strange."

Peto smiled dismally. "Guide Gleace, you have a way of describing things that makes them seem positively . . . stupid."

"Please understand, I'm not disparaging games," Gleace explained. "We play all kinds of games, often and loudly! But our community can't function if there's resentment of any kind. So, Perrin," the guide shifted his focus to him, "I'm afraid we won't be having any Strongest Soldier races. Especially after I saw Shem's struggle each year when he lost. I thought about pulling him home for a season in some years, just to work it out of him."

Perrin fussed with a biscuit. "It did get a little *ugly* at times."

"Ha!" Peto barked at that understatement. "The first time Shem beat Father, he didn't talk to Shem for a week!"

"But the races were a great motivational tool," Perrin defended, and already Mahrree could hear the defeat in his tone. "It gave the men something to look forward to, the entire village of Edge got involved—it became an event no one wanted to miss."

The guide nodded slowly. "I'm sure there were many good things attributed to it. Even if illegal gambling at the fort cost several soldiers enormous amounts of pay—"

Perrin's eye grew big at the guide's knowledge.

"—and even if you lost the companionship of your closest friend

“Everything has been given to us freely.”

for a time each year.”

Perrin pursed his lips at that.

Mahrree patted his leg under the table.

But Peto laughed. “And the day *after* the first time Shem beat him, he came to the house and Father wouldn’t even let him in.”

Jaytsy sniggered into her napkin.

“Peto—” Perrin tried to stop him.

“And it was raining outside. Pouring!”

“Peto!”

“Then it turned to hail!” Peto was foolishly unstoppable when there was a great story to tell. “Shem had to walk all the way back to the fort! He couldn’t run because he was so sore—”

“PETO!”

The only sound in the room after Perrin’s bellow was the guide politely coughing.

Perrin was already red with embarrassment. “I’m so sorry. I shouldn’t have raised my voice—”

“You left your best friend, confidante, and brother *out in the hail?*” the guide asked.

Perrin’s shoulder twitched. “You didn’t see the dance he did in front of everyone after he won the race.”

“He sang a little song, too,” Jaytsy mumbled.

“*Who’s* the strongest soldier now?” Peto whispered the melody. “*I’m* the strongest soldier now!”

Perrin began to puff until he realized that Gleace was intently studying him.

“*Still* you feel it, don’t you Perrin?”

He fidgeted. “Yes. Point well made.”

“In times of crisis and emergencies we can easily put aside our differences and come together to help,” Gleace said, with too much generosity. “But those things happen only a few times in each person’s life. It’s the everyday relationships that need to be protected. It’s when everything’s going easy that we become annoyed by the little irritations. And then we start to think, ‘I’m better than him, he’s worse than me, she doesn’t deserve this, I deserve more. I’m better than everyone else, and I must prove it.’ But that’s just being human. However, that’s what we need to fight every day. Battling that competitive nature is the war of our lives.”

“True,” Mahrree said. “At least women aren’t like that.”

Everyone stared at her.

Peto turned to his sister. “Did she really just say that?”

Jaytsy guffawed behind her hand.

Insulted, Mahrree said, “What?” The steady gaze of the guide caught her. More submissively she said again, “What?”

With great warmth, but a distinct glint in his eye, Guide Gleace hit her with, “Comparison is a form of competition. What you said suggested that women *are better* than men, didn’t it?”

Now Mahrree practiced her lip pursing.

Guide Gleace smiled in understanding. “The force behind all competition and comparison is pride. Pointing out faults, failing to be compassionate, defending our mistakes instead of trying to fix them. Pride causes it all. And *that’s* the great enemy that we’re trying to conquer in Salem. But in the world, pride’s the heart and soul. It defines, controls, and motivates everyone and everything.

“As large as Salem is, we have no room for it. Pride is also a form of fear. Not trusting in the Creator to care for us in this Test, but trusting ourselves instead. That always leads to failure.”

Mahrree sighed. “Salem’s going to take a bit of getting used to, isn’t it?”

“Yes, and you get to spend the rest of your life doing so. It’s a delicate balance we try to maintain. We debate, but we don’t argue. We tease, but we don’t harm. We laugh, but not at someone else’s pain. We judge, but assume the best about a situation, not the worst. We strive for excellence, but for everyone, not for individual glory. We don’t always succeed, but we never give up trying to. We only fail when we quit trying. So I’m sure none of you will fail living a Salem-like life.”

“Your confidence is overwhelming, Guide Gleace,” Mahrree said with a sad chuckle. “You obviously don’t know much about our family.”

“You agreed to come to Salem,” the guide reminded her. “That’s all I need to know. There’s something else you may struggle with, especially Perrin.”

Perrin sighed. “You best let me have it.”

“Humbly said. Excellent beginning. We have no rankings in Salem. For a man whose life was defined by status, this may take some getting used to. You’ll have no one following your orders and no one saluting you.”

Perrin shrugged. “I haven’t had that in Edge for the past few

“Everything has been given to us freely.”

weeks. I don’t see why I should have it here. I don’t even have a purpose here.”

“You do. You’ll learn of it, very soon. What I’m trying to explain is that everyone in Salem is treated equally. I may be the guide over all of Salem, but I’m also accountable to my local rector. If I need something, I request it of him, and twice a year, he evaluates our needs with us. Not even I can saunter into the storehouses and take whatever I want,” he said to Peto.

“You passed our governing house,” Gleace continued. “I doubt it’s anything as large or elaborate as the Administrators’ Headquarters. But we have need of nothing larger. My twelve assistants and I meet twice a week to discuss the community’s needs. We rarely have any legal issues to resolve. The first line for dealing with conflicts are the rectors. They almost always can fix the problems. If they can’t, the issue is brought to our council. Those who can’t accept our decisions are those who leave for the dissenter communities. Usually they’ve been struggling with our way of life for some time already. They’re looking for a reason—maybe they think someone’s offended them, or they realize that no one here is perfect yet, so they use that to justify leaving us.

“But none of us in Salem is perfect. We’re just people, trying our best, making mistakes, and trying to fix those. That’s the very essence of the Creator’s Test. Try, fail, try again, and eventually succeed. The Creator has ways of making up for where we fall short, ways that we don’t fully understand yet, but we must always try.

“What He’s testing is the nature and progress of our hearts,” Gleace continued. “The world has different measures. It’s all about getting more, building higher, and looking better. The world believes ‘enough’ is defined by what they have, plus a little more. So they’re never satisfied. Their hearts are small and weak.”

Gleace sat back and looked at his guests sadly. “And that’s why the world is dying.”

Perrin sighed. “I once told Shem I thought the most dangerous sentences began with the words, ‘I deserve . . .’”

“Precisely right. The world will always believe it deserves *more*. Here’s a question for you: How many hours a day do people in the world work?”

Mahrree shrugged. “All depends. Up to fourteen hours a day, but at least nine to ten.”

“Not here. Most people get all of their necessary labors finished

by midday meal.”

“What, everything?” Deck said, duly amazed.

“Yes. Everything.”

“Ask yourself this,” Mrs. Gleace said. “What do the people in the world work *for*? A larger house? Then to fill those larger houses with trinkets and furniture that need to be changed again after a few seasons because some trend says so? They work for new clothing in the latest styles. Better saddles for better horses and better carriages to look better. They’re working for more, and more is never enough. But we labor enough to provide for everyone’s needs. That takes only a few hours each day.”

“After our ancestors’ first year here, they established some rules,” Gleace explained. “The first was, no person is to be idle here, unless they are ill, crippled, or recovering from birthing a baby. Most of those who left the world had suffered from working for the wealthy. They spent hours each day milling, weaving, building, and digging for just one slip of silver a year, when their overseer received fifty for idly watching them. One of my ancestors wrote in his journal about digging in dark holes for golden nuggets near Trades, then handing everything he found to a man who did nothing all day but sit on a horse, shouting. It was his gold mine, only because he happened to find it first.”

Gleace shook his head in genuine disbelief. “I still don’t get it. But that’s the state of mind in the world. ‘I found this first, I created this first, I combined this first.’ As if they did it all on their own, as if the Creator didn’t inspire them, or give them the talents to do what they did. People really think they’re that brilliant, all on their own? You know, *that’s* what led to the Great War. Laborers were upset with being treated so unfairly. The wealthy were capitalizing upon the poor. So much anger churns and boils and eventually spills over. So when Pax and the others came here, everyone readily agreed that the first rule of Salem would be, ‘No idlers will eat the bread nor wear the clothing of the laborers. All must labor for their own.’”

“But even then,” Mrs. Gleace smiled, “or probably *because* of that, everyone still finishes their work by midday meal.”

“Remarkable!” Mahrree breathed. “But don’t you ever need a supervisor over larger projects?”

“Of course,” Guide Gleace said. “But the supervisors don’t sit around shouting. They’re working right alongside everyone else, and just as hard. No one here has servants. No one here is considered

“Everything has been given to us freely.”

higher or better because they did something first, or have more of something than everyone else. You know what completely baffles me?”

Mahrree shook her head along with everyone else. She was too baffled herself—pleasantly—to have the slightest idea what could confuse the guide.

“The concept you have in the world of earning enough slips to allow for a life of ease and luxury.” Gleace sat back and gestured helplessly. “How could that be fulfilling, sitting around and doing . . . what? A few times I’ve been too ill to work and had to lie around the house. Oh, I couldn’t wait to get back to being useful again!”

“And I couldn’t wait for him to get out of the house again, either!” Mrs. Gleace winked lovingly at her husband.

“How can one *enjoy* sitting around doing nothing?” Guide Gleace asked earnestly. “After half an hour, I’m ready to accomplish something. *Anything!*”

Perrin chuckled. “You know, Guide Gleace, with your attitude you would inadvertently find yourself one of the wealthiest men in the world, because you’d always be doing something.”

“But you said you have a great deal of free time,” Mahrree said. “So, what do you do with all of it?”

“Everything!” Guide Gleace smiled broadly. “Anything! We don’t sit around picking at our nails, if that’s what you’re wondering. What have you always wanted to do or learn, Mahrree?”

Mahrree didn’t need any time to think about that. “Ruins! I’d love to learn about the ruins.”

“And so you will,” the guide said. “We have ruins all around us. Many people have studied, written, and hypothesized about them, and explored them. You can join them. Tell me, how long do you think it will take you to become an expert in the ruins?”

Mahrree was nearly bursting with the potential. “Years?”

“Then you may take as many years as you wish. And when you’re ready for a new challenge, what do you want to learn next?”

“I have no idea. I never thought that far.”

“Well,” Mrs. Gleace smiled, “you have years to do so. That’s how we measure progress in Salem,” she explained. “Not by possessions, but by learning, exploring, and understanding. And what one person discovers, everyone discovers. A talent that one person develops, everyone benefits from.”

“The world, however,” Guide Gleace said with great disappointment, “is dull by comparison. Oh, they think they’ve got excitement and *progress*, but really it’s all the same old entertainments, the same old chase for nothing more invigorating than fleeting stature. How utterly tedious. It’s rare that anyone there comes up with *new* ideas, or pokes at old notions to discover if what everyone believes is actually true.

“But *you*,” he smiled slyly at the Perrin and Mahrree, “you poked all the time. And that’s how you got here. And that’s why you’ll love Salem.”

“Our poking *caused trouble*,” Mahrree pointed out.

“Ah, but the very best kind!” Gleace declared. “The kind that makes people question everything they know. People need to be poked every now and then, Mahrree.”

Hesitantly, she smiled, sincerely hoping that was true.

But Peto’s expression was thoughtful. “So, you mentioned the same old entertainments. What do you have that’s different?”

“Oh, where to start?” Mrs. Gleace said. “I think you’ll just have to experience what we have to offer, and you’ll begin to see what we’re talking about. For example, we have a granddaughter who plays the cello. That’s an instrument you don’t have in the world, because they don’t take the time to create them. The Creator gave her a great talent, and she spends several hours every day practicing. But she also has three little children, so each afternoon they enjoy time at their grandmothers’ houses, or here with me, so that their mother can develop her talent.

“Now, I know what you may be thinking,” she eyed Peto, the duck who was growing cynically wet again, “that’s unfair, forcing someone else to watch her children. But caring for my great-grandchildren is a blessing, not a burden. Through their eyes I see the world anew again, and what greater thing could I be doing than caring for the youngest of the Creator’s family?”

“Every Holy Day afternoon we go to our granddaughter’s house and she performs her latest works for us. I could never play like her, but I get to appreciate her talent because she shares it freely. Every season she gives a performance at the arena, along with many other musicians. People from the world tell me the music is more intricate and moving than anything they’ve heard before. Now, tell me, how much does it cost to attend concerts in the world?”

Perrin tipped his head. “Depending on the performer, up to a

“Everything has been given to us freely.”

weeks’ worth of pay.”

“Let me guess,” Peto said, “no one here pays for a concert.”

“That’s right,” Mrs. Gleace said. “Anything you want to attend, you just attend. Sometimes people have to be turned away because too many come. In that case, another concert is scheduled so no one is disappointed.”

Peto scratched his head. “I understand that your granddaughter lets her baby tenders in for free, but everyone else too?”

Guide Gleace leaned over to him. “Peto, who gave our granddaughter her talent?”

Peto shrugged. “I suppose she works really hard—”

Guide Gleace’s head shaking stopped him. “She does work very hard, but the raw talent was nothing she created herself. It was a gift from the Creator. Tell me, in kickball were there ever any boys who tried and tried but were just never good enough for the teams?”

“Oh yeah!” Peto snorted. “There was one boy who tried out every year. No matter how long he practiced, every ball he kicked curved to the left.”

“And you could kick straight?”

“Perfectly!”

“Why?”

“Because I practiced!”

Gleace held up a finger. “Are you sure? Or did the Creator give you a gift, one that He chose not to give the other boy? When you practiced, you improved *because* of that gift, not because of any special ability you made for yourself.”

Peto hesitated. “I never considered that before.”

“The Creator’s gifts are varied and myriad,” Gleace told them. “Some think of the obvious gifts, like music or art. But there are others, such as leadership, organizing homes, communities, orchards. Patience with children, animals, plants,” he nodded to the Briters. “Inquisitiveness is a gift. How fast is sound? Light? Thinking about difficult things is a gift. What’s under a mountain, and how can I find out?”

“Another gift is being able to tolerate being married to a person who sits around thinking about such things!” Mrs. Gleace said to Peto, who grinned.

Her husband chuckled. “Some have the gift of making people feel comfortable,” he gestured to his wife. “Some the gift of teaching,” he nodded to Mahrree. “Others, the gift of defending,” he said

to Perrin. “And I’m sure Peto has more gifts than just kicking straight. There are hundreds of gifts, given to us by the Creator so we can improve everyone’s lives.”

Gleace sat back, his face nearly radiating.

“Here in Salem we get to learn and grow and help each other, with no pressure of status, or gold, or worry about what others think of us. Here, you will find true freedom.

“So Mahrree—don’t mourn the books you left behind. You’ll find books in our libraries about things you never imagined. You can spend the rest of your life reading and learning and never get to the end of what we have to offer.

“Peto, you think you’re done with schooling? I’m happy to tell you that the schools in the world know only about one-tenth of what we do. You have plenty more to learn, and I’m sure you’ll be fascinated by it all, so don’t roll your eyes at me.

“Perrin, I’ve heard you wondered about zebras. I can introduce you to the men who tried to ride them.

“Jaytsy, we’ve developed methods for improving garden yields that will excite you, especially if you love green beans.

“And Deckett, wait till you see the cows we purchased in Sands and brought over last Harvest. Such beautiful animals!”

Guide Gleace leaned back in his chair. “Oh, Shin and Briter families, you have no idea what great things await you! Sometimes I envy those who come here. I’d love to experience the awestruck surprise I see on your faces right now. This massive sphere was given to us to explore and learn about, not to take from and hoard. What a tragic existence you’ve been forced to endure all these years, but the Creator will make it up to you, I promise. Soon you’ll discover what life was *meant* to be. It’s a gift—all of it, from fantastically generous Parents who sent us here for an incredible learning experience. Everything has been given to us freely. That’s the Creator’s way!”

But then Gleace’s countenance clouded. “Ah, but the Refuser has other plans. He’s far too clever.”

“How so?” Peto asked.

“The world’s forgotten him, my Hopeful Duck. Yes, only two more. No one there speaks much of him, and that’s the way he wants it. If they forget he exists, his hold on them is secure. He’s the one who told the Creator he didn’t believe this test was fair. He refused the gifts and the test. And now he’s angry about what he denied himself, because he sees that it actually was a great idea, so he’s using

“Everything has been given to us freely.”

the world and everyone in it for his own revenge. He and his followers are trying to get everyone else to refuse the greatness of the Creator’s Plan. Oh, and he hates Salem, because our people’s hearts are so pure he can never get a firm hold here, but still he tries. We have to always be watchful, because he always tries.”

Deck asked, “But what could he do in Salem?”

“Make us forget,” Gleace said, “all that we’ve learned and felt here. Remembering is the key, my dear Deckett. Remembering how the Creator wants us to live. You see, while the Creator gave us everything freely, the Refuser has stolen it all. The land, the animals, the seeds, the metals, the richness of this sphere—everything. And now he demands payment for all he holds hostage. He wants us to exploit each other the way he exploits us. Riches for goods. In the world they refer to it benignly as ‘good business’.”

Perrin let out a low whistle. “Guide Gleace, if were you to say something like that in the world, the Administrators would instantly label you as a traitor.”

Guide Gleace smile sadly. “I certainly hope so. A traitor to the Refuser is a defender of the Creator. The Administrators are the Refuser’s most gullible players. He’s using them masterfully like pieces in a big game, one he intends to win at all costs. The Administrators believe that they act according to their own ingenuity, but none of them is capable of original thought. Perhaps none of us are. We’re either inspired by the Creator or the Refuser, as if they give us the raw materials of an idea, then let us develop them into something wonderful or something terrible. All that the Administrators come up with is first devised by the Refuser. He will cheat and lie and manipulate in any way he can to win this game and destroy our existence. He cares nothing for any of us, and he disposes of his players as indifferently as we burn a filthy cloth. And he’s doing an excellent job. No one in the world realizes just how tightly his chains are around them.

“But here you’ll find no chains,” Guide Gleace looked at each one of them, his gaze resting the longest on Perrin. “Another refugee once told me that the world believes the greatest freedom is gold in the cellar, but I can’t help but wonder, wouldn’t you then always be obsessed with what’s happening in the cellar? How can you then spend any time enjoying the world above it?”

Perrin smiled wanly. “That’s where our savings were, in the cellar. Probably all been looted by now.”

Mahrree hadn't thought of their old home all day, and now she felt a pang of sorrow for it, being ravaged by strangers.

Gleace must have seen that on her face, because he said, "Everything you need, plus more, is here. Home, security, professions—as many as you wish to sample—"

"Wait a minute," Peto said. "Sample? How? Don't you train for a profession, then . . . that's it?"

"Peto, why be limited to one thing?" Gleace asked him. "Here in Salem we allow everyone to try something new, just to learn about it. One year our neighbor who was a professor of geography—that means 'terrain'—became fascinated by the metals he found in the mountains. So he quit teaching and became a blacksmith."

"He what?" Peto scoffed. "But professors earn much more than blacksmiths—"

Gleace's head shaking stopped him again. "Not here. Work is work, and all is necessary. No one's work is valued above someone else's. One day the most important person to you may be a doctor who can set your broken leg. The next day the most important person may be the carpenter who fashions you a set of crutches. The next day it'll be the neighbors who come over to take care of your chores. Everyone works, and everyone is valued equally.

"Back to our neighbor: after a year of blacksmithing he decided to do something more intricate. He became an artist for a time, creating elaborate designs with thin bits of metal."

Perrin frowned good-naturedly. "From professor to blacksmith to artist?"

"That's not all," Gleace smiled. "After that he became curious with the geometric designs he made with the metals, and began to wonder about the mathematical properties. So he went back to the university and took courses in advanced calculations."

"So what is he doing now?" Peto asked, mystified that a grown man would want to go back to school again.

"Now he's back at the university teaching again, this time mathematics. But last season I heard he was thinking about studying the stars. His goal is to figure out exactly how far away it is to the nearest one. He's making a sculpture of the universe in metal to help him think about distances."

Peto rolled his eyes. "How can he ever figure the distance to a star?"

Guide Gleace shrugged. "I don't know, but when he figures it

“Everything has been given to us freely.”

out, he’ll let us all know.”

“No one in the world could jump from career to career like that!” Mahrree exclaimed, “People would think he’s unstable.”

“And not just curious about life and its possibilities? Doesn’t that sound tragic?” Gleace nodded to his wife. “Tell them about Broony.”

“My friend’s mother was named Broony,” Mrs. Gleace said, “and when she was a girl she loved to weave cloth. After she married she wanted to weave new colors, so she spent the entire Weeding Season gathering all kinds of leaves, berries, barks, and roots. Then she boiled them down to discover new dyes, and as she did so she found herself wondering if they might *taste* beautiful as well.”

Jaytsy cringed and laughed. “Oh no! Did she drink any?”

Mrs. Gleace grinned. “She did. And you know what she discovered? Birch root juice tasted pretty good, mixed with enough sugar. That started her thinking. She wondered if any of the objects she had gathered might not have other properties as well. At that time she had a little girl, my friend’s oldest sister, who suffered from frequent colds. So, her mother purposely got herself ill as well.”

“She what?” Peto exclaimed. “Why?”

“To find a remedy. She would purposely get another cold, then sample leaves and herbs and bark and wait to see if any of them made her feel better.”

“That’s crazy,” Peto decided.

“Oh no,” Mrs. Gleace chuckled. “She was very methodical. Her husband helped her keep track of what she ingested, how much, and how she reacted to it. There were a few times she considered trying some substance, but felt strongly that she shouldn’t, so she disposed of those items without another thought. A few of them we now know were poisonous. But after three years of experimenting, Broony found a remedy. Now everyone in Salem, when they get a cold, knows exactly which leaves and bark to combine, and for how long to boil them. Within a day and night, all their symptoms are gone.”

Mahrree’s eyebrows shot up. “She discovered a remedy for *the cold*?”

“Along with many other remedies. And it all started because she loved to weave cloth.”

“That’s incredible!” Deck said. “I’m always getting colds. Now I can hardly wait to get another one.”

“And would you like to guess how much her remedy costs people?” Guide Gleace asked Peto.

“Nothing, right?”

“That’s right.”

Peto sighed. “But she spent so much time at it. She got herself sick on purpose! She should be . . . I don’t know, *rewarded* for that somehow.”

“She was,” said Mrs. Gleace. “She was rewarded with the knowledge that thousands of people each year felt better because of her efforts. Oh, I can tell you think that’s trite, but it’s the truth. Her oldest daughter’s health improved dramatically, and for over sixty years we’ve all benefitted from her sacrifice and work. She realized that the Creator provides solutions to every problem He sends us. But it’s up to us to think, experiment, and work until we discover the solution. Broony inspired many other doctors, so we continue to find new solutions to old problems. What could be more rewarding than that? She never felt she needed anything more.

“You see, my mother helped take care of her when she was ill. As bright and inquisitive as Broony was, there were some things she couldn’t do. Keeping yeast alive was one of them. The woman loved sweet rolls, but she always killed the yeast and made sweet rocks instead. My mother baked for her while Broony ‘cooked’ up everything else. To Broony, my mother was a worker of miracles because she knew how to make bread. My mother thought the same thing about her. It all worked out. In Salem, everything balances.”

“Wait a minute,” Peto said. “So Broony was . . . a *doctor*?”

Mrs. Gleace blinked as if that was obvious. “Yes, why? Oh, I keep forgetting. The world thinks only men can do some jobs, and only women can do others.”

“That’s not the way it is here?”

“People work in what interests them. We have women doctors, professors—”

“Ranchers,” Guide Gleace interjected.

Mrs. Gleace nodded at him. “Shepherds, wood workers—anything and everything.”

Deck leaned closer. “What about the men?”

“They can do whatever they want to as well,” Mrs. Gleace said.

“Sew clothing? Blankets?” Peto asked, scowling.

“Of course. The strongest weaves are made by the strongest arms.”

“Cook?” Deck asked.

“Naturally. Men can create fantastic dishes.”

“Everything has been given to us freely.”

“Tend children?” Peto said, and before Mrs. Gleace could answer, his face paled as he said, “*Help deliver babies?*”

Guide Gleace leaned over to him. “Yes. You met Jothan, right? But usually we just call them ‘fathers’.”

They all laughed at Peto’s horrified expression.

“Men don’t ‘tend children,’ Peto,” Mrs. Gleace explained. “They ‘father’ them. But we do have a few trained male midwives, as knowledgeable and compassionate as the women. In fact all of our doctors—male *and* female—are trained extensively by midwives in case a midwife can’t be located quickly enough. And fathers are always right by their wives’ sides.”

Peto nearly choked. “I . . . am . . . *never* . . . getting . . . married . . . here.”

Everyone at the table burst into laughter, except for Peto, who looked positively wretched.

Eventually the laughter died down.

“What is it, Peto?” the guide asked kindly. “Don’t worry—you can call for as many midwives as you want when your wife is ready to birth. They can hold you up, even.”

Peto waved that off. “That’s not it,” he said miserably. “Some people here have a *variety* of professions? I can’t even think of one.”

“It will come to you, My Hopeful Duck. Yes, that’s twice.” He looked over to Perrin who wore the same worried expression as Peto. “It’s coming to you as well, Perrin. All of you will realize that Salem was always meant to be your home.”

“It’s an amazing existence you’ve created here,” Perrin said. “I just hope our family can find some way to contribute.”

“Oh, you will,” Gleace said. “Already you’ve been living a Salem-like life.”

“How?”

“Perrin, we don’t make it a habit to steal away people, as we did with you and your family. We *invite* those from the world to come, *after* we’ve explained our ways. But you were ready to come. I don’t know of another family—there or perhaps even here—that would give up as much as you have for those you see in need. Shem told me: you and Mahrree had amassed a fortune in your cellar. You were by far the wealthiest family in all of Edge.”

“Wait,” Peto frowned, “*we* were? Even richer than Trum?”

Mahrree waved him off, but shrugged. “Well, I suppose . . .”

“And when you saw people in need after the land tremor,”

Gleace continued, ignoring Peto's slack-jaw and Jaytsy's rapid blinking, "you gave every last slip of gold and silver, along with the jewelry you inherited, to pay off everyone's losses in Edge. Shem knows because he helped moved it all to Karna in Rivers.

"You also took that caravan of supplies from Idumea, even though you could've lost your commission. You and Mahrree don't care for possessions or status, but for people. Already you understand. It's not how much you give away, but how much you keep for yourself. You kept nothing. You already lived as Salemites.

"Which leads me to the real reason you're here tonight," he announced to the family who thought they'd already heard all they possibly could. "Mrs. Gleace and I invite all newcomers to join us for dinner in order to formally extend *the invitation*."

He said those last two words with such weight that Mahrree realized it was supposed to be meaningful. She regretted that all she could offer back was bewilderment.

He glanced around at their faces and, seeing their blank expressions, said, "I'm guessing the Hifadhis didn't have time to tell you about *the invitation* either, right?"

"Jothan and I were too busy sizing each other up that first night to cover anything else but the essentials," Perrin admitted.

Gleace chuckled before saying, "Well, we invite you to commit to this Salem way of life, officially and publically. If and when you want to do so is completely up to you. We have people who live here for years before completely committing, but we extend the invitation to you now to think about it."

"And what if we say 'no'?" Peto's sharpness surprised his family. "What happens to us then?"

But the guide wasn't surprised. "You still get to live, learn, and work here. You still get to be part of our community, but it's easier to make that transition in your mind and heart after you wholly commit to us."

"There's only one thing that would be off-limits to you," Mrs. Gleace chimed in. "If you choose not to accept the invitation, you'll not be able to enter our temple."

The guide nodded, and Mahrree sat up eagerly. "What exactly happens in there?" she wondered, remembering Terryp had labeled 'temples' on his map. "What's in there?"

Guide Gleace smiled. "Beautiful furnishings and Salemites who are looking for silence so they can communicate with the Creator.

“Everything has been given to us freely.”

There’s no other place in Salem like it. No children are allowed, because even parents need a place to hide away from the cares of life for a few hours. It’s the House of the Creator, and not all Salemites enter the temple, either. Only those who desire a place of refuge to talk with the Creator, to receive guidance from Him, and to feel of His peace—”

“I want that.”

Peto eyed his father, whose earnest whisper had interrupted the guide. “Yes, Father—you said that out loud.”

But Perrin didn’t appear embarrassed by his quiet outburst, even though everyone was smiling gently at him. “I want that. I want that peace.”

“Then you shall have it, but there’s some preparation time,” Gleace explained. “After you formally commit to Salem, you need to wait a year before entering the temple. You need that time to ready yourself, and for us to make sure you’re fully committed. Your rector will recommend you when you’re ready. The temple is sacred, meaning that it’s dedicated entirely to the Creator. We’re very protective of keeping it pure. Not that I doubt your resolve in any way, but we want to make sure it’s never in danger of being desecrated.”

Peto frowned. “What does that mean?”

“I think I understand,” Mahrree said. “Peto, how do you feel knowing that Thorne has, by now, ordered our house to be searched by soldiers, and that everything we cared for has been thrown aside as meaningless?”

“They’ve kicked around Grandfather’s ball, haven’t they?” Peto said. “Probably even stabbed it. Without knowing, or caring . . . I get it.” To the guide he said, a bit defensively, “We wouldn’t do that, you know. Desecrate it?”

“I know,” the guide said, and Mahrree wondered if the man could ever be offended. “Certainly not deliberately, but perhaps accidentally only because you don’t know our ways. That’s why we give you time to get ready.”

“So what’s the first step?” Perrin asked.

“Something we call baptism,” Gleace told him. Catching Peto’s glance, he said, “It’s a symbolic act to demonstrate a very real commitment. It’s a way to signify washing away the ways of the world and becoming a new person.”

Peto sneered. “Sounds like a bath. A *public* bath?”

The Gleaces chuckled, but Mahrree shot a warning glare at him.

“Well, Peto,” the guide said, “you’re on the right track—”

Now Mahrree’s eyebrows were high as she blinked at the guide.

“—but you’re fully dressed, in white. And then we take you down to the river where we’ve dammed some areas to create ponds with hardly a current,” he nodded to Jaytsy who looked worried she’d be carried off downstream, belly first. “You can invite as many or as few people as you want to be part of it. Your rector or someone with the authority of a rector takes you into the river and dips you in, fully submersing—”

“For how long?” Peto demanded, and Mahrree wished she were in kicking distance of him. The symbolism sounded interesting, but not to her son.

“Guide,” Mahrree quietly seethed, “hold Peto down as long as you like. It’ll take at least two, maybe three minutes to wash the world completely from him.”

“Hear, hear!” Perrin slapped the table as everyone else laughed.

“Usually,” the guide said, “we try *not* to commit murder as we baptize someone. Peto, just down and up. It’s very quick.”

Peto nodded and seemed to realize he’s pushed it about as far he should dare.

“So, a quick bathing,” Mahrree said. “To wash away the world.”

“That’s part of it,” Gleace said. “The other is to signify burial, as if burying the old worldly part of you, then being reborn from the water as a new Salemite.”

“There’s a lot of water in birthing,” Jaytsy said. “Or so I’ve been told.”

Mrs. Gleace patted her hand. “And also a lot of bleeding and yelling, but,” and she winked at Peto, “none of that is part of baptism. Well, unless something goes horribly wrong.”

Peto grinned at her.

“Nothing does!” Guide Gleace insisted, but laughed with everyone else. After he sobered again, he said, “Once you’re baptized, you’re a committed member of Salem. It’s a covenant, like an oath. Perrin, you took oaths in the army, right? Similar to that, but the Creator is on the other side of it, not any High General or Administrator. You commit to share in all Salemite’s burdens, to assist them as you would hope someone would assist you, and you also covenant to stand against the world as you stand with the Creator. He in turn promises to bless us with His influence, with daily guidance and reassurance, and to save us at the Last Day.”

“Everything has been given to us freely.”

Suddenly Mahrree wanted nothing as much as she wanted to be washed clean of the world.

Perrin must have been feeling the same thing because he said, “How soon can this happen? This baptism?”

Gleace sat back, surprised. “Well, it’s up to you, but usually—”
“Tomorrow?”

Now Gleace blinked rapidly. “Uh, well, tomorrow being Holy Day, that’s quite a busy time for us—”

“The next day, then.”

“Of course,” Gleace said. “I *was* going to say that usually people wait at least a moon or two, but Perrin, if you want it day after tomorrow, then we can certainly arrange it. But only if you’re sure—”

“Before Dormin’s remembrance service,” Perrin said, his voice growing gruff. “Dormin was baptized, right?”

“Oh yes. He chose that quite quickly as well.”

“I want him to know,” Perrin said. “I want him to feel it, that we embraced all that he wanted to give us.”

Mahrree had been nodding vigorously. “Me too, Guide. Same time as Perrin?”

“Me too,” Jaytsy said. “If that’s allowed?” She rubbed her belly.

“Oh, we can manage that,” Gleace said warmly. “We’re very careful. By the smile on Deckett’s face, I’m guessing you as well?”

“Yes, sir!”

Gleace purposely didn’t look at Peto, but everyone else was.

Peto squirmed. “So what if I want to think about it for a while?”

“You may think about it as long as you wish, Peto.” Gleace slowly turned to meet his eyes. “Don’t let your family sway your decision. I don’t want you to make this commitment until you feel it in your soul that you truly belong here, that you want to belong *to* us and *with* us.”

“He’s too young anyway, isn’t he?” Jaytsy said with a friendly glower.

“Oh, not at all,” Gleace said. “We let children much younger than him be baptized. But not until they’re at least eight, when they know their own minds better. Choices, always choices in Salem. This isn’t the world, you know. We’ll never tell you what to do, or what to think, or what to believe. We offer what we have and show you what we feel is true, but then we let you make your choice.

“So whenever you choose, Young Mr. Shin. Whenever *you* choose.”

Chapter 14--“Then it all balances.”

After dinner the guide took Perrin to his office to talk while the rest of the family helped Mrs. Gleace clean up after the meal.

“Mahrree, can I interest you in taking home the rest of this chicken?” Mrs. Gleace said as she scraped the remaining meat and bones into a dish.

“I don’t want to take your leftovers, Mrs. Gleace—” Mahrree began, not wanting to deprive the Gleaces of an easy meal later.

“She won’t mind,” Jaytsy said, eyeing the guide’s wife. “She and Guide Gleace never ate any of it.”

Peto, who had been bringing dishes to the sink, spun around with accusation in his eyes.

“No, we didn’t,” Mrs. Gleace admitted. “And young Mr. Peto, once again you’re looking for that ‘catch’ because you think this may be part of some conspiracy. Oh, my poor boy. The world really has turned you inside out, hasn’t it? Our Hopeful Duck is still a bit wet.”

“So why didn’t you eat the chicken?” he asked as if interrogating the world’s sneakiest thief.

But Mrs. Gleace only chuckled sweetly. “Because, Peto, Hew and I don’t eat meat. Of any kind.”

Deck blinked at her. “Wait—your husband’s a rancher, and you don’t eat meat?”

“We haven’t for many decades now.”

“But he’s a rancher!”

“Yes, he loves cattle. He loves their shape, their innocence, their stubbornness, their plodding ways, even their eyes. Hew was a rancher because he wanted to make sure cattle are born well, live well, and die well.”

“I don’t get it,” Deck said, with the blankest expression Mahrree had ever seen. She had to agree. She didn’t get it.

“We love animals,” Mrs. Gleace explained. “We feel they are

“Then it all balances.”

part of the Creator’s creations, and they are living their lives here just as we are. If we can avoid killing them just to feed us, we do. Not everyone in Salem refuses to eat meat,” she said when she saw the worry growing in their faces. “Only about a third of us live this way. But it’s a decision we’re happy with. You may eat meat as long as you wish. But if ever you choose not to, we can give you all kinds of alternative recipes.”

That wasn’t what was alarming Mahrree, though. “Did we offend you? By causing you to cook chicken and serve it to us?”

“Of course not,” Mrs. Gleace assured her. “That’s your way, and we wanted you to feel comfortable. I understand those two roosters weren’t happy with the direction of their lives anyway, and willingly met our neighbor’s chop block.”

When this didn’t garner the laughter she thought it would, she added, “Perhaps that *was* a bit too dark. Are you offended that we didn’t eat it?”

“No . . .” Mahrree said, not entirely sure.

“Then it all balances,” Mrs. Gleace said kindly. “Everything in Salem balances!”

Deck still was trying to catch up. “But there’s an old bull sleeping in the field attached to your house.”

“Ernst,” Mrs. Gleace said. “Hew’s favorite bull.”

“Named Ernst?”

“Yes, well, to each his own. Ernst doesn’t particularly like anyone but Hew. He’s going to have a hard time when Ernst finally goes. He’s on his fifteenth year, now—”

“But . . . but Guide Gleace has been delivering calves!”

“Yes, he wants to make sure they and the cows do well. He loves them. He raises them, helps other ranchers, and makes sure that the oldest ones that die naturally become the best leathers.”

Deck sat down hard on a chair. “And that’s all right? That he prefers they aren’t butchered? But that . . . they live happily?”

Peto winced at his brother-in-law who was the absolute picture of disbelief and astonishment.

But Mrs. Gleace saw something else.

She knelt in front of Deck and said, “You love them too, don’t you? You’ve worried over your expecting cows, and have cradled your new calves, and I’m guessing you even shed a tear or two over butchering a young bull.”

Deck’s face was wretched when he whispered. “I was told that

meant I was soft.”

“And you think being soft is a bad thing?” Mrs. Gleace whispered back. “Oh, no. Softness is vital. Softness is life. The Creator Himself is soft, Deckett Briter. No greater compliment could be given to you.”

His chin trembled as he said, “But I also love steak!”

“As long as you didn’t know its name, though?”

“Yes!”

She chuckled as his complete misery. “My poor Deckett. I know, oh, how I know! You remind me so much of Hew when he was younger. I’ll tell him the two of you need to chat some time, to help you figure out where your mind really wants to be. It’s true that Hew had many head of cattle for years, but in the past forty years he never butchered any of them. He can teach you to be a rancher like he was. I think you’re going to love being a Salemite, Mr. Briter!”

Jaytsy watched her husband, her head cocked in surprise. “You want all the cattle to live?”

Deck shrugged glumly. “My cattle,” he murmured.

Jaytsy sighed. “You are the sweetest man I’ve ever known!”

“Oh, brother,” Peto grumbled. “End of weekly steaks, I can tell that already. Father will be *thrilled* when he hears this.”

Already pursing her lips, Mahrree said, “Ooh, I don’t think Perrin’s ready to be a non-meat eater. Maybe we’ll tell him about this another time. That’s not what Guide Gleace wanted to talk to Perrin alone about, is it?”

Mrs. Gleace’s merry expression turned solemn. “No, it’s not,” she said with more weight than Mahrree expected. “No.”

The finality of her word startled everyone into silence, and before Mahrree could wonder what was going on in Guide Gleace’s little office, Mrs. Gleace had already shifted and said, “So, how about I explain a bit more about our life here as we do the dishes?”

Peto, who was sure he knew all about Mrs. Gleace by now, said, “Smooth transition to a new topic.”

“Yes, I thought so. Now, every week people bring what they have available to the storehouse nearest them,” she plowed on in her new direction, dragging everyone with her. “Perhaps it’s something they make, like baskets, or something they grow, like produce. Maybe it’s their time and a skill, such as roof repair. Physical items are kept in the storehouse. Obviously some things can’t be kept there, though. If someone has a colt to give, he keeps it in his field until someone

“Then it all balances.”

retrieves it. Or people create vouchers to offer a trade. Hew’s received many vouchers for calving, but I have no need of a baby tender. So he brings most of the vouchers to the storehouse and whoever needs the service can claim it.”

Mahrree could read the confusion in Peto’s eyes. “In Edge Guide Gleace would be receiving pay, but then he would turn around and hand it over to Rector Yung for him to distribute as he saw fit.”

Peto scoffed. “No one in Edge would willingly do that.”

“How do you know if someone needs something?” Jaytsy asked. “Or if someone’s trying to steal?”

“Our rectors have many duties here,” Mrs. Gleace told her. “Twice a year the rectors evaluate each family in their congregation, more often if situations change, and help decide what the family needs. Amounts of food, clothing, tools, and so on. No one *wants* to take more than they need. But I imagine some of the wealthy in the world would find our standards more meager than they’re used to.”

“Not me,” Mahrree assured her. “My pantry was packed!”

“Good. Rectors can always be asked to reevaluate a need. A baby born, a child getting married, an elderly parent moving in—of course you’re going to need something more, or less.”

“Sounds time-consuming,” Peto said.

“Not really. The rectors know their families well. They feel promptings from the Creator for them too. Quite often a rector will arrive at a family’s home before they even call for him, because he just knew. In ten minutes the need is evaluated, and within an hour the item has been retrieved and is in the home.”

Peto bobbed his head.

Mrs. Gleace was on to him, too. “Think about this, Peto: last year we had a family lose their house to a fire. But within one week the members of their congregation came together to build them a new house and furnish it completely. Some of their neighbors who had been away for two weeks visiting grandparents in the north returned home to discover a new house in place of their friends’ old one. They didn’t even notice the difference until the next day! Now, would the villagers in Edge be able to do something like that?”

“We did a bit during the land tremor,” Mahrree said. “But in light of the way people behaved not too long ago to the refugees from Moorland? No, not anymore. Maybe they help only when they’ve experienced the tragedy themselves.”

“Or they think no one will help them unless they help others.”

Deck suggested.

“In Salem no one suffers alone,” Mrs. Gleace said. “No one finds themselves in need for more than a day. We lift each other’s burdens, and it’s really quite easy work when we do it together. I can’t imagine the loneliness of the world you lived in. I heard there are people in Idumea who live in the streets? What a horrible existence. That would never happen in Salem.”

Mahrree knew that Guide Gleace received a great deal of insight about their family from the Creator, but now she was convinced that the Creator was nudging Mrs. Gleace just as much. She had looked straight at Peto when she said those words, as if she knew what had bothered him about Idumea several years ago.

“I remember seeing some of those people,” Peto said. “Remember that one man outside of the garrison?” he said to his mother and sister. “Wearing that ragged clothing going through the trash heaps looking for food?”

Jaytsy and Mahrree both nodded.

“We were the only ones who noticed him,” he told Mrs. Gleace. “No one else cared. And even then, we didn’t do anything for him,” he added quietly. “But people here do, I guess.”

“Making sure that no one lives like that—wouldn’t you agree that’s worth sacrificing a little competition for?” Mrs. Gleace asked.

Peto nodded as he stared at his hands.

Mahrree marveled. Mrs. Gleace knew her son almost better than she did.

“So,” Peto began, “the guide enforces this law of Salem?”

Mrs. Gleace looked up to the ceiling, almost in despair. “No, Peto. You poor child! No one at the top forces his way on those of us at the bottom. It’s the *people* who have chosen to live this way. This kind of generosity and equality can’t be mandated. All who live in Salem have *chosen* to live this way, and it is they, not my husband, who impose it. Oh, we’ve occasionally had some who’ve tried to live among us like wolves in sheep’s clothing ready to fleece our flocks, but in Salem the sheep won’t put up with it! They take that wolf to task, and if he won’t reform, they send him on his way to dissenter villages.”

“So if people here try to cheat, or steal—” Peto began.

“—they don’t eat,” Mrs. Gleace said simply. “They can’t claim anything from the storehouses. Occasionally we’ve had some lazy ones try to steal from others, but they’re always caught. Thieves here

“Then it all balances.”

are rather sloppy and fortunately not well-versed in the ways of the world. They get to fix their errors and try again, and most accept the quiet offer from their rector to avoid being publicly embarrassed. The few who refuse are publicly declared as thieves, and everyone keeps an uncomfortably close eye on them. That shame almost always pushes them to doing the right thing. Occasionally someone will leave us to go thieving in the dissenter colonies, instead.”

Sensing there was more to that, because Mrs. Gleace no longer met Peto’s eyes, he prodded, “And what happens to them there?”

Mrs. Gleace swallowed. “The dissenters are far less forgiving than we are, and much more possessive. Anyone who steals from the dissenters either loses an appendage or is executed.”

Peto winced. “Pretty good deterrents, I suppose.”

“Faced with that overreaction as the only other alternative,” Mrs. Gleace said, “the vast majority of our people see that laboring for four hours a day isn’t such a bad swap for food on the table and a house to live in.”

“That’s a lot better deal than they’d get in the world,” Jaytsy said.

“That’s what we try to remind them, that we left the world for a better—and even easier—life. Our first ancestors ran to Salem with little else but the clothing on their back. They had lost their homes and even family members. They arrived broken and frightened. Only by clinging to each other could they heal each other. Think about it—how did your family come to Salem?”

Mahrree knew. “With only the clothing on our backs.”

“Exactly. Just as our ancestors came here, and running from a pursuing army, too. So how do you feel about this community now that you can see what we can provide for you?”

Mahrree could barely manage saying, “As if I have a family who would do anything to help me.”

“And aren’t we all family? *This* was the way our ancestors lived for the first six years until Guide Hierum was killed. The men who organized Idumea are the same who destroyed all the Creator established. Even though they had sat at His feet and learned from Him, the lure of possessing it all was too great a temptation for them.” Mrs. Gleace paused and looked at Mahrree. “This has frequently been on your mind, hasn’t it?”

Mahrree only could nod. So often she’d thought about Guide Hierum, wondering about the life of their First Families. But some years ago she’d given up hoping for a similar existence.

She shouldn't have.

"It's all right, Mahrree," Mrs. Gleace said kindly, as if reading her mind.

Her next words convince Mahrree that not only was the Creator nudging Mrs. Gleace, but whispering directly into her ear.

"Finally, Mahrree, you get to live what you've wondered about. Your heart is ready for this, I can feel it.

"Now," she said, rummaging around in a large crate on the floor, "many people have been paying us for Hew's assistance in calving, but we've been passing most of it right on to our rector. However, this," and she grunted as she pulled something bulky and heavy from the crate, "I held on to because I thought perhaps you'd appreciate them, Mahrree. I've got a whole garden out back, so I don't need them." She set the rectangular clay pot on the table, with tender but ambitious green stems and leaves jutting up from it. "When a neighbor brought these by yesterday I thought, Who could use a dozen herb starts for her own garden?"

No one fully understood Mahrree's sudden weepiness, but Perrin did when he made her window boxes for her herbs two days later.

By the time they sat with Mrs. Gleace on her back porch that evening to share stories and listen for the first crickets, Mahrree wondered how it was they ever survived so long in Edge.

Chapter 15--“What I don’t have is someone like you, Perrin.”

Perrin sat down on the chair next to Gleace’s desk, worried about what it was that the guide saw in his eyes to ask him to come to his study. Feeling like a school boy in trouble, he’d even volunteered to help with the dishes, but Mrs. Gleace merely pointed him in the direction of her husband’s study.

He felt many times during dinner that the guide could read any person’s heart as if it were an open book. Not all of the pages detailing Perrin’s life were as distinguished as he wished.

While the Guide rearranged some files on his desk, Perrin peered outside the dark windows, straining to see—

“Are you looking for something?” Gleace asked him.

“They hide themselves very well,” Perrin said, shielding his eyes from the light cast by the candles in the office. “Then again, they are Guardians, in a way.”

“What in the world are you talking about?”

Perrin turned to see puzzlement on the guide’s face. “Your guards,” he told him. “I haven’t been able to spot them.”

“Perrin, I don’t have any guards.”

“None?”

“None.”

“But . . . why not? You’re the most important man in Salem—yes, yes, yes I know. No one’s ‘more important’ than someone else, but you’re *the Guide*. That must count for something.”

Gleace shrugged. “I suppose. But that’s why the Creator lets me know if there’s anything I should worry about it. Otherwise?” He shrugged again.

“Don’t people come knocking on your door at all hours, wanting your help?”

“Well, I’ve trained them, just as the previous guides have trained

them. You know all about chain of command, right? We have something similar. If someone has a problem, they know to go first to their neighbors. If they can't help, the rector is called in next. If he can't solve it, then the matter is brought to one of my assistants. Only after that do I deal with the problem, and even then I ask that my time be scheduled in advance. Otherwise, I'd never have a moment to breathe. As it is, I deal with about a dozen issues each week. Occasionally someone has pounded on my door, and I've walked him back to his home and let his neighbors take care of the problem. Word gets around that you can't jump the chain of command."

Perrin smiled. "I can respect that. Still, it strikes me as a bit foolish to have no security—" He paused. "You really don't need it here, do you?"

"Never have. Maybe someday, but not this year. Now, if I were in the world, however, I'd probably have twenty men around me! Even though I served as a scout in my younger years, the world worries me, deeply. Please, Perrin—sit down."

As he pulled up a chair to the desk, Perrin found himself thinking about the large Conference Room table at Administrative Headquarters. While this pine desk in front of him, simple in construction, lacked the enormity and high polish that made the Administrative table so imposing, this desk was solid and clean, and somehow more significant than that glossy monstrosity in Idumea.

Gleace sat down in the chair behind the desk and turned to Perrin. "I see you're still wearing it."

Perrin blinked in surprise. He glanced at himself until he realized what Gleace was gesturing to: the woolen knitted cord on his wrist, mostly concealed by his sleeve. Shem had tied it on to his wrist well over a year ago, and it had been the key to helping him discern the difference between his nightmares and reality. While he was no longer traumatized, the woolen chain had become so much a part of him that he'd never considered not wearing it. But—

"I suppose I could take it off now," Perrin decided.

"There's no need," said Gleace kindly.

"I'm guessing Rector Yung told you about this." Perrin slipped the chain around his wrist repeated as he frequently did. "I'm not sure who the woman is who knitted him several lengths, but I assume she lives in Salem as well."

"Not exactly," the guide said. "I mean, yes the chain came originally from Salem. But my brother-in-law didn't tell you *everything*

“What I don’t have is someone like you, Perrin.”

about it.”

“Well, of course not!” Perrin said flippantly. “*No one* has told me everything yet! I’m sorry,” he immediately apologized. “It’s all been—”

Gleace’s upraised hand stopped Perrin. “Don’t apologize. It’s us who should be asking for your forgiveness, for keeping you in the dark about so many things.”

Perrin couldn’t help but smile. “But I prefer being in the light now, even if I do find it quite blinding at times.”

Gleace grinned. “Well said.” His gaze traveled back to the woolen chain again. “If you’d like a replacement, I have a few cleaner ones.”

“Mahrree’s washed this one a few times,” he admitted. But he didn’t confess that at those times he felt like a toddler waiting for his favorite blanket to be returned. “Was it your wife who knitted this?”

“No. It was me.”

“*You?*”

“I could master only that simple chain,” Gleace smiled sheepishly, “but it was enough. You’re not the first man to wear one, but I will admit that one is special.”

Perrin fingered it again. “Why?”

“It’s the first I sent with a blessing,” Gleace said. “Not exactly a practice of ours, but Jothan said Shem was growing panicky as you descended again during Raining Season over a year ago, and we couldn’t imagine losing you. This chain has helped other men with trauma, and each time the man receiving it also was given a blessing by the guide. But how I could come give you a blessing?”

Gleace sat back in his chair and smiled vaguely at the darkened wool.

“So I asked the Creator if He could convey my blessing through the chain to you, that perhaps when you felt it and saw it, you could feel of the Creator’s power as well. The Creator honors the worthy requests of His guides, as I believe He did with that.” Gleace’s gaze rose to meet Perrin’s.

Perrin nodded and blinked back a few tears. “It did work,” he cleared his throat. “At a critical time, I remembered all kinds of things I had struggled to remember. And,” he hesitated to compose himself, “I felt the Creator there, too. I once held a long knife with this hand,” he held up the arm with the chain, “aimed for my chest. And then I felt the wool. I felt all kinds of things,” he said vaguely, not wanting

to revisit the moment, but feeling the need to explain some of it, which he really wasn't doing very well either.

But Gleace said, "I understand. And I'm pleased it helped." He slid open a drawer on the desk and pulled out three more lengths. "For if ever you feel the need."

Perrin took the lengths and reverently put them into his shirt pocket, still staring at the desk that impossibly carried so much weight.

Gleace noticed. "Nice desk, isn't it?"

"Uh, yes?"

"Want to guess how old it is?"

"Twenty years?"

"Try one hundred and thirty years. One of the first desks made in Salem."

"Really?"

"In Salem we build things to last. I've been told this desk would have been 'in fashion' over one hundred years ago, then considered 'old fashioned' and destroyed to be used for kindling. But about ten years ago it was considered 'in fashion' again, according to some refugees. What a waste if I were concerned about such things, to destroy a functional piece of furniture merely because someone somewhere thought the legs should look differently. I would have had to rebuild it exactly as it was over one hundred years later again."

Perrin nodded. "Sounds so ridiculous when you put it that way. But you're right—that's the 'fashion' of the world: everything is destroyable. Is that what you wanted to talk to me about? Desk trends in the world?"

Gleace chuckled. "Perrin, I wanted to talk to you about a couple of things."

Feeling his palms grow sweaty, he rubbed them on his trousers and glanced around the office, feeling very unprotected. "Go ahead."

"First," Gleace said, "I want you to know that I worry about you adjusting to Salem."

"I know, but I—"

Gleace raised his hand again. "I'm not making a judgment, just an observation. And I want you to know that I'm here to help you. I have full confidence that will do superbly in Salem, but we *may* need to work at it."

Now understanding the dread some of the teens he dragged to incarceration must have felt when he sat them down in the chair, he

“What I don’t have is someone like you, Perrin.”

asked, “Meaning what, sir?”

Gleace smiled easily in an attempt to relax Perrin.

It didn’t work. Perrin knew when people were trying too hard.

“Meaning only that your entire life has been focused on keeping people safe so they can go about their regular lives. But you, Perrin, have never really gone about a ‘regular life,’ have you?”

“No,” he admitted. “I’m not sure what that would look like.”

“I know. I have no army to give you, although I do have some tasks specifically for you,” Gleace added enigmatically. “But that won’t occupy all your time. So you need to decide: what do you want to do with the rest of your life?”

Perrin exhaled. “That’s not exactly a question one gets asked every day.”

Gleace leaned back. “But it’s one you’ve thought of every day.”

Perrin stared at him before murmuring, “You really do know what’s in a man’s heart, don’t you?”

“Only the glimpses the Creator gives me. So tell me, Perrin: what do you want to do in your spare ti—”

“Be a builder!” he burst out, and Gleace laughed.

“Well, that was easier than I anticipated. I can think of a dozen men who’d love someone with your strength helping them put up a barn.”

Perrin chuckled, embarrassed by his enthusiasm that startled even him, but feeling a bit more at ease . . .

Until he remembered Gleace’s ‘other tasks’. Once again he looked around the room. The window was too big, he thought fleetingly.

“What is it?” Gleace prodded.

Perrin hadn’t said the words out loud, but the thoughts had been floating in his head for two days and were now scrambling to be expressed.

“That measly little canyon—that’s all. *That’s all* that separates the world from Salem? Shem said that in just a few hours he can make from here to Edge? And the only guards you have are a dozen middle-aged men going gray? That’s your only defense?”

Instead of appearing alarmed or offended, Gleace simply smiled in his easy way. “Well, *you’re* a middle-aged man, going gray—”

“I’m a lot more skilled than they are!”

“They might surprise you—”

“They could never stop an army!”

“You’re right,” Gleace said calmly. “That’s why we need you. I have enough shepherds, farmers, tanners, smiths, teachers—you name it. What I don’t have is someone like you, Perrin.” He leaned forward. “Salem is in danger, because Idumea will come for us.”

He said the words so plainly, almost casually, and it jolted Perrin as if awakening him from a bad dream only to realize he hadn’t been dreaming.

“No, no, no, we weren’t followed! Your scouts said no one left the forest of Edge! We got verification of that this afternoon—”

Gleace gently took Perrin’s arm. “*Today* we are not in danger. Nor next year. But *some* day. Perrin, it’s already been seen. The day will come when Idumea’s army will march into Salem.”

Perrin sank in his chair. Despair crept up on him through some unplugged crevice he forgot to seal before leaving Edge. “They’re going to follow me. No matter what I do, I bring trouble. I’m bringing it to Salem—”

Gleace shook his arm which he still gripped. “No! They would come no matter what. Circumstances will eventually change that will force Idumea to look for something else. That’s when they’ll find us. You were sent by the Creator ahead of that day. You were sent to prepare us! I told you earlier that Salem needs you, and it’s true. What do *I* know of defense? I don’t even have guards around my house, just an ornery old bull.”

He released Perrin’s arm and pulled a large book from the corner of his desk. The leather binding looked new, but when he opened it, the loose pages inside were old and ragged. “This book is unlike any other. Do you know what it is?”

Perrin reluctantly sat up to see it better. “Looks like *The Writings*.”

“That’s right. But not a copy of *The Writings*; it’s *The Writings themselves*. This is the collection of the original writings of all the guides down to me.” The guide’s voice became quiet as he gingerly handled the myriad of pages in different sizes and conditions. “Usually it’s kept in a dry, dark box, but I brought it out today just for you. I want you to read this one.” He carefully pulled out an old piece of parchment, darkened at the edges with the ink fading, but still legible. “It was by Guide Pax, after he first arrived in Salem, one-hundred-thirty-eight years ago. He walked to a rise on a hill west of here and looked over the valley. His assistants recorded what he saw, and he rewrote the words on this parchment. Read this section, right here.”

“What I don’t have is someone like you, Perrin.”

Perrin guardedly took the old parchment, feeling the power of all the hands that had touched it. Before he could even focus on the words he began to feel something inside warm, then burn.

“The inhabitants of this new city will live in peace until the end comes, when the enemy will threaten to annihilate them. But before that time the Creator will send one to prepare them. From the highest ranks of the enemy—”

Perrin’s voice began to break.

“—will He call one to mark the path of escape for the valiant.” He could hardly utter the next words, *“The Deliverer will ensure the safety of the Creator’s people, until the coming Destruction.”*

Perrin’s voice was barely a whisper when he said, “You think I’m the one ‘from the highest ranks of the enemy’.”

“You are. It was made known to the guide before me. Perrin, does the name Tuma Hifadhi mean anything to you?”

By the reverent way Guide Gleace said his name, he knew Tuma Hifadhi must have been someone important. “You mentioned Tuma earlier. Any relation to Jothan Hifadhi?”

“Tuma was his grandfather. *Guide* Tuma Hifadhi. He’s also distantly related to someone else you know. A Colonel Fadh?”

Perrin’s eyebrows went up. “Graeson Fadh? But . . . how?”

“Tuma’s grandfather was your colonel’s great-great-grandfather. He was one that left with our so-called Guardians. One of his sons stayed behind and changed his last name, cutting off some of the first and last letters of his last name to disguise who he was.”

Perrin scoffed lightly. “Yes, Kopersee told me about that trend. So Fadh has ancestors here too, just like Yordin? It seems everyone has a connection to Salem.”

“Well Perrin, *your* name meant a great deal to Tuma Hifadhi. Remarkable man—he lived to be ninety-three and was active until the day before he died. His work meant a great deal to him,” Gleace said quietly. “You see, he spent the last of his years organizing scouts and overseeing their training to keep an eye on *you*.”

Perrin’s eyebrows rose again. He should have just left them up.

“Hifadhi was told by the Creator that the man to fulfill Pax’s prophecy would be an officer who was not afraid of the forest. That first attack on Edge, shortly after you arrived there, you spent three days and four nights braving the wilds you knew nothing about, chasing an enemy you saw as a threat to those you loved. We had scouts

above you in the trees, watching you the entire time. I was the assistant assigned to overseeing their training and reviewing all their reports as they came in. I have them in another box if you want to see them. And then, a year later, a large man mysteriously dressed in all white entered the forest, armed with a bow, quiver, and at least three knives, according to what our scouts could tell.”

Perrin nodded. “Shem told me you had sent me help.”

“Perrin, the Creator revealed to Tuma that fourteen Guardians were out to get Mahrree and your children, and that you were intent on tracking all of them down. But you wouldn’t have been able to do it alone. We gathered as many men as we could and sent them immediately into the forest.”

“Shem said over seventy.”

“I hope you won’t be offended to know this, but we helped you. Several of the Guardians slipped past you while you were struggling with one in a ravine, but we chased them back to you. Rather like herding cattle to a gate. That you accomplished so much on your own was incredible, but there was no way you could’ve found and stopped them all.”

“I know,” Perrin said quietly. “I was praying for help. And I could tell with at least two of the Guardians that something was chasing them. I thought it was maybe an animal.”

“Just us, keeping track of them and sending them in your direction.”

“And Jothan saved my life that night. I never thought I would solve that mystery. And now the solution is even more amazing than I could’ve imagined. Jothan’s grandfather—a guide—sent him.”

Gleace smiled. “We couldn’t lose you, Perrin. Never before in the one-hundred-nineteen-year history of watching the forest had we seen someone come in as fearlessly as you, as if it were in your blood to be part of the trees. Hifadhi also knew the right man would have a wife and *children*. When he learned that Mahrree was expecting your second child, he started training ten men from which one would be chosen to get as close to you as possible, so that we could learn about you. That man turned out to be Shem. And Perrin, you actually met Tuma.”

Perrin squinted. “How? I’ve never been to Salem before.”

“But Tuma went to Edge, right after Peto was born. He had been waiting for years to hear about a brave officer, and he couldn’t stand not meeting you. Despite the protests of his children, his assistants,

“What I don’t have is someone like you, Perrin.”

and mostly me—I was the assistant who had been serving the longest, and if he didn’t return I would’ve been the next guide, and I wasn’t ready for that!—he went with a scouting party down to Edge. He was there for less than a day, but the Creator told him exactly where to be and when so that he could meet you. I believe it was in the center of Edge, near a pond?”

Perrin searched his memory, but it didn’t take long to find it. “Was he probably taller and darker as a young man, but a bit hunched over and gray?”

“Yes, he was.”

Perrin sat back. “I remember him! I’ve thought of him frequently over the years. He was so unusual. He caught Jaytsy as she was chasing after . . . something, and then he patted Peto to sleep. Mahrree and I tried for weeks to imitate how he did that. I always wanted to do that for someone else—give them a reprieve from their crying baby. That’s what I did at The Dinner in Idumea. I saw the Nelts and that fussing baby and knew it was finally my chance to repay the debt.” He shook his head. “Repay my debt to a *real guide*. Amazing!” He chuckled softly. “I keep saying that word.”

Gleace leaned forward. “Perrin, if I may know, he had wanted to say something to you. I never knew what it was, though. Do you remember?”

Perrin looked up. “Uh, we spoke for only a few minutes . . . he said something about how children move on and away, then something about the importance of grandfathers, how often they were the only ones who could say or do things for grandchildren.” He shrugged. “Not too significant, I suppose. I think he was just making small talk.”

Gleace looked a little disappointed, but covered it with a forced smile.

“There was . . . something else, though,” Perrin said, realizing he could say it in front of Gleace. In fact, he *should* say it. “Just before he walked off he put a hand on each of us and said something like, ‘May the Creator bless and preserve your family.’” He looked up to the guide to see if that was significant. Those were the words he heard replayed in his mind that horrible night he held the long knife above his heart, hoping something would stop him.

Gleace’s smile became genuine. “Of course he would!” he whispered. “Ah, Tuma. How much you risked just to keep them safe. I should have known.”

“What do you mean?”

“Perrin, Tuma gave you a guide’s blessing. I blessed the chain, but Tuma blessed all of you. The Creator gives guides the ability to ask for blessings—as all of us can—but he also allows guides to *give* blessings, acting in the Creator’s name. In this case, Guide Hifadhi gave you a blessing of protection, of preservation. No matter what happened, the Refuser wouldn’t be allowed to destroy you or Mahrree or your children. Make your life difficult? Oh, yes. But destroy? Not with the guide’s blessing upon you. After what happened with those fourteen Guardians, Tuma was very concerned about keeping your family alive. Just before he died he told me you would all eventually make it to Salem, and that he made sure of it. I wondered how he could bestow a blessing without revealing himself. Usually blessings are much longer, with a great deal of instruction, but I see now that he spoke only the words that were really necessary. Tuma always found a way.”

Perrin sat back in his chair. “Remarkable. How old was he when he made the journey to Edge?”

“Eighty-seven! He wanted to know if you were really the one we were waiting for. He came back convinced that you were. That’s when he sent the word for Shem to officially sign up with you as a soldier. Later Shem asked Hifadhi if he could stay indefinitely to watch out for you.”

“Shem knows all about this? Well, of course he does. Yet another thing he didn’t bother to tell me,” Perrin murmured.

“Yes, he does. In fact,” Gleace said, a bit apologetically, “*everyone* in Salem knows about you and this passage,” he gestured to the parchment still in Perrin’s hands. “When I became the guide, the Creator made it known to me that one of my most important duties was to get you and your family safely to Salem. We need your whole family, Perrin. You’ve all been prepared to come here. Will you help us?”

A new understanding came to Perrin, and he couldn’t drop the parchment fast enough. “The people who lined the roads waving to us this morning thought they were . . . they were seeing the *fulfiller of a prophecy?*”

The parchment floated and settled on the desk, almost apologetically, but certainly hopefully.

Gleace had the decency to look a tad sheepish.

Perrin rubbed his forehead, stood up, and stomped to the back of

“What I don’t have is someone like you, Perrin.”

the chair. Glaring at the corner of the office he said, “They were looking at me today as, what?” He leaned over to see the words again, aimed right at him. “*The deliverer?*”

Gleace smiled patiently. “No one knows exactly *who* you are Perrin, except the Creator. Deliverer or not, it really doesn’t matter. All He’s told me is that we need you here, to help us prepare. You *are*, however, the one from the highest ranks of the enemy. You were to have been High General—”

“This . . . this is too much,” Perrin gestured at the parchment, half expecting it to hide. “I’m not that man! And I put away my sword, Guide. I was never planning to take it up again.”

“Nor will you,” Gleace promised. “Salem doesn’t need an offensive strategy, but we need *defense*. Who better than you knows the strategies of Idumea? Who better could develop a plan to organize, prepare, and move this people to safety when the time comes?”

Perrin shook his head throughout Gleace’s response, but Gleace was just as persistent.

“All that you’ve experienced has been to prepare you to help us. Your fortifications against the Guardians. Your rescue and rebuilding of Edge. Chasing down the troubled youth of the village. You were learning skills then to help our people now. Salem is where your future lies. It always has been. The Creator brought you home now for a purpose.”

Perrin slowly sat down again, feeling overwhelmed, defeated, yet strangely intrigued. Still ignoring the parchment in front of him, he said, “But I really don’t think I’m your man. If Shem were an officer he’d be the rank of general. He’d do a much better—”

“Shem Zenos already has another calling, to be one of my assistants. One passed away a few weeks ago. I need someone to coordinate between you and me, should you choose to accept this calling. You two have become such a good pairing—”

Perrin scoffed. He meant it to be lighthearted, but it came out as a blast of frustration. “*Choose* to accept this calling? Your people rescue me and my family, give us a heroes’ welcome, deliver us into our own home and property, then think I feel no obligation to *accept* this calling? I’ll still be baptized, but this? *This?*”

Gleace’s patient smile suggested this wasn’t the first time he’d faced resistance. “You owe us nothing. We rescue families every season. It’s what we do. There are those who come who don’t accept their callings, who choose never to be baptized. You can still live in

the house. This isn't Idumea, Perrin. You still have the ability to choose for yourself. Choices, always."

Perrin studied his face, looking for any deceit, any hidden motives.

Gleace's face was pure and clear as he leaned closer. "I told you yesterday that you would never again hear the title of colonel. And you won't. But Perrin, Salem needs a *general*. Ever since you first entered the forests above Edge shortly after your marriage, our scouts have been saluting you. After you dressed as a man in white and sought out those fourteen Guardians to preserve your wife and children, we began to call you General, even though you were just a captain. Jothan Hifadhi and twenty other men saluted you as you stumbled out of the forest, your back slashed and bleeding, but your family safe. For the raid at Moorland, we had over one hundred men capturing escaping Guardians. At one point you, on horseback, made it all the way to the edge of the forest, cutting down Guardians as you went. Again, we had men just a few dozen paces away, hiding in the shadows created by the burning forest. You stopped and looked at one of our men who was less than twenty paces away, and he impulsively saluted you. You stared at him, not completely seeing him through the smoke. But you did see *something*, didn't you?"

Perrin swallowed. He always knew the forest was watching him, but he never could explain how. He thought it maybe was something mystical. He never imagined it was literal.

"You were always our general. Will you now accept the calling to officially be our General Shin?"

Perrin could hardly breathe. He had been ignoring the feeling in his chest, but it had grown so large and hot that he could no longer dismiss it. A distinct personality was associated with it, a familiar presence, one that he hadn't felt so distinctly since the day he buried his parents.

Because it *was* his parents, his mother on the left side, his father on the right.

And it was from that right side that he felt the words more intensely than if he had heard them.

This—this, Perrin—is the general you were meant to be.

Chapter 16--“Sometimes it takes years to understand how something’s supposed to happen.”

When Perrin and Guide Gleace came out to the back porch, it was to hear laughter.

“So then Shem glares at me, points his fork and says, ‘Perrin, do something, or I will!’” Deck told Mrs. Gleace.

She laughed. “I would’ve loved to have seen his face when you kissed Jaytsy in front of everyone, and in the middle of dinner!”

“He cried when they told him they were getting married,” Peto said. “Father’s been calling him Crybaby ever since.”

“Well, not quite. Not until he found out I was expecting,” Jaytsy clarified. “The first time he put his hand on my belly and felt the baby moving, I thought Deck was going to have to remove him from the room to calm him down.”

Perrin and the guide only smiled at the laughter.

Mrs. Gleace saw the seriousness in her husband’s eyes and asked, her tone heavy with meaning, “Everything go well, dearest?”

“Of course.” He put a hand on Perrin’s shoulder, and Mahrree noticed some kind of parchment was in his other. “Perrin has agreed to go on a little hike with me in a few weeks when calving is finished. We’ll make sure it’s also well after Jaytsy is finished too,” he nodded to her.

“A hike?” Mahrree asked.

“Yes, to see a *ruin*, Mahrree,” Perrin said with a hint of a smile.

She sat up taller on the steps of the back porch. “Ruins! Oh, may I go as well?”

Guide Gleace chuckled. “Another time, I promise. And to *all* of them. But this time I will take only Perrin, Shem, and . . .” he turned to Peto. He studied him for a moment before saying, “You. Peto, you

are to come as well.”

It wasn't a request, but a statement of fact.

“Me? All right,” Peto said a little unsure, but not about to argue with the guide. At least not since Mahrree pulled him aside in the kitchen and threatened his very life if he didn't start acting more respectful toward the Gleaces. “Why?”

“Because it's been known to us since we first came here, but this will be new to you,” he sighed before he continued. “Salem will remain a peaceful place until the end of the Test. But before the Last Day, we will see upheavals and turmoil that no one here has ever experienced.”

Mahrree shifted worriedly. “But that may not be for many more years, right? Many more lifetimes? I mean, I've always pictured the Last Day to happen hundreds of years from now . . .” her voice trailed off as she saw the earnestness in Mrs. Gleace's face.

She shifted her gaze to her husband.

Mahrree did so as well.

“We always like to believe we have more time than we do,” Gleace said. “All those little things we'll do later. But later comes far more quickly than we want to admit. Mahrree, I understand you love old things. Here, take a look at this.” He held up the parchment, pulled a lantern off the nail where it hung by the back door, and placed it on the floorboards so the family could see the document.

They were silent as they read the words.

Deck was the first one to look up. “Perrin, you're the one from the highest ranks, aren't you?” He leaned back a little as if his father-in-law were contagious.

Jaytsy looked at her father in surprise, too.

Peto's hand went up to his chest, until he forced it down again.

The only one not looking up was Mahrree. Her finger traced the words again and again, and Perrin watched her intently.

When she finally pulled her eyes away from it, she was smiling. “My dream of nineteen years is beginning to be fulfilled today. Just days ago I knew it never could be. But Salem is a place of miracles. You were always meant to be . . . ?” She looked at Guide Gleace for confirmation.

He smiled at her. “Salem's General.”

No one noticed that Peto had stopped breathing.

Mahrree grinned. “Salem's General! You're to be the general for a side that, until days ago, you never knew existed.”

“Sometimes it takes years to understand how something’s supposed to happen.”

Peto leaned against the railing and buried his head in his hands.

Mahrree, surprised at his strange reaction, gently touched his shoulder. “Peto?”

He quickly shook his head, glanced up at her with a reassuring smile, then put his head down again. “*General Shin!*” he whispered.

Jaytsy looked at the parchment again, then at her parents. “Nineteen years? General? All right, I *know* I missed something here.”

Perrin still watched his wife. “Sometimes it takes years to understand how something’s supposed to happen. Jaytsy, Deck, Peto—it’s not time for you to know *everything*, but you can know this: your mother knew the night we became engaged that she’d be living in a wooden house surrounded by mountains—”

Her children gaped at Mahrree, but she beamed at her husband.

“—And when I was eighteen and traveling to Edge to spend the season with the Densals, I knew that I would someday become a general. Neither of us could have imagined those dreams would come true *here*. But obviously the Creator has a far greater imagination than either of us.”

“Ah, well said!” declared the guide. “Sometimes we wish we knew the end from the beginning, but that would take all the joy and mystery out of life, wouldn’t it? I thank the Creator He isn’t limited by our feeble imaginations.”

“I’m guessing,” Jaytsy said, shaking her head in a daze about what she was hearing of her parents, “that we don’t need to worry about any Dinners?”

“No, I won’t be that kind of general, Jayts. I only create plans for securing Salem. General is just the title so everyone I enlist to help knows I’m in charge.”

Mahrree squirmed in anticipation. “Why ruins, Guide? What’s the significance?”

The guide sat down on a stump on the porch.

Mahrree marveled briefly that the Creator’s Chairman of Salem had old stumps for stools on his back porch, just like she had in Edge.

“I’m not entirely sure, Mahrree, to tell you the truth. But I have a good idea. I only know that I am to go there in a few weeks with those that the Creator has sent me.” He gestured to Perrin and Peto. “The ruin was a temple created many civilizations ago. From our best guess, over a thousand years ago, but maybe two or even three thousand—”

Mahrree gasped at the numbers.

Concerned about her breathing, Gleace paused.

Perrin patted her on the shoulder. "She'll be doing that a lot," he told the guide. "Just keep going."

Gleace kept a watchful eye on Mahrree who was fairly panting. "Many, many years ago this great stone temple, now only a foundation with broken walls that are overgrown with vines, was the site of the last gathering of the Creator's people. The images carved there suggest that they were being chased down by their enemy, and they took refuge at the temple. Then, some kind of deliverance was sent. The last image is of people holding up their hands in what seems to be joy. There are many stones with markings that we guess are other languages and writing systems, but we've never been able to understand them. However, it seems that the temple ruins may have been used as a refuge for others' Last Days a few times since then."

"This has . . ." Mahrree gasped and Perrin patted her back, "all happened before?"

"Many times, with many civilizations on this sphere," Gleace told her, his brow furrowed in worry. "The Creator establishes patterns and follows them. Are you going to be all right? Can I get you something?"

She shook her head vigorously, and rolled her hand to tell him to keep going.

"If I were to guess," he continued, still keeping the gasping Mahrree in his view, "I would assume that is where our descendants would gather as well at the end of their Test. It would make sense He'd send us there as well."

"How far is that ruin?" Peto asked, since Mahrree wasn't able to.

"Not too far," Gleace bobbed his head. "About nine miles from here in the southwest is a canyon. That lasts about a mile, then opens into a vast valley we have never allowed to be settled. The few times people have gone there and dug in the ground they've found steel arrow heads and rusting balls of iron. Larger iron balls may have smashed down the remaining walls a few civilizations ago."

"Iron balls?" Perrin rubbed his chin in thought. "Knocking down walls? They must have been propelled in some way?"

Gleace shifted on his stump, as if uncomfortable. "We have a theory about that," he said cagily. "We'll try to find a few for you. Most have been buried, by time and by those who find them. Anyway," he said, seemingly eager to shift the subject again, "at the end of that valley is a mountain, but the top of it is flat, like an immense

“Sometimes it takes years to understand how something’s supposed to happen.”

table. The front of it is a sheer cliff overlooking the valley, but we’ve cut a trail along the side full of switchbacks that’s much easier to scale. The trail itself is less than a mile up to the site of the ruined temple. Behind that ruin on top of the mountain is a large plain that sinks down into a hidden valley, sheltered by mountain peaks. It’s almost as if the mountain in the middle had the top of it cleanly sliced off to create an enormous flat camping area. The temple ruin is near the front of it, overlooking the cliff and the valley.”

“That’s quite a journey,” Mahrree whispered, her breathing calming down enough to let her speak.

“Ah, it’s not that bad,” Peto smiled. “With horses we could be there and back in just two days. Maybe even do a little fishing.”

“I wasn’t thinking about your trip,” Mahrree told him. “I was thinking about families, children, expecting women, and the elderly trying to reach safety when the army of Idumea is on their heels.”

“Oh,” Peto whispered.

Mrs. Gleace nodded. “Now it sounds a bit harder, doesn’t it?”

Deck put his arm around Jaytsy.

“Our hope is,” Guide Gleace continued, “that with sufficient preparation and warning, the people of Salem won’t be running frantically. They’ll be able to move in a manner carefully planned so that no one’s left behind or in a panic.” He shifted his gaze to Perrin.

So did Mahrree. “Sounds like his kind of work. And it sounds like you’ve found your purpose as well,” she said to her husband.

“Why not just move people there now?” Peto asked. “If you know the end’s coming, go sit at the end and wait for it.”

Gleace chuckled. “I love the optimism of youth. First, my dear boy, there isn’t enough room for one-hundred-twenty-thousand people to sit and wait for something that may not happen for generations. Second, we can’t live our lives in fear of some distant unknown terror. We have to live each day now, enjoy the now, rejoice in the now. Do you really want to sit at a ruin until you’re an old man fretting and wringing your hands, or do you want to go out and find a beautiful young woman, and see what the Creator has in mind for you next?”

“Beautiful young woman, Guide! Show me where they are.”

The entire family gawked at Peto.

He slapped his hand over his mouth.

“What happened to, ‘I’m never getting married here?’” Jaytsy reminded him.

Deck snorted.

Peto shook his head. “I don’t know why I keep saying such things. I really don’t.”

Gleace laughed. “Finding beautiful young women is *your* job, Peto. I quit doing that kind of work fifty-three years ago. But I promise you, at your new congregation are many lovely girls. I was visiting there just last season. I go to every congregation. Takes me two years to make the rounds, and you can believe me: she’s out there—you’ll find her.”



At the end of that long, exhausting, incredible day, Peto wearily tromped into his bedroom which he hadn’t fully inspected. Earlier, when he’d found the pocketknife, and heard that food was being delivered, he’d headed downstairs, not too concerned with where he’d sleep that night.

But now he smiled at his room—about the same size as in Edge—and decided he should see what the other drawers in his dresser contained. He experimentally opened a drawer and peered in at the tidy stacks of tunics.

The crinkling in his shirt pocket reminded him of what had been hiding there all day.

He pulled out the thick parchment envelope, gently removed the document, and smoothed it on his new bed. When he read the words about the greatest general that the world would ever see, his chest burned in sublime anticipation.

“This is it, isn’t it, Grandfather? Here in Salem? We got him here!”

Then, feeling the dishonesty of his statement, and realizing that Salem likely wasn’t a place for exaggeration, or for cynicism—

Salem was going to take a lot of getting used to, he sighed to himself.

Anyway, realizing that he needed to be more accurate, or Salem would be running him back to Edge, he said, “This is where he’s supposed to be that greatest general, right Grandfather? That’s what you were trying to tell me, back on the kickball field in Edge?”

His dark bedroom didn’t answer him anything, initially, but in the distance he heard a low rumble, as if the cosmos were sending him an answer via thunder. The rumble swelled ominously, impressively, until Peto was forced to admit it was only one of the Zenos’s

“Sometimes it takes years to understand how something’s supposed to happen.”

wagons leaving their work on the Briters’ house for the night.

Still, it was a good effect, and he took it.

Grinning, Peto slid the document back into the envelope, and was about to put it back into his pocket for safe keeping when he stopped.

Under the tunics was as good as spot as any, Peto decided, and he shut the drawer.

Because he was home.

In a dark office of an unlit building sat one man.

Around Nicko Mal were strewn nineteen years of notes, questions, findings, conclusions, and drafts of the greatest study never published, “Human Nature.” The room looked as if the author had taken the crates of meticulously written pages and hurled them in an explosive fit of rage.

Which, in fact, he had done.

The old man now sat calmer, primarily because he was exhausted, and stared at years of wasted effort littering his study like an untidy blizzard.

It was no longer an experiment. It was personal, oh so very personal. It had been ever since the Shins deliberately defied him by taking that stolen caravan to Edge—

No, no, Mal considered. No, it started *much* earlier than that. It began with a nosy little woman who dared to suggest his elevated thinking and high-minded measures were no better than the selfish and despicable kings he deposed. It started with *her*.

He wondered what else there was to do. How does one take revenge on those who no longer ‘officially’ exist? They abandoned him, his project, and his world without a thought for anyone else but themselves.

He kicked aside some of the papers scattered around the floor until he saw the hastily written note that had arrived by messenger not long ago. He bent over, retrieved it, and tried to smooth the crumpled page he had balled up earlier that day.

There was a beginning. A rather *impressive* beginning at that, he was loath to admit. He stood up, went to his desk shuffling through several inches of parchment, and pulled out a quill and ink. Then he began to write one idea, then another, and another as quickly as they flowed into this mind.

Safety Assured Leaving East of Medicezzi

He would not let them destroy his greatest work. There was one more reaction that still could be observed, and it was going to be the most extraordinary one ever.

It just might even change the world.

Chapter 17—“Not even one trumpet.”

The next day was Holy Day, and before they were to go to their congregational meeting, the Shin family had something to do first. The five of them stood that early morning in front of the small stone building.

No one dared knock on the door.

“Are you sure this is it?” Peto squinted at the simple wood door, the plain stone structure, and the unadorned peaked roof.

Perrin shrugged. “It’s where the Guide said to be—”

The door swung open and a man in his forties smiled in greeting. “Thought I heard someone out here. Come in, they’ll be ready for you in just a moment.”

Perrin glanced at his wife and led the way, Mahrree following with Peto, Jaytsy, and Deck behind. They found themselves in a small room where wooden benches had been set along the sides next to the windows, cushioned with simple brown pillows.

“Please sit down,” the man said genially. “I’ll let them know you’re here. Just wrapping up. Holy Days are our busiest, you know. This won’t take but a minute.” He slipped through double doors across from them, and the sounds of a quiet conversation leaked out before the doors shut solidly.

“I’m assuming,” Jaytsy said, looking around her as she sat, “that this is nothing like the Administrative Headquarters.”

“Not at all!” Mahrree chuckled softly. “First, I’m not so nervous in the waiting room that I’m trying to think of ways to pass out. And second, while the sofas were far more elaborate, they actually felt firmer than this bench.”

Everyone sat and stared at the walls, waiting.

“So,” Deck started, attempting to break the uncomfortable silence, “what was involved in installing a High General in Idumea?”

Perrin exhaled and rolled his eyes. “What’s involved is about a

thousand bored soldiers from the garrison and surrounding areas forced to put on their dress uniforms, all of the Administrators showing up in their fancy red coats with tails, plus several musicians—trumpeters, drummers, and the like—doing whatever it is they do, then the family of the new High General dressed in suits and silks and walking down a ridiculously long procession to the playing of the aforementioned trumpeters and drummers while the new High General does this odd slow march to some pavilion—” he gestured a grand structure in the air, “while wearing all his pomp and finery and medals and tries to look distinguished without clanking.

“Then he stands in front of Nicko Mal, recites some long, dull speech that they call the oath while all of the unfortunate soldiers stand at attention for what feels like an hour, then Mal does something—I can’t remember what—and the High General glides back down again between all of the soldiers with their swords out and raised high, probably wishing someone would drop one *accidentally*—since it’s Qayin Thorne, there may be a lot of *accidents*—and all the while they’re quietly praying, even though they’d never prayed before, that it could just end already. Oh, and there’s a stuffy dinner afterward.”

Seeing the sneers on everyone’s faces, Deck said, “So, this will be better then?”

“I don’t know what’s about to happen, Deck,” Perrin admitted. “I was just told to come this morning, bring the family, and . . . ?”

Mahrree smoothed her skirt. “I’m not sure I’m dressed for the occasion.”

Peto scoffed. “What else would you wear, Mother? No one here has even heard of silk!”

“Of course, of course. How silly of me—”

The doors swung open to reveal the same man, smiling broadly. “We’re ready for you.”

Perrin took a deep breath and stood up with his family. He headed for the doors, absently patting his left side for his sword—

Forgetting again just a moment too late that it wasn’t there, he clenched his fist briefly instead. Anything formal made him tense, especially when he didn’t know the level of formality expected.

But quickly he began to relax, because before him was a room not much larger than his new eating room. A long, plain table ran down the center of it, and on each side of the table were six men,

“Not even one trumpet.”

twelve in total, dressed in the same simple tunics and trousers as Perrin. They ranged in ages from middle-aged to quite elderly, and they quickly rose—well, some of the older ones weren’t exactly quick, and used the table and in one case a neighbor to get to his feet—to greet the Shins with enthusiastic smiles.

At the very end stood Guide Gleace, grinning, his empty chair in front of him.

The Creator’s Assistants were a far more friendly sight than the world’s Administrators, Perrin thought to himself. Mahrree wouldn’t be passing out today.

Salem’s new general smiled back, until his eyes fell on the assistant closest to him and positioned at the most junior spot at the table.

He was considerably younger than the rest, and also appeared a bit surprised to be there.

Perrin didn’t mean to, but it had been gnawing at him all night and morning, and it just happened: he glowered at Shem.

Shem’s smile fell and he swallowed nervously.

Just how much did Shem think one man could take? How many *more* secrets and surprises? What else would Shem spring on him, with his feigned innocence? “Oh, I forgot to tell you, but . . .”

Shem shifted from one foot to the other, knowing full well by Perrin’s squint precisely how frustrated he was.

That was the man Perrin was supposed to report to.

That being of lies, that withholder of information. Never—*not once*—in his past few days of full disclosure had Shem bothered to disclose that his so-called claimed brother was supposed to be Salem’s general. Not in the barn at Deck’s when he professed to be honest about everything. Not in the cavern of the First Resting Station, not even during their first night in Salem. Shem was an endless supply of surprises.

And *that* was the man he was supposed to report to?

Perrin pointed at him, wishing his finger could somehow be sharper. “*You!*”

The expressions on the faces of the assistants froze as their new general eyed their newest assistant.

“Perrin—” Mahrree said gently, taking his arm.

Shem firmed his stance, but also cowered ever so slightly. “Something wrong, General Shin?”

Because he possessed nothing more threatening, Perrin pointed

again, as aggressively as possible. “I want the truth from you, the entire truth with no more little parts hiding to jump out at me later: how long did you know?”

Shem chuckled nervously and looked around the table. If he was expecting support, he wasn't getting it, since the older men tensing in worry weren't sure what to say either.

Guide Gleace folded his arms and watched.

“Uh,” Shem began with a grin that bordered on the inane, “since the very beginning, Perrin. The only reason I was sent to you was because . . . we thought you were *the one*. Our future general. Guide Hifadhi wanted to be sure.”

Perrin pulled back his finger to make a fist that he still held up.

“We discussed this last night, Perrin,” Gleace said steadily from the other side of the table. “Shem could never have told you anything. He wanted to, but it was *my* calling to explain it all and to issue you the call to be our general. Shem was merely following orders. First Guide Hifadhi's, then *my orders*,” he emphasized. “Which, Perrin, outranked any of yours.”

Gleace's expression was kind yet admonishing at the same time. A mixture which, Perrin realized, had he been able to perfect would have caused all of the thieving youth of Edge to feel as contrite and humble as he felt right then.

When Mahrree again tugged on his arm, a bit more urgently, he knew he had no other option but to drop his fist and attempt a smile.

“Sorry, Shem . . . everyone. It's just that . . . so many secrets. So many revelations.” He shrugged helplessly. “My head's been swirling so much that this morning I wasn't even sure if I had my boots on the right feet.”

The men at the table laughed too earnestly, relieved that they weren't about to witness their first fist fight in Salem, and on a Holy Day at that.

Throwing all caution to the wind, Shem caught Perrin in a big hug. “I'm sorry too, *General*. But we've waited so long for this day. Isn't this amazing? Say it with me: amazing! Come on—your favorite word?”

Perrin's glare turned pitiful. It was difficult to stay stern when everyone around him was laughing. “All right, Shem. Maybe later, once everything's out of the way,” he said, not sure what ‘everything’ was about to be.

“Guide,” Mahrree said, “I hope we're dressed appropriately?”

“Not even one trumpet.”

Gleace smiled. “Just fine, Mrs. Shin. This isn’t Idumea, you know. The Creator has no need for shows and demonstrations. He doesn’t need to establish His power; He just wants to share it.”

“So, what happens now?” Perrin asked.

“Simple,” Gleace said, pulling his chair out from the table. “You sit here, I put my hands on your shoulders, and in front of your family and these witnesses, I—by the authority of the Creator—proclaim and bless you to be Salem’s general. I may ask for the Creator to help inspire you in ways to fulfill your calling, grant you the health and strength you need to defend this land, and probably thank the Creator for sending us such a capable soldier. I might even remind you to be nice to Shem, since he was just doing his duty, after all.”

Everyone chuckled at that, even Perrin.

“But perhaps I can leave that out. Then you stand up, shake my hand, and we all go our separate directions since Holy Day is the busiest day for all of us.” He raised his eyebrows expectantly and gestured to the chair.

Perrin nodded and started to make his way past the assistants to the head of the table. The men sat down and slid their chairs in to make room for him to get by.

“Hmm,” Peto muttered as his father squeezed between the old men and the wall, “not even one trumpet.”

One of the assistants heard him. “I’ve got a small flute in my pocket,” and he fished it out to show him.

Peto waved that off. “I’m sorry,” he smiled, slightly embarrassed. “Just . . . never mind.”

“Would you like flute lessons?”

Mahrree, Jaytsy, and Deck tried not to snort.

“No, no!” Peto exclaimed, blushing. “I was just being—Really, please. Just never mind.”

Perrin shot Peto a warning look.

“Because I’m a very good teacher—”

“I believe, Gull,” Gleace said as Perrin, who finally made it to the other end, sat down, “that young Mr. Shin was referring to some of the more bombastic displays in Idumea. Usually an event such as appointing a new leader would be accompanied by trumpets.”

“Ah,” the assistant said, slipping the flute back into his pocket, much to the relief and embarrassment of Peto.

Another assistant patted the flute-toting assistant on the back. “Young Mr. Shin was displaying a subtle example of sarcasm, Gull.

Since you never spent time as a scout, you never learned that affectation from the world. Mr. Shin is well-versed in the techniques, I'm sure."

"Sorry," Peto mumbled again.

"And as you can tell," Shem said, smirking, "several of our assistants are *also* well-versed in the techniques."

Perrin glanced around at the assistants. "Just how many of you served as scouts?"

Eight hands went up.

So did Perrin's eyebrows. Then he rubbed his forehead. The surprises weren't about to end anytime soon.

"I remember that move," an elderly assistant pointed at him. "You massaged your forehead even as a teenager."

Perrin's hand stopped moving.

"You must have been about sixteen or seventeen," the assistant went on, clearly enjoying his reminiscing. "I was working under your father Relf at the time. You came in to the stable where he was, asking your father for something. I don't remember what it was, but when he denied you, you started massaging your forehead."

Perrin's hand dropped to his lap as he stared at the old man.

"It's quite all right," he continued. "Rather an endearing trait. Helped us to identify you."

"He hasn't seen his file yet," Gleace said.

Perrin sighed. "My file?"

"To make sure we were watching the right people," Gleace told him, "we not only recorded physical descriptions, but also quirks and mannerisms."

The elderly man grinned. "I was the first to record you were a head rubber. Whenever the world went contrary to what you expected, that's when your fingers met your forehead."

Perrin clenched his fists to keep from rubbing his head.

The elderly man craned his neck to see Perrin's lap. "Yep. Recorded you did that too. Fists. To keep from massaging your forehead."

Mahrree was shaking so hard at the other side of the room that she couldn't contain it anymore. Her snort escaped, and her daughter, who was also giggling, elbowed her.

"It was my son who noticed *that*," the man smiled at Mahrree. "Mrs. Shin's a snorter," he said. "His descriptions helped your sister Galena to identify her in the forest, didn't they, Hew?"

“Not even one trumpet.”

“I never snorted in the forest!” Mahrree declared, to the amusement of the room.

“No, but you snorted in the village.”

Even Perrin began to chuckle. “I think I’ll have to take a look at those files. *All* of them,” he said, looking up at Gleace.

“Once you’re General Shin, those files will belong to you. Now, if we may?”

Four minutes later Perrin became General Shin, with Guide Gleace saying exactly what he predicted he would, without the reminder to be nice the Shem.

General Shin and his family left the small stone structure a few minutes later, after each of the assistants insisted on hugging him, and walked home for breakfast before the congregational meeting, as if extraordinary things happened like that every day.

In Salem, it seemed that they actually did.

Two hours later, the Shins and Briters realized that the guide wasn’t exaggerating the night before about the congregation meeting. Their neighborhood congregation hall was packed, with more children and young adults than any of them had seen before at a Holy Day service. Even though they were early, they sat near the back because of the crowd.

At the front of the congregation hall stood a couple of men talking to Shem. He had been watching the door and when he saw the Shins come in, he nodded a quick goodbye and made his way through the aisles to them. It took him a few minutes to get there because of the number of people wanting to shake his hand and share a word, but when he finally made it to the back, Perrin was smirking.

“Is everyone here to see you?”

Shem shook his head. “This is how it is every week. Not like Edge, right?”

“It’s a lot noisier than Edge, too,” Mahrree said, watching a family of small boys in front of her try to sit down on top of each other.

“And who went to the services there? Old people, one bachelor, and your family,” Shem reminded her.

“That’s true,” Mahrree agreed, watching the boys rearrange themselves. “I think the noise of children is better than—”

“—the snores of old women,” Peto finished for her. “That old

Mrs. Vits drove me crazy every week. Always sat behind us, too.”

“Peto, that’s not nice,” Jaytsy said. But her attention was drawn to a little girl wandering down their row, eyeing Deck. She stopped at his knee, leaned on it, and looked up at him with adoring eyes.

Deck sat back nervously and scanned the area searching for anyone missing a child. No nearby adults seemed to belong to her.

Unable to ignore her puppy dog eyes any longer, Deck looked down. “Hi.”

She smiled.

He squirmed. “Time to find your parents, don’t you think?”

“You have a nose.”

Deck looked around him again, growing desperate. “Yes I do.”

“It’s right there.”

Deck leaned over. “Jaytsy,” he said through clenched teeth, “why is she talking to me?”

“Because apparently you have a nose,” Jaytsy whispered.

Peto shook with silent laughter.

Deck prodded his brother-in-law next to him. “Talk to him. He’s looking for single women. Are you practical?”

The girl shook her head. “I like you. I like your nose.”

Deck’s face went mushy, either from trying to see his nose or trying to figure out what to say next. Suddenly struck with brilliance, he said, “I hear your mother calling you.”

“No you don’t. She’s back there talking. I see her.”

Deck craned his neck to see several rows of happily chatting women, all of whom could have been the right age to be her mother.

“Your father’s calling you, then.”

“No he’s not. He’s talking to those mans over there.”

Down the row Deck saw a man talking to his in-laws and Shem.

“So I can stay here and look at your nose. Are you a papa yet?”

“Almost.”

Jaytsy and Peto giggled next to him.

“You won’t be very good at it,” the girl decided.

“Wha . . .?” Deck exclaimed open as Jaytsy held her belly and laughed. Peto nearly fell off the bench.

The girl’s father was working his way down the row. “I’m sorry, is she insulting you? She tends to do that. Can’t really control the tongue of a three-year-old. I know—we’ve been trying. Come on, Troublemaker. It’s time to say awkward things to your mama.”

The girl smiled sweetly at Deck and batted her eyelashes. “Bye!”

“Not even one trumpet.”

Deck frowned. “Our child will never be like that.”

“Oh, now you’ve done it, Deckett Briter,” Mahrree sighed. “You’ve doomed yourself to have a daughter just like her. That’s how it works, you know. The Creator hears you criticizing, then He sends you the same challenge to see how well you’ll handle it. I know—that’s how we ended up with Peto.”

“Hey!” Peto exclaimed before being shushed by his family as the service started.

At the beginning of the service Rector Bustani, whom they had met the day before, invited the Shins and Briters to stand so he could introduce them. The congregation had become surprisingly quiet and reverent as soon as the rector stood up, which meant everyone there heard clearly who it was that had just moved in.

It was unnerving to face several hundred heads swiveling to gawk at them, especially since Perrin suspected what they were all thinking about him. It didn’t help that Rector Bustani had announced that earlier in the morning, Perrin had accepted the call to be Salem’s general.

He knew he was going pink when one of the little boys in the row in front of them whispered loudly, “He chased bad men with Shem Zenos.”

His mother quickly covered his mouth as several rows of people chuckled. The mother smiled an apology to Perrin and he nodded forgivingly at her.

“Can we see your sword later?” one of the older brothers whispered enthusiastically.

When they sat back down, Perrin leaned over to Mahrree. “So much for living in anonymity.”

“They’ll forget,” she whispered.

But by the time the service ended, no one had forgotten. There was a line to greet the Shins and Briters nearly as long as there was to catch a few minutes with the rector. It was forty-five minutes later before they started to make their way home.

Accompanied, of course.

“I’m really sorry,” the boys’ mother said to Mahrree as they walked together back to the Shins’ home. “We should rescue him.”

But Mahrree laughed. “Don’t you dare. This is the best entertainment I’ve seen in weeks.”

Peto, Jaytsy, and Deck chuckled in agreement.

Ahead of them on the road, Perrin looked back briefly. Mahrree

waved to him to continue.

“Really,” the boys’ father said, “he doesn’t deserve—”

“Oh, yes he does,” Peto declared.

The string of five boys that had sat in front of them during the service were knotted around Perrin, asking him so many questions that he never had a chance to answer them.

“So if a Guarder is coming from the left, and another from the right—”

“Well, that really didn’t happen—”

“What if you lost your horse? What if you were running, and then—”

“Actually, that *did* happen. You see—”

“They really made you leave your sword? That’s so mean!”

“Not really. I turned in my sword because I—”

“How do you hold one? Here, show me with this stick.”

“I don’t think your mother would approve—”

“No, this stick! It’s bigger.”

“Salem’s supposed to be a place of peace, so I don’t think—”

“He’s holding it wrong, isn’t he, Mr. Shin? He’s always doing it wrong!”

Mahrree was giggling so hard she was shaking.

The boys’ mother glanced over at her. “I hope you don’t take this the wrong way, but you’re nothing like I expected. Neither is your husband.”

The boys’ father nodded. “He’s remarkably patient.”

Their youngest son grabbed Perrin’s hand and held it firmly as they walked. Perrin glanced back again at Mahrree, with pleading in his eyes, but she just beamed at him.

“Everyone gets the wrong idea about him,” Mahrree said. “But we know he’s a big softy. Especially when someone puts an infant in his arms.”

Jaytsy ran her hand over her belly and smiled.

“I’ll admit,” the boys’ father said, “that I was a little worried to hear General Shin would be our neighbor, but now I’m more worried *for* him.”

The Shins, Briters, and the boys’ parents laughed, and Perrin glanced back one more time, seeking deliverance. By now each boy had a large stick in his hand, hoping for a lesson. Knowing there was no way around it, he stopped.

“Men,” he announced formally, and each boy stood immediately

at attention. He smiled at their obedience, which was snappier than many of his new recruits. “Well done. Men, hand me those ‘swords’. It’s time to teach you a thing or two.”

“Uh-oh,” Deck mumbled to Peto. “If he takes them to the barn for wrestling practice, they’re just going to giggle.”

“Like we did?”

Perrin stood at command in front of his short troops. “Do you men want to become the strongest soldiers?”

“Yes, sir!”

Their mother cleared her throat, uncertain about what the new general may be intending, but Perrin winked reassuringly at her.

“Back in the world we judged the strongest soldier—” he tossed away the sticks, much to the boys’ dismay, “—by having a race. Yes, I realize you don’t really *have races* in Salem,” he sent a sidelong glance to his family, “but you don’t *have swords* either, yet boys being boys you seem to know how to fashion them anyway. So men, we’ll have a race. But not just any race—an obstacle race like we had in Edge. Shem Zenos and I had to run through gardens, orchards, from one house to another, and once, I even had to run carrying a chicken for a mile. And guess what? Chickens don’t enjoy running.”

The boys burst into giggles.

“And in one race, Shem had to kiss a *girl!*” Perrin pulled a face which the boys all matched.

“Eww, yuck!”

“So, men—who’s ready to start becoming the strongest soldier? Your first task is to run home, when I say.”

The boys jumped up and down, clapping their hands.

Their mother relaxed. “He’s a clever one, isn’t he?”

Mahrree chuckled. “That he is.”

“Line up, men,” Perrin ordered. He waved over to the children’s father to come stand next to them. “Your father will run behind you to make sure none of you cheat. We always had chasers on our races. Now, line up here. When I say ‘go,’ you run as fast as you can for home, right?”

The boys nodded and got into position, waiting for the word.

“Ready . . . go!”

Four boys took off running with their father behind, but the youngest, three years old, burst into tears.

Perrin picked him up. “Want to be my chicken?”

“Yes!”

Perrin tucked him under his arm and started in a sprint after the older brothers, quickly catching up to them.

Their mother's jaw dropped to see General Shin loping past her sons, her youngest tucked under his arm like a laughing bale of hay.

Mahrree patted the boy's mother. "He may be jiggled up a bit, but Perrin never dropped a chicken."

The mother chuckled. "Yes, nothing at all as I imagined. I think you're going to do just fine in Salem."

After the race, which the three-year-old won with a little help, the Shins and Briters finished their midday meal consisting of offerings left by Salemites the day before. They were just cleaning up when a knock came at the front door.

"And so it begins," Peto grumbled as Deck went to answer it.

"Oh, I don't mind," Mahrree smiled as she carried plates into the kitchen. After several weeks of no contact with people in Edge, she was hungry for friends.

"Just us," a familiar voice called, and Shem and Yudit came into the large gathering room.

"I'm sure you've been visited near to death," Yudit said, "but we have something for you." She held a large wrapped package.

Perrin picked up the last of the plates from the table. "You're always welcome. Come sit down."

Yudit motioned to the family. "This is for all of you." She sat the bundle on the table and waited for Mahrree and Perrin to come back into the room. Then she unwrapped a large book. The Writings, Updated Version. "I understand your version was a bit thinner."

Mahrree started bouncing when she saw it. "Does it have the family lines?"

Yudit opened the thick leather binding and thumbed through the new crisp pages to the back to reveal charts and diagrams full of names and dates. "There it is. The first five hundred families, then their descendants. Takes up a big part of the text, but we've developed a rather efficient numbering system. Now Mahrree . . . Mahrree? Where did she go?"

Everyone heard Mahrree running up the stairs. They shrugged to each other and waited, because a moment later she came rushing back down. Pressed to her chest were papers, and she regarded Perrin with edgy excitement.

"I have something I wasn't supposed to let the commander of Edge know I had. But since *he* had Terry's map all this time—"

Mahrree laid down the pages and smoothed them on the table.

“Family lines!” Jaytsy squealed. “How did you get them?”

“This is *your* handwriting,” Perrin said, picking up one copy.

Peto took the copy underneath. “But I don’t know this writing.”

“That’s because your great-great-great-grandmother Kanthi made that copy, just as the king was asking for the lines,” Mahrree told them. “Her husband Viddrow told her make a copy, and it was handed down our line through the women. My mother had it hidden in her recipe collection. I made a copy of it right after Peto was born.”

Perrin narrowed his eyes at her. “Before or after?” he asked.

Mahrree thought for a moment, trying to understand what he meant before she remembered their argument on their second wedding anniversary. “After. And I was going to give a copy to Jaytsy in a few years to stash in her recipe collection, but now?” She grinned at Yudit. “Can we find my line?”

“Of course,” said Yudit. “Let’s start with the names before the division, and see if your names are the same we have recorded.”

“Mahrree Peto Shin,” Shem said slowly. “You *are* a traitor.”

“I know!” Mahrree squealed.

Yudit flipped several pages in *The Writings*, glanced at Mahrree’s notes, then turned another few pages. “No!” she whispered, and Mahrree had never realized before that the word could sound happy. “Shem, look!” She handed him Mahrree’s copy and pointed to a name.

“Hey, that looks like . . .” Shem checked the pages and said a happy, “No!” just like his sister.

“What? What?” Mahrree cried.

“My father’s line!” Shem said. “Mahrree, we share the same great-great-great-grandfather Boskos! My father was named after him. Five generations back, but we’re cousins!”

Yudit clapped her hands. “I love doing family lines. See? You do belong here!”

“Really?” Mahrree said tears welling in her eyes. “Are you sure? But I don’t have a Boskos.”

“Actually, you do. Look,” Yudit said, taking Mahrree’s pages and laying them next to the Zenos family lines. “In our records there were a couple of sons who went missing during the Great War. We don’t know what happened to them. We have birth dates, but no deaths. Either they died in battle or were separated from their families or severed contact. Right here—your great-great-grandfather Barnos

was one who was considered lost.”

“But his last name was *Eno*,” Mahrree said.

“That was common then. When adult children disagreed with their parents, they often cut off part of their last names to designate a break with the family. We have him recorded as having changed his name to *Eno* as well,” Yudit pointed to his name on the line.

“That’s right. Professor Kopersee told us about that practice,” Mahrree said.

“He must have chopped his name before his father Boskos came to Salem, bringing what family he had left with him,” Yudit decided. “There were a few adult children left behind. Look at your copy, Mahrree. See, even though Barnos’s parents’ names are recorded as Osko and Huld *Eno*, there were no other *Eno* families in the world. I have the records to prove it. When Barnos registered his name and his parents’ names, as was required at the time when someone moved into a new village, he probably changed their identities to protect himself from suspicion. Boskos became Osko, and Huldah became Huld. He likely didn’t want anyone to know his family were Guarders who escaped. We think that’s part of the reason why all the records were eventually destroyed. Who knows, maybe even King Querul had Guarder blood he didn’t want anyone to discover.”

“That’s what Graeson Fadh’s ancestors did, too,” Shem said. “Hifadhi was cut down to Fadh.”

Mahrree ran her hand reverently over the names. “I never would have guessed,” she said softly. “I never considered that *Zenos* might have been the same as *Eno*,” she said quietly, looking at her family lines next to the *Zenos* lines. Once they reached Boskos *Zenos*, the names were identical back to the First Families. “Had I known, Shem, I might have risked asking you about it.”

Shem exhaled. “Good thing you didn’t, Mahrree. I wouldn’t have known what to answer. ‘Yes, you’re my fourth cousin. That’s why we have the same color hair. Now, want to guess how I know that and where I *really* come from?’”

The family chuckled, and Mahrree put an arm around her cousin and squeezed him.

“That’s amazing,” Perrin said, shaking his head as the family leaned over to read the names on the *Zenos* family line page. “I know, Shem, I said ‘amazing’ again. I think I’m entitled. Well Peto, what do you think? He’s almost your real uncle. Peto? Where did he go?”

“Not even one trumpet.”

Peto was upstairs in his room, pulling the thick parchment envelope out from under his new tunics. With his hands shaking in excitement, he opened the envelope, pulled out the document, and thought he could smell Relf Shin. He unfolded it and smiled at the two names on the top of the page.

“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 grinned as he pulled out his new pocketknife, laid the parchment on the desk, and using a book as a straightedge, carefully sliced off the top strip.

It contained two names and the signature of his grandfather.

Peto chuckled as he folded the larger piece of parchment, put it back in the envelope, and slid it back into its hiding place.

“Now watch, Grandfather!”

He walked as casually as possible down the stairs, the thin slip of paper hiding in his shirt pocket, to see the inquisitive look of his father.

“Everything all right, Peto?”

“Yes, sure. I was just thinking, Yudit, if you still have that page open . . . Oh good, you do. What can you tell me about a name I saw on your family’s line.” He leaned over the book and pointed. “Lorixania? *That* looked like an interesting name.”

Yudit rolled her eyes. “Lorixania Eriniki! Well now, she was a character.” She pointed to the name on the opposite page, an ancestor on their mother’s line.

“With a name like *Lorixania*,” Perrin chuckled, “I imagine she should be.”

“We know only a little bit about her,” Shem said. “Such as that she was the most outspoken woman in our mother’s line.”

“And that’s saying something,” Yudit chuckled. “Our mother’s line was an unbroken string of loud women for six generations until Shem disrupted the pattern.”

Shem grinned. “When our father was courting our mother she warned him that no sons had been born in her family for generations,

and if he was serious about her, he better expect daughters. That's why my father was so proud of himself when I was born."

"Well, now Lorixania Eriniki—we don't have her married name recorded," Yudit explained, "Lorixania was rebellious, loud, and a shockingly large woman with a deep voice. She had her own ideas about everything, questioned everything anyone told her, and never followed expectations. During the Great War she tried a few times to follow her husband, who was an officer in the army, into battle. He kept sending her back, along with her long knives. Apparently she had several stashed around the house."

Perrin chuckled. "Sounds like my kind of woman."

"You think so, Father?" Peto asked.

"When the time for the division came," Yudit continued, "and Lorixania's parents got the message of 'Salem,' her father told her she needed to escape with them. But Lorixania decided he was making a mistake, and she didn't want to leave her husband, who refused to go."

"Baba Eriniki, her father, wasn't too happy about the idea of an army," Shem told them. "The idea of men organized specifically to fight? He thought that was the most horrific thing he'd ever heard of."

Perrin scoffed lightly. "Can you imagine his reaction to realize his great-great—" He paused to count the generations, shrugged as he gave up, then said, "his *descendant grandson* Shem Zenos was one of the highest ranked soldiers in the world?"

"Yes," Peto said slyly. "Can you imagine?"

Yudit grimaced. "I'm sure he's seen the need now. But back then there was a huge family argument, and Lorixania's parents couldn't convince her to join them. Her mother Mitera was devastated. We have a few pages of her writings describing her grief. Lorixania stayed behind, never to be heard from again. Broke her parents' hearts. What was her husband's name?" Yudit looked back at the line.

"Right there," Shem pointed. "We have only a first name. He was called Lek."

No one noticed Peto developing wetness around his eyes. No one had ever seen that before so no one even bothered to look.

"Lek?" Jaytsy made a face. "Sounds like something you do when you're sick."

"Now be nice," Mahrree said. "Don't make fun of people's names. It's Shem's family, and he might be insulted."

"It's not just Shem's family," said a quiet voice.

“Not even one trumpet.”

Everyone turned to Peto.

He removed a slip of paper from his pocket and laid it down on the chart of family lines.

Lek and Lorixania Shin.

Signed, Relf Shin.

“Dear Creator!” Mahrree whispered.

That was the only sound for a full minute. Seven pairs of eyes stared at the names scrawled by a younger Peto, accompanied by the verifying signature of Relf Shin, trying to let the weight of the names sink in. It was like trying to absorb mushrooms.

Finally Peto broke the silence. He knew that since he caused it, he best end it.

“Lek Shin was a general in Idumea,” he said softly to the stunned family. “One of the first five generals ever appointed. General Pere Shin wasn’t the first Shin general, nor was Lieutenant Colonel Ricolfus Shin the first in our family to be an officer. Lek Shin was to have been the first High General, but it seems he failed in his most important commission given to him by the king: to retrieve the rebellious Guarder family of his wife. That’s what the last High General Shin of Idumea told me, days after they pulled him from the rubble, and days before he died. That’s why Relf was there when the tremor hit. He’d accidentally found family histories in that old storage room, and went back early in the morning to read them in private. It was probably the box you thought you saw, Father, where you found the maps when you were a lieutenant. Someone moved the cabinet in front of it, but Grandfather moved it away. We’re Guarders, on *both* sides of our family. Always have been. Baba Eriniki actually had several descendant grandsons who ranked as the highest soldiers in the world. And this morning, one was installed as the general of Salem.”

Peto watched the other six people to see who would break their frozen silence next. It was Shem. Peto thought he could have been a betting man. He picked that one right off.

“We’re *family*, Perrin!” Shem cried as he gave Perrin a big bear hug that lifted him off the ground.

Perrin still stared, transfixed, at the names.

“That’s why my family needed a son! To come get you! To bring our families together again! This is amazing!” he shook Perrin, his arms still wrapped around him. “Say it with me, Perrin! *Amazing!*”

Deck chuckled at Shem's enthusiasm and Perrin's continued shock. "By my count," he said, "this is the third time in four days we've stared at a document in surprise. How many more might we expect?"

Mahrree sniffled. "Why, that's not fair. The children are related to Shem on both sides."

Yudit counted the generations. "We're fourth cousins to them, once removed, twice!"

"Say something, Father," Jaytsy shook his arm that Shem just released. "Look at this. You really do belong in Salem."

Perrin slowly sat down.

Peto shoved a chair underneath him just in time.

Picking up the strip of parchment, Perrin ran a finger across his father's signature. "Why didn't he tell me?" he whispered.

Peto wet his lips and tried to think of how to put it. "Relf didn't know himself until just before the land tremor. He said he'd get into trouble for finding the crate and not telling anyone. He probably didn't want you to get in trouble either, if anyone should find out. He had gone back that Holy Day morning to try to get more information when the tremor hit. The area collapsed on him before he reached it."

"Is that why you went back inside when we visited the site?" Jaytsy asked. "To try to find the crate?"

Peto nodded. "I wanted to find the file of the family history Grandfather was trying to reach. But it's all gone now. He said we had all we needed. He remembered those two names and had me write them down. He said someday I would want them again. I guess today is 'someday.'"

Perrin finally looked up at Peto. "I was the one who moved that cabinet, years ago. To hide the spot from where I stole Terryp's map. It never occurred to me to go back again to see what was in the crate. But apparently it occurred to my father. He could have told me."

Peto shrugged. "I guess he thought you weren't ready. I guess . . . we're just a family of secrets, aren't we?"

Mahrree looked down guiltily, Jaytsy squirmed, Shem cleared his throat, and Perrin finally began to smile. "What was it I said to you, Shem, in Deck's barn? I called you a lying, deceitful brother?"

"Sneaky. You forgot sneaky."

"Yes, sneaky."

"Looks like it runs in the family, brother!"

Perrin began to chuckle. "*Family*. All right, Shem, *amazing!*" He

stared at slip of paper. “I simply can’t believe it. I thought Yordin’s situation was ironic, serving the king to avenge his lost grandparents, but I’ve been doing the same thing. Fadh didn’t know he had relatives here, and neither did I. One’s been serving with me for seventeen years. I guess there was a reason I always considered you my brother.”

“Actually, Shem’s a fourth cousin to you,” Yudit clarified. “And to Mahrree. So for Jaytsy and Peto, since they’re related twice, their connection to us is doubled. I think instead of being fourth cousins once removed, twice, they should be up to second cousins, like fractions. But no one will believe me it should work that way.”

Perrin blinked at her. “Fractions don’t work that way, either. ‘Brother’ is just easier to remember. Peto, did your grandfather tell you when to show this to me?”

“No, he didn’t. He just wanted *me* to know.”

Perrin held up his hands in surrender. “Is there anything else anyone else feels I should know about, once and for all, because as Deck said, we’ve been doing this a lot and I really would like to try to get back to a normal life without any more surprises. If that’s possible.”

“As if he would know what a normal life *looks* like,” Yudit murmured loudly to her brother.

Perrin pointed at her. “Exactly! I want to *start* having a normal, quiet life. So, anything else? Please? Confession time, right now.” He beckoned at all of his family, including the two Zenos cousins.

Mahrree shrugged. “I can’t think of anything else I should tell you about, I’m quite sure.”

Shem narrowed his eyes at Mahrree, giving her a *sedative* glare, then turned to Perrin. “I’ve been keeping quiet about things for seventeen years, it’s kind of hard to remember what you don’t know. A few surprises may still pop up here and there, but I can’t think of anything right now.”

“Fair enough,” Perrin said and turned to Jaytsy with a raised eyebrow.

“You know *everything*, Father. I’m pretty sure you do.”

Perrin nodded, and turned to Deck.

“I just wonder every now and then what I’ve married into,” he said sheepishly. “Does that count?”

Perrin chuckled. “Sure, Deck,” and turned to Peto.

“Peaches.”

“Peaches?” Perrin repeated.

“Yes. Yudit, do they grow peaches around here?”

“Why yes, we do, Peto. My sister has an orchard with four different varieties. But since your father’s now glaring at me, I’m not going to say anything more.”

“Peto?” Perrin said steadily.

“Hmm?”

“Anything *else*, son?”

“Oh, are we still doing that? I was thinking about dessert and cobblers and thought, how terrible if they don’t have peaches here in the Harvest Season, but four different varieties? I thought there was only one.”

Perrin sighed. “You and your stomach.” He held up the slip of parchment. “May I keep this?”

“Can I plant four different kinds of peach trees?”

Perrin put the piece of paper into his pocket and nodded. “Do whatever you want with that back garden.”

Peto internalized the biggest sigh of relief ever to not be uttered. He’d picked a bad time to decide to become totally honest in everything he said and did.

Father had said, after all, anything the family *felt* he should know about. Peto didn’t *feel* Perrin should know anything more right now, especially what the *rest* of that parchment said. For some reason the time just didn’t feel right to tell him about the greatest general the world would ever see.

Good thing he was sneaky, he decided, and he wondered what other traits ran in his family, his now very large, extensive family.

And now he knew what to do with the peach pits, if only he hadn’t left them in Edge.

Chapter 18--“You have a family?”

Later that afternoon, after the shock of the family connections wore down to merely an astonishing reverberation, Peto got directions from Yudit on how to find Rector Yung’s house. He hadn’t had time to talk to him the day before—too overwhelmed with visitors and food—but he had a suspicion that Yung knew where he could find peach pits. Besides, Peto hadn’t visited the lonely widower, and after so many weeks he figured Yung would appreciate a visitor . . .

All right, Peto knew he had to be more honest than that in Salem. His frequent visits before to Yung hadn’t been about checking on the old man, but using him as a grandfather who could help Peto sort his thoughts. Peto needed more sorting, and hoped Yung wouldn’t mind being bothered yet again.

Yung’s place was less than two miles north of the Shins, and Peto wasn’t sure if he had the right place when he saw the large house.

Peto hesitated to approach, until he saw a girl scamper from a nearby chicken coop. “Excuse me, but I’m looking for Rector Yung?”

“You found him. Follow me.”

Disbelieving, Peto followed her up to a side door. His mouth fell open when she called out, “Grandpa Great, visitor!”

“Grandpa Great?” Peto murmured as he saw the swirl of a dozen people, all ages, gathering around a large eating room table. It must have been a different Yung—

“Peto, my boy!” Rector Yung, the familiar one, rushed over and caught him in a hug. “I was hoping for a chance to speak with you.”

Peto gestured, confused, to the crowd that was now watching and smiling at him. “Who are all of these people?”

“My family,” Yung announced. “That’s my son, my daughter-in-law—” Names were given, relationships stated, but Peto just stared at the people who were supposedly Rector Yung’s . . .

“You have a *family*?”

“Of course.”

“But Shem said you were a lonely old widower.”

“Yes, I’ve been lonely without my wife, and I’m old—”

“*You* have a family!”

The rector’s son chuckled and came over to shake Peto’s hand. “Part of his cover story, no doubt, to make it sound as if he doesn’t have four children, twenty-three grandchildren, and forty-one great-grandchildren.”

Rector Yung smiled. “And the first great-great is due shortly after Jaytsy’s baby.”

“*You have* a family!”

Yung’s daughter-in-law, setting down a bread basket, said, “Not as if we’ve been able to keep him here, though. He’s always been too adventurous. And when Shem and Guide Gleace came by a few years ago looking for someone to serve as rector in Edge, we’re sure they were asking him for suggestions, not looking for a volunteer.”

“How could I have resisted such a temptation? After I lost my dear wife,” he gestured to a painting on the wall, and something caught in his throat. “I needed something to do.”

Peto took a few steps closer to the startlingly lifelike painting of a younger Rector Yung—black hair, narrow and gentle eyes—and his wife: blond ponytail, fiery blue eyes. Peto glanced behind him at the various family members still watching him, and noticed the resemblances. A few had eyes like Yung, combined with the fire of his wife.

“I just never realized . . . never imagined, that . . .” he started but stopped, knowing his ignorance sounded stupid.

Yung’s son, a larger man with the coloring of his father, chuckled. “Papa always said he was good at covering his tracks, and apparently he’s as good an undercover scout as the corps claimed he was.”

Yung waved that away, a bit embarrassed. “And what can I do for you, Peto?” And, because he still knew how to be a rector, said to his son, “I feel like a little walk. Start supper without me,” and he escorted Peto out of the house.

“Rector, I didn’t mean for you to miss your supper.”

“Not a problem,” Yung said easily as they wandered in the yard. “They’ll try to force me to eat too much, then fawn on me too much, and will continue to be overly merry because afterward . . .” His voice grew quieter. “After, we’ll plan the memorial for Dormin.”

“Oh, that’s right,” Peto mumbled. “Sorry about all of that. He was supposed to come for dinner, right?”

“You have a family?”

“Supposed to stay the whole weekend,” Yung said, his gait slowing to a crawl. “He was supposed to tell your father all about his adventures—” A few moments passed before he started again. “Dormin kept an open journal which he freely shared. I suppose I could show that to Perrin, although it won’t be the same.”

Peto didn’t know what to say. Yung had always been cheering Peto up, not the other way around. “Sorry,” was all he could come up with.

“It’s all right,” Yung said. “As Asrar is fond of saying, it’s all good. Dormin wouldn’t have wanted to go any other way. He and my wife must be sharing so many stories right now.” Yung was smiling, but Peto, watching him askance, could see a tear trickle down his cheek. “Both of them were so good in the trees. I always got lost. I always needed one or both of them to see me through.”

Peto got the impression he was talking about something more besides the forest.

They walked a few more slow steps and Yung muttered, in a barely audible whisper, “I envy them.”

Peto knew it would be useless to say, once more, “Sorry,” so he just kept up the slow pace to wherever they were going.

Eventually Yung said, with forced cheeriness, “Well now, you came to visit me for a reason. What can I do for you, son?” He stopped and turned to Peto, his ready grin as wide as ever, as if he’d easily shelved his own grief.

Peto felt doubly stupid for what he was about to ask. “I . . . I came for . . . peach pits?”

“You didn’t bring any from Edge?”

“Was I supposed to?”

“No,” Yung smiled. “Besides, we have far better varieties.” He gestured around him. “Do you realize where we are?”

Peto stopped abruptly. They were in an orchard. Was that even a big enough word? The scent of the blossoms hung heavy in the air, tickling his nose. Rows of carefully pruned trees went on from all directions, for acres.

Yung definitely knew his way around trees, if not around randomly planted forests. The old man reached up and caressed a white blossom, smiling in anticipation. “Apricots will be plentiful this year, as long as we don’t have a late frost.”

Peto nodded, as if he knew what apricots were.

Indicating a large shed on the edge of the orchard, Yung said, “I

have seeds and pits of all kinds, Peto. In our family we have thirty acres of orchards. Tell me what you want. Cherries, pears, apples, apricots, plums, and certainly peaches. I also have walnuts, cashews, almonds—”

“No wonder you knew so much about trees and, and, and . . . stuff,” Peto managed, staring in awe. “Maybe I want to plant more than just four peach trees.”

“An orchard for yourself? Splendid idea! May I be so bold as to ask to help you?”

Peto shrugged. “I really don’t want to drag you away from your family, especially at a time like this—”

“*Especially* at a time like this,” Yung said, gripping his arm and steering him to the shed, “I need a project. I ran away to Edge after I lost my wife, I freely admit that. But now they say I’m too old to do that again, and besides, they don’t want rectors in the world. Peto, as an old friend—meaning that I’m an old man so you had better listen—I’m begging you. Please let me help you plant your own orchard.”

“But the land’s huge, and we have rocks to clear, and weeds to pull, and holes to dig—”

“Sounds wonderful, doesn’t it? Don’t make me get on my knees to beg, Peto. It’s getting harder to get back up. What do you say? Tomorrow night’s the memorial, then the next day, after school, we get started?”

Peto could see the pleading in his eyes. Not that he wanted to, but it would have been cruel to give him any other answer than, “Of course.” Then he added, “Do you know where I can get a shovel?”

Yung pointed to his shed, which Peto soon discovered was full of carefully labeled boxes containing every kind of seed and pit found in Salem.

“You may have one of mine for now. I’ll write you a list of supplies you’ll need from the storehouse, and you can pick them up tomorrow when it’s open again. Oh, Peto—we’re going to have so much fun!”

“If that’s what you want to call it. Oh, by the way Rector, tomorrow morning we have something planned. As a family that is, and I know that Father was planning to visit and invite you, but . . .” It was odd how difficult it was to get out the words.

“Wait, are you talking about a baptism? Already?”

“Father wanted it today, but Guide Gleace told him to wait until tomorrow—”

“You have a family?”

“Why, that’s wonderful!” Yung exclaimed. “Of course, I suspected your family would be one of those quick to take the plunge, figuratively and literally, that is. But I wouldn’t miss it for anything. Before the memorial, I’m assuming?”

“Yes, I think that’s the plan.”

“And who all is being baptized?”

Peto hesitated. Father had told him to be back by the evening when their rector would be over with Shem to discuss the baptism, but until that moment Peto hadn’t thought too much more about joining his family in a public river bath.

Now the thought of not doing struck him as cold and empty, and when he said the words, his chest swelled with happy heat.

“All of us. By the way, I have something interesting to tell you about Shem’s family and ours . . .”

When Peto returned home, with a list from Rector Yung as to what he would need to request from the storehouse for his new orchard, he found his family and Shem sitting on the sofas, chatting.

“Are you waiting for the rector to discuss tomorrow’s baptism?”

“Not yet,” Perrin said. “Apparently there’s yet another new development, and Yudit and Noch are trying to bring over Boskos to explain it.”

“Explain what?” Peto wondered.

Shem shrugged. “For once, I don’t know anything about this. I went home with Yudit, we told Papa that we’re all family, he looked at the family lines, and started sobbing. He sent me over here and said he’d be over to explain.”

“Not very fun being left out of everything, is it?” Perrin said.

“How many more times do I need to apologize for keeping you in the dark about things?”

“About seventeen more years’ worth, I’m guessing.”

“Boys, boys,” Mahrree exhaled. “Enough. Honestly, you’re acting like teenagers. I don’t need any more of those.”

The men chuckled at Peto’s insulted expression, and the front door opened again.

There stood Boskos Zenos, puffy-eyed, his daughter Yudit on one side, and his son-in-law Noch holding him up on the other.

“Look at you all,” he blubbered. “*Our family.*”

“Oh, dear,” Yudit sighed, gently leading him into the house. “He’s already started again.” They sat him in a stuffed chair, and Noch handed him a fresh handkerchief.

“Deep breaths, Boskos. Remember, deep breaths,” Noch told him. “Slower . . . very good, I think you can start now.”

“Is he all right?” Mahrree worried.

“This is quite normal for Papa,” Shem said, but his brow was furrowed in worry.

Boskos blew his nose loudly and said, “Shem, what you told me about the Shins took me by surprise, all the way back to when your mother was expecting you. You were our seventh child, and we were thinking of names. For another girl, obviously. One night, Meiki woke me up with the words, ‘Bos, I know what his name should be.’ And I said, ‘His? His who?’ And she said . . .”

His chin began to wobble again.

“ . . . she said, ‘Our son.’”

Noch knelt beside him as his eyes bubbled over again. “You can do it, Boskos. That was good. Just keep the words flowing.”

Yudit was already heading to the kitchen to get him a mug of water.

To the family waiting anxiously on the sofas, Noch said, “We practiced this at home. It’s going quite well,” he assured them.

Boskos gulped down the water Yudit brought him, wiped his face, and said, “She’d had a feeling. Maybe a dream, I don’t recall. But she said this baby was a boy, and he needed a special name. A *family* name . . .”

Wobble, wobble.

“Breathe, Boskos. Breathe . . . and . . . keep going.”

“And she said . . . she said it should be . . . *Shin.*”

“What?” Shem exclaimed.

No one else could speak.

“I know! I know!” Boskos cried. “That’s not one of *our* family names! That’s what I told her. And oh, I did not want that name. You know whose name it was? The High General of Idumea, that’s who!” Wringing his hands in despair, he continued, “I never argued with Meiki, oh never. She was just too perfect a woman, but we argued that night, oh did we. Why name our boy after the generals in the world? What a terrible thing to do! She insisted, and I insisted, and, and . . . well, I won.”

“You have a family?”

He looked up wretchedly at his son.

“I told her we should change a few letters, so it wouldn’t be such an unusual name. I suggested that the first two letters could be from Shin, but then use the last two letters from Salem. Put together, it’s Shem.”

Jaytsy smiled. “Why, that’s rather clever, using the name of Salem. What a nice pairing!”

But Boskos still looked miserable. “Oh, I wasn’t trying to be *meaningful* or anything. I just *really* did *not* want to have to say the word Shin every day!” To Perrin he said, “You understand, right? Things were different back then—”

“Of course,” said Perrin genially. “I—”

But now that the words were flowing, Boskos couldn’t hold them back. “And then . . . I tried to forget about all of that. And I did, for many years. I really did forget, son, that she wanted your name to be *their* name, until today. I’m so sorry, I’m so sorry. Because I now see why. Shin *was* a family name. I need to sit—”

Yudit was already bringing another mug of water, and Noch patted him on the back. “You are sitting, Boskos. Good job.” To the stunned family on the sofas he said, “I thought this would take a lot longer. At least he’s not hyperventilating anymore. Oh, wait . . . spoke to soon.”

“I should have been named,” Shem paused, “*Shin*?”

Perrin cleared his throat. “Mr. Zenos? Boskos? May I thank you for *not* naming him Shin? It was confusing enough at times for his first name to be so close to my last name. Had you not prevailed against your dear wife, life at the fort would have been far more complicated for us all.”

“I should have been named . . . *Shin*?”

“So I did the right thing?” Boskos said, between gasps.

“Yes, sir,” Perrin grinned. “The absolutely right thing.”

“I should have . . . been named . . . *Shin*.”

“Shem,” Yudit said, “I think you’re missing the point. Think about this. Over thirty-eight years ago, Mama *knew*. She knew who were the missing vines in our family, and even knew their family name. She also knew you would be the one to retrieve them.”

“How I wish I could have met your mother,” Mahrree breathed. “She must have been something.”

“She was, as Papa said, a most perfect woman,” Yudit told her.

“I guess it’s a good thing I wrote down those names of Lek and

Lorixania legibly, isn't it?" Peto chuckled.

"Peto, I just came up with a theory!" Yudit squealed. "What if it was my mother who influenced your grandfather to find that file? Then told you to write down those names, so we could have them today! To complete this massive circle of . . . I don't know what, yet, but to make sure we all knew what we know now!"

"Hey, I like that!"

"I'm sorry, Mama," Shem announced loudly. "But naming me *Shin*?"

Perrin chuckled quietly.

"Oh honestly, Shem," Yudit put her hands on her waist. "Can you just get over that and see the bigger story here?"

"But . . . but it's so *weird*. Everything I knew . . . my identity. Mama saw me as someone different, in a way. It feels all so sideways somehow, like I don't quite know myself, and it's very disconcerting—"

"And *there it is*!" Perrin announced, and clapped his hands. He stood up and pumped Boskos' hand vigorously. "Thank you, Mr. Zenos, so very much. And Mama Zenos—" he looked up to the ceiling.

"Her name was Meiki," Boskos offered uncertainly.

"—Meiki Zenos, thank you very much as well," Perrin called, "because now *you*," and he spun to point at Shem, "know a little bit of what I've been going through for the past several days. Disconcerting? Who you think you are, completely shaken up? Do you get it now? Do you?"

Shem blinked up at him. "All right," he said slowly, "but I don't think this is the same thing—"

"Oh, I completely agree. This is still only a small bit compared to what you've put me through. Seeing things sideways? I'd have to stop spinning first to see things only sideways, Shem. Or should I say, *Shin*?"

Everyone chuckled as Shem glared at Perrin, but his glare soon softened, and he said, "So does this make us even yet?"

Perrin bobbed his head. "No, but it's getting there, *Shin*."

"Please don't call me that."

"Why not? It's what your mother wanted."

Shem fidgeted and hesitated. "Because . . . that's *you*. Because I'm not you. I could never hope to be. Because . . . it feels like taking an honor that doesn't belong to me."

“You have a family?”

Perrin sat down slowly. “You just had to spoil my glee, didn’t you?”

Shem smiled weakly. “However, I must say, I was never quite sure of my name before—where it came from, why no one else was named that. But today, suddenly I really appreciate it. In a way, my name has always been my calling.”

“So,” Mahrree said, “Boskos really did get it right by putting *Shin* in *Salem* for your name. He was as inspired as your mother, he just didn’t know it.”

Boskos burst out in a new round of sobbing.

He didn’t have the strength to go back home for another hour.

Chapter 19--“I’m going to have to keep a close eye on the two of you, aren’t I?”

The sun was peeking over the eastern mountains, the first rays sparkling on the water, when Jaytsy whispered, “Does that river look freezing to anyone else?”

Her family chuckled with her, and shivered. It had been cold last night, and the frost was slowly wicking off the grasses around them. They had come dressed in the white clothing the rector’s wife had delivered last night, but even though it was of a thick weave, they kept their cloaks wrapped around them as they rode in the wagon to the dammed section of the river.

Also wrapped in cloaks and coats were Guide Gleace and his wife, Rector Yung and many of his family, most of their new neighbors, several dozen Zenoses, and Shem, also dressed in white.

Perrin glanced around the reverent and happy crowd, growing steadily, and recalled that he invited maybe a dozen of them. Well, things tended to multiply in Salem, he realized, and if one hundred—oh, here come more wagons—perhaps two hundred wanted to watch his family freeze in the Salem River, so let them. That only meant more people to help fish them out downstream should the dam suddenly collapse.

Besides, he had the feeling that he no longer belonged to himself; General Shin belonged to Salem. They wanted to make sure he was doing things right.

“Sorry about this,” Shem whispered to him. “I promise I didn’t tell that many people, but as you can see folks are kind of excited you’re here, and—”

“Yes, I know. *A few people* know about us.”

Shem bounced in place. “Bit brisk today. Usually we schedule baptisms in Weeding Season, as you can imagine.”

“I’m going to have to keep a close eye on the two of you, aren’t I?”

“So, Mr. New Assistant, how many times have you done this?” Perrin asked. “Baptized people?”

“Quite a few,” Shem assured him. “Baptisms are done by someone with the authority of a rector, and since I was given that position before I went to Edge—”

“Wait, you were a rector?”

“Oh, yeah. Another thing I forgot to tell you. Sorry. I wasn’t an *active* rector, so to speak. Just a way of giving me extra comfort and assistance, you know.”

“No. I don’t know,” Perrin said under his breath, watching as even more Salemites quietly and eagerly gather at the frigid pool. “It seems I know less every day.”

“Nearly all of my secrets are out now. Anyway, my nieces and nephews all asked me to baptize them when I came back on my leaves, once they turned eight. But, uh, confession time—yes, another one. I’ve never baptized someone bigger than a child. Your family will be the first adults—”

Perrin spun on his heel to stare at him, alarmed.

“—But I’ve got this, don’t worry. See my brothers-in-law? I’ve have them positioned around the pool, just in case I lose my grip. They’re all great swimmers. Hey, that was a joke. Perrin, I’m only joking . . .”

Perrin was striding purposefully over to Guide Gleace, who wore an expression of nervous amusement.

Perrin winked as he neared. “Don’t worry, I’ve not lost my resolve. It’s just that Shem now thinks I’m afraid he’s about to drown all of us. And after all he’s done to me this week, I think he deserves to feel a little agony fretting over what I may be talking to you about right now. I guess we could call this my last worldly trick before the world is washed away from me. So tell me honestly, sir—does Shem look terrified that I’m about to back out of this?”

Gleace was able to choke down his laugh, but his wife had to hide her giggle in her scarf. “Yes, he’s absolutely rigid with dread. Now it looks like he’s trying to convince Mahrree that everything will be *just fine*. I’m going to have to keep a close eye on the two of you, aren’t I?”

Perrin grinned. “Yes, I think you should. Shem’s going to freeze in there, isn’t he? Since he’ll be baptizing each of us, it’s him who will suffer the longest, right?”

“Well, I suppose that’s true—”

“Good.”

Five minutes later Gleace decided there were quite enough witnesses, and after he said a few words to the crowd, invited Shem to escort Perrin into the water. They made their way in *just fine* while the water reached only to their thighs, but stepping in deeper to their bellies made both of the men gasp at the cold. The Salemites waiting on the bank chuckled in sympathy.

Jaytsy held her belly in worry.

Mahrree rubbed it, as did Deck.

Peto crossed his legs.

But then something in the air changed, softening it. Everyone and everything grew quiet as the rising sun caressed the air and water.

Perrin lost all feeling in his legs, which was a welcome sensation in the freezing river. But he also felt as if a hot lump of sunshine dripped upon him. It was the same sensation he'd felt the night he chased away the Refuser from his house, and began to fight away his trauma. While he'd felt the promptings of the Creator before, this was the first time he'd felt the Creator embracing him in thick, warm joy.

Perrin never wanted to leave the water.

Shem, his hands trembling either from cold or nerves or both, showed Perrin how to hold on to his arm and, in a clear, loud voice said the blessedly brief prayer of baptism.

But Perrin didn't hear Shem's voice. Or rather, Shem's voice didn't sound like him. It was fuller, older, and far more powerful than Perrin had ever heard. Maybe it wasn't Shem he was hearing, he speculated later. But whoever it was, the voice was anciently and sweetly familiar.

Then backward he went into the water, and it flowed over him, cool and cleansing, without the least intention of drowning him, but enveloping him in second chances.

Again, he didn't want to leave it, but was content to sink further and deeper into that sensation of purity which, for the moment, wholly defined him.

Until Shem dragged him back up, his eyes wide with alarm that Perrin wasn't rising on his own.

“Are you all right?” Shem whispered, panicked.

And just like that, it was over. Fortunately his tears blended into the water streaming down his face.

“Right now, I'm perfect.”

“Yes, that's actually true.” Shem slapped him happily on the

“I’m going to have to keep a close eye on the two of you, aren’t I?”

back. “Now, when you leave the water don’t trip or you’ll go and spoil it all.”

Chuckling, Perrin trudged out of the river to Mahrree who stood with her arms close to her chest.

“Was it all right?” she asked.

He wiped his face with the towel Jaytsy handed him. “It was perfect.”

He didn’t notice until later that the crowd on the banks didn’t applaud or cheer, which would have ruined the moment. Instead they did what Perrin defined as merry murmuring, full of approval.

He also didn’t notice until later that he didn’t feel any cold until after each of his family had been baptized. Next went in Mahrree, who found herself chest deep in the water, which meant it was a quicker down and up for her, then Peto who howled briefly as his nether regions hit the cold water.

Deck walked with Jaytsy into the pool, and stood nearby as Shem baptized her. He walked her back to the bank before allowing Shem to baptize him.

Only once Deck was to the shore and wrapped in a cloak did Perrin begin to shiver. He glanced over at Shem, whose father was wrapping him in a thick blanket. Shem trembled, but beamed.

“You’re now officially Salemites,” he said, teeth chattering. “Thank you for not waiting until Snowing Season.”

Nicko Mal’s library was still strewn with papers. Yesterday he ordered a maid to start clearing the mess, but when she exclaimed, “My goodness! You must have dumped out every crate you owned. There’s so much paper here, it’s *shin-deep*,” he fired her on the spot.

He also decided he didn’t need any servants reading his research notes, nor was he ready to surrender the rage which still simmered in his chest making it hot and tight, so he left the clutter as a reminder.

To get to his desk, he waded through the piles, making a path which didn’t last long as the pages sloshed back into place. For the last hour he’d been fine-tuning his wording, and he called to one of his guards to swish over and take the parchment that he’d sealed in an envelope. “For the printers. Tell them every village will need these notices as soon as possible. Don’t delay.”

As the guard slogged through the papers and parchment, Nicko

sat back in his overstuffed chair. Only once the door was shut, then shut again because pages were catching in the frame, did he whisper, “And now, everyone who loved and admired you for all the wrong reasons will hate you for all the right ones. They will feel the same loathing I’ve felt for you all these years, Mahrree Peto Shin.”

He clasped his hands on his desk, gripping them as if they’d float away if he let go. “You may be ‘gone,’ but I’m still in control of the game, and I get to make the last play. I win, Mrs. Shin. I *always* win.”

Nicko Mal spent the rest of the day trying to remind himself of that truth, ignoring the feeling that he’d been cheated by the other players running cowardly away.

Mahrree had been bouncing with excitement after midday meal. Actually, she’d been nearly uncontainable all morning.

When Yudit arrived at the door, she said, “I was about to ask if you really wanted to go today, seeing as how it’s already been a busy morning for you, but you’re all ready, aren’t you?”

“What else should I do? Peto’s at his first day of afternoon classes—and may I add you people are brilliant for not starting teenage classes until after midday meal? Perrin’s putting up walls in Jaytsy’s house, Jaytsy’s with your sister Nan getting seeds for the garden, and Deck is visiting a ranch selecting cattle. So here I sit officially a Salemite, and I want to be and do everything that is Salemitish, including getting that library card you told me about.”

Yudit grinned. “I thought as much. Let’s go.”

Half an hour later the women walked into the large stone building in the middle of Salem, and all Mahrree could do was gasp. “So many.”

“We make copies, too. Of every worthy book, even ones the scouts purchase in the world and bring back here. Anyone is free to take one home for four weeks. We also have many of our own writings. Not just texts for schooling, but compilations of poems, stories, longer works, and histories.”

“Whose histories?” Mahrree asked, bracing herself in case the answer wasn’t what she hoped.

But it was. “Everyone’s! But first, right over here is the world section.” She gestured to a wing of the repository filled with rows of shelves. “Everything you had to leave behind in Edge is likely in here

“I’m going to have to keep a close eye on the two of you, aren’t I?”

as a copy. If you’re ever feeling nostalgic for your father’s collection, you can sit among the shelves and pretend you’re back in Edge.”

“You have dozens of copies of everything!” Mahrree marveled. “Look at this one—‘Embellishments Through the Ages.’ That was the only book my mother kept of my father’s collection. After she died, I took it home and hid our family lines in it. I knew Perrin would never be interested in opening it.”

Yudit chuckled. “If ever you have the urge to read it . . .”

“I never did,” Mahrree laughed. “But there *was* another book I wondered about, but never finished. It’s about an army officer whose wife’s family were Guarder traitors, and he had a sergeant who pushed him to—” Mahrree paused, realizing the story sounded familiar.

The women stared at each other.

“What was the name of that book?” Yudit asked urgently.

“I don’t remember!” Mahrree nearly wailed. “But the character names weren’t Lek or Lorigania or Boskos.”

“No, they wouldn’t be, would they?” Yudit sighed. “Still, remarkable coincidences. We can ask the librarians if they might know it, if it may be in our shelves.”

“Yes, I’d definitely like to track that down one day, but right now I’m more interested in verifiable histories,” Mahrree hinted.

“Then come this way. I have a feeling you’ll spend the rest of the afternoon over in this wing.”

And Yudit was right. It was as large as a congregation hall with shelves higher than Mahrree’s head and least fifty feet long. The rows, more than a dozen, were packed with leather-bound pages of writings. It was a good thing ladders were attached to each shelf, because Mahrree wanted to explore every one, low and high.

But first she had to make herself move.

Yudit chuckled as Mahrree remained rooted to the ground. “You see, histories aren’t just for the experts to write. Histories are for everyone, a record of their lives. Journals. Most people keep two: a private journal of their fears and worries, and a public one wherein they record the miracles they experienced, their discoveries, their growth, their children—everything. We make copies of those journals, too. We always have.”

“Always?” Mahrree breathed.

“Come to the best part of the repository.” Yudit took her arm and

gently lead her to the back wall which had the words “Ancient History” caved elegantly on a board on top of the shelves.

“Ancient?” Mahrree couldn’t say more than one word at a time.

“Indeed. Back in 200 Querul the First destroyed all the family lines given to him. But what he didn’t know was that the guides down to Pax always kept family histories. They were sacred, as sacred as The Writings. The guides made copies and distributed the histories among the assistants. That was one of their callings: to preserve—at all costs—those writings that proved the existence of the Creator and His influence in the world. Guide Hierum knew at some point the personal histories would be sought out and destroyed, so from the beginning all that was written was carefully guarded. When our people fled the world in 200, the histories were one of the few things they took with them. That’s why we encourage new refugees to bring the writings of their families with them.”

“But some people leaving the world were captured and killed,” Mahrree remembered.

“Yes,” Yudit said sadly. “And the histories they carried were also destroyed. That’s why Pax made sure at least three copies of each was distributed to different areas of the world before that. In the end, at least one copy of each history reached Salem. And here, before you, are copies of those writings. Mahrree, I don’t think anyone in the world realizes it, but our first five hundred families began writing about their experiences only a season after they were placed here.”

Mahrree could only shake her head as she gazed at the volumes.

“I think you would enjoy beginning right here.”

Yudit led her to the far left section of the wall, reached to the top of the shelf, and took down a thin history.

“The first five hundred families didn’t write as much as we do. They were still trying to figure out how to spell and compose sentences.”

She turned the first pages to show Mahrree.

“We still have their originals stored in one of the mountains in a large stone—and *fireproof*—vault. But as you’ll see, the first pages are like reading a seven-year-old’s writing. Short sentences, stumbling ideas, sloppy explanations. After the first year, though, many people began to improve in their writing skills. Still, so much is to be gleaned from these earliest experiences. This Mahrree, is the journal kept by Herna—Guide Hierum’s wife.”

Mahrree sat down weakly on a nearby chair as Yudit handed her

“I’m going to have to keep a close eye on the two of you, aren’t I?”

the book.

“She was a remarkable woman. We always hear about the greatness of Guide Hierum, but no man can be called as guide unless his wife is his equal in strength, knowledge, and humility. Herna was no exception. Not only was she the first woman to conceive and bear a child, she was also the first mother to raise her three children alone. Hierum was killed the week before their daughter was born. If ever you need a good cry, read later in this book when she describes giving birth without her beloved husband by her side. I’ve only been able to get through it once. It’s not a story easily forgotten.”

Already tears were stinging Mahrree’s eyes. “It never occurred to me . . . I knew Hierum was killed, and that he had a family, but I never realized she had to continue alone.”

“She did, and quite admirably. She never wavered in her commitment to the Creator. She taught her children well, and they all remained strong. They were the last holdouts to avoid going to Idumea. But in the end, they had to; there was no one left around them, and Herna knew she needed the help of others to raise her family. She reluctantly took her children to Idumea after living in the place of the ruins for nearly two years, alone.”

Mahrree sighed. “I can hardly wait to read this.”

“There’s something else I think you should know,” Yudit said in a tone which put Mahrree on the edge of her chair.

“What is it?”

“You saw from the lines that we’re both descended from Guide Hierum and Herna.”

After they’d stared in amazement at the family lines yesterday, realizing that the Shins, Petos, and Zenoses were all related, Yudit showed them that their lines, ones which Mahrree didn’t have access to, also led directly back to Guide Hierum himself.

Mahrree tried once again to keep down her exhilaration about that. She knew that who her ancestors were didn’t mean anything special or dubious about her, but still one can’t help but take secret bragging rights.

“I’m sorry to say I’ve been a bit proud of that fact.”

Yudit chuckled. “Realize a great many people are also descended from them. And through marriages, we’re all related in many ways.”

“So what should I know?”

Yudit took the book from Mahrree, thumbed a few pages, and handed it back. “Herna named her last daughter Rium, in memory of

her dead husband. Rium was a beautiful, sweet girl who matured into a delightful young woman. Many young men were taken by her joyful spirit and hard-working nature. It was while she was picking berries in early Harvest that a young man became completely enamored by her. They worked side by side for weeks harvesting berries from stalks with tiny thorns that frequently pricked Rium. Her young man, named Andras, even fashioned a pair of thin leather gloves hoping to help protect her skin. For several weeks they worked together, and after the harvest was in, Andras told Rium he wanted to continue seeing her. ‘You tried to protect me from the thorns,’ she told him. ‘I think you’d try to protect me from all kinds of dangers.’”

Mahrree peered at Yudit. “There’s more to this than a little love story, right?”

“There is. You see, within another season Andras and Rium decided to marry. Some in this generation realized that they needed additional names to help designate which men and women had decided to join together. Having a second name they used in common would help clarify the growing families. Andras and Rium decided on a last name together.”

“Oh, no,” Mahrree whispered, seeing where this was leading.

“Oh, yes. They chose the name that brought them together: Thorn. At this time, spellings were still being experimented with, so when they recorded the name at the village office, they added an ‘e’ at the end, not really sure how to spell it.”

Mahrree closed her eyes in disbelief.

But Yudit wasn’t done. “Andras wanted to rid the world of thorns, so he started cross planting berries with other vines, hoping to reduce the number of thorns that occurred. He had some success with raspberries. He had hoped that many generations from his, no one in the world would even know what a thorn was, and that anyone who came across their chosen family name would question what it meant.”

“But there are thorns everywhere in the world,” Mahrree exhaled, her eyes still closed.

“Yes, there are. The Creator designed it that way. Thorns are part of the test, Mahrree. How do we respond to them?”

“I can’t believe it. I just can’t . . . Lemuel Thorne, and his father Qayin, are direct descendants of the Great Guide Hierum!”

“Just like you and me, Mahrree.”

Her eyes flashed open. “They’re related to *us!*”

“I’m going to have to keep a close eye on the two of you, aren’t I?”

“Ah. Knew you’d catch on eventually. We are all family, Mahrree. Somewhere along the lines, we all connect together. How do we treat our family, Mahrree?”

“Not by running them out of the world!”

Yudit gave her a reproving look.

Mahrree sighed. “This may take me some time to accept.”

“That’s why I wanted to warn you now, before you came to those pages and made the connection. It will still be a struggle for you, though. It has been for Shem.”

“That’s right,” Mahrree exclaimed. “He knew, didn’t he? When he first met the Thornes?”

“The scouts have been watching the Thornes for many years, suspecting that Qayin had some link with the Guarders. Shem was furious to realize Lemuel would be serving with him in Edge. More often than you realize, he and Lemuel had some run-ins. In fact, once a situation escalated to the point that Shem had Lemuel on the ground with his long knife ready to plunge into the captain’s throat.”

Mahrree’s eyebrows flew up.

“He confided to me later that all he wanted to do was push that knife in one more inch to kill him, but he couldn’t.”

“Why not?” Mahrree asked, only slightly ashamed that she wished Shem had done it.

“He wasn’t allowed to. Shem’s taken lives before, Mahrree. Beginning when he was a young soldier in Edge. But he didn’t want to do it. His heart’s been scarred by those deaths, even about the two lieutenants who were intent on murdering your in-laws. One of them was Sonoforen, Dormin’s brother.”

Mahrree nodded. “Perrin told me all about that. To be honest, Shem’s got me just a little wary of him now. I had no idea he was capable of so much.”

“Nor did he. Over the years I’ve been his confidante. Whatever bothered him, he’d reveal to me. But he said holding Lemuel down was different. All he felt was pure rage, yet whenever the Creator influenced him, he never felt rage but a strong sense of purpose. He realized his desire to kill Lemuel was from the Refuser. It wasn’t Lemuel’s time to go yet. There’s more he needs to do—”

“Like what?” Mahrree spat. “Take over the world?”

Yudit tilted her head. “He really gets to you, doesn’t he? Mahrree, as difficult as this may seem to believe, Lemuel is loved by the Creator. Just as much as you and Perrin are. And so is Qayin and

everyone else who makes this test miserable. The Creator loves all of His children equally. He's not as equally pleased with all of them, true, but He still wants them to come home. Lemuel needs the opportunity to try to find that truth. He does have Guide Hierum's blood in his veins, after all."

"Greatly diluted!"

"As diluted as your *own*, Mahrree."

Mahrree sagged. "That's probably true," she mumbled.

"Shem still struggles, if that helps you at all. He told me last night that when he was in Idumea spying last week, he had his opportunity to rid the world of Qayin Thorne."

"Really?"

"Qayin kept his horse in a corner of the Administrators' stables where Shem was working, so no other animals would be near his prized stallion. The day the Administrators finally resolved to bring you and your family to trial, Qayin came whistling happily into the stables. Shem followed and pretended to work nearby. He heard Qayin tell his horse, in loving tones, about how the Shins were about to be destroyed, and how the reign of the Thornes was soon to begin. Shem didn't tell me specifics, but apparently Qayin had some particular feelings about you and Perrin that he shared with his mount. Shem looked at the pitchfork in his hands and realized he could run Qayin through and leave him in that secluded stall to die."

"So why didn't he do it?" Mahrree whispered.

"Because the world needs thorns, Mahrree. For every Shem and Perrin, there's a Qayin and Lemuel. For every Versula, there's a Mahrree. The Creator allows the thorns as well as the fruit. The test is to see how we react to those thorns. Without them, life is just a long holiday. But to sit back and enjoy ourselves isn't why we've been placed here. Even the Thornes are being tested, to see if they will change their natures."

Mahrree fingered the book in her hands. "Same amount of Guide Hierum's blood in both of us."

"Yes."

"So our ancestry doesn't matter; it's who *we* are that matters."

Yudit pulled up a chair next to her and sat down. "Allow me to plant into your mind a little seed that's going to need a lot of time to germinate. It's the same idea I gave to my little brother. Consider this: someday, in the distant future, likely not in this life, but in the Para-

“I’m going to have to keep a close eye on the two of you, aren’t I?”

dise to come, you will see Lemuel Thorne and his family with different eyes, with *perfected* eyes. And when that time comes, you will feel compassion and concern for him in ways you can’t imagine now. And you will someday sit down with him on a proverbial back porch somewhere, and you will chat about this life, about what happened here, and he will ask you for forgiveness, and because of the genuine love you feel for him, you will have already granted it. And you will eventually chat and even laugh as if you were old friends who simply forgot that you already had an ancient history together. And the pain and fury and skepticism that I see in your eyes right now will be a distant, and tiny, memory.”

When Mahrree said nothing, but gripped tighter the armrests on her chair, Yudit added, “As I said, this idea will take a long time to germinate. Centuries, even. Just leave that little seed in the dirt for a while, all right?”

Mahrree exhaled, long and low. “I will try,” she mumbled. “Lemuel murdered Dormin, you know.”

“Yes, I know. So do the Creator and Dormin.”

“I have to admit,” Mahrree drummed her fingers on the armrest, “that I feel like I’m already failing in my first day as a Salemite. I’m filled with all kinds of ugly, worldly thoughts.”

“No one expects you to be perfect today, Mahrree. No baby walks her first time out. She’ll fall again and again, and even adults tend to stumble now and then. That’s not a problem, unless they never get up again.”

“Thanks for your optimism,” Mahrree said drearily. “But what you’re suggesting . . .”

Yudit patted her arm. “What I’ve just suggested is far more difficult than I think any Salemite, besides Shem and your husband, has ever had to consider. I’ve dumped an entire avalanche on you when you expected a sunny day. I’m sorry, but I felt it was necessary to do, and so did Guide Gleace. He asked me to tell you about the Thornes, and he was the one who shared with me the idea of someday feeling love for them. If it makes you feel any better, Shem wasn’t too keen on the idea either. But, he accepted that seed.”

Mahrree shrugged. “That very hard, very small seed that will likely not crack for a few centuries, right?”

“Perhaps,” Yudit acknowledged.



Salem's amphitheater was packed that night, which meant over thirty-thousand people came to remember Dormin, last in the line of the kings.

Rector Yung spoke, as did Asrar Hifadhi, Guide Gleace, and Shem. Songs were sung. Stories were told. Even gentle laughter filled the air on occasion.

But seated as far back and inconspicuously as possible, Salem's five newest refugees were miserable. Sure, they smiled at appropriate moments, pretended to know the words when everyone else sang, and bowed their heads during the prayers.

But Perrin could barely move. Although he'd been invited to address Salem, he couldn't. He'd said that he didn't want to detract from the focus on Dormin, but the hard truth was that in the pit of his stomach he felt that Dormin's death was his fault. It was the same churning he felt when he learned his father had ordered the execution of King Oren, a sense that being able to put someone to death was far too much power for any man, and one of the many reasons Perrin never wanted to be High General.

But this was even worse. Dormin wasn't forced to die. Perrin had a suspicion—perhaps whispered to him by Dormin himself—that he had willingly given himself up.

And that act was far braver than Perrin Shin would ever be. He didn't belong in Salem. He didn't deserve this city to regard him as their general. He was wholly inadequate and nowhere near to being the man they hoped he'd be.

But he had to become that man, in honor of the bravest one they'd already lost.

Chapter 20--“Seems . . . there was a lot more going on than any of us realized.”

The next morning was overcast and dreary in the village of Rivers as Colonel Brillen Karna slid off his horse. Waiting for him in the stables was his second-in-command, Major Milo Rigoff, anxiously clutching a message. Brillen returned the salute of his major and eyed the parchment.

“If it’s another bit of gossip from Edge about Perrin, or another scrawled notice from Genev, I’ve already told you: I’m not believing anything, and neither is Yordin or Fadh, until I have hard evidence from Idumea.”

Rigoff clenched the message. “Sir, this *is* from Idumea. Maybe we should take it to your office—”

Brillen frowned as he took off his riding gloves. “Whatever it is, let’s get to it. I still won’t believe it.”

“But . . . there’s evidence.”

Brillen paused. “Real evidence?”

Rigoff nodded, and Brillen noticed his eyes were red.

Colonel Karna snatched the message out of his hands, and fumbled to open it.

Rigoff sent a warning glance over to an officer who had just burst into the stables.

A captain, also tasked to try to find their commander, stopped when he realized Colonel Karna had been located and was already reading the message. Now the two men watched worriedly as their commander’s light brown skin blanched, and they wished they had lured him to his office first—

“No,” Karna whispered. “No . . . you did *not*, Shem Zenos!” Another long pause.

The major and the captain exchanged dreadful looks, and Rigoff massaged his hands.

“Mahrree?” Karna said, his eyebrows furrowed. “*Mahrree?*” Another pause.

Rigoff’s cringe was now so severe that his cheeks were hurting. Karna would read the final news in just three, two, one—

Brillen’s eyes closed, the message crumpling in his hands as he gripped his head. “Perrin! No, no, no . . .”

His officers caught him before he collapsed on the ground.

The knock came at Lieutenant Colonel Fadh’s door. “Message from Idumea, sir.”

“Bring it in,” Fadh called.

“For immediate reading, sir,” the young soldier said apologetically as he handed it across the desk.

“They always are,” Fadh sighed. He opened the message and his eyes bulged. “Perrin!”

Several officers and enlisted men in his outer office came to the door. “More rumors?”

“Does anyone know where he really is?”

Fadh couldn’t speak. He couldn’t move. He just read the message, his eyes growing wetter until the tears trickled down his face.

His soldiers looked at each other in alarm, but none of them dared to ask what was wrong.

In a calm yet quavering voice, Graeson finally said, “Gentlemen. Please close the door.”

The messenger stepped out of the office, and a lieutenant shut the door.

They heard him weeping for half an hour.

Lieutenant Colonel Yordin stormed into his office. “What is it? Another decree from High General Thorne?” he sneered. “The man just couldn’t *wait* to get that big, fat chair for his big, fat—.”

“In a way, yes sir,” his captain said, holding out the message. “But, um, it’s . . .”

“Better be important enough to drag me out of a training bout!”

The captain nodded vigorously. For some reason, his eyes looked

“Seems . . . there was a lot more going on than any of us realized.”

bloodshot.

“Not sleeping well?” Roarin’ Yordin asked his younger officer.

“Sir, just please—read the message.” He took two large protective steps backward.

Yordin unfolded the parchment and started to read. “About Per-rin again. Officially this time?”

The captain took another step back to the doorway.

Roarin’ Yordin’s bald, tanned head turned red as he read. His face contorted into a mixture of agony and fury. Bitter tears leaked from his eyes by the time he reached the end. He grabbed the first thing he could find—a heavy chunk of molten metal he used as a paperweight—and flung out of his observation window.

“SLAGGING ZENOS!” he screamed as glass shattered around him. “I’d KILL you myself!”

Gari drew his sword, and his captain ran out of the building.

Corporal Hili was getting ready to leave for his duty shift when he saw the door of the barracks open. His heart sank as he saw the commanding colonel walk in, with Grandpy Neeks following. Both of them wore somber expressions. In the colonel’s hand was an official looking parchment, and the two men headed straight for Hili.

Poe swallowed. The colonel must have found out about Poe’s thieving past, although Colonel Shin said no one would. His army career was finished. He glanced around at his bunk mates.

The other nine men who shared his quarters were about to leave, but each paused to watch where the colonel was going.

The colonel stopped and glared at the soldiers. “Shouldn’t you all be reporting for duty?”

They nodded, sent a fleeting look of sympathy to Poe, and exited. Grandpy Neeks shut the door behind them.

Poe gulped when he saw that Neeks locked it. “Sirs? Something wrong?”

“Actually, son—”

That immediately set Poe on edge. The commander never referred to anyone as “son.”

“—something *is* wrong. Terribly wrong. I don’t even know how to start.”

“Just give him the message you received, sir,” Grandpy suggested gravely.

The colonel nodded and handed it to Poe.

With trembling hands Poe opened the parchment and began to read. A minute later he slumped on to his cot, letting the message fall to the ground.

Grandpy sat down next to him and wrapped his arms around the corporal. “Go ahead, boy. No one’s here to see you cry but the two of us. And we still have a few tears left to shed.”

“No!” Poe whimpered as the tears bubbled up and streaked down his face. “He can’t . . . can’t be gone!” The words came out damp and muffled. “Was the only one . . . the *only one*. No one else ever . . . He was the only one . . . who cared.”

Grandpy wiped his nose noisily on his sleeve.

“That stupid . . .” Poe gasped between sobs. “Stupid . . . *slagging Zenos!* How? Why her? Colonel Shin . . .”

“I know,” Grandpy commiserated. “I can’t believe it myself.”

“That stupid Zenos . . . he sent me to Idumea . . . it’s his fault I got transferred from Edge,” Poe was nearly dry-heaving, “and now he’s . . . he’s . . .”

“Paid for his crimes, Corporal,” the colonel told him, and loudly cleared his throat of all emotion.

Poe doubled over in convulsing.

The colonel regarded him sympathetically. “Neeks, take care of him today. When the two of you are ready, go to Idumea. There will be a memorial service at the arena in a couple of days for Perrin. Represent the fort at Grasses for us. I can’t think of two men more capable of doing so.”

“Thank you, sir,” Grandpy said gruffly and wiped his nose again. “Will be our honor.”

“This school year will never end,” Chommy sighed loudly to the boys around him.

Lannard frowned. “But it’s supposed to, in about a moon and a half—”

“He was speaking figuratively, Lannard,” another boy rolled his eyes. “Not literally. And Lannard’s the one who passed the Final Exam with glowing numbers, everyone!” he announced sarcastically

“Seems . . . there was a lot more going on than any of us realized.”

to their friends.

“That’s right,” Chommy said as he dug into his midday meal. “He gets to move on while we get to stay here with . . .” His voice trailed off.

They knew Mrs. Shin wasn’t coming back. The rumors had been rushing all over Edge. She was dead—all of them were—but the official notice hadn’t yet been made, and still the boys harbored a tiny hope that she was merely hiding somewhere and would be sitting at the desk at the end of the season with that mischievous twinkle in her eye and announce they would debate the color of the sky again, but in secret as they always did.

The boys ate in silence, none of them quite sure what direction to take the conversation next.

Until they saw Hegek. He appeared even more peaked and dour than normal, and since he’d been teaching their class he seemed to have lost a few pounds as well. Right now his thinning frame was trembling, and in his hands was a large printed notice, the kind placed on the boards around Edge. His gaze fell upon the Special Cases class sitting in the grass.

“Oh, not again,” a boy murmured. “The last time he had that look on his face . . .”

“I think it’s confirmation,” Chommy whispered, “that she’s not hiding in the marshes.”

“Oh, slag,” Lannard mumbled, but since he had a sandwich in his mouth it sounded more like, “Othlag.”

Hegek swallowed, and swallowed again as he made his way to the boys. “It’s about Mrs. Shin,” he said bluntly, as if he had no more ability to add Idumeaic flourishes to his sentences. “About all of them. This notice isn’t supposed to be posted until tomorrow, but they wanted us to know. Seems . . . there was a lot more going on than any of us realized. Here, just read it. Then I need to post it. Oh, and class is canceled for the rest of the day. Just . . . go home.”

None of the boys noticed him stumbling into the school building, because they were jostling for position to read over each other’s shoulders.

Lannard was the last to get his view, but as the boys peeled off of the group, the faster readers staggering away in shock, Lannard finally got close enough to run his finger to track the words.

When he finished he sat back. Everyone else had left, how long ago he didn’t know. But he couldn’t move, even when the squat man

in the red coat and tails came up to the gate of the school grounds.

“That’s him?” he asked the lieutenant next to him.

Lannard noticed Radan nodding, then widening his eyes at Lannard that he should stand at attention, or *something*.

The man in red marched through the gate and up to Lannard just as he got to his feet and saluted, remembering too late that salutes are done with right hands, not left, but the notice was still in his right hand and now he wasn’t sure what to do with either hand—

“So this is really him?” the man said, disappointment thick in his tone. “Well, I suppose it’s no surprise. Young man, I’m Administrator Genev. Certainly you’ve heard of me?”

Lannard struggled to find his voice and remembered only how Mrs. Shin had said she’d once met all of them—

“Yes, sir?”

Genev exhaled loudly. “Congratulations, boy. Not only have you passed the Final Exam this year, but you’ve also earned yourself a position at Command School in Idumea.”

“I’ve . . . *what?!?*”

“I understand you’re the one who helped provide valuable information to Captain Thorne over the past year, helping us to uncover the deceit of Mrs. Shin—”

“I’ve . . . *what?!?*”

“—and as a result of your loyalty to the Administrators and Chairman, you’ve earned this commendation signed by Chairman Mal himself—”

He didn’t notice the envelope Genev waved in his face, nor realized when Genev wrenched the notice from Lannard’s grip and replaced it with the sealed envelope.

“I’ve . . . *what?!?*”

“And you will be sent to Idumea to begin Command School this Harvest Season, if you so desire. You’ve earned a full scholarship, complements of the Administrators, to become an officer.”

“I’ve . . . *what?!?*”

“Perhaps next year,” Genev growled. “We’ll forego early admission seeing as how your vocabulary is still so limited. Slag, boy—just how did Thorne get so much out of you to expose the Mrs. Shin as the greatest traitor the world has ever seen?”

“I’ve . . . *WHAT?!?*”

“Seems . . . there was a lot more going on than any of us realized.”

When Versula Thorne heard the front door of the mansion slam, she knew she had to slow her gasping, but she couldn't. Not even if her life depended upon it. She buried her face in the pale blue blankets to muffle her sobs, but still she could hear the whistling.

Qayin never whistled, and he never did *anything* cheerfully, but it was definitely him, judging by the pounding of his boots.

His whistling paused.

Versula held her breath and wiped the leaking from her nose. She was ruining the silk sheets she clutched, but she couldn't hold back—
Again she convulsed, wracked with sobs.

The footsteps came down the Great Hall, pausing to listen at each door to work out where the noises came from.

Eventually Qayin threw open the door to the pale blue guestroom and leered at her cowering figure on the floor by the bed.

She hid her head in the blankets in a futile attempt to conceal her blotchy face.

“You're sobbing over him, aren't you?”

She didn't look up. His fist would come soon enough. She no longer cared. There was nothing, absolutely nothing, in the world she cared for . . .

Except for Lemuel.

Versula braced for the blow she knew would come, but instead she heard chuckling.

“Figures. You in here, sobbing. So this is where he slept when they visited? Surely the bedding has been washed in the years since that Dinner, wouldn't you think?”

“Qayin,” Versula murmured, feeling not particularly brave but rather self-destructive, otherwise she never would have dared to say the words, “Leave me alone.”

“Leave you alone?” he repeated, and she glanced up to see him smiling. The expression was odd on his face. The lines around his mouth were shallow, as if not sure where to go since they were rarely in that happy shape. “It's a fantastic day. Best one I've ever seen. The clouds are gathering, the birds are silent, and Perrin Shin's dead. I finally understand what people say when they call a day glorious. But you don't.”

He nudged her crumpled form with his highly polished boot.

“So how long are you going to mourn him, huh? We've got vis-

itors tomorrow. Snyder and his wife, along with his niece, will be coming for dinner, remember? I think the girl is probably Lemuel's best bet now. She's young and has enough Snyder blood in her. With her uncle and grandfather both officers, she should produce a decent son or two for Lemuel. Granted, she's isn't much to look at, but if what the surgeon says is correct about Lemuel, that he's crippled—"

Versula's renewed sobs cut Qayin off, and his lip curled into a sneer. "Who are those tears for, woman? Your disfigured son, or the man he helped kill?"

She only shook in response.

"That's what I thought," Qayin spat. "Get over it, Versula. He's never coming for you. Oh, don't look so surprised. I know you married me to make Perrin jealous. You were such an impulsive and shortsighted girl. But," he chuckled, "he never noticed, did he? So all these years you've been pining for him. Probably the most ridiculous thing I've ever witnessed. And now he's never coming back for you—maybe the only woman who actually wanted him—so have your little cry and be done with it."

"How can you . . . how can you . . ." Her gasping made it difficult to get out any more words than that.

"How can I what, Versula? Oh, I knew. I always knew. I didn't marry you for your brain, you know. I married you for your bloodlines, although you've proved to be a bit skittish at times. But, the best way to the high generalship was to be as close to it as possible. And I got it," he announced, as if the appointment hadn't been expected. Otherwise, why would they have moved in to the High General's mansion two weeks ago? "I'll be officially installed in three days. Yes, you may go out and purchase some expensive frippery for the day. You need to look presentable as the wife of the most important man in Idumea."

Versula said nothing but blubbered quietly.

"Kind of funny, isn't it," he said as he nudged her again with his boot, a bit more forcefully. "You *didn't* get what you wanted. You wanted him, and now he's gone forever, and you have nothing to remember him by—"

His snickering stopped abruptly, and Versula braced herself again. She kept her head low and squeezed shut her eyes.

Qayin had just jumped to a conclusion, a connection forming in his brain which would manifest itself in his fist. Usually he went for her lower back where the bruises wouldn't show, but he'd never

“Seems . . . there was a lot more going on than any of us realized.”

waited this long before. That meant he was thinking . . .

Every muscle in Versula tensed, waiting.

“*Something to remember him by* . . . Slag. Oh, you slagging sow. You said that the night of The Dinner when they were here, didn’t you? DIDN’T YOU?!” he bellowed and, gripping her upper arm, dragged her to her feet.

She lifted her head with as much pride as she could muster. “I said this before, and I’ll say it again: Leave me alone, Qayin.”

His grip on her arm became so tight that she was losing feeling in it, but she firmed her chin and stared into his cold blue eyes.

“You slagging sow,” he growled at her. “Tell me honestly, right now: whose son is Lemuel?”

Versula nearly swallowed her tongue in an effort to make it work. Before she could open her mouth he shouted again, “WHOSE SON IS HE—”

“—YOURS!” she shouted back, and hated hearing the word. She sagged in his grip and whimpered. “Lemuel’s your son. Yes, I went to Perrin once after we were married. To his dorm room in Command School, late at night. His roommates were out, I made sure of that. But—” She shook her head.

Qayin didn’t care that she fell to weeping again, and he dropped her unceremoniously on the floor.

“You’re sure? *Absolutely* sure?”

It was almost as if she could feel his fist in the air, hovering above her. It didn’t matter what she said next, he’d still use it.

She had nothing more of her plotting, her games. She had nothing left. Nothing.

“Lemuel is your son, Qayin. *Your* son.”

His fist never came.

Instead the boots retreated from the bedroom, and she heard him thumping down the Great Hall to his office, loudly whistling some inane little ditty because everything was right in his world.

Versula sobbed for another hour.

Teeria Rigoff looked up from her stitching. “Milo? What are you doing home so early? I haven’t even started supper—”

Major Rigoff took off his cap and set it down on the side table. “Brillen gave me permission to come home to tell you. Well, first

we had to revive him, and then he had to recover from the sedation administered to put the stitches in his head—”

“What happened? Did he get thrown from that horse again? Does his wife know—”

“Teeria, I need to tell you something. There’s been an update from Idumea. Officially, from Nicko Mal himself.”

She set down the shirt she was mending, dread in her eyes. “It’s about the Shins, isn’t it? They really are gone, aren’t they?”

Milo nodded, and Teeria slumped, her chin trembling. “I knew it. But I just had to hold on to that little piece of hope—”

Her husband went down on one knee before her. “Teeria, there’s more. The fort received word this morning, and the notices will go out tomorrow, but I didn’t want you to hear it from anyone else . . .”

“What is it?”

“I don’t even know how to start. It’s just . . .”

“Say it.”

He looked into her eyes. “First, I want you to know that I knew you used to have feelings for Shem Zenos—”

“Long ago,” she cut him off. “I was only a teenager. But once I met you, I never thought twice about him. I realized I preferred younger men,” she managed a smile.

“I’m only four years younger than you,” he reminded her.

“But still, there’s nothing more thrilling to an older woman than a younger man chasing after her.”

Her husband’s expression went unexpectedly wooden. “Why did you have to say that?”

She swallowed. “I was just . . . just trying to ease the moment. You’re always telling me I’m too serious. Milo?”

He had slumped to the floor, deflated. “True, but this is *not* the moment to ease. Especially with *those* words.” He closed his eyes and rubbed his face.

“Sorry, Milo,” Teeria joined him on the floor. “Please just tell me what’s happened.”

“I’m trying to. We always had our little suspicions, you know? Back in Edge? Sometimes Brillen or Grandpy or me would become *worried*. But we never saw anything inappropriate. They just seemed to be a little *too* close, you know?”

“Sort of?”

“We watched, always watched, trying to make sure no one got

“Seems . . . there was a lot more going on than any of us realized.”

hurt. That no one pushed things too far. And from what we could tell, no one did. But then . . . then Perrin had his trauma, and all of us were gone by then to other forts. There was no one there to keep an eye on things *for him*. You know what I mean?”

“I’m pretending to.”

Milo sighed. “Shem frequently sent letters to Brillen updating him about Perrin, which Brillen shared with me, and . . . Teeria, Shem was close. *Very close*.”

“Ye-es?” she said slowly, not quite catching on. Or, if she did, she didn’t want to understand just yet. “I think he was *close* even at the beginning.”

Milo studied her thoughtfully before saying, “You’ve always respected and loved Miss Mahrree. I just don’t want to ruin that.”

She blinked at him. “What are you trying to get at?”

“Teeria, sit down—”

“I am, Milo. I can’t get any lower than the floor.”

“Believe it or not, Teeria, you’re about to get lower . . .”

Sheff Gizzada didn’t open the doors of his restaurant in Pools the next day. He sent home his staff and put up a sign that said only “Closed until further notice.”

But at the back of his establishment, the not-so-secret hideout of enlisted men looking for a massive sandwich for a tiny slip of silver, the doors were thrown open all day. Gizzada wasn’t cooking, but his barrels of mead and ale were freely available to whomever wanted to drown his sorrows with the old Sarge.

He didn’t talk much, which was uncharacteristic for him. Soldiers by the hundreds somberly filed in and out all day, sharing stories and saying the same things like, “Just can’t believe it,” and “What a shock,” and “So sorry, Sarge.”

At one point Gizzada took down the big sign behind the counter, and for the longest time fingered the burned words in the wood labeling The General Shin and The Colonel Shin sized sandwiches, and the dessert of the day, named The Peto. He traced an S so often that some of the blackening faded.

When sundown came, and Gizzada was feeling as drained as his empty mead barrels, he prodded the last of the mourners out the door. He was just about to lock up for the night when he noticed two

more enlisted men in the alley heading for his door. He stepped out to shoo them away, but then noticed there was something familiar about them.

Not caring that his behavior wasn't very Sarge-like, he broke into a lumbering run and was caught in an embrace by Grandpy Neeks. Gizzada reached out and pulled in Corporal Poe Hili to be crushed by their hug. After a few moments, the three men, arm in arm, trudged back to the restaurant. Sheff Gizzada closed the door behind them, locked it, and pulled the shades.

The lantern stayed on all night long as the three men reminisced about the only officer worth his weight, and speculated about everything else.

Shortly after midnight, they began to plan . . .

Chapter 21--“There is now an official story.”

For the next couple of days Perrin learned what a ‘normal’ life looked like. He watched the sun rise over the eastern mountains. Then while his wife and daughter planted gardens in the morning, he built fences with Deck and Peto for the eighty acres. At midday meal he helped Mahrree compile a list of the world’s high and low points for the past one-hundred-twenty years, to present as a series of lectures Professor Kopersee had already arranged for Mahrree to deliver to all upper school teachers during their break next week

After midday meal he saw off Peto for the last few weeks of school in Salem, where he learned far more than he ever did in Edge, and most efficiently in only three hours each afternoon. Then he spent the afternoons finishing Deck’s house with the men of the community, while Deck traveled to different ranches to select cattle. In the late afternoon Rector Yung came to help Peto prepare the land for an orchard, and Perrin was tasked to move larger rocks out of the way.

Normal life, Perrin decided five days after their arrival in Salem, was bliss.

“I’m still waiting for the stress to begin,” he said as he sat down to a late dinner after nailing in the last shingles on the Briters’ roof. “But I really don’t think it’ll come. By the way, Deck and Jaytsy can move in tomorrow night. Some women from the neighborhood are there now, sweeping it out for the furniture to be delivered tomorrow.”

“Jaytsy will be thrilled,” Mahrree said, sitting down across from him. “She’s out with Deck and Peto bringing in his herd. You better hurry up before they arrive, so we won’t miss the parade of steak.”

Perrin was already chewing. “After we get them moved in,” he garbled and swallowed, “I can claim my office and start securing Salem. We could really use towers here, I’ve decided, and we can try smaller banners for the alphabet to spell out short messages.”

“And here you thought you’d have nothing to do in Salem.”

Perrin chuckled. “I’ve also been thinking a lot about Lorixania,” he said thoughtfully. “I’ve been listening to the men talking while they worked on the house, discussing somebody’s horse that’s down, or how someone else’s new fence design looks nice, and I realized I could have spent my whole life here instead of Idumea and Edge. I could have known all these people who worry and work and help each other as if they really *are* all family. I’ve been wondering how my life would have been different had my great-great-grandmother followed her father instead.”

He looked off at the wall for a minute, his eyes searching for a stone to stare at but only seeing wood. He settled for a knothole. “All because of her choices, my family for generations lived a life less than it could have been. Did she really believe she was on the right side? Grandfather Pere remembered her as a boy, and he said she was always sad. I wonder if she ever regretted her decision. It took us four generations to get back to where we should have been.

“I also wondered if Lek’s failure was behind the king’s anger. Yudit said that Lorixania was quite outspoken. What if her family leaving, and her making a fuss about it, caused so much of what our society experienced over the next several years? Just a few people’s choices can affect thousands. Maybe even more.”

“Maybe, but maybe not,” Mahrree said. “People make mistakes, but the Creator seems to know those mistakes are going to be made and prepares a way back. The point is, *we made it back*. I don’t know what my ancestor Barnos was thinking when he settled in Edge. Why did he leave the Zenos family? Then again, if our lives didn’t play out the way they did, how would we have ever met each other? There must have been some Divine help, don’t you think?”

Perrin stopped staring at the knothole and looked at his wife. “That’s why I married you, isn’t it? You always see the sides I can’t.”

Mahrree reached across the table to squeeze his hand. “And you always see the sides I don’t notice. Works pretty well that way, doesn’t it? But really, Perrin, I doubt an officer named Shin marrying a loud and outspoken woman *really* could have changed the course of the world, now, do you?” She batted her eyelashes.

“Who knows? It happened just recently! Apparently we Shins are attracted to loud Zenoses.”

Mahrree laughed. “But I didn’t change the course of the world. You kept reminding me that no one in Idumea cared about a little

woman in Edge.”

“But they did, Mahrree,” said Perrin, suddenly sober. “They always did. Gadiman’s file was proof. I’m sorry I never realized that.”

“Don’t be. Look where it got us. Now eat your dinner. Cattle are coming and they don’t want to know you had beef.” Perrin wasn’t quite up to going meatless that year.

Soon after, Mahrree and Perrin sat on their front porch watching one hundred bulls, cows, and calves noisily moo their way down their dirt road, kicking up dust and occasionally protesting the snap of Deck’s whip as he and several other men steered the livestock into the pasture behind his new house.

Shem’s father Boskos stood at the gate waiting to funnel in the cattle. He grinned as he saw another herd coming to enjoy the land that he used for so many years.

Deck, sitting proudly atop of Clark who helpfully nickered at a few errant calves, looked as if he’d never stop smiling.

But Peto, with Jaytsy in the wagon next to him, looked as if he’d never stop scowling. From their position at the back of the herd, the scent was considerably stronger.

But Jaytsy didn’t notice as she beamed at her husband silhouetted in the setting sun.

“So,” Mahrree said as she coughed away another dust ball, “these are our new neighbors. A little, um, *earthy*, aren’t they?”

By the time the cattle were settled in, it was fully dark. Mahrree didn’t recognize the man who came up to her porch until he spoke.

“So what do you think of your son-in-law’s herd?”

“Guide Gleace? How long have you been here?”

“I arrived a little while ago and brought someone along to meet you, but then we saw that stray calf and got caught up in all the excitement of catching it. I’m a little dirtier than I like to be, but—” he brushed the muck off his trousers apologetically.

“But nothing. Come on in and clean up,” Mahrree said, holding open the door.

The guide beckoned to someone in the dark, and two more men came up to the door.

Mahrree recognized Shem who was in deep conversation with the second man who was in his early thirties.

“Mahrree,” Shem said, “is Perrin around?”

“He should be back soon,” she said as she let the men into the house and showed them to the washing room. “He was trying to pick

out tomorrow night's dinner. I'm sure Deck will be shooin' him back in at any moment now."

Perrin did come in the back door a few minutes later, wearing a sheepish grin, with his son and daughter pushing him.

"I told you, not until later in the season! And only one that Deck hasn't grown fond of! Mother," Jaytsy put her hands on her hips, "he was out there outlining the rump of the biggest bull with a piece of chalk and labeling it *Perrin's*. He's lucky the cattle of Salem are afraid of him too, or he would've been wearing a horn in his gut!"

The guide scratched his head. "Cattle are afraid of Perrin? Interesting. Maybe we could use him when it's time to corral the lazy ones wandering in the hills."

Jaytsy shrugged. "Perhaps. Deck spent a whole Raining Season trying to understand why they run from him, but we didn't come to any conclusions."

"That's because you were too busy staring at each other with gooey eyes," Peto reminded her.

"Oh yeah," she giggled. "That's probably true."

"Well, I'm glad you're here," Shem said. "This is someone I want you to meet—Caraka Mondell. Actually, Mahrree and Perrin, he's already met you, but you probably don't realize it."

Mahrree analyzed the man. His face was rather plain and not distinguished in any way. Average. Quite *overly* average, if that were possible. "I'm sorry, I don't remember you."

Caraka smiled. "Most people don't remember or even notice me. That's why I was so good at my work. But your situation rendered you even less likely to notice me. When we were in the same room you were more nervous than any woman I ever saw. At one point you were so pale I was sure you were about to pass out. I tried several times to make eye contact and assure you all was well, but you rarely looked up." He waited for her to put it all together.

Mahrree frowned. "Idumea? The office outside the Main Conference Room?"

Caraka nodded. "I was the recorder. Have been for many years."

Perrin folded his arms. "I don't remember you."

"No surprise there. Some people have a face that's unforgettable. Mine is *unmemorable*. Then again, the first time you were there you were accompanying your wife, who you marched out quite angrily if I remember correctly."

Perrin winced at the memory and Mahrree squeezed his arm.

“There is now an official story.”

“And the second time you came in, you were wielding a sword ready to kill Chairman Nicko Mal. At least, that was our guess. Or Gadiman. When you left you were a rather *changed* man.”

Perrin nodded and bit his lip. “Not my best moments, were they.”

“Actually, I thought they were,” Caraka grinned. “I was a bit disappointed you didn’t bloody that ridiculous table—” He stopped when he saw the guide, whose expression changed only in his eyes.

They had darkened.

“I’m sorry,” he said to the guide. “It’s probably a good thing I’ve come home. I’m sounding too much like Idumea.”

“We’ll work it out of you.” Gleace patted him on the back.

“Come sit down. Tell us what else you remember,” Mahrree winked at her husband.

“There is *some news*,” Guide Gleace said, with exceptional heaviness. “And considering what Caraka knows, I thought he may be able to provide Perrin some information as he secures Salem. Caraka’s out of work now.”

Shem turned to him. “I just thought you were here on leave.”

“No. There have been a great many changes in the world since last week,” Caraka said darkly. “And I’ve left for good.”

“I’m calling everyone home except for two scouts who will stay working the stables for the Administrators,” Gleace announced to the surprised family. “I recently learned that’s a good place for gaining information. I’m sending reinforcements to help Jothan get the last of our people out of the world during the next few weeks, until things quiet down a bit.”

“Why?” Mahrree said, trepidation welling inside her to see the guide so concerned. For the past week she’d forgotten that the rest of the world still swirled to the south of them. “What’s happened?”

Guide Gleace sighed. “As you know, we smuggled you out of Edge on the pretense of ‘killing you’—”

“Which is quite the honor,” Caraka grinned mischievously. “The last person we ‘killed’ was Guide Pax.”

Gleace managed a dim smile. “That’s true. But a problem has arisen. You see, we created your death as a cover for your disappearance. However, it seems that Administrator Genev, who has decided to make Edge his permanent base for the time, has concocted his own story.” With that, the guide looked intently at Caraka.

Caraka’s previous grin was replaced with apprehension.

“They need to know,” Gleace prodded him. “It may help Perrin

with his future plans.”

The guide sat down on a chair, an air of gloom accompanying him, and Caraka reluctantly sat in another next to him. Jaytsy and Peto sat on one of the sofas, and Perrin and Shem sat on the other, with an anxious Mahrree between them.

Caraka leaned forward, his elbows resting on his knees. “I’m not sure where I should start.”

“Start with Idumea’s official story,” Guide Gleace suggested. “Get it out of the way.”

Caraka nodded and exhaled. “There is now an official story as to what happened to the Shin family. Your house was searched and . . . they found Terry’s map.”

Perrin rubbed his forehead. “What did they do with it?”

“Sent it to Idumea for evaluation. But the story released by the Administrators is that it *is* the original one.”

“Good,” Perrin’s shoulders sagged. “It just may be preserved still. So now I’m a traitor?” he asked with a pitiful smile.

Caraka shook his head. “No, not the Hero of Edge. You are still a hero, but a tragic one now.”

“Really?” Perrin said. “And how did *that* happen?”

Jaytsy and Peto leaned forward on the sofa, fascinated.

Caraka squirmed. “The story is, the map wasn’t Colonel Shin’s. It was Sergeant Major Zenos’s.”

“Mine?” Shem exclaimed. “Well, that’s not fair. I didn’t even get to see the original.”

“Poor Shem.” Mahrree chuckled and patted him on the knee.

Caraka saw it and, oddly, winced before looking away.

“Why would it be in my house if it was Shem’s?” Perrin asked, insulted that he didn’t get credit—or blame—for possessing the map.

Caraka shifted in his seat, feeling the pressure of so many stares. He shielded his eyes before he said the next part. “Because Shem gave it to Mrs. Shin.”

“What?” Now it was Mahrree’s turn to exclaim. “Why me?”

Caraka looked pleadingly at the guide.

“Remember, Caraka, you’re only telling them the official story. You’re not behind any of this.”

Caraka groaned and closed his eyes so as to not see the line of victims who sat before him innocent of his news as he blurted, “So that Mrs. Shin could run away with the sergeant major!”

Every mouth in the room fell open, except for the guide’s and

Caraka’s.

“Finish it,” said Gleace grimly.

“According to the Administrators, Mrs. Shin and the sergeant major were . . . *together* for quite some time. The colonel followed them into the forest to stop their *togetherness*.” Caraka made some vague hand motions and then tried to wipe it all away.

Mahrree and Shem slowly turned to look at each other.

Peto snorted a guffaw.

Jaytsy slapped a hand over her mouth.

Perrin’s breathing began to quicken.

Horrified, Mahrree stared at Shem.

People in Edge now thought that she and him—

Feeling as if she’d just been punched in the gut, Mahrree leaned toward her husband as Shem leaped off the sofa as if stabbed by it.

“Wha—? How—? Why—?” Shem spluttered as he paced the floor. He instinctively walked back to his spot on the sofa, saw Mahrree, and spun around to not face her.

Mahrree covered her eyes with her hand, but watched Shem between her fingers.

Jaytsy patted the seat next to her as Shem stomped aimlessly around the room. He threw his hands up in the air when he saw her. Instead of sitting, he marched to the eating room, took a chair, and slammed it down in the farthest corner of the gathering room.

Plopping himself on it, he bounced his legs nervously. “I never. Not once did I *ever* . . . I—”

“Shem!” Perrin said sharply. “Enough! No one said you did!”

Shem leaped to his feet again. “The Administrators said I . . . that we—” He pointed at Mahrree who was still so humiliated she wasn’t sure if she’d ever come out of hiding. “I don’t believe this!” He spun to Caraka. “So all the soldiers in Edge now think that I and Mahr—”

The only consolation Mahrree felt at that moment was that Shem was so shocked he couldn’t bring himself to say her name.

Caraka, wincing so fiercely that his face screwed itself into nearly a slit, nodded.

“No!” Shem wailed as he sat down hard on his chair. “Do you know how often I told them about the importance of being honorable and exact in *everything*? Do you know what I sound like now? The biggest hypocrite in the world!” He hid his face in his hands.

“For how long?” Perrin calmly asked Caraka. “How long were Shem and Mahrree having an affair—”

That terrible word brought Mahrree out of hiding. “Don’t say it *like that!*”

Perrin kissed her forehead and put a comforting arm around her. His composure astounded her. “I didn’t mean it *like that*. What I meant to say is, *What have the Administrators suggested* about the length of the . . . um . . . uh . . .”

“*Togetherness?*” Peto tried to stifle his laughter, but he couldn’t, even with his sister jabbing him. “I’m sorry, but it’s so funny. Come on, Mother and Uncle Shem? Together? Who would believe that? This is hilarious.”

“Maybe in a few weeks, Peto,” said Perrin heavily.

“Seasons.” Mahrree hid behind her hand again, realizing that her children had just heard about her supposed . . .

“Years,” Shem said quietly in the corner, his head hanging low.

Peto scoffed. “I don’t get it. Just laugh it off. Another stupid administrative lie. We’ve dealt with those before.”

His sister glared at him. “And what lies about *you* have they spread?”

“This feels . . . different,” Mahrree murmured. One part of her wanted to shake it off, chuckle at the inanity, but this was no ordinary cut that would quickly heal. It was a stab in her gut, and that’s where she felt it, aching and twisting.

Caraka cleared his throat. “It’s been suggested that they had been together for quite some time, since before the land tremor. You see, it helps to explain the unusual behavior of the colonel, especially after his parents’ death. The story is, he was suspecting the affair—together—*relationship*,” he finally decided to call it, “so his erratic behavior was connected to that, not to the death of his parents. The attack on Moorland was an attempt to impress his wife to come back to him, but instead it revealed that Shem Zenos was . . . a Guarder spy. Colonel Shin decided to keep that a secret to preserve his reputation.”

Shem’s head fell even lower.

Perrin only shifted in his seat as Mahrree wilted miserably into him.

Caraka sighed before he continued. “Mrs. Shin’s recent outburst about the findings of the expedition was an attempt to convince her husband to leave Edge, to get him out of the way. When he refused to support her at the platform, he was demonstrating his devotion to the Administrators. When he resigned, it was his last desperate attempt to win back his wife. He was torn between his ‘two loves:’ his

wife and the army.”

Peto’s scoffing chuckle didn’t spread to anyone else.

“Since Mrs. Shin and the sergeant major were—” Caraka made some more vague hand movements, “they made plans to abandon the colonel and his children. The map was to tell Mrs. Shin where to meet her lov—uh, *Shem*.”

“They were to run away to Terry’s land together?” Perrin shook his head at the absurdity.

Caraka shrugged.

“So everybody in Edge,” Mahrree said from behind her hiding hand, “now believes that I was . . . *with Shem*—”

“Uh, no,” Caraka said quietly. “I’m sorry to say everyone in the *world* now believes you were *with Shem*. Messages went out to the forts a couple of days ago, notices to the villages a little after that. There’s already talk of another play.”

That was all Mahrree could take. “No!”

Shem’s head couldn’t hang any lower without scraping the ground.

“I guess you didn’t need to hear that part,” Caraka mumbled apologetically.

“Everything I ever said to the recruits,” Shem murmured, “*everything* I ever said will now sound like a lie.”

Mahrree gasped. “My students! Oh, what must my students think?! They had such foul mouths and minds as it was, and now?”

Even Peto winced at that. “But hey, why do we care what the world thinks?” he tried again. “Isn’t that the point? Why we left? To not care about the world anymore?”

“I know I shouldn’t,” Mahrree said, “but I just can’t help it. I do. I care.”

Next to her, Perrin sighed heavily in grudging agreement.

“But why are they saying all these things about Mother and Shem?” Jaytsy wondered. “Why not just let them die in the forest?”

The answer hit Mahrree again in the gut, and she didn’t think she’d eat again for days. “I know why. He got it right,” she nodded to Shem, whose name caught in her throat. “Everything we ever said will be considered a lie. What I claimed on the platform? That can all now be dismissed because of what kind of a woman I have been ‘revealed’ to be. It’s really deviously clever. They couldn’t destroy my words, so they destroyed my reputation which rendered my words meaningless. And my husband, the beloved of the world, died in some

tragic way in the forest, right?”

Caraka nodded. “Trying to retrieve your body, which was riddled with arrows, which then fell into a cavern. You were both lost.”

“Rather romantic.” Perrin tried to smile.

But Mahrree couldn't. “So Perrin Shin, who should have been High General of Idumea, falls because he naively followed his treacherous wife, and was deceived by his closest friend. He remains the hero the Administrators couldn't hope to destroy. I, on the other hand, was a far easier and more expendable target.”

“Very good. Maybe you *could* have been an officer.” Perrin kissed her again.

“Or worked for Genev,” Peto whispered to his sister.

“So who's behind all of this new story?” Jaytsy wondered.

“Genev helped, I'm sure, but I've been thinking a lot over the past week,” Perrin said, “about the world. If it's any *one* person, I think it's Nicko Mal. I remembered something the other day, from back when I was in Command School. He came to our diplomacy class to deliver a lecture on human nature. It was before he took over the government from King Oren, but he must have already been in the thick of planning it. He said humans have no extra ability or strength to look fear in the eye and say, *Come get me*. He spent half an hour explaining how humans are just complex animals, that people can be manipulated to respond to stresses just like a horse, and to be led like one as well. He had done experiments with dogs. He'd strike a bell with a stick, then strike the dogs. Soon he only needed to strike the bell and the dogs cowered. Eventually he just appeared, without even a stick, and the dogs hid in terror. He said humans were no different, and could never be anything better.

“So, naturally, I spent the next fifteen minutes arguing with him that because humans were the children of the Creator, their potential and abilities were far greater than mere animals. He just rolled his eyes whenever I said ‘Creator.’ I was furious, and Mal was irritated that I challenged his position. The more I think about it, the more I wonder if we aren't all just part of one his grand experiments. In this case, we're the dogs.”

“I know you have a remarkable ability to irritate people, Father,” Peto spoke up, “but you really think all of this was Chairman Mal's attempt to *prove his point to you?*”

“It's a *little* more complex than that,” Mahrree decided. “But for some reason that sounds right. What lengths some people will go for

entertainment.”

“And ego,” Perrin said.

“Chairman Mal had access to everything,” Shem reminded them. “All the Administrators, control over the army, all the files—”

“Mrs. Shin’s file,” Caraka added.

Perrin shook his head. “We destroyed it.”

“You destroyed Gadiman and Genev’s file on her,” Caraka told him. “But you didn’t get Captain Thorne’s. Apparently he had a spy working for him, telling him everything that Mrs. Shin taught, and *didn’t* teach, and taught *extra* in her classes.”

“Lannard!” Mahrree whispered. “He was working for Thorne, exercising his horse.”

“What happened to us?” Jaytsy asked, nodding to her brother.

Caraka brightened a little to have a different subject. “Guarders. Turns out they incorporated some of our story. We *had* said that Guarders kidnapped your family from their houses, but Genev twisted that as well. Your father was hoping, *according to the Administrators*, to use you and your brother to help retrieve your mother who had already run away with Shem. But at least now everyone also believes the Guarders have returned, in full force, so that’s effectively scaring off people from trying to find their own ways to the ruins.”

“So what happened to Shem in this new story?” Peto asked a little too eagerly.

Shem’s head bobbed.

“Still killed by Thorne,” Caraka said. “The scouts took care of Dormin’s body. Since it was dark, no one who witnessed the event seems to question that it wasn’t Shem who was killed. Or they were threatened to state that it was.”

Peto frowned. “I supposed that makes Thorne quite the hero, huh? Killing the traitorous, adulterous Shem—”

Shem’s head came up, a fierce look in his eyes.

“A little,” Caraka admitted. “But not as much as he probably wishes.”

“So he’s not in charge of the fort?” Shem asked.

“No, not at all. He’s still recovering. Apparently he was struck by a lightning bolt. His right arm was so badly burned it’s permanently lamed.”

Shem winced, as did Mahrree, but Perrin’s and Jaytsy’s faces remained immovable.

“Caraka,” Perrin said, “I’m sure it was my father’s sword that he

used. Do you know what may have happened to it?"

"Rumor is that it *was* General Shin's sword that the lightning struck, when Thorne drew it to come after you. But it's damaged beyond repair."

Perrin nodded once, in satisfaction. "I never thought it would tolerate taking an innocent life. Yes, I know that sounds strange, and I know it's not alive, but somehow I feel it got its revenge for Dormin's life. Nor would it allow itself to be used against anyone else. Somehow I feel my father may have been behind some of this."

Caraka nodded. "I think you may be right about that. Well, even when Thorne's recuperated he still won't be in charge," he continued. "That's part of the reason I came back. Genev has ordered commandants to govern every fort."

"Commandants?" Mahrree said.

Perrin sighed. "We had provisions for that, but I never imagined they would actually use it. Essentially it means the Administrators have lost faith in the fort commanders, and have appointed new political leaders to rule alongside the commanders. But it won't stay that way. The commandants will take over, no doubt. The army becomes a puppet for the Administrators."

Caraka nodded. "Already there is great pressure. Every single worker is being interrogated, moved around, and replaced in the Administrative Headquarters. No fort will look the same. Soldiers are being shuffled around like chips in a game of Dices. Even High General Thorne now has to go through Chairman Mal for approval of anything."

"Nicko's angry that the cat let the favorite falcon fly out of the barn," Perrin said with his first genuine smile of the evening.

"There's even talk of burning down the entire forest from Edge to Moorland, just to find out what it hides," Caraka added.

"That's why I want everyone home now," Gleace said. "If they destroy the routes, our people will be trapped in the world. The Administrators haven't made up their mind yet about the forests, but Shem's route is no longer protected and is far more dangerous. If they do expose the forest, they will also uncover a great many of their own secrets, especially about the so-called Guardians. I doubt they want to do that. But I'm not about to take any chances. I don't play Dices."

Caraka gave him a grateful smile before he turned back to Perrin. "Genev is personally overseeing Fort Shin. The name is staying, by the way, as a reminder to respect the Shin name, but to never trust

anyone they love. *I am* sorry,” he said, looking at Mahrree.

Mahrree sighed and slouched on the sofa. “Every person I’ve known for over forty years—my friends, my mother’s friends, the congregation, our neighbors, my students, the teachers, the officers—*everyone* will believe I’m nothing more than one of the girls who hung out at the northeast entrance. Just a regular sow.”

“Mahrree!” Perrin said sharply. “Stop that!”

Shem slapped his forehead. “I used that entrance to sneak over to your house at night after Perrin and I came back from Idumea.” He groaned. “And I’d stay all night at your place! Look at all the evidence I gave them!”

Perrin stood up between them, and Mahrree realized it was getting to him as well. The idea struck her that maybe worse than being labeled as a betrayer was being cast as the person foolish enough to be betrayed.

“Enough, both of you!” Perrin ordered Shem and Mahrree. “You have to let this go. None of it is true, and all of it belongs to the world. We left that world, right? Peto was right, amazingly: we shouldn’t care. Let them create whatever lies they want to, but it won’t touch us. If you ever wanted another reason why we had to leave, now you have it. Let the world destroy itself! I refuse to let it hurt our family, and we will talk of it no more. Is that understood?”

Mahrree nodded, forcing herself to meet her husband’s eyes. How could anyone not believe that she adored him? All of Edge may think that the man they regarded with fear and veneration was little more than a clueless cast-off, but Mahrree hoped her husband could see the devotion in her eyes.

“Zenos!” Perrin barked.

Shem sat up instinctively and tried to look Perrin in the eyes, but mortification came over him as he noticed Mahrree watching him.

“Shem, will you let this die? Here and now?” Perrin demanded.

Shem sighed. “I want to. I’ve just never been so, so . . . What will Brillen Karna think, Perrin? I used to write him all the time. And Fadh? Yordin? Grandpy and Rigoff and Poe—”

“I don’t care, so neither should you.”

Mahrree knew there was nothing Perrin could say that was further from the truth.

Shem closed his eyes but whispered, “I’ll try.”

“Not good enough, Zenos!”

Shem took a breath and said louder, “Yes sir! I will let it die.”

Perrin walked over to him and pulled him out of his chair. “Come here.” He held Shem’s face in his hands. “Years ago I accused you of being a Guarder spy. I never would have imagined then that I would laugh about it later. Yet the very next day we did. This, too, will become funny. It never happened and this story will never leave this family or this room.”

Jaytsy and Peto nodded, as did Caraka and Gleace.

“I’ll speak to all those coming from the world to make sure none of them spreads the rumor,” Gleace promised. “It will die before it ever reaches Salem.”

Shem blinked away furious tears.

“Now tomorrow,” Perrin said to Shem, “I want you to come over and talk to my wife again like she’s your sister. Because that’s what she’s always been. Well, actually, a cousin on one side several times removed, and a cousin by marriage on another side a few times removed. You’ll have to explain that terminology to me, because I don’t get it. How do you *remove* someone?”

Shem started to smile as Perrin released his face. “Yes, you’ve got it completely wrong. And yes, I understand and agree. I just have to leave. Now. Tomorrow will be better.”

Mahrree made a motion to get up, but Perrin waved her back down as Shem abruptly headed out the front door without looking at anyone.

Guide Gleace stood up. “I’ll take care of him.” He nodded goodbye to the family and hastily followed Shem.

Perrin turned to Caraka. “I appreciate your coming to tell us all of this. Would be quite the family tale to share if ever we were to share it again.”

Caraka held up his hands. “Again, I’m sorry I had to deliver the news. If it makes you feel any better, your memorial service three mornings ago in Idumea packed the entire kickball stadium. I saw the crowd gathering as I left.”

Perrin smiled slightly. “I could never imagine why fifty thousand people would all want to cram into the same area. I hope the weather was nice.”

“It was. You will be missed, sir. The world will not be the same without the Shin family.” He leaned over to Mahrree. “All of you.”

Mahrree nodded a weak thanks.

As Caraka went out the front door, the side door attached to the eating room burst open.

“There is now an official story.”

Deck bounded in, dusty and happy. “So what do you think of my one hundred babies? Beautiful, aren’t they? Oh, no,” he said reading their bleak faces. “*Another* document?”

Mahrree stood up, The Dinner smile firmly in place. “Not at all, Deck. Your babies are beautiful. But I just learned that I really have changed the world.”

Down the road two figures walked slowly in the darkness. No words passed between them, but heavy sighs from the taller, younger man filled the air.

“You know, Shem—” the older man started to say after the eighth sigh.

“Why did you choose me to be an assistant?” Shem interrupted. “I haven’t even served as a rector—”

“That’s not entirely true, Shem. Before we sent you to Edge what did Guide Hifadhi do?”

“Put his hands on my shoulders and declared me to be . . . a rector,” he finished in a whisper.

“That’s right. Not a practicing rector such as Yung, but endowed with the same guidance, inspiration, and ability as a rector. The same power the Creator grants to all scouts going to the world. And you behaved as a rector, countless times, for the Shins.”

“Not always,” he said miserably. “And I’m not like the other eleven assistants. They’re married, older, wiser—”

“Shem, I didn’t choose you. The Creator *called* you. He’s the only one who calls men to His work. He sees your heart. He only gives me glimpses into it. And I still see a man called by the Creator.”

Shem sighed for the ninth time.

The guide put an arm around him. “Remember, the Creator doesn’t judge us on the temptations we encounter, but how we *react* to those temptations.”

It took Shem a minute to work up enough courage to say, “So you know, then.”

“It’s just as I told you,” Gleace said kindly, “the Creator gives me glimpses into people’s hearts.”

Shem groaned at that revelation, and whatever further insights the guide may have had about him.

With forbearance Shem didn’t feel he deserved, Gleace asked,

“Did you ever act on those temptations?”

“No,” he whispered. “Never. I killed the thoughts, over and over again. And Perrin thought I could never kill anything.”

“Then you passed that test. And now you also know how terrible it would’ve been if you’d *failed it*.”

“I couldn’t even look at her, Guide. She was so upset, seeing herself as a common sow . . . And when *he* looked at me I thought I was going to vomit.”

With the same calm patience, Gleace asked, “Do you think Perrin ever suspected?”

It was an excruciatingly long moment before Shem managed, “Yes, I’m sure he did. I even sort of confessed it the night I told him everything in Deck’s barn. When Perrin put her hand in mine before I dragged them through the forest, he twitched a signal which, depending upon the situation, means, *I place you in charge of what is mine, should I not be able to take care of it*. I tried to keep my mind clear, yet there it was again, and I was overwhelmed with . . . Guide, I don’t want to feel that way about her! But so many times when I looked at her . . .” Shem didn’t say anything more, afraid he’d start blubbing.

“Yet still her husband loves you as his best friend and brother,” Gleace said steadily. “So apparently he still trusts you—”

“But Guide, why?” Shem wailed. “Why was I plagued for so many years by . . . He’s my *brother*! She’s *his* wife! I *never* gave in. Perrin’s great uncle Hogal even noticed it, the first time. Told me to keep my eyes on *him*, on Perrin. And I succeeded, for a time. Then it would come back again . . .” Shem rubbed his eyes as if to wipe away memories. “The worst were the past couple of years,” he confessed.

Gleace just listened, as he always did when the burden had to be voiced.

“She’d ask me to stay. At night. Often. She worried about him when he was sedated and practically dead to the world. She told me she felt so vulnerable, and she’d innocently hug me, then beg me to stay and comfort her.” Shem squeezed his eyes shut. “And so many ideas, so many ways I could take advantage of all of that would pour into my mind, showing me how *easy* it would have been—”

He stopped walking and covered his eyes with his hands, trying to shove back in the tears, the images, maybe even his confession.

Gleace stood by patiently as his newest assistant agonized.

“There is now an official story.”

“But Guide, I promise you I didn’t,” Shem said, his hands dropping to his sides. “I never, ever tried anything. I pushed away those thoughts as quickly as I pushed her away, and I stayed all night on that *stupid sofa*.”

“And that’s why this lie, which wasn’t *entirely* a lie, has such an effect on you,” Gleace said carefully. “You’re afraid you’ve been found out.”

Shem turned to Gleace, whose expression was much gentler than he thought he deserved. “Guide, I was doing everything you and Hifadhi wanted me to do, everything the Creator commanded, so why?”

Gleace slid his hand up to Shem’s shoulder to keep a firm hold on him as they slowly continued on their walk. “Because you were doing everything right, everything we wanted you to do, and everything the Creator commanded. That’s why.”

“*What?*”

“Consider this—how important was this work?”

“Very important. Nothing was more vital to Salem than bringing the Shin family here.”

“And who wanted you to fail?”

Shem sighed yet again. “The Refuser.”

“Exactly. And what better way to destroy this work than to destroy the Shins’ trust in you? Had you succumbed, in any way, to the temptations you suffered concerning Mahrree Shin, they would have lost all trust in you, and then everything else would have been lost, too. But you were stronger than his temptations, Shem. You refused to give in to the Refuser, and you got them all to Salem safely.”

They continued on in silence for a few more minutes. Sensing that Shem wasn’t feeling any better, the guide squeezed his shoulder. “It’s just about over, Shem. The Creator is immensely pleased with you, and He also knows the turmoil you’ve been in all these years. Why did you never tell me or Guide Hifadhi about this problem?”

One more sigh. “It’s not like it was constant. It came and went, until recently. I was sure I could beat it for good on my own. I’d succeed for a couple of seasons, and then it would hit me again without warning. I’d be gripped with this . . .” He gestured lamely to the air. “So I’d fight it again . . .” Finally he quit stalling. “Mostly I was afraid you wouldn’t let me go back if you knew how I felt about her.”

“That would have been a possibility,” Gleace admitted. “But maybe we could have *helped* you fight it instead, Shem. You’re not

the first man to suffer from inappropriate feelings for someone who couldn't be his, you know.”

Shem shrugged guiltily.

Gleace squeezed him again. “Shem, she’s right around the corner. I can feel it. The one who will make you forget all about old-what’s-her-name, and make you grateful you never did anything improper.”

“Then *please* guide me to that corner!”

The guide smiled. “Now, now. That’s not my job. But when you least expect it, that’s when you’ll find her. And she’ll be well worth the wait.”

Chapter 22--“I shocked him, didn’t I?”

The next day, Shem didn’t come over to talk to Mahrree, as Perin had ordered. Instead he surreptitiously watched her house as he helped move in furniture for the Briters. Whenever he caught a glimpse of her carrying a crate of something from her house to Jaysy’s, he ducked in the opposite direction.

She didn’t bother to seek him out, either.

On Holy Day, new Assistant Zenos joined Guide Gleace to visit another congregation, so he avoided the Shins easily that day. At the meeting on the east side of Salem, he sat on the stand in front of the congregation with an unimpeded view of everyone while Guide Gleace spoke. Shem practiced his ability to look at people without appearing to look at them, trying to find women who might be single.

He immediately discovered a problem.

Single women weren’t easily identified.

It would have been thoughtful had they all sat together in one section labeled as “Available Women Who are Interested in Slightly Older Men,” because no one in the audience sat alone. Shem considered how kind of the Creator it would have been to give him a hand in finding *her*. It wasn’t as if he believed in love at first sight, but certainly the Creator could give him a nudge and say, “*Take a walk with this one*” or “*Invite this one to dinner.*” Perhaps something could have happened when he gazed at the right woman, such as a beam of light illuminating her, or a chorus of cosmic voices chiming in his head, “*It’s her!*”

But by the end of the meeting Shem would have settled for just a fly landing on some woman’s nose to tell him she was a possibility.

But there was nothing.

Oh, plenty of females were smiling in his direction, but the teenagers who giggled shyly were far too young, and some of the mature women who frequently glanced his way were definitely married.

It didn't help that Guide Gleace introduced him as Salem's Most Famous Scout and Eligible Bachelor, now his new Assistant, and now home for good. He paused and then said, "So my dear Salemites—we need to get to work on him."

And after the meeting, they sure tried. Shem was overwhelmed with people welcoming him home, then telling him about a sister who was single, or an aunt, or a niece, or a young widow, or a neighbor, and her name is this, and she lives here, and I'll have her send you a note, and when's a good time for you to come over?

Shem pretended he remembered all of the details that were tossed at him from all directions. Interestingly, none of those available women actually came up and introduced themselves, but he saw several hanging back and watching hopefully, as if Shem would know what to do next.

He didn't.

There was no light or chorus or flies anywhere.

Maybe she wasn't in this congregation. That was all right, he consoled himself as Gleace finally pulled him away from the crush to visit another congregation. There were one hundred and three more he would speak to in the next few years, and eventually he would have seen every available female in Salem—

And then he'd have to start sorting through them all—

Guide Gleace was apologetic as they rode to the next meeting. "All right, I now see that I should modify my introduction for you. I told you the other night that I wasn't very good at matchmaking. I think I should leave your love life to you, and I stick to being the guide."

The next day when Shem was headed over to the Shins to discuss with Perrin the guide's concerns about securing Salem, he had forgotten about finding the right woman, and found himself preoccupied with avoiding just a specific one.

Shem approached the Shins' front door hesitantly in the late afternoon and held up his hand to knock. He was relieved the Shins and Briters were the last two houses on the lane and no one would notice him standing there awkwardly, reluctantly.

At least this wasn't Edge, where people made it a hobby of gawking and where now everyone believed that *he* and *she* actually acted out the dreams that woke him abruptly so many nights . . .

He couldn't bring himself to knock.

Hearing voices in the house, he trudged to the side eating room

“I shocked him, didn’t I?”

door. He glanced over at the barn hoping to maybe see Perrin out with Deck, but there was no one. He sighed and raised his hand again. After a moment his fist finally connected with the wood.

“Come in!” he heard Mahrree call.

He cringed and practiced his own Dinner smile as he opened the door. “Just me.” He was about to add, “Where’s Perrin?” but the words wouldn’t come as he hung halfway in the house.

He knew he was staring, but there was nothing else he could think of doing because he couldn’t think. The sight at the table held him completely captivated. There was no unexplained light or music in his head.

There was, however, the faint buzzing of flies.

He had just turned a corner.

He had never been on this road before, but he knew what to do on unfamiliar terrain: evaluate the situation, assess the threats, then proceed with caution.

Except he couldn’t seem to do any of it.

“Shem!” Mahrree said. “Just the person I was hoping to see. This is *Miss Calla Trovato*. She accompanied me home today after the first lecture I delivered. Professor Kopersee didn’t mention that he invited over one hundred teachers from all over Salem. Anyway, I think the lecture went well. So well that Miss Calla here wanted more information. She’s a teacher in one of the northern communities. I’m sorry, Calla, I forgot what it was called.”

The woman with pure black hair and sparkling blue eyes smiled at her. “Norden,” she said demurely. As she turned to Shem, her smile changed slightly.

Shem noticed. Her smile sucked away his ability to breathe so he did nothing but stare. He desperately wished for some kind of sign on this road to tell him what to do next.

Mahrree fought the corners of her mouth. “Calla is staying at a house near here for the week, but had so many questions that I invited her to come back with me to chat. Seems she’s quite knowledgeable about army maneuvers and strategies in Idumea.”

“Yes,” Calla said, shyly looking down at the table. “My father served briefly as a scout like you when he was young, Mr. Zenos. And I have to admit, I’ve read all your reports that came in. Kind of odd for a woman to be interested in the army, but, well, what can I say?”

She cautiously looked up at Shem with a fragile smile.

He didn't move a muscle. He didn't even blink.

Mahrree rolled her eyes. "She's being modest. She's quite the army historian, Shem. I think she would benefit from hearing some of your experiences. Your reports were a little skimpy at times. I got the copies from your sister to see for myself."

"Uhh," Shem started, but no other words would come out.

Mahrree sighed and pulled him into the eating room. "Shem, get in here. You're letting in the flies. Now, sit down. On a *chair*, Shem."

He obeyed, still staring at blue eyes across the table from him, a nose with a little bump he immediately labeled as cute, and peach-pink lips he didn't dare look at more than once.

"Shem!" Perrin boomed as he came into the eating room.

He jumped in his chair, knowing how to react to that voice. "Yes, sir?"

Perrin chuckled. "At ease, man. You look like you've seen a Thorne. Oh, hello. I'm sorry I didn't realize we had company. I'm Perrin," he said, holding out a hand to Calla.

"I know," she blushed, sending a pink hue through her cheeks which caused Shem's heart to swell, then deflate in utter contentment. Later he would remember hearing birds singing a well-harmonized chorus, and maybe he smelled sweet rolls, too. And fireflies. There were definitely fireflies, even though it was hours until dark . . .

"I'm Calla Trovato. It's wonderful to finally meet you, sir. I've read all about you," she said, shaking his hand.

"Have you, now? I better be on guard, then. And no 'sir.' Just call me Perrin."

"I'll try to remember that." She smiled timidly and glanced at Shem before she focused on the pages in front of her.

Shem kept staring.

He didn't notice that Perrin gave Mahrree a significant look.

Or that Mahrree rolled her eyes and widened them at Shem.

"So Shem," Perrin said, sitting next to him. "Ready to get to work? Or am I interrupting something here. I can go give Deck a hand for a while . . ."

"Yes," Shem said in dazed simplicity.

"Yes you want me to help Deck, or *yes* you want to get to work?"

Shem smelled flowers now, most definitely flowers, and he was breathing in their intoxicating scent that hung heavily around this vision before him who was called Calla—wasn't *calla* the name of a

“I shocked him, didn’t I?”

flower?—when he realized there was a grating noise next to him, demanding he pull his attention away from this vision, and so he slowly turned and saw Perrin’s face, as unwelcomed as a skunk’s.

A smirking skunk.

Shem blinked. “What?”

Perrin struggled to keep from laughing. “Yes you want me to help Deck, or yes you want to get to work?”

Shem stared at him blankly. If Perrin wasn’t going to say anything more useful than *blah, blah, blah* then Shem wasn’t going to waste any more time on him, so instead he turned back to begin memorizing the exact color of this Calla flower’s eyes—

Perrin stood up, grabbed Shem by the shirt collar, and yanked him out of the chair.

“I’m very sorry, ladies. Try again later. This poor man is lost somewhere in . . .” He caught Calla’s eye. “A deep blue sky.”

He winked at her as she blushed, then Perrin dragged a confused Shem up the stairs to the study.

Calla looked down at the table and straightened her already tidy stack of notes. “I shocked him, didn’t I?” she murmured.

Mahrree began to chortle. “Yes, you did.”

Calla put her hand to her chest and closed her eyes. “It always happens. Men around here can’t understand why I felt such a concern about the army of Idumea. Ever since I was thirteen I just always needed to know what was going on. No wonder I’m still single at thirty—”

Mahrree took Calla’s arm. “That’s not what shocked him, Calla. I’ve known Shem for years, and I have *never* seen that look before on his face. I’m not sure he even heard anything anyone said.”

Wretchedly, Calla looked up at Mahrree. “So . . . what was . . . why didn’t he . . .”

Mahrree grinned. “I recently learned that Shem and I are distant cousins, and I’ve been watching for family traits we may share. I think I saw one today. It seems some people in our family have a difficult time forming words when staring into the eyes of someone they find *attractive*.”

Calla went pink. “Do you really think he found me—?” She couldn’t bring herself to say the word.

Salemites were so humble, Mahrree decided. “Promise me you’ll come back tomorrow so we can put this theory to the test.”

Calla nodded and rubbed her cheeks with her slender hands. “All right.”

“By the way, Calla,” Mahrree said, watching her closely, “what did you think of Shem? After all these years of reading his reports, you finally get to meet the sergeant major?”

“Actually, I saw him once when he was a younger man delivering a report to Norden,” she admitted nervously. “Several congregations were there to listen to him describe the current conditions of the world.” Calla chewed on her bottom lip and smiled faintly at the memory.

Even a blind woman could see what was happening, Mahrree thought to herself. These people knew nothing of deceit or hiding one’s feelings. Mrs. Gleace had told Mahrree that one of the requirements for becoming a scout to the world was the ability to lie. Shem had been Hew Gleace’s quickest study. But for the rest of the population? Salemites, being what they were, were hopelessly honest.

And Mahrree, being what she was, just had to test that.

“So . . . did you get a good look at him then?”

Calla turned a darker shade of pink. “I sat on the front row,” she confessed with a smile of embarrassment. “I was sixteen, and I intended to take notes. For my personal records, you know.”

“Oh, I think *I know*.”

Calla couldn’t look her in the eyes. “I didn’t write a word of what he said, though,” she confessed as she straightened yet again the pages in front of her. “I just sat there and *watched* him.”

There was so much longing in that word *watched* that Mahrree heard Calla’s pang from fourteen long years ago. For a moment Mahrree felt guilty for making Calla go back there.

But then the moment passed, because Mahrree was just too curious. “Personally, I think a man improves with age,” she said as Calla stared at a stray ink mark on her pages. “A bit of wisdom, a bit of depth, a bit of bulk . . . Maturity can be *quite appealing*, don’t you think?”

Calla’s study of her pages intensified to a near blistering heat.

Mahrree grinned, just out of range of Calla’s view. “I remember Shem at twenty-four. But now that I consider him thirty-eight? Well, Calla, what did you think of him today?”

When Calla looked up at her, it was with such anguished fervor

“I shocked him, didn’t I?”

that she couldn’t speak, so her pink flushed to a rose red.
Mahrree grinned in delight.

Upstairs Perrin dropped Shem in a chair in the study. He squatted in front of him to look him in the eyes. “Want to tell me what happened down there?”

Shem shook himself slightly, no longer smelling flowers or sweet rolls, and wondering what happened to the fireflies. “Is she still there?”

“Maybe. But since you didn’t say two words together to her while I was around, I’m not sure she’ll stay long.”

Suddenly Shem felt as if he had woken up, and knew all too well what had happened during that marvelous dream which . . . was wholly embarrassing, now that he considered it.

Shem gripped his head. “Oh Perrin! She’s going to think I’m an idiot. I really didn’t say *anything*?”

Perrin chuckled. “You don’t know?”

“No, I’m not sure! I mean, I *thought* of all kinds of things to say, but I guess none of those words came out. I *can* talk, you know.”

“Don’t tell me, tell her.”

“I can’t. Did you *see* her, Perrin?”

“Yes, I did. Very pretty—”

Shem leaped to his feet. “Why were you looking at her? You already have a wife!”

“Shem, I look at everyone. I notice everything. But I’m not *interested* in her.” Perrin choked back a laugh, sensing Shem wasn’t quite himself.

Shem wasn’t entirely sure who he was either, and nothing that came out of his mouth arose from any logical thought.

“Why wouldn’t you be interested in her? Do you think something’s wrong with her?” Shem asked, slightly panicked by, well, everything. “I mean, I think she’s a little older, but so were you and Mahrree . . .”

Perrin took his shoulders. “Shem, breathe. Calm down—”

“Perrin? Shem?” Mahrree called from downstairs. “Calla needs to leave now. Would you like to say goodbye?”

Perrin nodded at Shem.

Shem paled. All words left his mind again, just that quickly.

Perrin turned him to the door and opened it. He pushed Shem down the hall to the stairs, then prodded him down part way.

Shem froze on the stairs when he saw Calla at the bottom of them, biting her lip. Her perfect peachy-pink lip.

Words came to his mind. "I can talk."

Calla smiled shyly. "Yes, I see you can, Assistant Zenos."

"And call me Assistant Zenos, not Shem." He began to feel proud about so many words coming out, until he notice Calla blinking at him a few times, and behind her Mahrree shaking her head sadly.

Perrin coughed a laugh and tried to push Shem the rest of the way down the stairs, but he wouldn't budge.

"Calla," Perrin said, "do you need someone to walk you home?" Perrin poked Shem in the back.

"Uh, well, it's not dark for quite a while, so," she hesitated, "I suppose not."

Perrin sighed. Salemites knew nothing of subterfuge. "Well then, make sure you stay for dinner tomorrow night, Calla, so that it *is* dark when you walk home. I'm sure I could find you an escort."

Calla smiled. "Thank you. Um, goodbye Perrin and . . ."

"Shem," Perrin reminded her, jabbing Shem harder.

Shem slowly pivoted to Perrin. "I thought *I* was coming for dinner tomorrow."

Mahrree threw her hands in the air and stormed off to the door.

Perrin patted Shem on the shoulder. "We have a big table now, remember? We can seat a dozen people. There's *room*."

"Oh yeah." He turned again to Calla. "I can eat, too." Oh, the words just kept flowing! This was easy!

Calla chanced a grin. "I'm glad to hear it. Until tomorrow, then?"

Shem nodded and kept nodding as Calla left.

When Mahrree closed the door she put her hands on her hips and glared at Shem.

He didn't understand why she seemed so upset. "That went all right, didn't it?" he said.

The next night Shem proved he could talk.

He practiced all day while at the Guide and Administrators Office. Not everything about Guiding and Assisting was wholly spir-

“I shocked him, didn’t I?”

itual. There was paperwork as well. So while Shem learned the intricacies of filing storehouse records, and birth and death notices, he mumbled dinner conversations.

At one point he was startled to hear the elderly man training him, Assistant Doyle, say, “Green, mashed potatoes since I’ve lost a few teeth, and to carve animals out of sticks for my great-grandchildren.”

Shem looked up from a stack of files. The old man with beautiful penmanship was writing out a congratulations to a newly appointed rector. “Assistant Doyle, why did you say that?”

“Because,” Doyle said as he added an elegant swoop, “you just asked me my favorite color, my favorite side dish, and what I like to do in my spare time.”

“Oh.”

“Allow me to guess: meeting someone new tonight? Perhaps a female?”

“I’m having dinner with the Shins and a schoolteacher. I think.”

“Well, sounds a little promising, I think,” Doyle said, returning to his work. “But may I offer a suggestion?”

“Yes, please.”

“Come up with some questions that are a little more compelling. You’re supposed to be the most interesting bachelor in Salem, after all. It won’t do at all to carry on a conversation worthy only of fourteen-year-olds. Ask her stories about her life, and share a few of your own.”

By the time Shem arrived at the Shins for dinner, his head was full of so many topics he couldn’t keep any of them straight. But that didn’t matter, because the moment he saw Miss Calla Trovato, all ideas fell out of his ears. It was because of the birds singing. When did Perrin and Mahrree get birds in the house?

In a way, he was almost sorry they’d sent Peto over to Jaytsy’s house for dinner to keep him out of the way. Peto had words. Lots of them.

“Why does Shem look so pitiful?” Mahrree murmured to Perrin as they brought out the platters for dinner. “He reminds me of a lost hound dog. If he starts panting, I’m going to have to smack him.”

“Now, now, this is all new to him. At least they’re sitting on the same sofa.”

“And saying nothing!”

“Go easy on the poor man, Mahrree.”

“I’m *trying to help* him. In fact, I’ve been preparing all day.”

“Oh, no, Mahrree. What are you planning?”

“Nothing, nothing . . . I just have a list of conversation starters in my pocket should Shem come up with absolutely nothing at all. Is he starting to drool?”

“Mahrree, just give the man a chance, all right?” he murmured to her. “DINNER!” he announced, and both Calla and Shem jumped in startled unison.

Shem held out the chair for Calla—only after Perrin gestured urgently that he should—then he sat down across from her and began his mindless staring again.

“Um, I hope you don’t mind,” Calla said as she pulled out a folded page from a pocket, and produced seemingly out of thin air a quill and tiny jar of ink. “May I ask you a few things over dinner?”

Shem blinked, and blinked again as she unfolded the paper to reveal tight and careful words, filling the page.

Perrin whispered to Mahrree, “Don’t think you’ll need your conversation starters.”

Secretly, Mahrree was relieved. Small talk had never been her thing. Her first three questions were, what’s your favorite color, your favorite side dish, and what do you like to do in your spare time. For some reason she felt like a fourteen-year-old coming up with those.

“I know this list seems kind of long,” Calla apologized as Shem’s eyebrows rose. “But I’ve been saving them up for the last seventeen years. Now I certainly don’t expect to get through all of these tonight—”

“No, we need to save something for tomorrow night,” Shem said with the simple tone of an eager yet patient child seeing a giant cake placed in front of him.

Calla smiled as Perrin and Mahrree nodded in agreement.

“And the next night,” Shem said. “And the night after—”

Calla sat a little taller. “So, uh,” her voice grew timorous as nudged behind her ear a lock of sleek black hair which had escaped from her bun.

Shem watched the motion and stared at her ear while she read off her notes.

“So I was wondering, question number one—,” her voice shifted from soft and nervous to an authoritative teacher tone, “—over the

“I shocked him, didn’t I?”

years, your training tactics became more aggressive, probably because of the increasingly belligerence of the young men who were recruited. What I was wondering is, do you think that aggression reflected changes in society as a whole, or do you think the army just appealed to men of a more violent nature?”

Shem blinked away from her ear to find her watching him. “What?”

Calla nervously fingered the page she stared at. “Because I’m rather inclined to believe the former instead of the latter, since your recruitment numbers were always so high. High enough to get you promoted more frequently and in a shorter amount of time than any other enlisted man in the history of the army. I have a theory that young men were feeling somewhat lost, and the structure of the army provided some stability, and that the colonel and you may have been seen as the ‘father’ or ‘older brother’ figures that many of the men may have been seeking.” She met his eyes again.

Shem blinked. “I thought you were going to ask me something easy, like how many horses we had.”

“I already know. From your reports. I’ve read them all. Made my own copies of them, too. Um.”

Shem rested his head on his hand and looked into her eyes.

“But . . . I could ask you about the horses.”

“Sure,” Shem sighed airily.

“So how many horses did you have?”

“One.”

Calla pursed her lips.

Now Shem stared at those.

“I meant, the fort. How many horses did the *fort* have.”

“I have no idea.”

“One-hundred-ten,” Perrin prompted in a whisper from across the table.

Calla pretended not to hear him.

“One-hundred-ten,” Shem repeated dreamily.

“Did that include Thorne’s horse that you mentioned in your reports, or is that just the number of officially attached fort horses?”

“I have no idea.”

“No,” Perrin whispered. “It didn’t include Clark, either.”

“No,” Shem repeated obediently. “It didn’t include Clark, either.”

“Who’s Clark?” Calla asked.

“A horse,” Shem said as if in a trance. “Came with us. He’s in the barn, if you want to see him.”

“A horse named *Clark*?”

Shem shook his head, still in a captivated stupor. “None of us got it either.”

Perrin started to sit up to defend the name when he felt a kick under the table from his wife.

“So one-hundred-*twelve* horses?” Calla clarified.

“Yes.”

“Not one-hundred-ten, then?”

“No. I’m sorry. I don’t know why I lied to you.”

Mahrree turned a snort into a believable cough.

Perrin kicked her back.

Calla smiled sweetly at Shem. “You’re forgiven. Any other questions you want me to ask you next?”

“No,” Shem said with a vague smile. “Just read me question number one.”

“Again?”

“Sure.” He watched her lips again and his smile grew.

Perhaps the problem, Mahrree and Perrin decided later when they discussed it over at the Briters, was that each of them was giving Shem, who didn’t notice them anymore, conflicting mental signals. While Perrin was trying to get the message of, “Don’t stare at her lips—look into her eyes!” through to his dense mind, Mahrree was sending the words, “Don’t look into her eyes or you’ll never think clearly. Look at her nose or her forehead.”

But Shem obviously didn’t receive any of it.

Calla sucked in her lips self-consciously before clearing her throat. She pushed aside her list of questions.

The expression on Shem’s face was that of utter devastation that the interview was already over.

Instead, Calla clasped her hands in front of her and leaned forward. “Tell me about . . . Qualipoe Hili. Why did you give him your jacket when he rode to Idumea to deliver the message to the Shins about the collapsed school building in Edge? All you wrote in your report was that your jacket was cut up when he returned, and that you had to buy a new one.”

Shem’s face brightened. Not only could he talk and eat, but he could tell stories. “Well, Poe Hili is an interesting boy. *Man*, now actually, I suppose. I first met him when he was nine and he was

“I shocked him, didn’t I?”

wearing this ridiculous silk shirt to Mahrree’s after school care. Do you know what silk is? I’m not sure you really want to know how it’s made, but there are lots of theories . . .”

Calla rested her head on her hand and looked dreamily into Shem’s eyes.

When Perrin and Mahrree slipped away from the table about twenty minutes later, neither Shem nor Calla noticed.

Chapter 23--“Nothing worked out the way it should.”

It was a surprisingly hot and bright afternoon in Edge as nearly all of the villagers were gathered at the amphitheater. They were there for the memorial service for the Shins.

Not for *all* of the Shins, however.

It was obvious to Sareen, as it must have been to everyone else, that Magistrate Wibble never once mentioned Mahrree Peto Shin who had lived in Edge her entire life and taught many of the villagers. Nor did he say a word about Sergeant Major Shem Zenos who had defended them for so many years.

On the platform next to Wibble was displayed Colonel Shin's dress uniform, the numerous medals catching the sun and occasionally blinding sections of the amphitheater. Next to it was a dress of Jaytsy Briter's, a set of her husband's clothing, and then the kickball uniform of Peto Shin. Propped up on wooden posts, they appeared even more empty and eerie.

Sareen stayed for nearly the entire service, sniffing and wiping away tears she didn't want to feel in her bitterness. When Wibble invited the crowd to file by the clothing remains as if they were bodies, and a few women pulled out pocket knives to slice off bits of the colonel's uniform to keep for themselves, Sareen knew the gathering had taken on a maudlin tone and she'd had enough. There'd be a fight soon over his medals once people realized they were made of real gold and silver.

Instead of heading back to her bookshop, she went to the Shins' empty house. The soldiers who had been guarding it since the Shins were lost were letting people into it now. Since there were no surviving members of the Shin family in the world, their goods were up for the taking.

For the looting, Sareen realized. The windows had been

“Nothing worked out the way it should.”

smashed, and when she entered the house she discovered the furniture was already gone and rubbish had been strewn over the floor.

This hadn't happened at the Briters, though. Deckett Briter's uncle, aunt, and cousin had arrived the evening after all of them had been lost to the forest, not knowing what happened but intent on coming to help with the baby they anticipated being born soon.

Sareen couldn't imagine the shock they must have experienced to discover all of the Shins and Briters were gone, but she heard rumors about them for the past few days. Word was that Deckett's uncle was beside himself with fury when he was told the news by soldiers, and marched to the forest himself to find his nephew, only to be held back by patrols. The next day he and Administrator Genev were seen at the forest line, talking and gesturing at the trees. At one point there was some kind of frantic activity, and Deckett's aunt and cousin, who were cleaning out the house, rushed up there. The stories which trickled back to Sareen were that they thought they heard a baby crying, or found evidence of the Briters' newborn, or something else, but suddenly the Briters left in their loaded wagon, weeping and shaken, and no one knew anything else.

The Shins had no family left in all the world to mourn them so deeply, Sareen sighed. Maybe she was the closest thing left in Edge.

She was surprised to see Mr. Hegek come down their stairs, a crate in his hands. He nodded curtly to Sareen.

When she'd opened her book shop two years ago, he'd eagerly come in to congratulate her. Then he started thumbing through her selections. Oh, she had the small table with recipe compilations and the obligatory text or two on how to farm, as if anyone didn't know. But it was her long wall devoted to stories of *improving relationships* that caught his eye.

It was as he was shaking his head at the fifth book he perused that he asked her, in the withering tones that only a school director can perfect, “Really, Miss Sareen? This? *This* is what you're selling to the youth of Edge?”

She had batted her eyelashes and said, “Don't we *want* the youth of Edge interested in reading?” And from that point on there had been a frosty wall between them.

But as they regarded each other across the remnants of what used to belong to a family they both had loved, mutual grief caused considerable melting.

“What disrespect,” he said, glancing around the gathering room.

“I don’t know if the soldiers did this or the neighbors.” Noticing that Sareen was eyeing his crate, he said, “Her lesson plans and student records. Genev wanted them,” he spat. “As if any of this still matters since she’s gone.”

Not that Sareen cared much for the director of schools, but anyone having to deal with the Administrator of Loyalty deserved sympathy. “Are you in trouble with Idumea?”

Hegek scoffed, his tone shaky, “I’m the one who let her teach whatever she wanted, after all. What do you think?”

Sareen winced. “I’m sorry.”

“As long as I’m cooperative, I should be able to wriggle out of this eventually. In a twisted way, I allowed her to trap herself, so I’m considered ‘useful.’ Lannard was acting as a spy, although I doubt he really knew it. And here I thought that boy would never amount to anything. They want him in Command School to become an officer as his reward. I’ve been ordered to ‘revise’ his academic file.” In a hush he added, “So if you thought the army had problems *before* . . .” and he looked down his nose at her meaningfully.

Sareen managed a dismal smile.

Hegek set the crate on the floor. “She had everything stored under their bed. Very well organized—” His chin trembled, and Sareen looked down at her feet to avoid seeing his emotion. “Don’t know how anyone will be able to take that bed,” he said in a sad chuckle. “Monstrous thing.”

“I just came for books,” Sareen said, feeling she had to justify her presence there as well. “No one wants those, apparently.” When Hegek raised his eyebrows as if to ask, *Why would you want them?* she added, “I can swap them with other booksellers.” She turned her attention to the shelves, mostly still full.

“Quite the collection,” Hegek agreed. “May take a few myself, if you don’t mind.”

Sareen shrugged. “You probably don’t want the same ones I do.”

He smiled dimly as if that was obvious, and in silence they began to pull down titles.

Once, as Sareen climbed up a shelf, she spied an odd hole in the ceiling timbers, and before she could ponder on it too long, she suddenly remembered how it got there: Miss Mahrree’s After School Care. The boys had been practicing with bows and arrows *in* the house since the day was so windy—Shem Zenos’s less-than-brilliant idea—and several arrows had lodged in the timbers. Captain Shin had

“Nothing worked out the way it should.”

pulled out that one, she remembered.

In her eyes sprang tears, hot and angry.

None of this had to happen. She'd tried so hard to make Shem Zenos love her. They could have been very happy together, and the Shins wouldn't now be dead—

She accidentally dropped the books on the floor and climbed down, wiping her face.

Mr. Hegek patted her back comfortingly as she gathered up the books. Sareen heard him sniff. “Going to take some time to get over all of this,” was all he murmured, and Sareen didn't know if he were referring to her or himself.

During the next half hour they made a few comments, traded books occasionally, and finally packed up the piles they made.

On top of his fourth crate Mr. Hegek gingerly placed some rolled parchment. “What remains of his map collection,” he explained to Sareen when she saw it. “Oh, how I wish I could have seen Terryp's map. I *know* it was the Colonel's,” he whispered to Sareen. “I just know it. When I first came to Edge, he visited me in my small office and we chatted about Terryp. It seemed to me then that he knew Terryp quite intimately, and now I know why. We're not hearing all of the truth, Miss Sareen,” he said, glancing around nervously for any other ears, but the soldiers were walking lazily around the house, not sure why they were still hanging around. “Nor will we ever. But believe me—the map was Colonel Shin's, not Zenos's.”

Sareen squinted. “So what do *you* think happened?”

“Since it wasn't Zenos's map, it wasn't here to tell Mrs. Shin where to go,” he said in barely a whisper. “Mahrree loved her husband, that I know. I came by the morning after he resigned, and I saw them a few times after, and they seemed very happy, despite the village ignoring them. Or maybe because it was. But Miss Sareen, I think they were *all* planning to find Terryp's land together.”

“But what about their daughter?” Sareen whispered back. “Terrible time to run away when she's about to give birth, don't you think? And they didn't take anything with them. No supplies, not even the map they would need.”

Hegek's shoulders sagged. “Well, I haven't figured out everything. Something went wrong, and they weren't intending to leave just yet. But,” he sighed, long and heavy, “I suppose it doesn't matter now, does it? Nothing worked out the way it should.”

Sareen sighed sadly along with him, and without another word

Hegek hauled the crate out of the house. It took him several trips to get all of the crates out to the cart he borrowed.

Sareen was leaving the front yard with the last of her books when she heard the commotion. She shoved her gatherings to the other side of the road just as the crowd of several dozen arrived, storming into the Shins' small house and grabbing whatever was left.

She folded her arms and sniffled when the torches lit on fire the roof and walls Shem Zenos had constructed, and she stepped away from the jeering crowd as the house reduced itself to a shell of burned-out stone walls.

As much as she now hated Zenos, as shocked as she was by Miss Mahrree's treachery, she couldn't help but weep as so many wonderful memories dissolved into ash and smoke and rubble.

Eventually all that was left were wisps of smoke emerging from what Sareen realized was Edge's own ruin. No one needed to visit Terry's land now to see ruins, even if they had been allowed to.

As she finally picked up the last crate to bring back to her shop—no one in the crowd of hundreds that had come to watch the fire and occasionally cheer was interested in mere books—she looked wretchedly one last time at the charred remains of the Shin home. A neighbor, Mrs. Hersh, was using a stick to shove off of her property some smoking embers, but that's not what caught Sareen's eye. Stunned, she approached the front yard again to realize that it was green.

In fact, it wasn't just green, it was blooming, with tiny flowers she'd never seen before, and in colors that startled her. Pinks, purples, yellows, and whites. Despite the trampling mobs, despite the patrolling soldiers, despite the raging fire, something was growing, planted in the Shins' front garden—when or by whom, she had no idea—and for once the Shins had a proper garden.

Dismayed by so much new life that not even she had noticed, and unsure of what it could mean, Sareen backed away, scooped up the last crate, and skittered off.



Calla stayed for the week, but was rarely at her cousin's house. Every afternoon she walked from Mahrree's lectures to various locations on the arm of Shem. On her third afternoon he took her to his father's place to show her the lands. On the fourth afternoon they helped Yudit plant part of her garden, a section she later confided to

“Nothing worked out the way it should.”

Mahrree she had no intention of using that year, but she wanted an excuse to watch her little brother and the woman he couldn't take his eyes off. On Calla's fifth and last afternoon, Mahrree watched them wander off toward the heart of Salem and hoped Shem remembered that the two of them were to have dinner that night with the entire Zenos clan. Mahrree wondered what Shem would do when Calla left in the morning to return to Norden. If only she could have been there for a little longer.

Later that evening as she cleaned up the kitchen, Mahrree plotted ways to keep Calla there. Maybe Guide Gleace could assign Shem to Norden for a while, even though there was already an assistant up there. She was planning her little talk with the guide when she heard a knock at the door.

It was Shem, and he looked very serious. “Mahrree, can I talk to you?”

She hesitated. This was the first time they were alone since last week's news of their alleged ‘togetherness.’ The awkwardness Shem displayed around Calla had overwhelmed anything that stood between them for the past few days, but right there on the front porch the uncomfortable feelings of last week flooded back over them, with no Perrin to staunch the flow.

“Of course, Shem,” Mahrree said with forced cheeriness. “Always. I'm afraid Perrin's out right now—”

“I know. I saw him on his way to Caraka's. He told me to come by. I really wanted to talk to you alone.”

“All right,” she said guardedly, letting him in.

He sat down on the sofa and, remembering that's where he was last week, stood up and took a chair instead.

Mahrree sat on the sofa opposite of him.

He leaned forward, wringing his hands. “I need to know what you think about . . . Calla.”

Mahrree relaxed. “I think she's kind, intelligent, honest, and a wonderful woman. Why do you think I wanted you to meet her?”

“Do you think I should tell her what happened with us?”

Her eyes wide, Mahrree said, “What *happened* with us?”

Shem cringed. “I mean the *rumors*. What if someone some day comes from the world and, knowing the official story, says something to her—”

“How much does she know of the world?” Mahrree asked.

“An amazing amount, actually.” His face lit up. “It's almost as if

she was there with me. She knows so much and asks such interesting questions. We discovered that she developed her interest in the army around the same time I left for Edge. She used to read everyone's reports but then focused on only mine after that first Guarder attack. She was merely fourteen, but she started writing analyses herself. Can you believe that? She wrote that my main mistake in that first conflict was my not drawing my sword! She's practically written her own book. Perrin should read it. Did you know she's the oldest of six girls? And I have six sisters! All her sisters are married except for her youngest one. Calla's just never found the right man, one who can appreciate her love of—" Shem stopped, realizing he said far more than he intended to. He looked at his hands.

But Mahrree was beaming. "So Shem, if she really understands the world, she certainly would understand about the Administrators and their deceptions, wouldn't she?"

"True, she should," he said, still staring at his hands that started to slap against each other. "I just would hate for her to hear something *unexpected*."

"But Jothan will be closing the route in the next few days," she reminded him. "Nearly everyone is out, and the guide doesn't expect any new refugees for many more moons."

"What I worry about is *later*." He looked up at her. "What if years from now someone comes and she hears the stories? I know we agreed to never discuss this again, but I don't want her to—"

Mahrree leaned forward with an understanding smile. "You don't want your wife to hear that you loved someone else before her?"

"Yes, she would be devast—wait." Shem swallowed hard. "*What did you just say?*"

"Shem, it's been so obvious, even I could see it."

"It was?" he cried.

"Yes, and I completely approve. You want to marry Calla!"

Shem held his breath for a moment as the meaning of her words sorted themselves out in his mind. It occurred to Mahrree that she saw only half of what was going on in there.

Shem finally exhaled. "I've been thinking about it, yes." He buried his head in his hands. "I know I just barely met her, but I just feel so comfortable around her. It's so natural. I'll admit that first day was anything but *natural*," he laughed to the floor, "but now . . . Is this crazy, Mahrree?" He looked up at her, earnest worry in his eyes. "To think such things so soon after meeting her?"

“Nothing worked out the way it should.”

“Do you feel crazy?”

“A little, but I like it.”

“Good,” Mahrree said, sensing that everything sticky between them from the last week was dissolving into the cracks of the floorboards.

He was her little brother again, asking his big sister for advice about women. Even though he had six other sisters, she relished that it was *her* he came to.

“Shem, if you’re so worried about the rumors, then tell her about them. I’m sure she’ll see them for what they are. Besides,” she fidgeted as she knew she needed to tell him something even more sticky, “Perrin and I realized last night that the rumors are probably our fault.”

“Your fault?” Shem sat back. “Perrin said he wanted you and me to discuss something. This is it?”

“Yes, it is. And actually, it was *his* fault,” Mahrree clarified. “You see, after you and he returned from Idumea after burying his parents, we discussed the possibility—well, the *reality*—of his perhaps not coming home someday.”

This was tougher than she expected. Last night she and Perrin concluded it would be better to explain this to Shem without Perrin present. Now she wondered why they came to that conclusion.

Actually, Mahrree realized, it was Perrin who suggested not being around when the issue came up, *the coward* . . .

“We had always avoided talking about his dying on duty,” she continued, “but when he came back he said he was going to make *provisions* for us.”

Shem furrowed his brows.

She had to rush out the next words, or she’d die of embarrassment. “Shem, he wrote a letter! I didn’t see it, but he told me the contents. He hid it in the bottom drawer of his desk.”

“I know,” Shem said, too casually for Mahrree. “The ‘Death Drawer.’ That’s what we irreverently called it behind his back. There was an envelope addressed to me.”

Mahrree nodded. “Perrin had thought that if he never returned, you would be the one going through his things. But now we realize Lemuel must have taken it.”

“Thorne was tearing apart that office the night Perrin resigned. I don’t think he ever went to bed. So what was in the letter?”

Mahrree closed her eyes briefly. “I can’t believe he left me to tell

you this alone . . . this is so embarrassing—”

“How could anything be worse than last week?” Shem said.

“Then this will be a close second,” she warned. “All right,” she glanced at Shem but was unable to keep his gaze, so she studied the hem of her sleeve instead. “Perrin wrote asking you if, um, if you felt any *affection* for our family . . . for *me*, specifically . . . if after his death you would consider—” She shielded her eyes with her hand to create a barrier between her and poor, naive Shem. “If you would—”

“Don’t say it,” Shem stopped her. “I think I know where this is going.”

Mahrree dared to peek at him.

Fortunately he was smiling, albeit in a mortified manner. “If Lemuel found a letter from Perrin giving me permission to *you know*, he may have assumed much more was *already* going on between us. That’s just how his mind worked. No doubt Genev read that letter as well. Their official story probably grew directly from it.”

“Oh, Shem,” Mahrree winced, “I’m so sorry! We both are. Perrin had actually forgotten about the letter until just yesterday. I’m not sure how he worded it, but—”

“But it was likely much more direct than either of us is expressing it right now,” Shem decided. “And I’m glad he’s *not* here, because his bluntness would have done both of us in! It’s all right, Mahrree. Perrin had only the best of intentions. None of us could have seen this coming. Besides,” he paused and examined his own sleeve hem, “I think perhaps over the years I may have been a bit too close at times. I should have been more guarded around all of you. *Especially* you.” He looked up at her miserably. “Can you forgive me?”

Mahrree shook her head at the pleading in his eyes. “I really can’t imagine there’s anything to forgive. You’ve done nothing but protect us from dangers we never knew about, and saved us in many ways.”

His face remained bleak with concern.

“But Shem, if it makes you feel better, I forgive you of anything and everything.”

He finally seemed hopeful. “Really?”

Mahrree was surprised. “Of course. Shem, you’re one of the best men I’ve ever met, and any woman would be lucky to have you. Especially a school teacher from the north. Isn’t that funny? That’s exactly how Perrin found his wife.”

“It’s not funny,” Shem smiled. “It’s *perfect*.”

“Nothing worked out the way it should.”

Early the next morning Shem was on his way to bring Calla home. The guide, without any meddling from Mahrree, had suddenly found business that needed to be done in Norden and thought Shem would be best to handle it for the next two days.

It was in the afternoon of the third day when Shem arrived home at his father’s house to find his sisters Yudit and Nan with Mahrree, going through papers in the eating room. He dropped his pack and glared at the three women whose conversation stopped as he opened the door.

“What are you three up to? None of you live here.”

“It’s my fault, Shem,” Mahrree said, glancing at his sisters. “Now that the teacher lectures are finished, I’ve been asked to give weekly presentations for the community about the recent history of Idumea, and your sisters were showing me your reports home so I could correlate some dates.”

“It was my idea,” Yudit said, looking guiltier than she should. “Mahrree explained her dilemma at not having any of her notes, so I suggested we look through your things.”

“She has a library card, right?” Shem said. “She could check out some books.”

“That’s right,” Nan said cheerfully. “Still, it’s good for her to have *your opinion*, don’t you think?”

Shem sifted through the pages on the table.

“Well?” said Yudit.

“Well what?” Shem said.

“Norden!” Nan cried. “How was it?”

“North of here.”

Yudit tried again. “Did Calla get there safely?”

“Of course.”

“Did you meet her family?” Mahrree asked.

“Yes.”

“And?” said Nan.

“Her father never left my side. Never knew a man could have so many questions.”

“What kind of questions?” asked Nan.

“Army stuff.”

“Is that all?” Yudit pressed.

“Should there be more?”

Shem's sisters looked at Mahrree.

She was studying his face. "Did you like her family, Shem?"

"They were a bunch of nosy women. Felt just like here."

Mahrree blushed but Shem's sisters were obviously used to this.

"When do you think you'll see her again?" Nan asked.

He only shrugged.

The sisters looked again at Mahrree.

She was nearly squinting at him in her analysis of his completely blank expression. "So it was a good trip, Shem?"

Shem sighed. "Where's Papa?"

"At my place," Nan said.

"Then I'll be at your place talking to Papa. Be sure to clean this up when you're done." And he promptly left the house.

The women sat in silence until they were sure he was gone, then Yudit and Nan turned on Mahrree.

"So what was he saying? He barely seemed to move a muscle!" Yudit grabbed Mahrree's arm in her death grip.

"Anything? Anything at all?" Nan asked.

Mahrree shook her head. "Nothing. Not even an 'I need to talk to Perrin look.' But then again, he and Perrin were really good at this." She folded her arms. "But he didn't look *sad*, did he? If something had gone wrong, the wrinkles around his eyes would show it."

Nan nodded. "If he was angry he'd be huffing, too."

"Maybe it's worse," Yudit said softly. "When he was a little boy and depressed, he'd completely shut down. There were times when he would be so sad—probably missing our mother—that he'd just sit in a corner and stare at the wall."

"But I don't remember him doing that since he was seven," Nan reminded her. To Mahrree she said, "He used to be such an emotional boy. He and father cried more about our marriages and new babies than we did. But after a couple years in Edge he was much more reserved."

"We thought maybe he might be having the same problems others had," Yudit added. "Some men would come back from the world dark and angry, incapable of feeling normal emotions. Not even joy at a baby's birth or sorrow at a loved one's death."

"The world was too heavy for them," Nan said. "People in Salem have soft hearts and souls. The world doesn't just harden them, it shatters them. More than twenty years ago Guide Hifadhi said that the longest anyone could be gone would be two years, because after

“Nothing worked out the way it should.”

that it was hard to bring them all the way back again.”

“Some never even came home,” Yudit whispered.

“So your family must have been worried when Shem wanted to stay with us,” Mahrree said.

“Yes, we were. And we watched him closely,” said Nan.

“But Shem was allowed to stay because of your family, who Guide Hifadhi felt Perrin was,” Yudit said. “Obviously it was the right choice.”

“Except for moments like this,” Nan said, “when you apparently don’t know our little brother as well as we hoped you did. I was expecting more from you, Mahrree.” She glared playfully and Mahrree shrugged an apology. “When they left the other morning, I was sure Shem would come home bursting with good news. My daughter Elza saw them as they passed her house and she said they were laughing.”

“I tried to send two of my boys to follow them for a while, but Shem saw them and sent them home,” Yudit said.

“Probably good for them that Calla is in Norden. Give them a little privacy,” Nan hinted.

“But it doesn’t sound like they got much,” Yudit shook her head.

“And we’re not helping either, are we?” Mahrree said.

The three women sighed and sat in silence.

“Perrin!” Mahrree finally whispered. “Shem tells Perrin everything . . . I think. Something like this, he’d go to his brother, right? Good news or bad?”

“He would!” Yudit agreed and Nan clapped her hands.

“But wait. He didn’t ask for Perrin,” Nan reminded. “He wanted to talk to Papa.”

“Maybe he was already at my house,” Mahrree suggested.

“So what are we waiting for?” Yudit leaped to her feet, grabbed a stack of papers, and said, “Mahrree, we should take these to your house.”

Five minutes later the three women stomped into the Shin home, dropped the papers in untidy piles on the table, and looked at each other expectantly.

Mahrree walked over to the stairs. “Perrin? Are you home?”

“Yes,” called down a voice.

“Have you seen Shem?”

“In the past week?”

“I mean *today*?”

“Maybe.”

Mahrree frowned. "What do you mean, *maybe*?"

"What do you mean, *what do I mean*?"

Mahrree threw her hands in the air and started up the stairs.

But Perrin came trotting down. He slowed as he saw Shem's sisters. "Ah. It's an inquest, is it? Trying to play Genev in Salem?"

"No," said Mahrree unconvincingly. "We were just . . ." she waved her hand at Yudit.

"Just wondering how our little brother is, that's all. He seemed a little . . ." Yudit looked to Nan.

"Uncommunicative," Nan said.

Perrin gave her half a smile as he came down the rest of the stairs. "Now I wonder why that is. Not having sisters, I wouldn't know, but I imagine he may have walked into his home after a long trip—"

"It's less than four hours by wagon," Yudit told him.

"—found three women lying in wait—"

Mahrree thought she saw a movement outside the gathering room window. It looked like boots at the top of the window.

"—and all the poor man wants is to maybe sit down and rest—"

The boots were followed by a body which fell to the ground in front of the window.

"Shem Zenos! Stop!" Yudit yelled as the body took off in a fast run down the road, laughter fading in the distance.

"—but instead he has to sneak out of houses just to get some peace and quiet. You three are unbelievable," Perrin finished.

"He said he was going to my house!" Nan said.

"And he thought you would be on your way there right now. Why the change in plans?" Perrin asked.

Mahrree started to laugh. "Because we thought he had come here first to talk to you."

Perrin shook his head. "We're getting rusty already. When it takes less than half an hour for three middle-aged grandmothers to track him down . . ."

"I'm not a grandmother yet!" Mahrree protested.

"Who are you calling middle-aged, *Grandpy*? You're only one day older than me," Yudit put her hands on her hips.

Perrin reflected just as much wounded pride as Yudit. "He told you about calling me *Grandpy*? And I helped him escape!"

"The point is," Nan held up her hands between Yudit and Perrin who were eyeing each other good-naturedly, "what did Shem say?"

“Nothing worked out the way it should.”

“Nothing,” Perrin said. “You three showed up just as he was sitting down to talk.”

“Did he look happy? Sad? Heart-broken? Excited?” Mahrree prodded. “Did he give you *a look*?”

“Yes. It said, *Three women are chasing me. Hide me.*”

“Oh, you’re useless!”

“I would have been of more use if you had not barged in.”

“So where would he go now?” Yudit asked, scratching her chin.

“The children just got out of upper school,” Nan said. “They’ll be coming home soon.”

Yudit nodded. “If we fan them out from this house—”

“Whoa!” shouted Perrin. “Enough! Leave the poor man alone.”

Yudit raised her eyebrows at him. “This is what we do, *General Shin*. Track down our brother and get him to talk. Certainly you can appreciate that.”

“Yes I can. But why don’t you let him do things in his own time, in his own way, all right?”

Nan nodded reluctantly and Yudit sighed. “Just what Shem needed—a big brother to fight for his cause.” Yudit looked askance at her sister. “Not sure this is going to be a good development.”

“Oh, I think I got here just in time,” Perrin decided.

Yudit pointed at him. “As soon as you hear something, you tell Mahrree, all right?”

“Only if he wants you to know.”

After the sisters left, scanning for their missing brother, Mahrree put her arms around her husband.

“I’m not telling you anything,” he said as she snuggled into him.

Mahrree stiffened. “So you *do* know?”

Perrin chuckled. “He didn’t have time to say anything, although I could tell he wanted to. All he said was, ‘I’m back and—’ That’s when we heard the door blow open and he headed out the window.”

“I’m sorry. I really didn’t think he was here. So now what?”

“We give him time and we let him do things at his own pace.”

“You make a terrible big brother.”

Chapter 24--“Just leave me alone for a while?”

Mahrree checked her plants early the next morning, looking for signs of new green, and . . . yes, yes there it was! Less than two weeks since they planted the seeds, tiny green shoots were flicking up small clumps of dirt as they greeted their first sunshine. Mahrree, on her knees to inspect the spurts of life, grinned that she was now a gardener, and that she was happy about it.

Until a shadow moved over her. Thinking it was a cloud she needed to shoo away, she looked up.

Shem stood there, as hulking and heavy as his demeanor. “I don’t have much time, Mahrree. I’m due at Guide Gleace’s. I’m letting you know what I’m telling everyone else. Before I left her in Norden I asked her, and . . . she said no.”

“Oh Shem—” Mahrree reached for his hand.

But he shoved it into his trousers’ pocket. “I don’t need your sympathy, I just need some time to myself.” His tone was uncharacteristically cold. “Can you do that? Just leave me alone for a while?”

Mahrree pouted but said, “Well, sure, Shem.”

He nodded once. “Thanks. And thanks for all you tried to do for me. I’ll come by later some time,” and he strode off.

Disappointed, Mahrree got up and went into the house. Well, what were they expecting? That he comes home and finds *the* woman in one week? Not even Salem is *that* perfect.

She looked at the breakfast dishes waiting in the sink. “Maybe Calla’s just not ready,” she told them. “If she said she needed more time, certainly anyone could understand that. I should write her a letter, ask her what she thinks about him—”

“About who?” Peto asked as he came into the kitchen.

“Shem. He asked Calla to marry him, and she turned him down.”

“What an awful woman!”

“Just leave me alone for a while?”

“No, Peto. She’s perfectly lovely. I think Shem may have just scared her. It was very quick to propose marriage. She might not have been ready.”

“She’s *thirty*,” he reminded her. “She’s probably been ready for half her life. He’s one of the best men Salem’s produced, and she turned him down? What more could she possibly want? Women are so unpredictable. Don’t look at me like that, Mother. You know I’m right. Poor Shem. I think the two of us should build a house together and spend every night eating steak and complaining about women.”

Mahrree scoffed. “And what women do you have to complain about? Who’s broken your heart?”

“No one, yet. And it’s going to stay that way. Shem’s nephews and I watched him mooing after her when they were at Mr. Zenos’s place. It was pitiful. Puppy eyes. Giggling. They were nauseating.”

“But you kept watching? To see who would get sick first?”

“Yeah, something like that. But then they started throwing rocks at us. I guess they didn’t like us following them.”

Mahrree groaned. “How are they supposed to get to know each other when you’re interfering?”

“What about you inviting them both to dinner?”

“We left them alone for three hours!”

“But at the Zenos dinner no one left them alone,” Peto said. “They spent most the evening telling Calla all the stories Shem didn’t record, and apparently there were some good ones.”

Mahrree plopped into a chair. “Perhaps all of us messed it up for him. In our eagerness, we chased away his first chance at marriage.”

When Mahrree trudged up to Perrin’s office to tell him the news, her husband just shook his head at her and went back to his work.

Mahrree saw another one of Shem’s sisters at the storehouse that morning. She rushed up to Mahrree. “Did he tell you? What can we do? Yudit wants to go to Norden to talk to Calla, but I think she just needs some time.”

“I agree,” Mahrree said. “Give them both a few weeks. Perhaps we need to leave them alone.”

But that was easier said than done. When Shem came over the next night for dinner, Mahrree kept giving him weepy eyes, despite Perrin’s glares.

Shem finally said, “It wasn’t the response I expected either, but it’s what it is. Just move on, *please!*”

He left after dinner to prepare for a trip in the morning. Guide

Gleace had agreed to Perrin's tower idea, and was sending Shem all over Salem to scout out locations. At least he'd have something to do, Mahrree thought, to keep him occupied and to forget about Calla.

But that wasn't what Mahrree *wanted* him to do. In consultations with the Zenos sisters that they kept private, since the husbands had unanimously told the women to leave Shem's love life alone, they came to the conclusion that Shem should try to call on Calla again. Nan's husband Honri would be traveling past Norden for trade in the dissenter colonies in a few weeks, and Nan would go to pay a visit to Calla along the way. Yudit volunteered to accompany them, but Nan feared Yudit would tie Calla up and drag her back to Salem.

Somehow, Perrin heard about it. A few days later he cornered Mahrree in the kitchen and glowered at her. "Honri is *not* going to take Nan along with him, just so you know."

"What *ever* are you talking about?" she said sweetly.

Since she never talked *that* sweetly, she knew Perrin was on to her. "Because believe it or not, we men talk too. Not as long and ridiculously as you women, but we're not going to help you meddle."

"But the Shem Situation is getting worse—"

"*The Shem Situation?* You've named this?"

Mahrree fidgeted. "Well, it just kind of happened—"

"What about your dinner plans? That big gathering you and Jaytsy are planning for all of the Zenoses? Focus on that."

Mahrree's chin jutted out in a full-fledged pout. "We are. But I can focus on a few things at the same time, you know. And since that baby of Jaytsy's refuses to budge . . ."

"Hmm," Perrin said, his face softening. "I don't know how much larger she can get. She's quite—" He gesture in a manner that Mahrree hoped her daughter would never see. "At least Peto realized that bouncing pebbles off her belly isn't a good idea anymore."

"I really thought she'd bounce that last one up his nose," Mahrree sighed. "Poor Deck. At least he's keeping busy with his herd, but even he doesn't know what to say to her anymore. And Mrs. Braxhicks also agreed that Jaytsy's *enormous*," she whispered that last word, in case Jaytsy was anywhere near the house.

"Their new crib is nice," Perrin had to admit. "But it doesn't look sturdy enough to me."

"It was made by an old grandfather who worked under your father for a year," Mahrree reminded him. "He knows a little about the world, and how to make a sturdy crib. Jaytsy lays out the blankets on

“Just leave me alone for a while?”

it every day. She really needs a distraction, and while the dinner we’re hosting tomorrow is helping, so is talking about the Shem Situation. Don’t you want both your daughter and your brother to be happy?”

He wasn’t falling for it. “Just let the man work out his own love life, all right?”

“But he’s not! He needs help!”

“*You* need help—”

“Mother?” came Jaytsy’s voice from the front door.

Perrin and Mahrree exchanged hopeful looks and headed to the gathering room.

Seeing their expressions, Jaytsy shook her head. “No, no pains, no sudden gush of waters, absolutely nothing,” she said miserably. “I think the Creator forgot I’m expecting, although I remind Him every hour that I’m ready to be done. I’m just here to tell you that Deck’s happy to donate that bad-tempered bull for Father’s new fire pit in the backyard. It should feed all the Zenoses.”

“Thanks, Jayts,” Perrin said with excessive cheeriness, the only way he knew to deal with her persistent bad mood. “Have you . . . have you tried—” and he bounced several times in place.

Jaytsy blinked at him. “Seriously? Jumping up and down?”

“Maybe to . . . I don’t know, *dislodge* the baby?”

Jaytsy shifted her gaze to her mother. “Did he make you do that?”

“He wouldn’t have dared.”

Their daughter exhaled and dropped her bulging body on a sofa. “I’ve been trying all kinds of things, trust me. One woman in the congregation suggested eating hot peppers, and another told me to sleep with my head lower than my feet. And yes, Father, I did think about your option. I tried jumping off a fence rail.”

“And?” Perrin said.

“Do you see a baby in my arms?” she snapped. “No, all I have is a burned tongue from the peppers, a bloody nose from sleeping weirdly, and a turned ankle from my jump last night. Mrs. Braxhicks just checked on me again and said that the baby comes when the Creator says the time is right. You’d think by now He’d be tired of hearing me complain.” She slowly rubbed her belly.

“I’m sorry, Jaytsy,” Mahrree said, trying not to cringe. She seemed even larger today than yesterday. “We’ve got lots of cooking tomorrow,” she said merrily. “Won’t that be fun? Maybe that’ll be just what you need.”

She shrugged. “I suppose bending over and putting things in an

oven—”

“Oh, no you won’t!” Mahrree exclaimed. “You’re just timing things for me. I’ll do all the moving. You just rest.”

“Right,” she said dully.

But she did more than that the next day as she and Mahrree spent from morning until afternoon working on “The Dinner, Salem Style,” as Perrin called it. Jaytsy not only watched the creations her mother put together and shoved into her oven, but she also pulled them out, otherwise everything would have been burned as Mahrree tried to cook in two separate kitchens.

It was to be a Hycymum Peto meal, with the Zenoses exposed to her unique combinations. By the time evening and the Zenoses came, Jaytsy and Mahrree were exhausted but excited.

Perrin and Peto had brought their table out to the back garden, and filled it with Hycymum’s creations: leengweeny, terry-ocki, crawsants, la-zhan-ya, and stroodall.

Mahrree scanned the joyful crowd gathering for their picnic dinner, looking for Shem, but . . . he wasn’t there.

Yudit caught her eye and shrugged.

Nan, standing nearby, whispered, “No one’s seen him today.”

“But he sent me a message,” Mahrree told her. “He was out on another tower finding trip, but he said he’d be back for The Dinner.”

“Yudit thinks he’s avoiding us, again,” Nan sighed.

Seeing their conversation, Yudit started over to them, but Noch caught her arm. Mahrree could just make out him saying, “Enough with the Shem Situation.”

Mahrree checked with the other four Zenos sisters, but none of them had seen him either, and they’d been watching. Her further investigations would have to wait, because Perrin stood on the back porch and held up his arms to get everyone’s attention.

“Thank you so much for coming this evening. It’s hard to believe that it’s been four weeks since we first arrived in Salem. So much has happened, and I feel as if we’ve been here our whole lives. A great deal of that is because of all of you. On our first evening here, you welcomed us as family, even though none of us knew we were actually distantly related. You built us a house, showed us around Salem, came to our baptisms, and couldn’t have made us feel more welcome. So we wanted to thank you by bringing you a bit of the world. While normally that would sound alarming, it’s all in the form of food, using recipes of Hycymum Peto that Mahrree and Jaytsy brought with

them. So thank you all, for making us feel so at home, and I promise that no one will spoil the evening by mentioning anything about a *certain situation*, correct?” He glared directly at Mahrree, and the Zenos husbands followed suit, nudging their wives.

All of their children and grandchildren laughed.

But that wasn't the end of it, not by any means. Because Mahrree saw a look of worry on Jaytsy's face as she talked to two of Shem's married nieces about his absence. It was unusual for Shem to miss a family event when he was home, especially when it involved a meal where neither he nor his father had to cook.

When it was starting to grow dark and time for dessert, Mahrree reluctantly brought out one of Hycyum's favorites: sorbay. It was Shem's favorite as well, and Mahrree had made it especially for him to bring him out of his distracted disposition. But now he was even missing sorbay.

He would be missing everything, she worried, if they couldn't pull him back.

Mahrree saw his sisters frequently scanning the darkening horizon looking for their brother, which made her smile. She was no longer solely responsible for watching out for him. She never had been.

As everyone was finishing dessert, Mahrree finally saw a dark figure come around the house to the back porch. She knew that shadow anywhere, and so did his sisters.

Nan was the first one to him. “Where have you been? We've been worried about you! You really shouldn't be alone at times like this.”

“At times like what?” he asked innocently.

“You know what I mean, Shem! Mahrree's set a plate for you in the house. You need to eat.”

“I'm fine, really,” he said to his sisters, Mahrree, Jaytsy, and several nieces who now surrounded and trapped him against the house. In a loud voice he called, “I could use some help here. Would you all call off your wives?”

“If we had that kind of power we'd be using it all the time,” Honri called back to the agreeing laughter of the men.

Shem raised his hands in surrender. “All right, this is enough! I'm going to talk, so you all better listen. Sit down. All of you. Yudit, I mean you too. Go.” Shem stood in the lantern light of the back porch with his arms folded until everyone was settled.

“You’ve been concerned about me,” he announced. “I appreciate that. But you’re also smothering me. I think that was part of the problem. It’s hard to get to know someone when everyone else is *watching* and *hovering*.”

The women collectively looked down in guilt.

Several of the husbands nudged their wives.

“I’ve done a lot of thinking the past few weeks, and everything’s turning out for the best,” Shem continued. “I wasn’t sure of that at the beginning, but now I see how the Creator has had a hand in everything. I am happy with the way things are and I want each of you to be happy for me as well. This is how it must be.”

“No, Shem! It doesn’t!” Yudit insisted.

“This is *my* speech. Hold all comments until later.”

Noch covered Yudit’s mouth with his hand, to scattered chuckles of the family.

“As I was saying, this is how it must be. Now, when I asked Calla my question, she answered in a way that I didn’t expect. But, again, it’s all right.” He paused and looked down at his feet, shaking his head. When he finally looked up, it was with a somber and pained demeanor. “I have now accepted her answer of ‘No’ to my question of, would she be opposed to being my wife.” His face remained wooden as he surveyed his family.

There was a great deal of lip pursing, eyebrow furrowing, odd look exchanging, squinting, and finally grinning as what Shem said sank in.

Perrin was the first verbalize his congratulations.

“You DOG!” he shouted with an exasperated smile. “Do you know what you put us through?” He jabbed an irritated thumb toward Mahrree.

She was frowning, still running Shem’s words over in her mind.

“Why, yes. Yes, I do!” Shem grinned back. “Pretty good, huh? I learned from the master about surprise engagement announcements,” and he gave Perrin a sloppy salute.

“Wait a minute!” Yudit was on her feet. “Calla DOES want to marry you?”

“Of course she does.”

Now Mahrree stood up. “But you said, you said . . .”

“I asked her a question, and she said no,” Shem repeated. “I didn’t specify *what* question I asked her, now did I? And hardly any of you asked me what that question was. Honestly, I thought she

“Just leave me alone for a while?”

would want to think about it for a while, but she said she already knew she wanted to marry me the first time I stared at her and said, ‘Uhh.’”

All the men were laughing now, but none of the women were. Their mouths were still hanging open far too wide.

“So,” Noch started, pointing to Perrin, “this is all his fault? All of us have been suffering from when Perrin teased you about Jaytsy’s engagement?”

Perrin fidgeted.

Jaytsy giggled and Deck looked apologetic.

“Not entirely,” Shem said. “I didn’t need all of you hounding me about Calla, so I came up with a better way.”

Boskos Zenos, laughing, made his way up to his son and gave him a great big hug.

“And this man here,” Shem said, wiping a tear off his father’s cheek, “was the only one of two people who asked me what the question was that I asked Calla.”

“You knew?” Perrin nearly wailed.

Boskos nodded. “Why do you think I’ve been so teary?”

“You’re always teary, Grandpa,” one of his teenage grandsons answered him to a chorus of chuckles. “What was different?”

“Who else?” Perrin demanded, frustrated he wasn’t one who asked the right question.

“Guide Gleace,” Shem told him. “Why do you think he’s sent me to Norden nine times in two weeks?”

“But . . . but you said you were . . .” Perrin spluttered.

“Finding your tower positions? Yes, I was, on different routes to Norden. Come on, Perrin. It only took five minutes in each area to find a spot and get the rectorors to agree. This isn’t Edge, you know. Then I was free for the rest of the day to spend with my future bride. You never asked about my final destinations, did you?”

Perrin’s shoulders sagged in dismay. “You did it to me again, didn’t you? I thought I could finally trust you, and now?”

Noch reached over and patted Perrin on the back. “Now I understand a little of what you’ve been going through, Perrin.”

“Master of secrets,” Peto grinned at Shem.

Shem beamed with pride. “Old habits die hard, I guess. But I should keep my skills sharp. You never know when I’ll need them again. Besides, this was the only way Calla and I could have some privacy from all of you. So we’re here to announce that in eight weeks, on the 31st Day of Weeding Season, we’ll be moving in down

the road here as husband and wife. We start on Papa's addition tomorrow morning."

"*We're* announcing'?" asked Nan looking around.

A second shadow emerged from the back of the house. Everyone turned to watch as Calla joined Shem in the lantern light.

"I'm sorry we're late," she said bashfully under the stares of several dozen Zenoses and a handful of Shins. "We stopped to share our good news with some of my family along the way."

Shem put an arm around her and squeezed her shoulders happily. The two of them glowed brighter than the lanterns.

Mahrree pointed at the trees. "How long have you been there?"

Shem beamed at Calla. "Isn't she great? A regular Guarder! All of you walked past us a few times without noticing. Now, Mahrree, I saw the sorbay—let me at it!"



"I just don't believe it," Mahrree murmured as she looked through the kitchen windows and across the dark garden to the Briters'. Shem and Calla were over there to meet Jaytsy and Deck after the dinner was over and the Zenoses had dispersed. "I mean, all this time . . . I never saw it in his eyes, the few times I saw him."

Perrin chuckled as he put away the last of the dishes several Zenos men had washed and dried before they left. "He's had years of practice hiding things from us, Mahrree. I should have known. He seemed far too anxious to get traveling again. He usually doesn't like to stray far from home. Or, at least that's what I used to think." He sighed. "I wonder if I'll ever know him completely."

"Now with Calla living on the other side of us at her cousins' house, at least we'll see Shem when he goes by to visit her. Then they'll be living down the road from us. I just don't believe it!" she repeated. "Maybe Salem really is *that* perfect."

She moved closer to the window when she saw the Briters' door open, spilling light and two dark shadows onto their garden. "I think they're coming over to say good night," she said to Perrin.

"Mahrree, would you stop spying on them? I believe it was you who gave me a lecture on that back when Jaytsy and Deck were courting." Perrin gently pushed her away from the window and turned down the lamp. "Honestly, I'm surprised he told us so soon knowing the way all of you would watch him."

“Just leave me alone for a while?”

And then, as if he hadn't heard a word he had said, Perrin peered out of the darkened window.

“And what are *you* doing?” Mahrree demanded.

“Seeing if Shem needs any advice. He's not exactly practiced in the art of . . . well, *you know*. Just seeing if I could offer him some help,” he said lamely as he watched the dark garden.

Mahrree joined him in time to see Shem and Calla stop between the two houses to stand in the moonlight. Perrin and Mahrree held their breath as Shem tenderly took Calla's face in his hands and their dark figures slowly came together.

“Ah,” Perrin said. “Nicely done, Shem.”

Mahrree sighed happily. “After all these years of being forced to watch us, he picked up a few things. That's definitely a Perrin move.”

Perrin smiled. “I hope he said something about the moons' light in her hair.”

“Mmm,” Mahrree agreed as they watched the two of them kissing in the dark. She leaned against her husband's shoulder—

Until a thought struck her.

“*You* never say anything about the moons' light in *my* hair.”

Perrin's mouth scrunched up. “Well . . . you don't exactly have ‘moons' light hair.’ Not like Calla.” There was in his tone a hint of appreciation for Calla's raven-like hair.

Until he felt his wife glaring at him.

“But I like your hair!” he added, but not quickly enough. “The light definitely plays off of it, especially on those *shimmering* gray hairs you're starting.”

“It's not gray! It's very, very, very light brown. So light it looks almost gray. But it's not.”

“Of course not, Mahrree,” he said, kissing a section of hair with *very* light strands of brown. “One thing we'll have to watch out for in the future is very sneaky Zenos children. Especially if they're friends with our grandchildren.”

Mahrree giggled. “Shem and Calla will have a hard time finding their teenagers if they ever plant trees around their house.”

Perrin chuckled. “Shem Zenos is getting married. Salem truly is a place of miracles.”

Upstairs in his bedroom, another Shin family member watched

Shem and Calla from his window. Peto shook his head as the kiss continued longer than he expected.

“All right, Shem. Enough already. You’re an assistant to the guide after all,” he muttered. “I realize you’re making up for lost time, but do you have to do it *in our garden*? There’s a perfectly good barn just a few paces away from you. Take her there.”

He sighed as he continued to watch them kiss.

“Calla said her youngest sister is my age, right?” he whispered.

Then, thoroughly mortified with himself, he knocked his head against the wall.

Chapter 25--“No, Grandpy.”

Mahrree was in a deep sleep when she felt a presence hovering over her. She opened her eyes and gasped.

“Oh good, you’re awake,” Deck said in a low voice, uncomfortable to be in his in-laws bedroom. “It’s Jaytsy. She thinks the baby’s coming, but she’s not sure. She wants you to come over so I can get Mrs. Braxhicks.”

Perrin mumbled into his pillow as Deck dashed out the door, “Did Deck hit his head again?”

“No,” Mahrree said, quickly getting up. “It’s Jaytsy.”

“Jaytsy hit her head?”

Mahrree put her lips next to his ear. “No, *Grandpy.*”

Perrin’s eyes opened at that. “Finally?”

“Maybe,” Mahrree said, dressing hastily. She glanced out the window. It was still dark, but dawn would be coming soon. “Come over later to find out. I might not be able to leave.”

“I’m not catching anything wet and slippery.”

“Trust me, no one wants you to.”

She jogged over to the Briters and opened the door just as Deck was coming out to retrieve Clark.

“If this isn’t the real thing, I don’t want to be around when it is!”

Mahrree found Jaytsy sitting on the sofa, momentarily fine.

“It’s Shem and Calla’s doing,” she said. “The baby’s always most active when Shem’s around, but last night it could barely move when he put his hand on my belly. Calla rubbed her hands, put them on my belly next to his, and said, ‘Time to come out, little one!’ She said she does that for her sisters when they’re expecting, and if it’s a girl it’s born by the next day. Boys take another week before they come.” Jaytsy started to laugh, but her face contorted as a wave of pain overcame her.

Mahrree nodded encouragingly as Jaytsy breathed through it.

“Worse than when we were in Edge?”

“Much,” she gasped.

“Good!”

“Must also mean it’s a girl,” Jaytsy said when she could speak again. “Deck’s little insulter is coming to live with us today.” She struggled to get to her feet. “What’s the date? The 59th Day? Guess you were right—it’s about four weeks later than when I last thought I was ready to birth.” She winced and held her back. “Well, today’s the day. Let’s take a walk, watch the sunrise, make Father nervous and scare Peto. Maybe we can even make Deck lose consciousness over and over again. Full day ahead of us, so I hope you’re ready, Mother.”

Mahrree whimpered. There was no place she would rather be. Salem was filled with people who knew all about birthing babies.

Perrin looked out the side kitchen window to the Briters’ house. The midwife had arrived on horseback and hadn’t left. That was half an hour ago. Deck hadn’t come out of the house either. The sun was starting to rise and the cattle would need attending to. That’s why Peto was drooling sleepily through his breakfast.

As much as Perrin wanted to know what was going on, he also didn’t want to. For a man so accustomed to bloodshed, the idea of being within earshot of his daughter birthing was quite unnerving. He couldn’t imagine how Deck was taking it. And that’s who he was most worried about.

Everyone had come to Salem and found family, except for Deckett Briter. He had no blood relatives anywhere, according to the few names he knew and the records they could find. All he had in Salem was his wife and her family, and by association, Perrin reminded him, their very extensive family as well. Still, that didn’t replace Deck not having a father to support him on a day like this.

Perrin knew what he needed to do this morning, but it was more unpleasant than the idea of saluting Lemuel Thorne.

He put down his mug and nudged Peto awake again.

“I’m going over there. Deck may need . . . holding up. I don’t know. You get to the cattle, all right? Maybe find a Zenos or two to help you. If you don’t, I’ll have you trade me places.”

Peto pried open his eyes with his fingers. “I’m going. I’m going.”

“No, Grandpy.”

Perrin took a deep breath and walked the very short distance to the Briters. He gritted his teeth, waiting to hear terrifying screams or blood-curdling shouts as he approached the front steps. Instead all he found was Deck opening the door.

“I just need a little air. That’s all she said I needed.”

“Let’s take a walk,” Perrin suggested. “Give you some time—”

“Oh, there’s no time.” A woman, older than Mahrree, appeared by Deck’s side. “Jaytsy’s progressing quite nicely.”

Perrin squinted. She seemed familiar, but he couldn’t place her. “But Mahrree took nearly a full day to birth her babies.”

“Every woman is different, Mr. Shin. By midday meal you’ll have held the baby, announced the arrival, and planted an acre of corn.”

Suddenly Perrin knew, and his breathing quickened as panic rose in his chest. “Edge! I saw you in Edge!” The world had felt so far away, and now suddenly here it was talking to him.

“Yes, you did, briefly. I’m Mrs. Braxhicks. I returned just last week, Colonel.” She shook her head. “I’m sorry, *Mr. Shin*. Or rather, General Shin? I was in Idumea for retraining when your family ‘vanished.’ Imagine my surprise when I returned to check on Jaytsy and instead found soldiers rummaging through the house.”

Out of the corner of her eye she spied Deck sagging. With a brawny arm, she grabbed his collar, pulled him upright, and propped him against the door frame.

“Stay with us, Deckett. That Genev is a real beast, I’m telling you,” she said to Perrin, not missing a beat. “He was stopping people and grilling them on what they knew. I had received a message that I would be escorted to the fort in the next morning to meet with the Administrator of Loyalty. I can’t tell you how thrilled I was when Jothan came to take me home the night before!”

Perrin relaxed until he remembered something. “So you heard the *official story* then?”

“Yes, I did,” she said soberly, but the corners of her mouth began to twitch. “And I have to confess that as I stood at the message board reading it, I started to laugh so hard that people asked if I was all right. What a fabulous piece of fiction! Of course I knew then that your entire family was safely here. Why else would they create such a tale? My inappropriate outburst was probably why Genev wanted to question me.”

Perrin smiled. “Do you know what others thought of the story?”

“No, sir, I don’t. Doesn’t matter now though, does it?”

“No, not at all,” Perrin said. He could see why she’d been allowed to go to the world; for a Salemite, she was a decent liar.

Mrs. Braxhicks turned to Deck. “Enough fresh air? Good.”

“I can’t do this,” Deck said to Perrin. “I mean, Mrs. Braxhicks has been preparing me, explaining things—the other day she even drew *diagrams*,” he winced.

Mrs. Braxhicks smiled proudly.

“But it’s not like cattle at all,” Deck trembled. “It’s my *wife*. Your *daughter*. You should see what she’s going through—”

“He can if he wants, and if Jaytsy doesn’t mind,” Mrs. Braxhicks nodded at Perrin. “Often maternal grandfathers assist. And I still have the diagrams.”

Perrin’s eyes doubled in size.

“How could I ever suggest we have more children, seeing what’s happening to her?” Deck said miserably.

The midwife turned to him and held him firmly by the shoulders. “As enormous as the pain is now, much of it will be forgiven and forgotten as she holds that baby. There’s no great reward without a great sacrifice. It’ll be worth it, a dozen times over, even. What she needs most of all now is *you*.”

Deck was ashen.

“There is strength in a man that every woman yearns for,” Mrs. Braxhicks told him, “and that every baby needs.”

From upstairs, Mahrree’s voice traveled down, slightly panicked. “Mrs. Braxhicks? Jaytsy says she feels nauseated?”

“That’s what we’ve been waiting for,” Mrs. Braxhicks said. She turned to the stairs and called, “Be right up! Jaytsy knows what to do. Give her the bucket and tell her to pant.”

“There’s no strength in me right now,” Deck’s voice quavered. “I promise you.”

“Yes, there is, Deckett,” the midwife told him. “She’ll need your strength to help her find hers. Newborns behave differently in the arms of their fathers. They feel protected and secure. While a mother prepares a child to enter the world, a father gives him the courage to actually face it, starting today. Let’s go be a father, Deck. Besides, someone needs to hold the newborn while we take care of her mother afterward.”

She tugged on his arm and led the stunned almost-father back into the house.

“No, Grandpy.”

Perrin sat down hard on the steps of the front porch and held his head in his hands.

The sun slowly crept up over the mountains, but Perrin didn't watch it. He just stared at the steps and slowly rocked, praying everything would go all right as he felt the minutes, maybe even an hour, pass. At one point he heard Mrs. Braxhicks' voice come muffled to his ears saying, “Push, push, push!”

He also heard a long grunting noise that would have been very loud upstairs in the bedroom.

He pressed his hands to his head and waited to hear the thudding of Deck hitting the floor. Or Mahrree.

But the loud wail that reached his ears instead was chilling.

His daughter.

He rubbed his forehead furiously trying to erase the sound of her in agony, but it was no use. Some sounds are never forgotten.

Jaytsy wailed again, this time longer, permanently sealing the horrible cry in Perrin's mind. There was nothing he could do to help her. Nothing.

Perrin rocked harder.

Another wail, this time fainter and higher pitched, came to him.

It was also unmistakable.

He stopped rubbing his head and looked up.

He glanced at the sun that now hovered fully over the tall peaks and wiped away the wetness that was falling from his eyes. He stood up, turned to the door, stared at it for a moment, then walked into the house.

Grandfather Shin—

No, no, no, much too formal.

Grandpa Perrin—

No . . . closer, but not quite.

Certainly not *Grandpy* . . .

Whoever he was now had someone to meet.

He tiptoed through the gathering room, listening for anything that might suggest everything hadn't gone as it should, but soon he heard the distinctive giggle of his daughter.

Just moments ago it was soul-wracking cry that ripped through his heart, and now she was giggling?

He heard his name mentioned and a moment later Mahrree was coming down the stairs.

“You're here!”

Perrin nodded.

“For how long?”

“Long enough!”

“You’re a little pale,” Mahrree said.

“So are you.”

“I know,” she laughed shakily. “I didn’t think I’d make it. Thank goodness the baby came so quickly, or I would have been flat on the floor and Jaytsy would have had to hold her own hand.”

“Everyone all right? So how was it?”

“Amazing! You have to come see,” she said reaching for his arm.

“Now?”

“Jaytsy’s insisting. We’ve already moved her to the bed. She wants you to hold the baby.” Mahrree’s eyes filled with tears as she pulled him up the stairs and into Deck and Jaytsy’s bedroom.

Perrin tried to ignore the bloody cloths Mrs. Braxhicks was putting into a bag, but his eyes lingered on the considerable mess until his daughter called to him.

“Come meet your granddaughter: Salema!”

Perrin shifted his gaze from the bag to his daughter sitting partly upright in bed under a blanket, with Deck sitting next to her. They were both contentedly gazing at the tightly wrapped package of blankets in Deck’s arms.

Jaytsy beamed at her father. She looked exhausted but ready to climb a mountain if someone dared her.

Mahrree whispered into Perrin’s ear. “She’s still a bit messy from the birth. You didn’t see our babies until they were cleaned up. Just look beyond the clumps and smears.”

Perrin did his best not to cringe but walked quietly over to the bed, expecting the worst.

“Just for a few minutes,” Mrs. Braxhicks said. “We’re not exactly finished here yet.”

Perrin nodded as he leaned over to look into Deck’s arms.

Deck sat up, in surprisingly good color, and held up the bundle. “Take her,” he whispered. “If you’re holding the baby, you don’t have to dance, right?”

Perrin smiled and took the tiny package.

She didn’t look so bad. Not worse than any soldier after a battle. And that’s what she had just gone through—a battle.

Mahrree leaned against him as he cradled the newborn.

“She’s so quiet,” Perrin said softly, concerned.

“No, Grandpy.”

“One yell was all she needed, then she settled right down. Must be a Briter trait,” Mahrree suggested.

“I don’t remember them being so small,” he whispered.

“They make them smaller now,” she told him.

Perrin chuckled.

The baby opened her eyes at the deep noise and tried to focus on him. Her little lips parted as she searched his face. As she worked her new muscles, one of her eyebrows arched.

Perrin sighed.

She could call him anything she wanted. Even Colonel Cuddly.

By midday meal Perrin hadn’t planted an acre of corn, but he had figured out how, in the future, everyone in Salem would know a baby had arrived. Among the many banners he was designing, one would be pink striped, like Hycymum had made him years ago in Edge. The dozens of towers which would be positioned throughout Salem could fly the banner as a signal that a baby had been born in the neighborhood. Message boards at the base of the towers could provide the details, the kind which Perrin was on his way to deliver right now to Guide Gleace. Gleace wanted daily reports of Salem’s “Comings and Goings,” as he put it.

At the Gleaces’ front porch, Perrin found three more new grandfathers. It was a pleasure to swap stories with them, a fraternity he was now the newest member of. It was more gratifying than exchanging battle tales with other commanders, and although there was as much blood and yelling, the outcomes were far happier.

One man was bringing Guide Gleace news of his 78th grandchild, and he easily recited the names and ages of every last one. “My own army, General Shin,” the elderly man smiled at him. “Glad to hear you’ve begun your own.”

Back at the Briters, Mahrree served as the messenger, gate-keeper, and proud grandmother.

Grandma.

Grand *Mama*.

Well, something.

By afternoon the food and supplies began to arrive, filling the spacious kitchen and eating room with promises that meals would keep coming for several weeks.

Mahrree had a speech she recited for women who came by, providing the details of the birthing and her new granddaughter in a one minute presentation which she delighted to repeat to Zenos women and their neighbors.

During a lull, Mahrree looked at the table full of food, blankets, and clothes, and whispered, "Just like Edge used to be, but better."

"So that's where you've been hiding," Deck chuckled as he found his brother-in-law pitching hay in the barn. "You've moved enough for four days. It's time to quit."

"School doesn't start for another hour," Peto said, not looking up.

"True, but it's time for *me* to get something to eat, which means it's time for *you* to keep your sister company for a few minutes, and to meet your new niece."

"Uhh . . ."

"Don't worry, she's all cleaned up and wrapped in blankets. Nothing will squirt at you. Come on, Uncle Peto. It's your Salem duty, you know."

Grumbling, Peto followed a chuckling Deck to his house, washed his hands, and trudged up the stairs while Deck chatted with more squealing women.

"Peto!" his sister cried, albeit quietly, and gestured for him to sit down next to her on the bed. "You're going to hold her. Come on, Salem tradition," and she placed the tightly wrapped bundle in his rigid arms.

He gulped. "I don't know how to do this."

"And I've had lots of experience?" Jaytsy chuckled. "We're all figuring it together."

"Am I doing this right?" Peto asked stiffly.

"Just support the head and let her snuggle in," Jaytsy showed him, shifting the newborn in his arms.

"I'm not the snuggly type," Peto said, trying to position the baby closer to him.

“No, Grandpy.”

“You will be, when it’s yours.”

Strangely, Peto didn’t find himself disagreeing with that idea, but instead did his best to cuddle Salema.

Jaytsy nudged him. “Sniff her.”

“What?”

“Her head. Sniff it. Trust me. She smells really sweet.”

Peto shrugged and sniffed her. “Maybe that’s what the soap in Paradise smells like. Scrubbed her up before they sent her down.”

Jaytsy smoothed the baby’s thick, black hair. “Just like silk.”

“Looks like Father’s hair, doesn’t it?” Peto said as he tried smoothing it himself. “Just needs touches of gray here and there.”

Jaytsy giggled. “But she yelled like Mother.”

“Like you, then,” Peto said. “But I think she has *cow eyes*.”

Jaytsy looked at him. “How do you know about *cow eyes*?”

“I did my share of spying on you and Deck. Mother said it’s too early to tell, but I think those gray eyes are going to go big and light brown like Deck’s, mark my words.”

“How would you know? How many newborns have you seen?”

“Might as well start now to make predictions about all your children.”

“Don’t talk to me about another baby yet!”

Peto smiled. “So how many do you think you and Deck will have, now that there are no limits?”

Jaytsy shrugged. “All my life I knew I could have only two children. Just weeks ago I learned I could have as many as I wanted. That’s a little hard to imagine, especially having just gone through the process. But we’ve talked a few times, maybe having six, or even eight children.”

Peto blinked rapidly. “Really?”

Jaytsy smiled shyly. “I love watching the Zenos family. There’s so much life and fun and—”

“Noise! Can you imagine the volume of our family if there were half a dozen of you and me?”

“Wouldn’t it have been fun?”

“Are you serious?” Peto stared at her.

“I am,” said Jaytsy soberly. “All right, I admit there also would have been a lot more arguing. And more chaos. But Peto, I know you can’t imagine it right now, but however many children the Creator wants to send us, I want to try to take. He’ll make us strong enough for whatever He sends.”

She ran her finger over Salema's small ones.

"At one point, when I was trying to push her out, I really panicked," she said quietly. "I was so scared. I knew I couldn't do it. I imagined myself dying right here and wished that I could, just to end the agony. But then suddenly I knew I could push her out. I *had* to do it. Not for me, for her. For those who follow her. Oh, I wish you could understand. The whole world is different today!"

Peto watched her carefully. Now wasn't the time for a smart remark. Jaytsy wasn't quite herself anymore, because something weird and *motherly* had happened to her.

"You should envy me, Peto," his sister declared. "I was sure I'd die, but instead I made a new person! Isn't she incredible? Oh, I feel like I can do anything today! Why, I could march back into the world and take it over!" she exclaimed. But she fell back into the pillows which propped her up. "After I have a *very* long nap, which I understand won't happen for a *very* long time . . . Hmm. Maybe the Creator designed it that way, so that all new mothers wouldn't be taking over the world . . ."

Instead of staring at the strange creature who had taken over his sister, Peto looked back down at the baby who was opening her mouth and craning her neck.

"I think she wants to go fishing. She's got a trout mouth."

"I hope you take her someday. But actually that means she's hungry, that I'm not about to get that nap yet, and that it's your signal to leave for a little while."

"Absolutely," Peto said, gingerly handing Salema back to Jaytsy. He stood up and watched her fix the baby's blankets. "Best thing you ever baked, Jayts. I think you should really shock our parents and make it an even dozen of those."

"Thanks, *Uncle* Peto," Jaytsy grinned as Peto left.

"Only if he has a dozen as well," she whispered to her daughter.

It was Shem's reaction everyone was waiting for, and mother, father, grandparents, and uncle were all there as Shem and Calla arrived in the late afternoon to meet Salema.

Mahrree wished Davinch could have dropped by, just to sketch the scene.

“No, Grandpy.”

Calla emitted a tiny squeal as she sat down on the edge of Jaytsy’s bed. “It worked again! It’s a girl. I have some of nature’s power, I just know I do. Can I see her toes, please? I love newborn toes.”

“Of course!” Jaytsy pulled a tiny foot out from under the blanket.

“Look at the nails,” Calla whispered in awe. “Hardly visible. Shem, come look at these little things. They’re miraculous!”

But Shem just stood at the door, his chin trembling as he watched his future bride holding the newborn’s foot.

Calla noticed. “Isn’t he adorable?” she said to Mahrree.

Mahrree nodded. “And sweet! I always thought so.”

Perrin scowled.

“He is adorable,” Calla said firmly to Perrin, demonstrating considerable bravery in light of his continued frown. She stood up, took Shem by the hand, and pulled him over to the bed.

He sat down and took Salema’s tiny foot in his big hands. “You did it, Jayts,” he whispered. “I’m so proud of you!”

“I want you to hold her, Uncle Shem. You did so much for us as well.” She passed the baby over to Shem who took her expertly, despite the tears in his eyes.

“Welcome to Salem, Salema,” he said holding her up to get a good view. “I hope you never see Edge.”

“Yes, ‘Salema’ is a much better name than ‘Edgia’,” Peto decided.

“Deck and I decided we wanted our firstborn to be named after Salem,” Jaytsy explained. “Shem, we liked how your father incorporated it into your name.”

“I love Salema!” Shem said. To the baby, whose eyes were open but hazy, he said, “A lot of people worked very hard to get you out of Edge. Your mama the most.” He kissed Salema’s cheek.

“Shem, please don’t drown my daughter,” Deck said as the tears trickled down Shem’s face.

“Deck’s daughter,” Shem sighed as he tucked the newborn close to him. “Deckett has a *daughter*. Doesn’t that sound great?”

“Yes, it does,” Deck smiled.

“And Perrin’s a grandfather! What are we calling you?” Shem asked him.

“Perrin.”

“I mean Salema,” Shem clarified. “She’s not going to walk up to you and say, ‘Perrin, I need a kitten.’”

“Sure she will. Why not?” he said, folding his arms.

Jaytsy turned to him. “Because you’re a *grandfather!* Salema’s not going to go to her grandmother and say, ‘Mahrree, make Perrin get me a kitten!’”

Mahrree put on a thoughtful face. “Why not?”

“Because it’s not right!”

“According to who?” Mahrree asked. “Those titles—are they rules or just customs? We can change customs. And rules!”

Perrin smiled appreciatively at his wife.

“Ah, not again,” Peto sat down on the floor. “Get comfortable, Calla. Mother’s on one again. I haven’t seen that look on her face since we got here. Must have been building up.”

“I think she has a point,” Calla said. “Why not do what’s best for your own family? That’s Salem’s way, after all. Maybe she just doesn’t like the idea of being a *grandma.*”

“Oh, she likes the idea of being *grand*, all right,” Peto assured.

Mahrree went pink as Calla laughed.

“It’s just the *feel* of the word *grandmother*,” Mahrree said with dramatic flair. “*Grandfather*,” she tried again, and Perrin shuddered at her pronunciation.

“We’re just not old enough to be *grandmother* and *grandfather*,” Perrin said, and immediately pointed a warning finger at Peto.

“So choose your own titles,” Calla said. “Come up with your own nick-names, or whatever. Was there anything they called you in Edge that might be appropriate?”

Mahrree smirked. “Colonel Cuddly comes to mind.”

Perrin jabbed her.

Shem smiled. “General Giggles? I think that was my suggestion.”

“Definitely not, Sergeant Major Sniffles,” Perrin said.

“Now *that* has potential—Uncle Sniffles,” Peto pointed at Shem. Shem sniffled on cue and laughed softly as he rocked Salema.

“Sergeant Major of *Snuggles*,” Calla whispered, but not quietly enough. Immediately she turned red when she realized her mistake.

“*Really?*” Perrin said, scowling. “I’ll have to remember *that.*”

Calla looked apologetically at Shem, but he just winked at her.

“Mama Mahrree,” Deck suggested.

“What?” Perrin turned to him.

“Mama Mahrree. Wouldn’t that work?”

Mahrree bounced her head back and forth. “Maybe. Maybe. So what’s Perrin?”

“No, Grandpy.”

Deck smiled. “Papa Perrin?”

Perrin held up his hands and shivered. “Let’s just leave it at Mahrree and Perrin for now. When Salema’s big enough she can give us our own designations. Then the next baby can give us different titles if he wishes, and so on.”

“You could end up with a dozen names,” Shem pointed out.

“So?”

Mahrree nodded. “I agree. Let the babies name us.”

“Pop-Pop Perrin!” Calla offered. Her smile faded quickly as Perrin glared at her.

“You’re forgiven, Calla,” Perrin assured her. “After all, you gave me *Sergeant Major of Snuggles* to hold over his head.”

It was late in the evening, but Salema’s parents had no comprehension of time. They were on the baby clock, and Salema wouldn’t understand the motions of the sun and what it meant to the rest of the world for a while. The new parents laid on their bed in a foggy bliss.

Last night *two* of them went wearily to bed after the big family dinner, and now tonight *three* of them lay in utter exhaustion with unconscious smiles on their faces.

“Is it time for bed yet?” Jaytsy asked Deck, whose eyes were closed. His daughter slept peacefully on his chest. “Mrs. Braxhicks said she’d be by again at bedtime.”

“Does it matter? We’re already here. Let’s just close our eyes. Wait. My eyes *are* closed. Aren’t they?”

Jaytsy giggled and rolled slightly to watch her husband run a finger down their daughter’s back. “I can’t believe she’s finally here.”

“Oh, I believe it!” Deck exclaimed. “I saw her come. If you need any reminders, I can give you plenty. Not like I can forget any of *that* any time soon. At least I didn’t have to do any reaching. By the way, happy anniversary.”

“What are you talking about? We had our first anniversary weeks ago.”

“The anniversary of when we met,” Deck clarified. “It was two years ago that you showed up at my parents’ kitchen door with a basket of food from your mother.”

Jaytsy thought about that. “Are you sure?”

“When I arrived that day at my parents’ place after burying them,

I knew nothing would ever be the same again. I couldn't even think of a good reason to continue. I had no hope. No purpose. Then you showed up at the door. Now I have a wife, a big house, my own herd, and a daughter. I was right. Nothing is the same. It's better."

"Oh, Deck, that's really today?"

Deck sighed. "Actually, no. It's not for a probably another nine or ten weeks yet. I just figured we'll be too busy to remember it then, so I brought it up now. Still a good story, right?"

Jaytsy snuggled into her husband. "The day I learned your parents had died, I told my mother it wasn't fair. I went on and on about everyone who had died. She said that someday all of it would make sense, and that every story has a happy ending. I just had to wait long enough for it."

"So are you happy today?"

"Completely!"

"*There* you are."

Captain Thorne bristled when he heard the sneering voice, and he closed his eyes. He wouldn't be out of pain for a while yet. Sitting on a bunk in the surgery wing, he took a deep breath and waited for the throbbing in his right arm to ease.

"I still don't understand why you just don't have the surgeon cut the hideous thing off," Commandant Genev hissed. "And look at me when I address you, Captain!"

He opened his eyes, as slowly as he dared, to give Genev his coldest glare. "I want to keep it," he said steadily. "To remember."

Genev scoffed. "Remember what, Captain? Your failure? Your ineptness? The surgeon says he can amputate—"

"NO!" Lemuel bellowed. He was always brash before the next dosage of the pain mixture took effect. "I refuse to go through life as an incomplete man!"

"So you rather everyone sees you as an *impotent* man? You can get rid of that pain, and get rid of that *stench*, too." His lip curled as he stared at the captain's dying arm.

Lemuel was sliding a glove over his shriveled hand.

"Oh, yes. *The glove*," Genev said. "That makes *everything* look normal again. No one can tell . . . or smell."

"The smell is easing. Once it's completely . . ." Lemuel couldn't

“No, Grandpy.”

bring himself to say the word ‘dead’ in reference to his arm, “there should be nothing left to draw attention to it.”

“Except that it never *moves* unless someone bumps it.”

Lemuel seethed with fury. Commandant Genev took sinister delight in daily tormenting him.

“Is there something you require, Commandant?” the captain said coolly. The throbbing was beginning to subside, promising another few hours of reprieve. “I’m not on duty for another half hour.”

Genev clasped his hands behind his back. “Yes, yes there is. I want to know why you destroyed the message from your father insisting you be reposted to the garrison in Idumea.”

Lemuel clenched his jaw.

“Because, as you are fully aware,” Genev batted his eyelids annoyingly, “*I* am the commander of this fort. All requests and communication, *from* anyone *to* anyone, pass by my desk first.”

“The communication was between my father and me,” said Lemuel flatly.

Genev ignored that. “The response you sent out this morning was, ‘I am staying in Edge.’ Why?”

Lemuel swallowed hard.

“Surely you don’t prefer Edge over serving with your own father, now, do you? The High General requests you to be by his side, and you turn him down?”

Lemuel stared into Genev’s eyes. If he could block this roach of a man from reading him, he could block anyone, especially his father.

“I have yet to conquer the forest, Commandant. I promised myself I would remain here until I found the Guardians, until I destroyed those who stole away my Jaysy—”

Genev’s short bark of a laugh stopped him. “She’s gone, Captain. Forever. She was killed by the Guardians, *remember?*”

“She wasn’t with them,” Lemuel whispered, making sure his eyes were still hard as stone. “It was just the Shins and Briter. No one saw Jaysy. She may still be out there—”

“Her corpse rotting as disgustingly as your arm, Captain!”

Onions. The man always ate far too many onions, Lemuel thought. Talk about a stench.

“Until I have proof, I refuse to believe that—”

Genev got right up into his face, his midday meal nearly overpowering him. “You *better* believe, Captain! The entire world does. They have all mourned the tragic deaths of Perrin, Jaysy, and Peto

Shin. They've wept over the loss of the grandchild that never took a breath. They're dealing with the knowledge that the Shin family is forever and completely gone. Now, if the entire world can accept that truth, why can't you?"

Because it's not the truth! Lemuel wanted to scream. If only he were stronger, more able to ride, and less needy of the surgeon's mixtures that kept him going each day, he would have been back on his horse Streak and in that forest finding her.

Almost Lemuel convinced himself they all died in the forest.

Almost he believed the story that Chairman Mal had published to the world. But when he believed it, he'd have to accept that Jaytsy had died, too. As much as his mind was willing to embrace the new truth that allowed Lemuel to be a hero because he destroyed the traitor Zenos, a small portion of his heart simply couldn't.

Where *was* Jaytsy? They must have just left her, large with expecting.

It gnawed at Lemuel every time he thought of it. *He* would have found her, rescued her, cared for her and the baby, raised up Perrin's grandson to be greatest soldier the army had ever seen. Perrin Shin's legacy could have been Lemuel's legacy.

It still could be.

She still could be out there, held captive by the Guardians who were waiting for the opportune moment to demand a ransom for her and her son.

His son—

"I ASKED you a QUESTION, Captain!"

Captain Thorne blinked out of his private musings and met the glare of Genev. He didn't have a ready answer. Then again, since when did Genev require the truth?

"I accept *your* truth, *sir*."

"See that you do." Genev cleared his throat and glanced to the door to see a surgeon's assistant coming in.

When the young man recognized Genev he paused, as everyone did in the presence of the Administrator, before continuing to the captain. "Sir, the surgeon has a new salve to try on your arm. With your permission, I'll remove your jacket—"

"Absurd!" Genev announced. "Why all of you try to pretend nothing is completely wrong here!"

Lemuel stared at him and the irony of his statement. He turned to the assistant. "Yes, take off my jacket."

“No, Grandpy.”

“Can’t even dress and undress yourself,” Genev snickered. “In any other profession you would’ve been kicked out as useless. But the Army of Idumea still sees you as valuable for some reason. After four weeks I still fail to see why. Maybe someday you’ll prove yourself of worth. So, Captain, are you requesting to remain in Edge? To ignore your father’s insistence that you serve under him?”

“I’m staying in Edge,” Thorne said as he struggled to get out of his jacket with as little help as possible.

“You are to request it of ME, Captain!” Genev snapped. “I decide who stays and who goes. You are NOT the commander, nor will you be for a very long time. Is that understood, soldier?”

“Yes, sir,” Thorne responded tonelessly. “Sir. May I continue to serve at Fort Shin. Sir.”

Genev stood at his full, squat, height. With a thin smile he said, “Yes. Of course, Captain Thorne. You are, after all, my favorite officer. I will send a message to High General Thorne myself, telling him how *important* you are to Fort Shin.”

He nodded curtly and strode out of the surgery.

The assistant applying the salve sighed in relief, but immediately tensed up again when he noticed Thorne watching him. “Sorry, sir.”

Thorne nodded once, and grimaced as he watched the assistant apply the sweet-smelling concoction to the charred and shriveling flesh of his arm. He would keep that arm, to remember what he was, and what he was about to become. Yes, he would become the most impressive soldier in the army, and with *only* one good arm. And it wouldn’t be because of High General Thorne’s leadership, or Commandant Genev’s guidance.

Lemuel Thorne would become the greatest officer the world had ever seen by his *own* making.

And when that time came, Commandant Genev would be a disgusting corpse rotting in the forest.

A few weeks later, Deckett Briter stood in front of their congregation on Holy Day. In his arms was his little girl, dressed in a simple white gown, to announce to everyone her name and to ask the Creator to bless her. He tried not to be nervous as hundreds of eyes gazed adoringly at the young new father cradling his tiny baby with black

hair that stood straight up.

But it wasn't the pressure of so many people that worried him. Nor was it even the fact that he'd never prayed out loud in front of so many people before, even though Rector Bustani had given him some suggestions, and he'd heard a few other fathers publicly ask blessings for their newborns since they'd arrived in Salem.

He wasn't even trembling because his wife stood by his side, or that he'd asked his father-in-law to stand with him as well, not so much as a distraction, but as a backup.

No, what most concerned Deck was that Salema would start wailing again, as she was prone to do when she was on display. He wasn't sure if it was because she was feeling exposed and open, as he did right then, or if she was hollering so that everyone would hear her, which Deck suspected was a Shin family trait, but he'd never admit that in front of anyone.

Right now, he had the swaying and bouncing down pretty well, but only Perrin seemed to be able to master the Hifadhi pat.

They'd discovered that technique when Salema was a week old, and Jothan and Asrar Hifadhi came to visit them. As soon as the front door opened, somehow Salema knew and she began to exercise her lungs.

Jaytsy looked at the Hifadhis apologetically. "Still trying to figure her out," she said. "I just changed her, and I fed her half an hour ago, but we can't calm her down—"

But Asrar took Salema and said, "Don't apologize, and don't let anyone try to tell you newborns are easy. Most aren't." She bounced Salema gently up and down. "I'm guessing a gas bubble is lodged, and this poor girl doesn't know what to do with it. When you consider that she's a full-grown spirit crammed into a tiny body, and she's been working it for such a short time, and she can't quite remember anymore where she came from, and what she's supposed to be doing now, it's no wonder she's confused by all these new sensations. Wouldn't you feel like wailing a few hours each day in her situation?"

"I never thought of it that way before," Jaytsy said. "I guess I would."

A moment later Salema released gas from both ends, and relaxed slightly in Asrar's arms.

"It's just so exhausting, isn't it, Salema?" Asrar crooned as if the now-quiet baby could understand her every word. "I think some of us come to the world more anxious to get on with things than others.

“No, Grandpy.”

Some folks are fine with enjoying this time as a baby, but not you. You have so many plans, don't you? And you want to do them all right now, yet you can't even hold up your head. You're not even sure what I'm saying, either, but you want so much to respond. It will all come in time, little one. One day, one step at a time. You'll get it all sorted out, so be patient with yourself.”

Salema stared at her as if she did understand, while Deck and Jaytsy watched in wonder.

“Yes, she looks exhausted now,” Jothan observed. “May I?” and he lifted Salema from Asrar. “And now, little one, would you like to take a nap? Every day you get bigger and stronger, and napping helps. So, nap time?”

Jaytsy leaned over to Deck and whispered, “I wouldn't be surprised if she answered him.”

Jothan fitted the tiny baby on his shoulder, allowing her to snuggle in to his thick neck. He closed his eyes for a moment, as if waiting for something, and then he started patting.

But not any timid, soft patting. He clapped his hand so loudly on Salema's back that Jaytsy couldn't help but lunge forward. “Oh!” she began, but recognizing that the Hifadhis had some gift with newborns, held herself back and said instead, “That's . . . *rather hard*, don't you think?”

Deck had gone to the other side of Jothan to see his daughter's face. “Apparently not. Her eyes are closing!”

“My grandfather Tuma discovered this,” Jothan said. “And I understand he once quieted your brother Peto to sleep, when he was in Edge for the afternoon to meet Perrin and Mahrree. Babies don't need tiny, useless pats. They need to really *feel* that pat, throughout their whole body.” Jothan's voice was deep and soothing, yet he fairly rumbled as he said quietly, “Don't worry, I'm not leaving bruises, and her back won't even be red. First, feel the rhythm of the infant, such as her heartbeat, or her wailing. Then match your patting to her rhythm. She needs to feel peaceful consistency, to feel in harmony with the world she's now living in. She needs *grounding*.”

Deck didn't understand most of that, but somehow it worked. “She's falling asleep!” he whispered in astonishment. “Jothan, can you please come over every night?”

He smiled as Salema released a shudder and a sigh. “If you're absolutely desperate, of course I will. But how about I just teach you the technique instead?”

So after they laid Salema down for a nap, Jothan made Deck feel completely ridiculous by patting him on the back in the same manner, then making Deck pat him back to judge the force and to try to find Jothan's "rhythm" while Deck pretended he could. By this time Perrin had come over, and soon the three men were patting each other on the backs, while Jaytsy and Asrar giggled and guessed who'd burp first.

While Jaytsy did better with it, Deck *almost* had the technique down, but he was sure his daughter could feel his hesitancy whenever he took her in his arms. Occasionally neither of them could calm her.

But she always settled right down whenever Perrin took her and started what Mahrree called the "Hifadhi beatings." She wasn't too sure about the force, either, but she couldn't dispute the results as Salema soon fell to sleep as deeply as Peto had so many years ago.

Deck decided that Salema just liked massively built men. She'd likely marry one in twenty years.

No matter the time of day, Perrin was willing, and would quite often say, "I'll just keep her for her now. I can work and cradle a baby at the same time. Come by again after you two have dozed."

That's why Perrin stood near Deck, smiling proudly yet keeping his hands behind his back, because for now little Salema was silent, bright-eyed and watching the crowd that beamed back at her, and for once Deck was feeling confident in his ability to be a father.

After the congregation ahh-ed appropriately at Jaytsy's explanation that they wanted Salem in their firstborn's name, Deck bowed his head and offered a prayer, thanking the Creator for their new baby and asking for blessings on her life.

He wasn't sure what he said, because he tried to follow Shem's advice, who told him that he wasn't so much asking for blessings, but receiving hints from the Creator as to this child's potential. It was his right as patriarch to be inspired to know how they should raise their child, and to have glimpses into who she already was.

That morning Deck had asked Shem, "Couldn't Perrin do it? He's a patriarch, right? And he certainly knows how to listen to the Creator."

Shem had bobbed his head and said, "Well, yes, grandfathers can do it, but Deck—you listen just as well as he does."

So, filled with anxiety, he tried his best to say the words that came to his mind, and not substitute his own ideas. Finally he ended the longest prayer he'd ever said out loud.

“No, Grandpy.”

His shaking didn't subside until they sat down again with the family, and Perrin put an arm around his shoulders. “Well done, Deckett Briter,” he whispered. “I know Mahrree took notes as to what you said, but one thing stood out to me.”

“What was that?” Deck whispered back.

“That you blessed her with a ‘boisterous spirit.’”

“Did I really?”

“Yes, and I'm sorry if you heard my response to that.”

“You responded?”

“I couldn't help it. I accidentally whispered, ‘*Oh, no.*’”

Even though Perrin chuckled quietly, Deck didn't know whether to join him or begin shaking again. Still in his arms, his little girl looked up at him with her big gray eyes, turning light brown. They weren't drifting and hazy, but fixed on him intently.

An idea was shared, between his eyes and hers, and the message was, *The first of many.*

He began to tremble again.

Chapter 26--“I think he’s found his calling.”

Taking a man from his future bride one week before the ceremony is an excellent idea, Guide Gleace told his Assistant and his General as they sat in the guide’s office planning their trip.

But Shem was unconvinced, and his pout was pitiful.

“What you need is a good camping trip with the men,” Hew Gleace assured him. “Give yourself an outlet before the big day.”

“But I don’t need an outlet. I just need my Calla!” exclaimed Sergeant Major Snuggles.

Perrin and Hew exchanged looks.

Perrin’s said, *I wasn’t exaggerating when I said he’s nauseating.*

Hew’s said, *You’re right. He’s completely ridiculous.*

Plastering on a sympathetic smile, Hew turned back to Shem whose his eyes were more forlorn than an abandoned puppy’s. “Listen carefully, Shem: do you really want to do this a week *after* you’re married? Leave your blushing bride *all alone* while you go with Perrin, Peto, and me to the ancient temple site?”

“Leave her *lonely*?” Perrin emphasized.

Shem blinked. “Uh . . . I don’t want to do that, do I?”

Hew and Perrin both shook their heads.

“Besides,” Hew said, patting his back, “I’ve never known a prospective groom, no matter what his age, who didn’t have some extra energy to burn off. Best thing to do is to work it out—and *away* from your beloved,” he added when he could see Shem had other ideas. “So that’s why we’re leaving tomorrow morning. Calving is over, Jaytsy and her baby are well, school is out, the weather is perfect—it’s time to show you what the Creator wants you to see.”

“You’re right, as always,” Shem sighed.

“I’ll be at your place at dawn then, General Shin,” Hew said to Perrin. “Do your best to keep Sergeant Sappy here from sneaking to

“I think he’s found his calling.”

Calla’s for an extended goodbye. We’ve never had guards in Salem before, but maybe we need to get some now. And Shem,” Hew said when he saw his assistant stand up, “I’d like you to stay a few minutes.” He nodded to Perrin that he could leave.

But before Perrin did, he tugged briefly at his shirt.

Hew smirked in acknowledgement and turned to Shem.

“What do you need, Guide?” Shem asked as Hew gestured for him to sit down once they were alone. “I’ve got the papers and ink and quills in case you need me to record anything.”

“Bring them along on the trip. That’s when I may need you to record something. But right now? I wanted to have a little chat with you, since soon you’re to be married—”

“I’ve had ‘little chats’ with everyone, Guide!” Shem grinned. “Everyone seems to think I need advice. But Calla and I have gone through my rector’s counseling, and—”

“I know,” Hew said. “In fact, I spoke with Calla this morning.”

“You did?”

“I wanted her to know what it’s like being married to an assistant to the guide, and that while I will frequently take you away, your first priority is to her and your marriage, and should she need you more than I do—”

“Oh, she won’t,” Shem said confidently. “She’s been living on her own for years now, and she—”

Hew was holding up his hand, which Shem had learned years ago in training meant, *Silence*. “I assume at some point she’ll become a mother, and sometimes she’s going to need extra help with those little ones . . .” Hew’s voice trailed off when he realized Shem had started smiling dreamily.

“Shem?”

“Yes, sir?”

“Did you hear—”

“Oh, I heard you, and she’s wonderful, Guide! She can do anything!”

“Uh-huh. Well, I’m glad to see you so fully enamored with her. I suppose it’s safe to say you’ve forgotten all about old what’s-her-name?”

Shem heard the edge Hew added to his tone, and the grin on his face faded. “I have, Guide. There are no more feelings for her, and I even told Calla about . . . about my *troubles* concerning Mahrree.”

“And how did she take it?”

The goofy grin was back in an instant. “She’s wonderful, Guide! She said she completely understood! Now I know what love is!”

Hew sighed at the sweet-yet-clueless oaf in front of him. “No, you don’t Shem. But that’s all right. This full-boiling infatuation will eventually simmer down to a manageable heat, and once this excitement wears off—”

“Oh, but it won’t!” Shem cheerfully insisted. “It’s wonder—”

“—derful,” Hew finished with him. “Yes, I’ve heard. Shem, trust me: you’re just at the beginning of your marriage, and your feelings are going to evolve in many ways, but that’s good—”

“No, I’ll always feel this way!”

“Son, would you *please* just let me finish?”

Shem cocked his head quizzically, and the guide, realizing that his assistant was as goeey as Hew’s fourteen-year-old granddaughter making maple syrup, tried another tactic.

“Shem, look at your shirt.”

“Guide?”

“You put on a clean one this evening before coming to visit me, correct?”

“Yes . . .”

“Any trouble with the buttons, Shem?”

He looked down. “Oh. How did I do that?”

“Your shirt’s inside out, Shem! You’re completely distracted and infatuated, and that’s what I’m trying to help you understand. You’re taking all of this a bit rapidly and . . .”

Shem was fiddling with his shirt, perplexed at how he buttoned it while it was inside out.

“Go ahead and fix it, Shem. Mrs. Gleace won’t be coming in.” Hew stood up and looked out the dark window to give Shem a chance at getting his shirt on correctly without an audience. “You see,” he tried once more, “what you’re experiencing right now is the initial bloom of love, but it takes time, Shem. It takes years of devotion and struggles and joys to grow a deep and an abiding love. I just don’t want you to be surprised when some of this excitement wears off.”

Hearing Shem in his chair, Hew decided it was safe to turn around again.

When he did, he shook his head sadly.

There sat Shem, grinning like a small child. A small child who skipped two buttons on his shirt.

“Oh, Shem. Stand up, son.”

“I think he’s found his calling.”

As Hew undid Shem’s buttons to fix them, Shem said, “I know what you’re trying to say, Guide. Really, I do. Calla’s wonderful, and we’ll be very happy together.”

“Maybe she can do up your shirts for you,” Hew murmured. “Unless she’s as silly as you.” He patted Shem on the shoulder as he finished. “She told me this morning that she’s loved you since she was sixteen years old. That’s nearly half her life. Did you know that?”

Shem blushed and grinned once more. “Yes, she told me she developed a crush on me way back when I went to Norden once when I was twenty-four. The poor girl. She’s been pining for me for fourteen years! Tell me that’s not the sweetest thing you’ve ever heard.”

“Yes, it’s sweet, Shem. But think about this: for nearly the same amount of time you’ve had feelings for another woman,” Hew reminded gently, and Shem swallowed. “Please, Shem, promise me right now: if ever those feelings arise again, come tell me and let’s work them out. Calla deserves a husband who is whole-heartedly in love with only her.”

Shem beamed. “She’s got it, Guide!”

Hew slapped him on the back. “Today, I believe that. Now go home, get some sleep, and I’ll see you at dawn at the Shins.”

Calla made Shem’s leaving easier the next morning by waiting at the Shins. That had been Mahrree’s idea.

In fact, Mahrree had all kinds of ideas for the next two days. For some reason, Calla was reticent around her. Kind, yes—and polite and sweet and charming, but oh so nervous.

Mahrree didn’t understand that. For the past seven weeks Calla had become well acquainted with the Zenoses, and had sat with Salema a few times so Jaytsy could rest. Perrin once came home from Shem’s and said, “Calla showed me her notes about the army over the years. I told her she needs to write it up as a book, and she began by interviewing me right then and there. Her knowledge of the world and its history is quite thorough. You really should talk to her.”

“I’ve been trying to! But all I ever get from her is a shy smile, a quick hello, and a view of the back of her head as she hurries away. She’s more anxious around me now than she was when I first brought her home to meet Shem.”

“So what’d you do to scare her off?”

“I don’t know!”

But Mahrree was going to change that. Calla was about to become her neighbor and wife to her little brother, and she couldn’t avoid Mahrree forever. Mahrree had insisted that while the men were away Calla should stay at their house, because it was closest to her future home, *of course*. That would give them the opportunity to get ready for the wedding, and let Mahrree turn Calla into her new best friend. Subtly, *of course*.

So Calla stood next to Mahrree on the porch that morning, fidgeting as they watched Shem take the short ride from his barn.

Mahrree gently elbowed Calla, who nearly jumped out of her skin. “He’ll be expecting a proper goodbye. You know what that means, right?”

“A handshake?”

Mahrree chuckled. “At least *he* knows. Don’t worry, I’ll give you a few private minutes.”

Shem sighed miserably when he saw Calla. “Two whole days!” he said as he dismounted. He rushed up to the porch and took Calla’s hands. “Will you be all right?”

“Yes, just fine. I’m sure the time go will go by quickly.”

Mahrree could hear the doubt in her voice.

So could Shem. “Really?”

“But I promise I’ll miss you.”

“Really?” he brightened.

Before Mahrree could roll her eyes at their pitiful exchange, Guide Gleace rode up and waved to Mahrree.

“Drag him away, will you, Mahrree?”

“Sorry, Guide. I promised Calla he’d give her a proper farewell.”

Shem sighed as he looked into Calla’s eyes.

She stared back into his eyes and sighed wretchedly too.

“And . . . that means it’s time to leave you two alone.” Mahrree stepped off the porch to walk over to the guide. “We can afford them five minutes, right?”

“You’re a very generous woman,” Gleace said. “But even with five minutes, the poor man may weep all the way there. Oh, it’s too early in the morning for this!” he declared, and Mahrree turned to see Shem and Calla in full embrace, and in full lip contact as well.

But Mahrree couldn’t help but sigh in delight. “Guide Gleace, Perrin and Peto are saddling up in the barn. Perhaps you want to go check on them? Shem and Calla may need six minutes, instead.”

“I think he’s found his calling.”

“Good idea. Keep an eye on them for me, would you?”

Mahrree didn’t really *watch*, but inspected her front yard for weeds although she still didn’t know what should be yanked up, all the while making sure the happy-sad couple didn’t sneak away.

A few minutes later three horses trotted around from the barn, and Gleace called, “Still? *Still* he’s saying goodbye?”

Mahrree shrugged helplessly at him.

“Zenos!” Perrin yelled in his finest command voice.

Shem merely held up one finger and turned Calla so that only Shem’s back was showing as they continued their kiss.

Mahrree snorted and Peto rolled his eyes.

“Insubordination!” Perrin declared.

Mahrree laughed as still neither Shem nor Calla made any signs of separating. “He’s just making up for lost time, Perrin. How many times did he have to suffer watching you kiss me goodbye?”

“Yes, but I made my goodbyes in the privacy of our house. Usually. But *this!*” Perrin gestured, but couldn’t fight his smile anymore. “Shem, the sooner we leave, the sooner we’re *back*.”

Shem finally pulled away, if only to catch his breath. “That’s a good point.”

Calla nodded and gently pushed him off the porch. “Then go, and have fun. And be careful. Don’t break anything. And don’t eat the wrong mushrooms,” she said as Shem walked to his horse.

“Mushrooms,” Shem chuckled as he mounted. “You think of everything, don’t you?”

Peto exhaled loudly. “Is being sappy requisite for being in love?”

Perrin shook his head. “Your mother and I were never sappy.”

“It’s true,” Mahrree said.

“And who’s around to verify that?” Shem asked.

“Well, there’s one advantage to getting older—no one’s around to know if you’re telling the truth or not,” Mahrree said. She patted her son and husband’s legs. “As Calla said, be careful, have fun, but not at Shem’s expense, all right? He needs to be *healthy* for next week.” She raised her eyebrows meaningfully at her husband.

Perrin winked at her. “See you tomorrow night.”

They rode past the Zenos house and out to the main cobblestone road, and Calla joined Mahrree to wave goodbye to the rising dust cloud left by the four horses.

Mahrree put her arm around Calla. “The time will speed by, I promise. Your future father-in-law is moving into his new wing today

and wants you to start rearranging the house to your liking. We have the list of supplies to retrieve from the storehouse to stock your new home, and we also have a newborn to help with. Two days will go by faster than you'll realize, especially as we try to avoid Shem's sisters who, I understand, can be a bit overwhelming. I, however, am much easier to work with," Mahrree sniffed in feigned haughtiness.

Calla smiled timidly at her. "Thank you for taking such good care of me. Shem speaks so highly of you and Perrin, and I've known about you through this reports over the years, and . . . well, I have to admit I'm still not quite sure how to . . . talk to you."

So that was the problem? Mahrree chuckled and turned to walk Calla to the house. "The more you get to know us, the more you'll realize we're nothing special. Shem's always been too generous with his praise."

"But Mrs. Shin—"

"It's Mahrree. Do I need pin that reminder to your dress?"

"Sorry. But Mahrree, you . . . you're the world!"

"Excuse me?"

"I mean . . . you know everything about the world, and you even changed the course of its history!"

Before Mahrree could stop her—several stories had leaked into Salem during the past two moons—Calla the avid army historian continued.

"You, you . . . commandants now, in every fort? Lock-downs and curfews and skirmishes in villages? Even Perrin's friends have been sent to other villages. Yordin's over in Sands now, and Fadh's been sent east to Winds, and Karna's all the way south in Waves. I'm sure General Thorne did that to keep the three of them separated, but oh, the chaos will only increase. People are angry about Terryp's land, frustrated about being contained, furious with the changes in the forts that are now clamping down on them, and you—you *did all of that!*"

Mahrree stared at her, speechless.

But Calla was a torrent of words which must have been building for weeks, and now washed down everywhere. "Why, there are even Mahrree Shin Laws. Did you hear that from Jothan?"

"Well, yes, he did mention—"

"As a teacher I have an interest in the history of the world, and I know Professor Kopersee has asked you to write the new history text—"

"I think you'll need to help me with it, Calla."

“I think he’s found his calling.”

“Oh, but what could I contribute? But Mahrree,” Calla the unstoppable rained on, “you, *you*, you’re *still* shaping the world and you’re not even in it!”

Mahrree had stopped walking and stared at Calla, who was beaming with terrified pride.

“You . . . you’re a *legend*.”

“I’m a middle-aged grandmother with a big mouth, Calla.”

“But a very important big mouth,” Calla insisted, then frowned as she thought about her choice of words.

Mahrree chuckled and took her by the arm again. “I believe I see what the problem has been.”

“What?”

“Nothing.”

Calla shrugged and said, “I heard that Kopersee invited you to take over his position. Shem said the university president accompanied him to offer you the job, but you turned them down?”

“I don’t think I’m quite ready for such a responsibility,” Mahrree told her. “Writing their textbook will be daunting enough as it is, and I *will* make you help me, by the way. All of you Salemites think too much of us. We’re just regular people who tend to get into trouble.”

Calla’s shoulders sagged. “If you say so. But you did such a good job with those lectures you threw together your first week here, I can’t imagine you wouldn’t be a great professor.”

“Women aren’t even allowed to teach in the universities in the world,” Mahrree reminded her. “These options are so new to me.”

Calla frowned. “Mahrree, can I confess something?”

“Please.”

“I was . . . I was very surprised when you invited me to your house after that first lecture. I realized I kind of took over the question and answer period, and I was sure you’d think me some silly person with too many questions. But you weren’t unkind or impatient. In fact, you seemed a bit amused—”

“I was,” Mahrree laughed.

Calla dared to release a tight chuckle. “Then you said I should come home with you . . . that was just too much to ask for. A private audience? With the most famous woman in the world? And then . . . *and then* you introduced me to Shem! Oh, Mahrree, how many dreams could come true on one day?”

“This is why I love Salemites so much, especially you,”

“What do you mean?”

“Shem’s always been my honorary little brother, and for years I’ve been looking for just the right woman for him. That afternoon, as you asked question after question about the army, I knew you had to be top of the list. And even though I may be closer in age to your mother—”

“Actually, my mother married young and had me when she was nineteen. She’s only a year older than you.”

Mahrree stopped walking. “You *had* to say that? You really had to say that she’s *only* a year older than me?”

When Calla blinked worriedly, Mahrree chuckled. “You need to learn when I’m teasing you, you poor girl. That’s what big sisters do, or so I’m told, and I’d still like to claim you as my younger sister, if you don’t mind?”

She didn’t expect Calla’s chin to tremble violently. “Really? You mean that? Me?”

They were nearly at the front stairs now, and Mahrree was feeling confident she’d torn down some invisible prickly bushes between them—

No. No, there was still one more.

For the past few days Mahrree had prayed to know how to talk to Calla, and at that moment an idea flashed through her mind that, because of its randomness, she knew she hadn’t come up with it herself. It was a prompting from the Creator.

“Calla, I want to tell you something else,” she began, not entirely sure what she’d say, only that the words would be given her. “I’ve known Shem for seventeen years, but I’ve never seen him look at anyone the way he looks at you. He’s like a nauseated puppy—that’s Perrin’s description, by the way. But a *good* nauseated puppy—”

This? Mahrree thought, *this* is what she’s supposed to say?

“—and while I know that some may say this is just a temporary infatuation, and that in the future there will be days when he doesn’t look at you with such sickly fervor, I don’t think that’s true. The way Shem looks at you is with such tenderness, such utter delight, such pure adoration. He’s never regarded anyone like that before, and I know he will think of you that way for the rest of his life, and a thousand years after that.”

Tears welled up in Calla’s eyes. She tried to say something, but all that came out was, “Blrgrthw?”

Mahrree laughed. “Just like Shem! The two of you turn into blub-

“I think he’s found his calling.”

bering sops at the slightest things. I declare you and Shem are absolutely perfect for each other. I can’t imagine a better woman for him.”

She didn’t expect Calla to collapse right there on the stairs, as if a heavy load had been removed from her shoulders, and the lack of weight dropped her instantly. And then the tears started . . .

“Oh dear,” Mahrree murmured as she sat next to Calla and rocked her. “I’m so sorry, Shem. I think I just broke your bride.”

The four men rode south, almost to the end of Salem’s main valley, before turning right into a canyon which cut through the western mountains sheltering Salem.

A couple of weeks earlier, Guide Gleace had shown Perrin a large map of the region. Perrin was nearly giddy to realize they’d be riding into one of the several areas he’d seen on Terryp’s map which had been labeled as “unknown.”

Upon seeing Perrin doing a little jog of glee, Gleace assured his general that every map Salem produced would be brought to him.

Dozens of maps detailing Salem and the surrounding areas were soon delivered, and all had been tacked up on the walls of his office. There wasn’t a splinter of wood to be seen on two of them.

Down in a corner, and a bit behind a cabinet, were two smaller maps: one of the world, and one of Edge. He put them up only out of obligation, and had yet to give them a second look.

When the university’s terrain professor had delivered the maps, he told Perrin to leave open a space for the map he’d receive when he and Mahrree headed later to Terryp’s land. It was a Salem tradition, he explained, that you didn’t own a copy of the map Salemites had made of it until you went on the trek. That was fine with Perrin; he had far too many maps to play with for the next many moons anyway.

Now as they rode to one of those new places, Perrin could hardly contain himself.

“It’s incredible to imagine,” he said as they entered the canyon, “that a mystery land is at the end of this!”

Gleace chuckled. “And known by our people for generations. Just like Terryp’s land. We’ve got Peto on the list to go at the end of next Planting Season when the youth in this area head over to Terryp’s ruins, but Perrin, if you and Mahrree want to go over there sooner, such as in this Weeding Season, I’m sure we could arrange

for a guide from the archaeology department—”

“Thank you, but we’ll need to wait,” Perrin said. “Mahrree’s worried about leaving Jaytsy and the baby for so long, and I don’t want to be gone for several weeks until I’ve got Salem secured. Besides, as much as Mahrree wants to go, I think a small part of her is nervous about the trip, so she’s finding excuses.”

Gleace nodded. “Well, it is a bit of a distance by horse, especially for someone so uncomfortable in a saddle such as Mahrree.”

“That’s not quite *all* of it,” Perrin said. “I think she’s worried that she’s built it up so much in her mind that the actual place will be somewhat of a let-down.”

Gleace cleared his throat, and Perrin glanced over at him. “Are you sure that’s Mahrree’s excuse, or *yours*?”

Perrin forgot it was impossible to stretch the truth around the Creator’s guide.

“A little of both,” he admitted.

“I can promise you,” Gleace smiled, “that neither of you will be disappointed. But there are more than a dozen ruins within a day’s ride of your home, so the two of you should go on some excursions and introduce her to some dull horses.”

“Not a bad idea,” Perrin admitted. “Still can’t go this Weeding Season, though,” he murmured to himself. “It’ll only be our nineteenth anniversary—”

“What’s that?” Gleace asked.

“Nothing,” Perrin waved it off.

Peto squirmed. “It’s really a three days’ ride to Terryp’s land?”

“You have to go around an entire mountain range, Peto,” Gleace reminded him. “That’s not a quick feat, you know. This trip will be a good introduction to what you’ll see there. And a good introduction for your rump.”

“Now can you understand why I didn’t want to go on the Administrators’ expedition to Terryp’s land?” Shem said. “I’ve already been there several times, starting when I was fourteen. I would have been too tempted to show them the easy ways there. When you know the route, it’s much less than a week from Edge.”

“We may have to be more careful in the future when we schedule our tours,” Gleace said. “We no longer have Shem to warn us when someone is slowly creeping over there.”

“Are you trying to keep Terryp’s land a secret?” Peto asked.

“Not at all,” Gleace said. “Anyone from the world is welcome to

“I think he’s found his calling.”

explore and even live there. There’s no danger, no problems. Just huge lands waiting for another civilization to occupy it.”

“Then why hasn’t anyone from Salem moved there?”

“We have plenty of space here, Peto. We also don’t want to be that close to the world,” the guide explained. “Someday somebody will realize that the desert border between Sands and the edge of Terryp’s land is not even two miles. Right now, the world is too frightened to even try to cross that narrow desert.

“The world fears to leave what they know. Terryp’s land is where we originally began, you know. The Creator placed the First Families there, right next to the ruins, so they could see what other civilizations had done and be inspired by their accomplishments. But six years later the men who organized Idumea conspired to control not only the land but the people. And within a few short years everyone left Terryp’s land and went to the confining territory where they’ve remained trapped by their own irrational fears. There are very few people with the desire to look beyond what is accepted and known. Your family, Peto, was one of the unusual ones.”

Peto smiled at that, as did Perrin. He tried to take in every last detail of every slope and crevice around him, wishing to remember it all. He had to keep reminding himself that he could always come back. This adventure was now his calling.

Perrin glanced sidelong again at his son, and noticed that Peto’s smile was fading. He, too, was analyzing the terrain around him, but he wasn’t happy with what he saw.

“Guide Gleace?” Peto said. “This route is too obvious.”

“What do you mean?”

“Sir, if there are to be over one hundred thousand people fleeing from Salem to this valley up ahead, and then go on up the cliff side to the ancient site, it’s obvious they’d go this way. An army could easily overtake them. There are no other canyons or channels leading off of this to confuse pursuers, not like the canyon at the entrance of Salem.” Peto shook his head. “This isn’t good, sir.”

Perrin realized his son had a point. “What about the other canyons, Guide? There were others I saw on the map further north that lead to the valley, then up to the ancient site.”

“But they’re all of similar terrain,” Gleace sighed, evaluating the area as if noticing the canyon for the first time.

“Then we can’t use the canyons,” Peto decided.

Gleace nodded. “And that’s why you are here, young Mr. Shin.”

“Sir?”

“It never before occurred to me that this route is obvious,” Gleace told him, gesturing in dismay. “I always saw it as convenient. But you are entirely correct. An army could come through here five abreast at full gallop.”

Perrin exhaled, his previous glee diminishing into tedious reality. Securing Salem—moving tens of thousands of people unnoticed—was going to be complicated.

Perrin rubbed his forehead, disappointed that Peto figured out before he did that the army could easily overtake families sauntering along the canyon floor.

But Peto was already studying the mountain ridge above them. “Guide, do elk follow trails like deer?”

“In a way, yes.”

“How hard are elk to hunt?”

“Not too hard, if you know where to look.”

“But that’s the trick, isn’t it? To know where to look? Especially if you don’t know that elk exist. Where do they usually stay?”

Gleace eyed Peto knowingly. “Up against the trees on the edges of meadows.”

“Can they walk *through* the trees without being noticed?”

“If they have to. The bulls can maneuver without catching their racks on branches.”

“Branches that would sway and give away their position?” Peto’s tone was growing tighter and higher.

Perrin turned to watch his son.

“That’s right,” Gleace said. “There could be a herd up there on the ridge right now.”

“So the people need to move like a herd of elk, or deer,” Peto decided. “Wherever they can go, so can humans, and without detection from anyone on the canyon floors. Guide, we shouldn’t be traveling *here*, we should be *up there!*” Peto pointed to the ridge.

Gleace grinned. “Excellent! Peto, that’s precisely what you will do . . . later. You and your father will be responsible for finding the best ‘elk route’.”

“We will *what?*” Perrin said.

“There needs to be several different routes.” Peto looked up at the hillsides in the canyon. “From different places in Salem, *through* the trees. If one gets compromised, there should be other options.”

“Not a bad idea,” Perrin had to admit.

“I think he’s found his calling.”

Shem leaned over to him. “And Peto never wanted to be in the army?” he said quietly. “He’s a natural strategist. That’s probably why he was so good at kickball. He instinctively knows how to avoid the enemy and sneak around to reach his goal.”

Once again Perrin was struck by how little he really understood about the world, and his own son.

“Groups should be smaller as well, less noticeable,” Peto continued with growing enthusiasm. “Take a look at those evergreens, Guide. The branches don’t start until about six feet high. Perfect for someone to walk under. Maybe Father and Shem would have to duck, but most everyone else wouldn’t lose their hats.”

Gleace chuckled, and Shem leaned over to Perrin. “I think he’s found his calling.”

Peto still stared up at the ridgeline. “This could take a while, Father, to go all over these mountains.”

Perrin’s smile returned. There was nothing he wanted to do more than go exploring with his son.

“We have time for that, Peto,” the guide said. “The Creator has given us plenty of time to prepare. I think I know why you are here, young Mr. Shin.”

“To learn the names of those trees,” Shem said. “He doesn’t like Douglas Fir.”

“No I don’t,” Peto chuckled. “Do you know the names, Guide?”

Gleace shook his head. “Sorry. If it doesn’t moo, I don’t know its name. But that will be our first order of business when we return, to get you with a botanist and a geographer. We’ll start you in those courses at the university when it resumes in Harvest Season.”

“What are . . . botanists and geographers?” Peto asked.

“What you’re about to become,” the guide said.

Peto looked up again at the trees. “It’s like a maze, isn’t it? Little breaks and openings in the forest taking you one way, then another?”

“We could probably make some of our own mazes, Peto,” Perrin suggested.

Peto grinned. “I can’t believe I ever thought studying kickball injuries sounded appealing.”

“You did?” Perrin asked. “When was that?”

Peto waved him off. “Never mind, Father. Quiet. The mountains are talking.”

The sun wasn't yet at its zenith when the four men exited the canyon and entered a narrow valley, barely a quarter mile wide and half a mile long.

None of them spoke.

The air was humid and quiet. Surrounded by jagged mountains that rose abruptly on every side, the valley sat serenely growing its grasses which had previously been trampled and soaked with blood.

Perrin felt as if a centipede were crawling up his spine. Throughout the canyon they spotted deer, coyotes, and even a moose and her calf. But there were no animals here, even though a clear stream lazily trickled through it.

It felt abandoned and purposely avoided.

"It feels like death," Perrin decided, shivering although the air was warm and heavy.

"Always has," Gleace agreed grimly. "Green, lush, vibrant, and dead, as if this is the place where things come to expire. You can come, but you cannot leave."

Nervously, Peto cleared his throat. "So . . . are *we* safe?"

The guide smiled. "Today is not the Last Day, Peto."

"Are you sure?"

"Completely. Too many signs the Creator has given us that haven't occurred. Until they do, we are perfectly safe."

Shem looked around. "The mountain peaks are quite majestic, and the valley floor is obviously fertile. I just never understand why this place makes my skin crawl."

"Because it's been the site of the greatest evils this world has produced," Gleace explained, his bright blue eyes clouding. "Many people have met their ends here. Where evil dies, it remains. It cannot progress, it cannot move on to the next test, until it's finished with the punishment it's earned."

"So . . . the spirits of the evil dead are *here*?" Peto winced.

"In a manner of speaking, Peto," the guide said and reached over to pat him comfortingly on the shoulder. "Their souls are in the dark deserts prepared for them, where they contemplate with anguish all that they failed to do. But something of their evil remains here."

"I couldn't imagine living here," Perrin murmured. "Has anyone tried?"

"A few have," the guide said. "Some of those who chose not to continue in Salem. They were advised to avoid this area, but the flat

“I think he’s found his calling.”

grassland was just so tempting. But no one has ever lasted more than a season. They’d bicker among themselves, fight with their neighbors, and even commit murder before they’d have sense enough to leave. Some folks just don’t notice the deadness of this valley. I’m glad that each of you felt it the moment we entered it. That speaks volumes about the nature of your hearts.”

“Let’s just get moving on,” said Shem moodily. “The ancient site is always better.”

“Indeed.” The guide clucked his horse onward and the three others followed. “The longer people linger here, the more they become used to the feeling,” he told his companions. “Then they become consumed by it. We won’t risk that today.”

Perrin and Peto looked up to see that the valley ended in a vast bowl surrounded by sheer mountain peaks. In front of the mountains jutted out a massive plateau that ended as a cliff, dropping down into the valley. It undoubtedly was an excellent vantage point to look over the enclosed valley and the canyons which fed into it. The plateau sloped slightly to the ring of mountains behind it, creating an area accessible only by going over the mountain peaks or climbing the jagged cliff.

“You’re right, Gleace,” Perrin said as he evaluated it. “It looks like a mountain that had its top sliced off.”

They spurred their horses into a gallop to make faster time. The heaviness of the valley slipped away the closer they came to the cliff. By the time they reached the rocky area, the air was lighter and the mountains appeared beautiful again.

Gleace led them to a small pasture sheltered by the side of the rocky cliff and got off his horse. “This is where the fun begins, boys. We leave the horses here for the night and climb up to the ruins. Plenty of space for a lovely campsite there.”

Perrin evaluated the sheer cliff before him—a couple hundred feet high—then eyed the seventy-five-year-old man. “Are you, uh, up to the climb?”

Gleace gave him a playfully hurt look as he took a pack and slung it easily over his shoulder. “Don’t I look like I am?”

Perrin held up his hands. “No offense, Guide, it’s just I’m a little concerned that—”

“I can handle it. I did it just last year. It’s not as bad as it seems. We don’t go straight up the face, you know.”

No, Perrin didn’t know, but he was relieved.

“There are plenty of switchbacks,” the guide told him. “Besides, if I stumble I have the two strongest soldiers from the world who can carry me the rest of the way.”

“Watch it, Perrin,” Shem told him. “Gleace just might beat both of us up there. It’s Peto I’m worried about.”

Peto was grimacing as he got off his horse. He removed his pack, then grabbed the sheepskin he’d thrown over the saddle before they left. Clutching it he said, “Just in case my behind *becomes* sore.”

“You’ll be fine,” Perrin said, swatting his son on the rump.

“Ow! Yes. See? Just fine. Let’s get walking.”

An hour later Guide Gleace was the first man to the top of the cliff, followed by Shem, Peto who waddled much of the way, and Perrin who poked Peto’s behind with a stick when he flagged.

The view from the top was impressive, but the temple site itself was what caused the four men to stop and gawk.

As bleak and oppressive as the air felt below them, it was as light and calm on the vast tableland. About sixty paces from the cliff stood an immense crumbling gray stone structure.

Instinctively, the men walked there.

Judging by the amount of fallen cut stone around them, the temple must have been two levels high when it was first constructed. Dozens of columns which used to support a now-missing roof still rose upwards, a few over fifty feet.

At the front of the temple several pillars remained, rising about ten feet above the stone floor below them. A section of beautifully carved rock spanned the top of most of them, precariously balanced like a crumbling bridge.

“Ooh, I’d like the walk along that span,” Peto whispered.

“Are you joking?” his father hissed at him.

“Sorry, I realize that wasn’t the most reverent thought—”

“It’s not that. I’m just worried that the whole thing might come down at any moment.”

“It won’t,” Shem said, and with his normal voice he sounded as if he were shouting. “This has stood for hundreds of years, if not thousands. And Peto, you wouldn’t be the first to scale the columns and go for a stroll in the air,” he winked.

Guide Gleace cleared his throat. “Assistant Zenos, I’ll pretend I didn’t hear that.”

“Yes, sir,” Shem said apologetically. “Not like I did it *recently*.”

Perrin neared the steps and turned to Gleace. “May I?”

“I think he’s found his calling.”

“Go up and explore the temple? Why do you think we’re here, General?”

Even though the five stairs in front of him, running the full width of the portico, were cut from massive stone blocks, Perrin was still hesitant to step on them in case they would crumble.

But the potential before him was too tempting, and soon he got over his worries, as well as the steps, and was at the front entrance standing before a massive pillar.

“Mahrree will love this!” he breathed as he ran his hands along the deep grooves etched along the full length of a column, following them up until his eyes rested on the flat stones spanning the top. Carved delicately and elaborately along them were vines and symbols which seemed to Perrin more representative of written language rather than random patterns.

Peto joined him on the portico of the temple, then wandered to the side where a few large blocks remained, taller and wider than Perrin. Placed side by side, they formed the walls of the ruined temple. Peto gingerly fingered the etchings, some of flowers and trees, interspersed with precise shapes in rows.

“This was their writing?” he whispered.

Guide Gleace strolled over to him. “As best as we can tell. But we can’t decipher it. To think: here are the stories of a long-gone civilization, and we can’t understand any of it! So frustrating.”

Perrin was aware that Shem was to the other side of him, and he glanced over to see Shem running his fingers along the inside of a hole in the stone wall.

Perrin stopped caressing the column in front of him and joined Shem. He peered through the hole to see the rest of the open temple, overgrown with weeds and shrubs, then evaluated the hole.

“It’s almost entirely spherical, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” Shem said gravely, “it is.”

Perrin analyzed the large blocks around the temple. “There. I see another similar hole. And over there. There’s a chunk out of the side, halfway gone. And yet another!” He trotted down the steps to crouch next to a boulder-sized section of wall, with a large corner missing.

“This wasn’t natural,” he said as Gleace, Shem, and Peto joined him. “This was deliberate! What could cause such destruction?”

He didn’t notice Gleace and Shem exchanged quick glances.

“I’ll find you an example,” Gleace said, pushing grass away with his feet.

“Guide,” Shem said, “are you sure this is the best idea?”

“He’ll figure it out soon enough, Shem. Now, I saw one last year . . . where was it?”

Perrin was still tracing the blast of damage on the stone, not noticing that Shem was staring at him, hard.

Peto joined the guide in looking through the grasses, not really sure of what he was searching for. But he knew it when he saw it.

“Guide, is this it?” Peto smoothed his hand over a large black sphere splattered with reddish-orange dust.

“Yes, very good, Peto. Over here, Perrin. Here’s your answer.”

Reluctantly he pulled himself away from the ruined corner, and frowned at what he saw halfway buried in the dirt. “Is it a stone?”

“No,” Gleace said, pulling up some of the concealing grasses. “Solid iron.”

Perrin’s mouth dropped open. “Really?”

“Pick it up for yourself to see,” Gleace dared him.

Perrin scrunched up his face. If a sphere that large was *solid* iron . . . Already his bad back was twinging at the thought. “Uh, Shem?”

Together they hefted the large ball. Once it was wedged out of the ground where it had rested for untold centuries, it wasn’t so heavy.

Perrin easily carried it over to the broken block and sat it in a crevice. “It obviously fits. But what kind of force could propel such a heavy object?”

The guide looked at Shem. “Tell him.”

Shem sighed. “You already know, Perrin.”

Perrin looked up. “I do?”

“Moorland.”

It took only a moment for the pieces to all come together.

“Of course!” Perrin whispered. “The explosions that destroyed those buildings.” His eyes danced across the ball as if he could see it in action. “Explosions that are channeled . . . *focused* from a . . . a . . . *cylinder* of some sort.” He rubbed his chin as he pondered. “But it would have to be enclosed at one end to contain and direct the explosion . . . *that* could send an object an enormous distance, just like the debris from the explosion was thrown in Moorland.”

His hand ran over the ball, feeling its rough texture and coating his palm in flecks of orange. “The cylinder would have to be constructed of iron itself, with no seams—cast as one continual piece—to withstand the pressure of the explosion and remain intact, and to do it repeatedly. Remarkable!” he breathed in morbid admiration.

“I think he’s found his calling.”

Shem came over and touched the iron sphere, but immediately pulled back in loathing.

“When you wanted to go back and investigate the craters in Moorland, I knew I couldn’t let you. When I witnessed the explosion, I realized it was the secret to destroying this temple. About ten years ago another scouting party from Salem ran across the kinds of cylinders you just described down in the valley. It took them quite a while to put together that they were connected to these iron balls. What took us days to understand you figured out in just minutes. If you had access to what they were creating in Moorland, I have no doubt you would have figured out how to recreate the same amount of devastation as we see here.

“That’s not a compliment, Perrin,” he added when he saw the depth of planning in his friend’s face. “I couldn’t let you go back to Moorland. And if I had, the knowledge of how to construct such weapons would now be in the hands of General Qayin Thorne.”

But Perrin barely heard him. His imagination was in another time. “It would take horses to pull such a heavy cylinder, but the canyons are wide. The explosive matter would also have to be packed carefully . . . Fire, right? Shem, you said a fire started the Moorland explosion. In fact, it was the torch *you* threw, wasn’t it?”

Shem squinted at him in disapproval, but Perrin didn’t notice. He was staring off at the valley.

The guide closely watched his assistant and general.

Peto spied something in the grass, and kneeled to dig at it.

“Maybe the explosive matter is stable until ignited,” Perrin continued in faraway deliberation. “But large cylinders would be cumbersome to transport. But what if . . . what if . . .” Perrin’s eyes danced wildly with the possibility. “What if it was replicated in a *smaller* version? Something that each man could carry? Smaller balls, smaller cylinders. Individual explosive devices!”

Peto pulled up something from the grass and held it up. “Using something like this?” In his hand were several small iron balls, crumbling into rusty dust.

“Yes!” Perrin snatched up them up. “Exactly!”

“Perrin, STOP!” Shem grabbed his shoulders and shook him, causing Perrin to drop the balls.

“No! Where’d they go?” Perrin tried to pull out of Shem’s grip to find the rusty pieces which were again lost to the grasses.

Shem fought to keep his hold on him, and Gleace bit his lip in

worry that a wrestling match might occur among the jagged stone.

“Back where they belong!” Shem shouted at Perrin. “In history, in another time. We don’t need that level of destruction, Perrin!”

Perrin stopped tussling with Shem so that he could deliver him a properly sharp glare. “Don’t you realize what they could *do*? Shem! From a distance we could take out Thorne and everyone else, unseen and safely! We could *really* secure Salem!”

“And if Thorne could create those same devices, the world could pick off our children just as easily!” Shem pointed out. “No, Perrin. Your mind is too keen to destruction, my brother. Not in *our* civilization. Not in *our* time.”

Perrin spun to the guide in appeal.

“I have to agree, General Shin. It’s too much power. Even if you *could* figure out how to create that black powdery substance, you can’t guarantee it won’t fall into the wrong hands. While I see great potential for it, I also see far more devastation. Look what it did here. Salem could be destroyed in a day.”

Perrin turned to his son, hoping that maybe he could see reason, and help the others to see it, too.

But Peto said quietly, “Not this way, Father. It should be buried. Iron comes from the mountains and it should be returned to the mountains. Even the little balls.”

“Peto! Can’t *you* realize what this could *do*? Put men up on those ridges you pointed out, shooting at the army below—”

“Yes, General,” Peto said soberly. “And it’s making my stomach sick to think of it. Please don’t pursue this, Father. The dirt can’t even dissolve these balls, so they fester and rust. These are why the valley feels dead.”

Feeling defeated, Perrin sat down on the stone block and put his hand on the sphere. “Interesting theory, Peto. What did you eat last night to wake up so clever this morning?”

Gleace sat next to him. In his kind and calm manner, he gently admonished Perrin with, “The Creator is generous with His power. He gives us mere mortals the ability to start life, and the knowledge of how to end life as well. How we use His powers reveals a great deal about our hearts and minds. The Creator expects us to rein in those impulses until it’s the right time to use them. If we don’t, chaos and sorrow are the inevitable results. Great men choose to control those urges. You’re one of those great men, so let your ideas die, Perrin,” he implored, “where everything else has died.”

“I think he’s found his calling.”

Perrin nodded slowly, but as he stared at a broken stone in the grass so many tactics flowed through his mind like a landslide.

But, just like a landslide, it was too much power and potential. He had to let it flow away. While his plans were dissolving as easily the iron ball under his hand, he knew he had to bury them.

When the Guide of the Creator tells you “no,” then no it is.

He felt three pairs of eyes watching him worriedly, waiting for his response. Eventually he took a deep breath and patted the sphere.

“I suppose we need to clean up this area. Perhaps we should push all the iron into the valley, away from the temple it destroyed.” Then, remembering how they removed the debris from their demolished bedroom after the land tremor, he added, “Wish we had a target.”

Peto began to smile. “There’s that a large boulder down there. Closest one to the boulder with all the iron spheres we find gets to kiss Calla first on her wedding day?”

“Hey!” Shem protested.

The Guide cleared his throat at the suggestion of a competition. “Now, boys—”

But Perrin grinned. “You’re on!”

Peto noticed Shem’s shocked expression. “You better aim well, Uncle Shem!”

By evening they had uncovered and sent over the edge fifteen large spheres and several handfuls of smaller balls. Shem won the boulder hitting contest, which wasn’t a contest since competition wasn’t allowed, because Gleace kept ‘accidentally’ bumping into Perrin and Peto as they tossed their iron. Satisfied that the area was as clean as they could make it, they set up camp just past the ruined temple so they could view the tableland which lay behind it.

“This area is immense,” Perrin said while Peto and Guide Gleace built a fire. “The way the bowl dips down into its own valley makes for a naturally defensive area. I can see why it was used in the past.”

“I estimate we could fit up to eighty or ninety thousand people here,” Gleace said quietly. “Certainly not forever, but for a week?”

Perrin nodded. “I want to walk all of it in the morning and take some measurements, just in case this is where we’ll come in the future. In the meantime, I’ll help Shem get more wood.”

Peto watched his father leave before he dared turn to the guide.

“You said up to ninety thousand, sir?”

“I did.”

“But . . . that’s not all of the population of Salem, Guide.”

“I know,” Gleace whispered, staring at the fire.

“So,” Peto started nervously, “where would the other thirty thousand go?”

“Likely even more than thirty thousand, Peto, by the time the Last Day arrives. But I don’t know where they’d go,” Gleace admitted. “Maybe not all of them would *want* to come. Perhaps they’d flee to another area. Maybe this isn’t even where we’ll come for our Last Day. Or, perhaps the population simply won’t be as high—”

“Why wouldn’t the population be so high?”

The guide, hearing the panic in his voice, regarded him kindly. “The Last Day will come only after a great deal of upheaval, Peto. Land tremors. Mount Deceit awakening. Famine. Invasion. A part of me wishes to live to see the Last Day, but then other days I think perhaps it won’t be so bad watching from the other side. Those who escape Salem will be the last of the survivors.”

Even though the guide was trying to smile, his somber tone gave Peto a chill. He scooted closer to the fire, which only made his toes feel hot. “Are you sure this is the place for Salem’s retreat?”

“No, actually. Not yet.” Gleace poked the fire with a long stick. “That’s why I came, looking for an answer. Perhaps tomorrow He will tell me.”

“And . . . how might the Creator tell you?”

“There are many ways the Creator communicates, Peto,” the guide said easily as he tossed more sticks on their fire. “Sometimes through dreams. Sometimes through others’ words to us. Sometimes in random thoughts. And occasionally in very clear visions, such as the one Guide Pax was given when he first saw Salem and realized that someday Idumea would come after us. But usually I’m just considering a question and I find the answer as I read The Writings. There are days I know I’ve read the words before, but they suddenly have a new meaning for me. And often I just need to sit still and listen for whatever the Creator needs to tell me. I try to keep an open mind to all possibilities. He tells me what I need to hear, and how I need to hear it.”

Peto nodded thoughtfully.

After a silent moment Gleace said, “I’m waiting for the next question.”

“I think he’s found his calling.”

“Next question?”

“The one which inevitably follows: Have I had any dreams or visions?”

Peto looked up at Gleace. “Would you answer if I asked that?”

He tilted his head. “I’m interested as to why you *aren’t* asking.”

“Aren’t those things meant to be kept private?” Peto said, thinking about the parchment concealed in his drawer about the greatest general in the world. “I mean, something like that is . . . sacred, I guess. You don’t want to share it with just anyone. Only those who could appreciate it, or who it’s meant for.”

The guide leaned back and smiled. “Very good, Mr. Shin. Spoken like someone with experience in such matters.” When he saw Peto’s startled expression, he added, “And no, I won’t ask you about how you know that. As you said, it’s sacred. Keep it sacred.”

Chapter 27--“Parchment. Quill. I see it.”

The sun had not yet risen when Perrin opened his eyes. Something had awakened him, but he couldn't place what it was. Alarmed, he sat up and noticed that Peto, too, was opening his eyes and looking surprised that he was awake at this hour, and voluntarily. Shem was also just sitting up, blinking in confusion.

At the same time they all turned to Gleace's sleeping pack.

It was empty.

Shem scrambled out of his blankets, and Perrin and Peto followed him just as quickly. Together they scanned the dim terrain for Salem's missing guide.

“There,” Shem whispered.

His distant figure sat at the edge of the cliff, silhouetted against the faint glow of the coming sun.

Shem snatched up his pack and motioned to the Shins. Silently they trotted to the cliff side where Guide Gleace sat cross-legged, staring off into the distance.

“Shem,” he said quietly. “Parchment. Quill. I see it.”

Perrin and Peto exchanged questioning looks as Shem hurriedly pulled out something to write with.

He sat down next to the guide, and Perrin and Peto sat on his other side.

“Over there,” the guide said, his voice strong and clear, and his eyes bright. “From the canyon we came through. That's the path they'll take. Around fifty thousand. The army will come to Salem in even greater numbers, but will lose one-third of their soldiers in Salem.” He shook his head as if to clear an image and squinted to focus. “Fear! They'll be lost to *fear*.”

Shem rapidly wrote every word.

“Army?” Peto whispered to his father.

But Perrin was fixated on another detail. “Fifty *thousand*?”

Gleace heard them. “Idumea’s army. The *world’s* army,” he said, staring straight ahead as if he were counting them. “The Salemites *will* be in place behind us as they march here. It’s here. *It’s here.*”

Gleace sucked in his breath as his eyes darted across a distant scene no one else could see. “So much pain before it! Before they reach here . . . So much loss and sorrow! Every family will feel it. No family will escape the grief.” Tears trickled down his face, and his hand gestured as if the men with him could see what he did.

Shem kept writing.

Perrin stared at the man whose face shone as if illuminated by the sun which had yet to rise.

“It *will* be the final day. The Last Day. This valley *will* see the end of another Test. The people of Salem will stand in terror at the sight of it.”

The guide twisted to look at the ruin behind him and struggled to get to his feet. Shem, Perrin, and Peto followed.

“They will stand in terror there, but not without hope. Yes!” His clear eyes welled with new wetness as he pointed. “They will stand shoulder to shoulder, unarmed—”

“Unarmed?!” Perrin whispered, a bit too loudly.

Shem shot him a fierce look and kept writing.

The guide nodded. “Unarmed, General, so that they can fully witness the Arm of the Creator coming to their aid. The Deliverer will see them here to safety, before the coming of the Destroyer.”

Perrin took a hard step backward. *Unarmed*. How could they face fifty thousand soldiers with no weapons?

Peto watched the guide’s face fervently.

“This isn’t Salem’s battle to win,” the guide continued. “It will be the Creator’s. He will fight their final battle for them. His Destroyer will save them!”

Perrin couldn’t imagine anything that could startle him more that morning, until he noticed Gleace was . . . smiling.

“Glorious! Glorious!” he cried, almost cheering. “All sorrow will be erased. All loss will be replaced. Every family will be restored! The end will be so glorious!” He closed his eyes squeezing out fresh tears and nodded at the scene that raced across his mind. “Glorious!” he whispered again.

And then he fell silent, smiling at whatever was in his head.

The three men stared at him intently, wishing they had a glimpse.

Slowly the guide began to sag. Perrin stepped closer, in case the

man crumpled. The glow on his face faded, and Gleace opened his eyes which were now weak and cloudy.

“Shem,” he whispered looking to the ruined temple. “Did you get it all?”

“Yes, yes I’m sure I did.” Shem reviewed his writing, correcting sloppily jotted words.

“Guide?” Peto asked reverently.

Gleace continued to stare at the ruins, the coming dawn highlighting the top stones with splashes of golden light. “Yes, Peto?”

“When?”

Shem’s head snapped up, and Perrin watched the guide earnestly. He’d wanted to ask the same question but didn’t dare.

Gleace slowly turned around and offered Peto a frail smile. He put a steadying hand on his shoulder, then one on Shem’s. “You will see the Last Day, my boys.” He turned to Perrin. “We will all see it. No one worthy will miss the Last Day.

“Now,” he said as he fought to keep his eyes open. “Could you please help me back to our campsite? I’m a bit drained—”

Perrin caught him as he collapsed.

Peto took Gleace’s other side, and together they walked him back to the cold fire, with Shem following. They lowered Gleace gingerly to his bedroll where he immediately fell asleep.

Shem sat down by the embers and threw on kindling to revive the fire. “I need to rewrite this more clearly.” He pulled out another piece of parchment and began to copy the words.

Peto sat next to Shem, but Perrin, fascinated and a bit stunned, continued to study the sleeping guide.

Peto cleared his throat, and Perrin shifted his gaze to him.

“Exactly what *was* all of that?” Peto asked in hushed tones.

“You know as much as I do, Peto.”

“He saw a vision, didn’t he?”

Perrin nodded. The singular experience should have moved him to utter astonishment. He should have been on his knees thanking the Creator to have witnessed such an event that only last season he didn’t think still occurred on the world.

But as he stared at the growing fire, his mind was more astounded by numbers.

“Fifty thousand,” he said to no one in particular. “*Fifty thousand*. Coming to that valley. But they’ll come to Salem with around *seventy-five thousand*.”

He pondered those staggering numbers before saying, “How? How so many? There’s only twenty thousand soldiers in the world now, and the garrison houses half of them. Edge had the smallest contingency. Other forts have more, but where would they find another *fifty-five thousand*? They can barely meet the recruiting quotas now.

“And *unarmed*?” Perrin continued. “What kind of commander would leave his people facing an army of tens of thousands without weaponry? But it’s the Creator’s battle. So what would He do, send a land tremor? But that would affect those from Salem as well. Some other natural disaster? If the army is in the valley, and the Salemites up here . . . a flood, perhaps? Fire possibly?”

General Shin looked at the surrounding terrain and rubbed his forehead. “Too many unknowns,” he whispered, oblivious to his son watching him. “Equation has too many variables again.”

Peto frowned, not understanding.

“Solved the last equation, in one very fast night. Suddenly all the numbers were known. Security of Salem. How do I secure Salem against seventy-five thousand soldiers? Then twenty-five thousand lost to fear? What could that mean?”

Shem paused in his writing and now watched Perrin addressing the burning embers.

“How in the world do you terrify twenty-five thousand soldiers?”

“Maybe *you* don’t, Perrin,” Shem said.

Perrin pulled his eyes from the fire and looked at him.

“It’s the Creator’s battle,” Shem reminded him. “That means He already has it planned and readied.”

Perrin sighed. “So how do I know what I do for it?”

“In time, when it’s right, He’ll tell you.”

As if Perrin didn’t have enough worries, Shem unintentionally dumped another one on his friend. Perrin wasn’t always sure he recognized when the Creator was speaking to him. Too many times he’d made mistakes, only to wonder later if he had missed a prompting.

Frustrated, Perrin sat down by the fire. “I have more questions now than I did last season when Gleace asked me to secure Salem!”

“Then that’s what you do, Perrin,” Shem said simply. “You *secure* Salem. Your duty is to prepare our people, mark the path for them to get here safely by whatever trails you and Peto develop, then step aside and let the Creator do His will. This isn’t your battle to fight.” Shem paused. “You’re worried, aren’t you? That you won’t know what to do?”

Scoffing lightly, Perrin nodded.

“I have full confidence in you,” Shem said.

“But how, when I don’t have confidence in myself to listen properly? You’re the Assistant! This should be your calling!”

To Perrin’s surprise, Shem smiled. “Have you forgotten the forest already? When Thorne was creeping closer, and the storm was rolling in, it was *you* the Creator spoke to. It was *you* He told to line up the horses, and without hesitation you did so. You obeyed him exactly and immediately, and that’s how we all escaped. The Creator didn’t make a mistake in calling you to be our general. You’ll know exactly what to do to help everyone else escape again. You passed a test last season you didn’t even know you were taking.”

Peto watched for his father’s response.

Perrin felt a drop of comfort in his pond of doubt. “Perhaps you’re right. That’s why I was here, wasn’t it, to watch Gleace have that vision and understand what my duty will be. My work will be done before the Last Day even arrives.” He glanced at Peto who was staring at him. “Something wrong, son?”

Peto hesitated. “You sound like . . . you don’t think you’ll be here for it.”

The thought hadn’t occurred to him, so Perrin waved that off. “No one will miss it, right Shem? Something about being worthy?”

Shem nodded as he glanced at his notes. “The Writings say everyone who has passed the Test will witness to the Last Day, Peto. Gleace verified that for us. Even those who have passed on before will see it. Our grandparents and all our ancestors will be here, watching.”

But Peto’s eyes had developed that cynical coloring again, and Perrin knew that wasn’t the answer he was looking for.

Peto look over at the sleeping guide. “He saw more, didn’t he?”

“I’m sure of it,” Shem said. “He’ll go over what I wrote down and maybe add here and there. But I suspect he won’t put in too much. We probably have all he wants us to know.”

“How long do you think he was sitting there?” Perrin asked.

“I don’t know. Last I remember before falling asleep, he went walking to the trees to meditate. I find it interesting we all woke up at the same time. Even Peto.”

“We were supposed to see him, weren’t we?” Peto asked.

Shem nodded. “Guides are the Creator’s mouthpieces, but they

don’t work alone. The burden would be too much. He never goes anywhere without an assistant or a rector as a witness to what he does.”

“How often does he have visions like this?” Perrin asked softly.

“I think this may have been the first,” Shem said. “He’s been guide for about twelve years, ever since Hifadhi died. But to have a waking vision? That’s very unusual. I could see it in his face, though. Maybe if I knew how to focus, I could have seen it too.”

“You will,” said Peto, with a hint of a smile. “But you’ll see the real thing, remember?”

Shem hazarded a matching grin. “Peto, I can hardly wait! Well, actually I *can*. I hope I’m an old gray grandfather when it happens. I want to hold the hands of my grandchildren when the soldiers march in and tell them, ‘Start counting, I know how many there’ll be.’”

Peto chuckled. “I just pictured you as old and gray.”

But Perrin didn’t even smile.

Shem and Peto immediately sobered again.

For several minutes no one said a word, just stared into the fire which gave them something to do, even though the sun was now up and they didn’t need the heat.

Perrin finally broke the silence with, “Salem needs to be ready for anything, in any season. Invasion. Lack of shelter. Lack of supplies. Lack of water—”

“No,” Shem interrupted, “that’s the one thing we have up here. That spring I showed you last night as we were gathering wood? That runs all year long.”

“Well, that’s *something*. But certainly not enough. They’ll need warnings. They’ll need a route. *Several* routes.” He appraised the mountains peaks around them. “Starting today. Peto, we need a new route home. I’ll let you, my newly appointed strategist, choose the first possibility. See if you can identify some deer or elk trails. You know, I’m starting to think you might have made a decent officer.”

“Why, thank you, sir,” Peto grinned. “And I think you should assign me a rank, right now. How about colonel?”

“Perrin,” Shem said, “what was that rank lower than a private?”

“There is no rank lower than private,” Peto glared.

“There should be, starting right *now*,” Shem decided. “How about . . . peon? Peon Peto.”

“That’s not even funny, Shem.”

“Oh, I think it’s funny enough.”

“You won’t think it’s funny when I don’t tell you where the elk

routes are before the Last Day—”

“Mark the path,” Perrin’s faraway voice cut into their good-natured squabbling.

“What, Perrin?” Shem asked.

“He will call and choose one to *mark the path of escape* for the valiant,” Perrin recited Pax’s prophecy. “The routes must be *marked* in some way, so that everyone, no matter when they travel, can find their own way.”

“How?” Peto wondered.

“Not with signs,” Shem said. “Nothing soldiers could read and understand.”

Perrin stood up as if that would let him see the peaks more clearly. “Those elk trails . . .” he whispered. Louder he asked, “Shem, do elk antlers leave marks on the trees?”

“Sometimes. When they’re trying to shed the antlers they rub up against trees. But Perrin, bears also *claw* trees,” Shem suggested.

“Yes, they do,” Perrin said distantly. “I once saw a bear that had wandered close to the fort. It tore apart a fallen log looking for grubs. Mahrree and some other teachers came over to look at the carnage to try to learn more about bear behavior.” A smile grew on his face as his eyes continued to wander over the mountains. “They sent their meager findings to Idumea since no one in the world really *knows* about bears. And certainly nothing about elk! You know, no one from the world would be able to tell the difference between *natural* and *deliberate* markings. It would all look the same to their untrained eyes.”

“Oh!” Peto exclaimed. “I see where you’re going with this—”

“Qualipoe Hili.”

Peto paused. “And . . . now I don’t.” He looked for an explanation from Shem.

Shem shrugged.

Smiling vaguely, Perrin said, “Poe and the other boys left signals for the dealers buying their stolen goods. They had exchange stations in unusual places, such as in the crevices of boulders, under bushes, or near the canals. And to signal that something new was waiting, they’d mark it with something natural looking, like stacks of rocks, broken fence posts, overturned crates, and—”

“Slashes on trees!” Shem finished. “Not that I normally approve of copying thieving Guarders, Perrin, but there’s potential there.”

Peto sighed. “That’s what I was going to suggest, marking the

trees.”

“But which trees, Peto?” Perrin asked. “And which routes? And what kind of markings could seem natural to soldiers, but could be deciphered even by a small child, should one become lost? And how do we mark the trees without damaging them? Those, *Lieutenant Shin*,” he said to a grinning Peto, “are your assignments.”

“Yes, sir! Sounds like I need to become a botographer. Geographologist. Bo—”

Shem held up his hands to silence Peto’s attempts at destroying the terms. “One who studies plants and terrain, Peto. Botanist. Geographer.”

Peto shook his head. “You Salemites made up those words. Since now I’m a Salemite, I’m making up botographer.”

The sun was high in the sky when Guide Gleace finally woke. Perrin, Peto, and Shem had spent the morning walking along the plateau and plotting potential routes to get there. Instead of leading Salemites up the cliff to the ancient temple site, they would follow a path that deposited them on the plateau. Perrin didn’t say it, but he suspected that they’d need at least a dozen trips to find all of the routes. Maybe even more. He could hardly wait.

During midday meal the men told Gleace of their idea for multiple routes labeled by a marking system on the trees. He smiled in approval, his eyes still looking weary and his face pale.

“But wait . . . *Lieutenant Shin* wants to become a *botographer*?”

“There’s a lot we still need to work out, Guide,” Perrin assured him. “Just early planning stages. *Very* early.”

When Perrin and Peto started to clean up the camp site, Shem sat next to Gleace who thoughtfully nibbled on a sandwich.

“How long were you up last night?” he asked him.

“I’m not sure, Shem. I went to ponder in the trees for a time, then fell asleep. But then I had dreams so terrible that no man could sleep through them. When I awoke, I watched the stars for a while trying to understand the images I saw, but I couldn’t quite hold on to them. So I went for a little walk and found myself at the cliff side. As I looked out over the dark valley I began to see my dream again, but I knew I was conscious. I was there only for a little while before the three of you joined me. That’s when I saw all that would come.” He

sighed as he gazed on the green valley, bathed in cheery sunshine.

“I have a clean draft of what you told us, if you’d like to go over it,” Shem held it out to him. “Add more details, that sort of thing.”

Gleace shook his head. “No more to add. You need no more details. If people know too much of what’s to come, they may not choose to be part of it. There’s been enough revealed to get them ready.” He startled Shem next with, “It’s like childbirth. You know the details, I’m sure you do.”

Shem squirmed.

“Yes, yes you do. In less than one year you’ll be facing it, Shem. Watching your own beloved wife struggle and cry out in agony to birth your first child.”

Gleace glanced at Shem’s face, which was a mixture of anticipation and horror.

“So you understand,” Gleace nodded. “It’s not pleasant to think about, is it? As much as you want to become a father, you know someone will have to suffer through the birth, and it won’t be *you*. If you spend all your time obsessing about it, you won’t have the nerve to face it. Same with the Last Day.”

Shem looked down at his hands and rubbed some invisible dirt off of them.

“Oh, but Shem,” Gleace’s voice brightened and he smiled with the warmth of a dozen suns, “afterward . . . ah, *afterward!* Glorious!”



Going down the cliff side trail was far easier than hiking up. Soon the horses, which seemed to fear straying too far away from the partially enclosed pasture, were loaded up, and the men headed north and east through the forest and up a mountainside to the first dim elk trail Peto wanted to try.

“The route shouldn’t go down into the valley,” Peto said as the path they tried to blaze came level with the flat highland.

Shem let out a low whistle. “The undergrowth is so dense, it would all have to be cut out.”

“So we cut it out!” Peto said, full of zeal.

“Good thing we have time, isn’t it?” Perrin said as he wrestled with a tall shrub.

Several times they became tangled in bushes and vines, and Gleace declared the area had not seen any elk for a very long time.

“So now we know this isn’t a very reliable route,” Peto decided as he pulled at another bur-filled cluster that clung to his trousers’ leg. “We’ll just find easier ones!”

“There’s my Hopeful Duck!” Gleace chuckled. “And yes, that’s the last time I’ll call you that, Peto. At least out loud.”

“Wish I still had my sword,” Perrin muttered as he pushed aside a low hanging tree branch. “Could slash my way through this much faster. Even a hatchet would be useful right now.”

“Look,” Shem said, “I said I was sorry about that, at least five times!”

“But Shem, it’s just that most men know not to whack at a branch that’s overhanging a cliff.”

“My hand was slippery, all right?”

“The branch wasn’t even in our way!”

“It was connected to another branch that was!”

“So hack at that one instead!”

“I was trying to! Then you came over and started telling me my angle was wrong!”

“So adjust your angle! Don’t throw the hatchet over the cliff!”

Shem growled loudly as Perrin chortled and tried to push away another branch.

The guide leaned over to Peto. “Are they always like this?” he whispered.

“Frequently, sir.”

Gleace shook his head. “They remind me of two of my boys when they were fourteen and fifteen.”

“My mother says they’re making up for lost time,” Peto explained. “Since neither of them had a brother when they were teenagers, they act like teenagers together.”

“Sounds about right,” Gleace said. “Ah! Look ahead. Now *that’s* a deer trail. Couldn’t come to it soon enough. I was beginning to think that one of them would throw the other off the next cliff.”

“They don’t really mean it, Guide,” Peto said, a little worried. “They’re just—”

Gleace nodded at him. “I understand. When some men carry heavy loads, they lighten it a bit on each other.”

Peto furrowed his brows at that confusing insight and shrugged.

“She’s going to be so worried about me, I just know it,” Shem fretted again as they finally emerged out of a thick tangle of undergrowth at the base of the mountain to find Salem laid out before them. “We should have been home hours ago.”

“It’s not even nightfall yet, Shem,” Perrin pointed out. They stopped their horses to watch Gleace and Peto pick their ways out of the last of the forest. “We never specified a time we’d be back. Besides, there’s nothing wrong with letting her miss you a little.”

Shem glared at him. “Is that what you would tell yourself when you didn’t make it home to Mahrree when you promised?”

“Yes, I suppose it is. Look, we’re not far from home. We should make it there in half an hour, then you can comfort your bride-to-be.”

“If she’s worried out of her mind, it’s your fault.”

“My fault? How?”

“I don’t know. I’m still working on it.”

When Shem, Perrin, and Peto slowed their horses in front of the Shins’ home, it was to hear laughter, and lots of it.

Shem frowned at the house. “That’s Calla’s laugh.”

“You’re upset that she’s happy?” Peto said.

“Well, I thought she’d be worried, standing outside and waiting for me,” he pouted as he dismounted and tethered his horse.

“She undoubtedly was, Shem,” Perrin said. “Mahrree probably pulled her into the house to tell stories about you. I’m sure she’ll produce some tears for you to wipe away later.” He and Peto walked their horses to the barn as Shem opened the front door.

“We’re back,” he said, a little disappointed that Calla wasn’t weeping.

“Shem!” Calla leaped off the sofa where she sat with Jaytsy and the baby, and rushed into his arms.

“So you *did* miss me?”

“If we were alone, I’d show you how much,” Calla whispered.

“Come here, then. I have something to show you.” He grabbed her hand and pulled her to the front porch.

Jaytsy turned to her mother. “What do you think he’s showing her? Oh, wait. Never mind.”

By the time Perrin and Peto came in from taking care of the horses, Mahrree had most of their dinner on the table and Shem sat cuddling Calla on a sofa telling her about the route they took home.

“I see Shem’s doing better,” Perrin said quietly to his wife as he led her into the kitchen to show her how much he missed her.

Peto, getting smarter every day, knew not to follow him but sat on the other sofa with Jaytsy and poked at a roll of fat on baby Salema’s arm.

“Did he have a hard time without her?” Mahrree said.

“Not until this last hour. How did she do?”

“Until an hour ago Calla was pacing up and down on the front porch. It took Jaytsy bringing Salema over for her to play with to lure her into the house.”

“So was this the longest two days of her entire life,” Perrin smirked, “or is she finally speaking to you?”

“Oh, she’s speaking all right! Turns out she was just intimidated. By me, little ol’ Mahrree. How intimidating am I, really?”

“You really expect an honest answer for that?”

“Uh . . . no. So how was the temple ruin?”

“*Very* interesting. Lots to tell you. But later when we won’t be interrupted. I have a granddaughter to squeeze first.”

Salema was practicing a goo sound at Peto when Perrin swooped down and snatched her out of her mother’s arms.

“There’s my little girl!” he said as her eyes grew big and an attempt at Shin-like grin appeared on her toothless face.

“I think she missed you,” Jaytsy said, but Perrin had only eyes for Salema as he sat down with her. “By the way, nice to see you again too, Father,” she sighed. “How’s Deck? Oh, he’s fine. One of the bulls got out and gave him quite a chase this morning through the garden, but no one cares because he’s *not the baby!*”

“I’m sorry, Jayts, what was that?” Perrin asked, still making faces at Salema who stared at him in fascination.

“Nothing, Father. So Peto, how was the trip?”

“Great, until Uncle Shem threw the hatchet off a cliff—”

“I did NOT, for the LAST TIME, *throw* the hatchet off a cliff!”

“No,” Perrin said in a cheery sing-song voice to his granddaughter. “He dropped it. Yes he did, Salema. Guide Gleace’s hatchet. Aaaaaall the way down! But at least he won the right to be the first to kiss Calla on their wedding day. That’s his thanks to the guide for throwing the iron ball dropping contest. Yes it was. Yes it was!”

Calla was sufficiently confused. “What? A contest? A hatchet?”

Mahrree, who was putting the last of their dinner on the table, said, “Sometimes, Calla, it’s best not to know the details. They all came home safely, that’s all we need to know. But it sounds like there’d better not be any more camping trips for you *boys.*”

“Oh, but there will be,” Peto exclaimed. “We need at least a dozen to find the best routes. Probably more, though.”

“A dozen more?” Mahrree said. “Calla, on second thought, we better get every detail so we can make a list of what they can’t do next time.”

“Wives just ruin all the fun,” Peto decided. “That’s why I’m never getting one. Can you imagine a *female* on the trip?”

No one responded to him. Perrin was rubbing noses with Salema hoping to elicit her first giggle, Jaytsy went out the door to retrieve Deck for dinner, and Shem and Calla were whispering to each other on the sofa and smiling shyly.

But Mahrree heard him. “Poor Peto,” she murmured to herself. “All the words you’re going to have to eat someday . . .”

Dr. Frenulum nodded slowly in encouragement as his patient stood in front of him. “Yes, very good . . . that top button’s going to be your trickiest one, I think.”

Lemuel’s left hand trembled with frustration as he tried to force the silver button through the hole.

“If I may—” and Frenulum started to give Captain Thorne another hand, but the young officer twisted out of his reach.

“Sir,” the surgeon said kindly, “I admire your resolve, I do. Your determination is commendable. But you can accept help—”

“That’s why you do my belt, Doctor,” Lemuel muttered, almost getting that top button this time . . . this time . . . this time . . .

Frenulum licked his lips anxiously. “Sir, I don’t know that I’m giving you enough advice. But there’s a surgeon at the garrison—”

“I’m not going back to Idumea,” Lemuel said, his tone growing exasperated. Every response he gave broke his concentration.

This time . . . this time . . .

“Just for a season or two, Captain, until you can learn to fully function on your own. Then you can come back here—”

“No. They’d never let me come back. I need to stay here.”

He didn’t add, *Because I need to be near the forest. Because I need to look for evidence. Because I need to find Jaytsy.*

Because I have to be able to button my own blasted buttons to take care of Jaytsy and her son.

This time . . . this time . . .

Chapter 28--“Just our luck that Shem is the most famous man in Salem.”

The next few days were so unbearable that Peto was positive he could never endure another wedding. But there was no way he could escape the preparations, because he was the baby holder.

It wasn't such a bad duty, he'd admit if someone forced him to. He just sat at the kitchen table cradling little Salema while she slept and her mother worked. The infant had a way of snuggling into his chest and releasing little sighs that Peto would've labeled, had he been female, as “sweet.”

But he wasn't, so he wouldn't.

His mother and sister were making a Hycymum Peto-style cake. But it was no ordinary cake; it was as big as Mt. Deceit.

“Oh, ha-ha,” Jaytsy rolled her eyes when he said that. “Hardly.”

“Well, it's the shape of it,” he said, eyeing the multi-tiered cake that was two-thirds the height of his mother.

“Do you realize how many people we have to feed?” Mahrree said. “I think half of Salem is coming.” She was smearing a sugary concoction over the cake, making it a glistening light brown.

“Just our luck that Shem's the most famous man in Salem. Everybody already knew about the wedding, even before they put it in that newspaper. And they're all bringing food themselves,” Peto reminded her. They had attended a Salem wedding a few weeks ago, and there was enough food to feed half the world.

“But no one will be bringing anything quite like *this*,” Mahrree said confidently. “And it's the least we can do for your uncle.”

“Cousin,” Peto reminded her. “Fourth or fifth or second—”

“He's always been our brother,” Mahrree said, “and he's always been your uncle, and I want to do this for him and the bride I found for him and who is now *my dear friend*.”

“By force or by fear?” Peto smirked.

“Neither,” Mahrree insisted. “She’s quite warming up to me. Besides, as much as you go on about never getting married, this may be the last wedding I get to help with until little Salema marries.”

Jaytsy sniggered as she sorted through a pail of purple flowers.

“And how are you going to get that cake to the wedding? It must weigh as much as me,” Peto said.

“Deck and your father are strong enough,” Mahrree assured him. “That’s why it’s on this platform for them to move it.”

“But if they need any extra muscle,” Jaytsy eyed her brother, “I’m sure some of Shem’s nephews can help.”

Peto flexed a bicep. Not as big as his father’s but quite adequate.

“Don’t you dare wake up my daughter,” Jaytsy warned. “Do that again and she might think a fly bumped her.”

“Now both of you, stop it,” Mahrree chided, but she was smiling. “My mother would be so proud of this, wouldn’t she?” She stepped back to admire her work.

“Definitely!” Jaytsy beamed. She dipped another small purple flower into a syrupy mixture and sprinkled bits of light brown sugar on the top. “Even the flowers are edible. It will look amazing.”

“How many of those are you doing?” Peto asked as she started sugaring a third tray.

“Enough to cover most the cake,” she said. “As soon as Mother is ready.”

Mahrree smoothed up one last section. “There! Now for the decoration.”

It took them another hour and half to arrange all the flowers in clumps, then in trails, then in some kind of combination that didn’t look any different to Peto, but finally made his mother and sister satisfied.

But that wasn’t the end of the wedding preparations. That evening Shem came over after dinner, two days before his wedding. He sheepishly looked at Mahrree, barely glanced at Peto, then followed Perrin up the stairs to the office.

“What’s Shem doing over here?” Peto asked his mother. “I thought he’d be spending all of his time making gooey eyes at Calla.”

His mother just smiled. “Men talk,” she said meaningfully.

Peto didn’t catch the meaning.

When Shem came down the stairs more than an hour later, he was redder than Peto had ever seen him. He didn’t even look over at

“Just our luck that Shem is the most famous man in Salem.”

Mahrree who sat on the sofa reading a book.

Interestingly, she didn't look up at him, either.

“Good night, Shem,” she said, staring at her book.

Shem cleared his throat, turned purple, and darted out the door.

Chuckling, Perrin came down the stairs.

“So?” Mahrree asked him, “Is he ready?”

Peto squinted, completely perplexed.

“Is anyone ever really *ready*?” Perrin said.

“Ready for what?” Peto wondered. “And talking for an hour?”

Perrin raised his eyebrows. “Since he's about to be married—”

Peto groaned with sudden and nauseating understanding. “Oh, just forget I said anything.”

“It took an hour,” his mother began, thoroughly enjoying her son's discomfort, “because your father is quite expert in—”

“Aaaugh! STOP! Just stop!” Peto covered his ears.

She laughed as Perrin put an arm around Peto's shoulders. “Don't worry, son. When your time comes, and it *will* come because the desire strikes every man, I'll take you upstairs and explain—”

“NOTHING! Because I don't want to hear any of *that* from *you*!” He turned and pointed at his mother who was making eyes at his father. “Or you!”

“Oh, there are a few things your mother could share—” Perrin started with a mischievous grin.

“It was bad enough when I was eight,” Peto shuddered. “Then again when I was twelve . . . I know it all!”

But Perrin shook his head. “No, what you know are the basics, and our attitude about when it's appropriate. But what I'll teach you before you marry is the *art* of—”

“AAUGH!” Peto covered his ears. “Why would I ever want to hear those details from you?”

His mother smiled sweetly. “Would you rather hear them from me?”

Peto flinched and shook his head violently.

“It's what the Creator intended for husbands and wives,” Mahrree called as he ran up the stairs. “It's really quite beautiful—”

Peto knew his parents heard his bedroom door slam. That was probably why they burst into laughter downstairs. The wedding was making them so immature.

By the 31st day of Weeding Season, Peto was more than ready to get the wedding over with. He was tired of food being prepared, and

not for him, discussions about the wedding, what people might bring, and whatever, who cares.

The morning of the wedding they moved the massive cake in the wagon to a large green common space which, it was hoped, would accommodate the few thousand people they anticipated coming to watch Salem's most eligible, and probably oldest, bachelor finally marry. Peto watched as people poured in, about an hour before the ceremony, bringing food to share and blankets to sit on. Salem's largest picnic, with a wedding as entertainment.

An odd irritation gripped Peto as the Salemites converged. He couldn't quite define what bothered him; the food offerings were more than satisfactory. But there was something *else*, almost a compulsion beyond his control, that made him watch more closely the bearers of the dishes rather than the dishes themselves. For some annoying reason he found himself wondering which of the young women might be single. Why didn't they just put down their food on the makeshift tables and stop smiling at him?

But soon enough Shem Zenos and Calla Trovato turned every head in their direction. Relieved for the distraction, Peto joined his family standing near the front with the rest of the Zenoses and Trovatos. Watching the proceedings solidified Peto's attitude that he'd never subject himself to such a public and humiliating spectacle.

Shem was practically glowing—probably because he'd spent the morning scrubbing his face until it was red—as he walked with Calla, arm in arm, through the crowd of people which parted for them.

"Oh, she looks so pretty!" Jaytsy breathed to her family.

Peto just shrugged. It wasn't as if Calla was wearing anything fancy. No one in Salem ever did. It was just the same tunics with trousers or skirts, all neat and plain. But Calla did have on a pure white top and skirt, as was Salem's tradition for a wedding, with no lace or silk or ruffles, since no clothing in Salem had those. But maybe Calla's black shining hair, which she wore down around her shoulders, could have counted as "silky." Maybe Jaytsy was referring to the dozens of tiny white flowers her sisters had woven into her hair from ear to ear. Those would be a pain to get out later. She might even have a few bees visit her during the day.

"And I've never seen Shem look so handsome," Mahrree whispered back.

Peto scrunched up his face. Evaluating "handsome" wasn't ever his habit. Shem was also head to toe in white, and his hair so precisely

“Just our luck that Shem is the most famous man in Salem.”

combed that he must have been at it for an hour, but he looked like the same old Uncle Shem. Except for the goofy grin. That was *definitely* something different. At any moment he might break out into a genuine guffaw.

Perrin smiled. “They’re perfect.”

But Peto squinted. Perfect? Shem was too tall and broad, Calla was too narrow. Shem had several scars on his face that looked like misplaced laugh lines, Calla’s eyes were maybe just a bit *too* blue—

Everyone stood up for a better view as Shem led his beaming bride to stand before Guide Gleace. Peto nodded in approval about one thing: at least Shem was surprisingly tear-free.

“I don’t know how he’s managing all this,” Perrin whispered into his son’s ear, as if reading his mind. “Look at poor Boskos Zenos. I’ve never seen a man sob so profusely before.”

Peto had avoided watching Shem’s father, whose tears were eliciting gentle chuckles from the Salemites who knew that Mr. Zenos never expected his son to marry. Not even Calla’s mother cried as noticeably that her oldest daughter was finally marrying, but she certainly was shaking, held up by Calla’s proud father.

It was a good thing the ceremony lasted only ten minutes, Peto thought, or there’d be collapsing parents left and right. Still, Shem was doing surprising well at holding it together.

Until Guide Gleace said, “. . . and now I am most pleased to declare you husband and wife. Mrs. Zenos, you may kiss your husband now.”

That’s when it started. Calla’s lower lip began to quiver as she looked up at Shem. “*I’m* Mrs. Zenos!” she said quietly, but everyone heard her and began to chuckle. Tears filled her eyes as Shem took her face.

“Don’t you dare start that,” he begged her. “We weren’t going to cry, remember? But if you start crying, then I’ll start crying—”

“Shem, you already are,” Guide Gleace pointed out, to the amusement of the crowd. “Now claim her as your wife in front of everyone, Mr. Zenos, or I’ll have to say the words all over again.”

Peto had never before seen two sobbing people kiss, and he never wanted to see it again. Guide Gleace even presented each of them with a white handkerchief as they pulled apart.

In disgust, Peto turned to his family, but they were just as pathetic. Deck was wiping the tears from Jaytsy’s face, ignoring two of

his own. His mother was weeping, and even General Shin was sniffing and dabbing at his eyes as if he was suffering from allergies. Only Salema wasn't crying because she was asleep. So Peto watched Calla and Shem again, still sobbing as they walked back through the crowds shaking hands and hugging family and friends.

They would be dehydrated by the end of the wedding dinner.

Just two shriveled peas by nightfall.

Why would anyone willingly subject themselves to this?

Peto spent the rest of that long afternoon sitting on a blanket at the edge of the large green where everyone had turned the day into a massive party. Normally he was in the thick of everything, but today he just couldn't bring himself to be sociable. At Peto's feet were two plates which he had filled with the best pickings. But strangely, he had very little appetite. Even a small piece of Grandmother Peto's cake, which was the undisputed hit of the day, sat untouched. He was too filled with unexpected agitation to eat. All he could do was stare.

And what he was staring at . . . well, it just didn't make sense. He was staring at *girls*. A few of Shem's nephews were staring, too. Then they stood up and moved in closer to a group of giggling females. Then they started talking to them. And laughing. And eating off each other's plates.

Why Peto felt jealous he also didn't know. It was all just stupid, but he couldn't seem to stop himself.

For a time he shifted his attention to Davinch, who sat nearby swiftly drawing detailed sketches of the blubbering bride and groom. He'd already brought over the full color paintings of the Shins, which now covered the walls of their gathering room, along with dozens of framed sketches. The Shins and Briters had stared in awe at the nearly life-size portraits grinning back at them. The paintings still gave Peto a start each morning as he trotted down the stairs to see that he was already up and perched on the wall behind the second sofa.

Davinch nodded in acknowledgement at Peto, and Peto's first smile of the day occurred when he imagined Davinch's portrait of Shem and Calla, sobbing forever on their gathering room wall.

But suddenly everything got worse. That was because Davinch now noticed the cluster of Shem's nephews, and that one of them had started talking to a girl Peto knew was Calla's youngest sister.

Davinch flipped over a page and began a new sketch.

Peto stopped watching Davinch's work and focused instead on the dreadful scene before him. With her dark blonde hair and greenish

“Just our luck that Shem is the most famous man in Salem.”

eyes, Calla’s sister didn’t look too much like her. She was also much louder and more obvious than her reserved sister, with a lively voice that carried over any conversation near her. Peto felt his chest grow hot whenever he heard it.

He had considered several times that he should go up and talk to her, or to any other girl for that matter. It wasn’t as if the youngest Trovato daughter was the most beautiful girl at the wedding. Or the most *delicate*, as he would put it. She probably could’ve beaten Jaytsy in an arm wrestle, and seemed like the kind of girl who would happily prove she could. She just seemed *interesting*. She may have even been ‘practical,’ but Peto didn’t know how he could find out. He was far funnier and more handsome, he was modestly sure, than Shem’s nephew who stayed by her side. It was just that the pain growing in his chest kept him rooted to the patch of grass.

He didn’t even know her name. A few days ago Shem and Calla were over at the Shins for dinner, and Shem was reciting Calla’s sisters’ names. Peto, stuck there with potato peeling duty, had nothing better to do than to listen. “So first you, of course, then Ella, Polla, Tuella, Hildegardian—”

That was when Peto snorted so loudly he missed hearing the name of the youngest sister. Not that it mattered.

Finally the wedding day turned into wedding evening, and the Zenos and Trovato families helped clean up whatever the leaving Salemites forgot, which took less than five minutes since Salemites were naturally tidy creatures. Peto made himself busy by needlessly fluffing up the trampled grass to avoid spying on the girl whose laugh reminded him of startled geese.

Each time he stole a glance, just to see if she noticed, she clearly wasn’t watching him.

He watched as his father pulled Shem aside shortly before he left with Calla, and whisper something to him. Then Shem wiped his eyes and caught his friend in an embrace. Peto scowled as General Shin hastily brushed away tears of his own *again*.

A few minutes later Shem helped his new bride up into their wagon, they waved to the remaining family and friends who cheered, and headed off into the setting sun to begin their new life together.

“I can’t believe he finally did it,” Mahrree sighed happily. “What a wonderful day.”

But that wasn’t what Peto was thinking, especially when the wagon pulled away and he was afforded a view of Calla’s youngest

sister shouting after the newlyweds. It sounded something like, “Remember, Calla—it took you years to catch him. Don’t go breaking him on your first night!”

Mrs. Trovato looked aghast at her daughter, but she also seemed puzzled because she wasn’t quite sure what her comment meant. “Oh, Lilla, do behave yourself.”

Lilla.

Her name was Lilla. Loud, laughing, Lilla.

The same name as Deck’s aunt, so it should be easy to remember. But he didn’t need to, he reminded himself, because he’d likely never see her again, and—

But he watched her, feeling a tightness growing in his chest which was made all the worse by a memory from several years ago. He’d been listening to his parents argue about something petty, but they were *smiling*. Smiling in that *particular* way that meant they’d both be making excuses to go upstairs to their bedroom to “check the window” or “get some papers” which never made it down the stairs. Because when his parents started smiling as they argued, it meant they’d disappear for about half an hour, then come back with their clothes and hair looking neater than before, as if they consciously fixed themselves up.

When he was thirteen he finally asked his father, “Why do you two get so loud?”

Perrin had leaned in and said, “Because loud means passionate.”

Within seconds his mind put together all the horrible pieces, and stared in shock at the image. Ever since then he sneered in disgust whenever his parents starting another one of their “debates” that ended elsewhere.

Loud means passionate.

Today Peto couldn’t shake that phrase from his mind, no matter how hard he tried, as he stared at Loud Lilla Trovato.

She glanced in his direction—a deliberate, focused look, aimed right at him—before she turned to say goodbye to Shem’s nephews.

Peto never wanted to feel so awful ever again.

Weddings were overly emotional things, he decided, and this would be his last one.

Lemuel sat at his desk, with his back straight, his feet firmly

“Just our luck that Shem is the most famous man in Salem.”

planted on the floor, and his left hand in the correct position to carefully pen another line.

“Slagging ink! No wonder they make everyone write with their right hands. Smears everywhere!” He fumbled to ball up the ruined page and threw it into the embers of the fire. At least his left-armed aim was improving.

After his temper cooled, he pulled out another piece of paper, exhaled long and low, and began again to practice writing as if he were six years old again.

Trying to keep his hand elevated, and his arm positioned just so, he slowly scrawled, “I . . . will . . . rescue . . . Jaytsy. . . I . . . will . . . rescue . . . Jaytsy . . .”

Chapter 29--“Any new predictions for the next year?”

In the middle of Harvest, Mahrree woke up with a smile, even though many of her muscles ached. It was Harvest Season, after all.

She and her family had been learning that in Salem, *everyone* brings in the harvest. Even General Shin, who, while hurrying to get all of the new towers constructed before the snows came, was tasked to carry pumpkins.

And while the Shins were initially worried, and admittedly a little put out that they were required to help harvest their neighbors' gardens, they soon got over that.

Because in Salem, everybody worked. And when everybody worked, the task was finished in astonishing time.

They witnessed that with Jaytsy's immense garden, which had flourished. Within a couple of hours, dozens of neighbors had congregated on her garden, harvested all of the potatoes and moved a few hundred pounds into her and the Shins' cellars, then pulled up everything else and neatly organized the produce into baskets, most designated for their cellars, the surplus to go to the storehouse.

Rector Bustani was there, too, going over numbers and making recommendations. But the final decision, he told them, was theirs as to what they kept and what they donated.

At first Mahrree fretted with Jaytsy that maybe they were giving away too much, but when they saw the stacks of goods in the cellar, then saw a wagon come down the lane with bags of flour, oats, and even sugar intended to get them through the Snowing Season, they realized they had more than enough.

“But should you find yourself running out,” Rector Bustani told them as he checked off items on his extensive list, “let me know. We can get you more from the storehouse should you discover by the end of Snowing Season that you need something, like beans.”

Mahrree had chuckled at that. “It wouldn’t be beans we’d need,” she assured him. “Not in *our* house. But maybe bacon. We’re not quite ready to go meatless yet.”

Their rector had smiled. “That’s all right. Choices, always, in Salem. If you need more bacon, then let me know. We try to get every household well stocked in Harvest, so that we don’t have to drive the wagons through knee-deep snows. Ah, and here comes the first loads of Mr. Briter’s hay for his herd.”

Jaytsy and Mahrree had stared, openmouthed, as two massive wagons filled with hay rumbled to their drive on the way to the barn, where Deck was waving to give them directions.

They closed their mouths when the blowing straw began to fall onto them.

Without thinking, Jaytsy said, “But we can’t afford all of . . .” Then she remembered where she lived.

Bustani patted her on the shoulder. “You just donated about three hundred pounds of potatoes, along with onions, corn, and beans, and three head of beef. By the way, the cobbler will be by later to fit you all for new boots for the snow, and I’ve got you listed to receive new coats, additional blankets, scarves, and hats. You can submit your sizes and color preferences to my wife, and she’ll help you get fitted.”

Mahrree didn’t feel any hesitancy after that about laboring two days a week in neighboring farms, along with her husband and son. Never before had she so enjoyed digging for carrots in the dirt, or plucking tomatoes off of vines, because never before had she heard so much laughter in fields, or so many stories, or so much singing.

That was a little hard for Perrin to adjust to, as he hefted baskets of produce which his neighbors had filled, to load into wagons destined for other homes or the storehouses. Mahrree recognized his Dinner Smile as men put an arm around his shoulders and belted out little ditties about something Perrin found inane, like the joy of squirrels. They’d jostle him good-naturedly, wanting him to join in on the chorus, but he’d reply, with a pained smile, “I don’t know the words.”

“I’ll teach you! You must have a great bass voice—”

“I don’t *want* to know the words. In the world, officers weren’t allowed to sing.”

Something in the way his smile turned brittle would finally nudge at the men that *maybe* General Shin really wasn’t the singing type, and that he should be allowed to move a few more bags of grain.

While the harvest required every Salemite’s labor, still it took

only a few hours a day, and because of the rotation cycle, only a couple times a week. This afternoon, Peto would be working at a vineyard after his university classes in botany and geography, while Mahrree would take care of Salema so Jaytsy could be at Rector Yung's daughter-in-law's house learning how to make something called applesauce with the bruised apples from the rector's orchard.

In the world, bruised apples were tossed to the pigs, or tossed in the river. In Salem, they were turned into a tasty preserve.

Everything in Salem, it seemed, was preserved. Nothing was thrown away.

It took Mahrree a few weeks to realize that there were no rubbish heaps in Salem, as there were on the fringes of villages in the world. Even broken bottles and dishes were reused, and a building in Salem, next to the largest storehouse, was filled with discarded items free for the taking by whomever wanted to tinker with them. The supply in there changed frequently, because Salemites enjoyed the challenge of turning something broken into something useful again.

Today Perrin wouldn't be harvesting or shifting melons, because he was heading north to check on lumber supplies for his towers. But first, Mahrree had some business to conduct.

She rolled over and gently poked him awake. "We're supposed to have a talk today."

"Why," he mumbled miserably into his pillow, "do you *always* do these things so *early* in the morning?"

"Because you're supposed to be getting up early anyway, remember?"

"Hm?"

"Your tower construction? Up in Norden? Calla's mother's expecting you."

Perrin groaned. "Oh, yeah. That's one exuberant woman."

"She's just eager to please."

"Sure."

"I thought you'd be more worried about *Mr. Trovato*."

"I don't think he can have any more questions for me."

"It's been three moons since the wedding. I'm sure he has a new list."

"And of course he would happen to be the best logger in the area." Perrin sighed and rolled on to his back. "Maybe we should make the tower out of block instead."

"Don't worry. You'll be home late tonight. But you really *could*

stay the night there. The Trovatos sent a message again last week reminding us they have plenty of room to house you.”

“No, thank you. Calla told me the whole family is invited for midday meal today. Her mother wanted to know my favorite foods.”

“Calla said my mother’s recipes reminded her of Mrs. Trovato’s cooking. Maybe she and my mother are distantly related.”

“You said we were supposed to have a talk this morning?” Perrin reminded her.

“Yes! It’s been one year.”

He frowned. “One year since what?”

“Since you looked into my eyes and asked me what I knew. Since I told you that I knew nothing. That I predicted a very dull year in our future with the only exciting thing happening was The Cat fathering a litter of kittens. The 48th Day of Harvest, 338.”

Perrin began to chuckle. “That’s right! I forgot all about that day when we both figured out Jaytsy was expecting. Well, you certainly didn’t predict that very dull year correctly, did you?”

“No, and I’m admitting that now.”

“Let’s see how much you got wrong,” Perrin said. “First, I’m no longer a colonel—”

“That’s right. You’re a general.”

He shrugged. “Merely a title, since I have no army.”

“But it’s also for the *other side*,” she pointed out, “so that’s quite an achievement.”

“Indeed,” Perrin nodded in amused thoughtfulness. “Our daughter is now a mother, making us grandparents. Ugh. That’s still an uncomfortable word. Anyway, we have a new house, they have a new house, we have new furniture—”

“New lives, just leave it at that,” Mahrree suggested.

“Shem was revealed to be a spy—”

“Who’s now married.”

“And Peto no longer kicks balls but studies trees and terrain at the university, is tending a young orchard in the back garden, and he and I have been on half a dozen camping trips so far looking for routes,” Perrin finished. “Did I miss anything?”

“The Cat fathered another batch of kittens,” Mahrree offered. “The family down the road now have five black and white kittens in their barn.”

“Well, that’s nothing new for him,” Perrin waved that off. “Ah, but *you!* You changed the world! Changed Idumea’s laws! And you

teach the whole community now instead of the budding thieves of Edge.”

“Rather nice to lecture people each week who actually *want* to hear what I have to say, and not because they’re going to report it to Captain Thorne,” Mahrree smiled, ignoring the first two ‘accomplishments’ in Perrin’s list.

“And one more thing we forgot that changed over the past year.”

“Yes?” she asked.

“We all died.”

Mahrree burst out laughing. “How could I forget that?”

Perrin grinned. “Any new predictions for the next year? Perhaps I should write this down.”

“Actually, I do,” she smiled as she ran her fingers through his hair. He hadn’t cut it since his resignation nearly half a year ago, nor had Shem cut his. They were rebelling against their past lives of short hair and all the regimentation it stood for. Calla, when she noticed a few weeks ago that both men’s hair had similar waves probably inherited from their shared ancestors, declared that no man should have prettier hair than his wife.

The wives decided they could live with their husbands’ shaggier looks as long as neither of them grew their hair longer than their shoulders and kept their chins bare. Mahrree had grown used to a smoothly shaved face and told Perrin she would never kiss him again if let his beard grow. Calla didn’t have to make that threat because Shem couldn’t have grown a beard like many of the men in Salem sported anyway.

Mahrree twisted a curly lock behind Perrin’s ear that she wished Jaytsy could have inherited, instead of her mother’s blandly straight hair. But Salema’s tufty black hair already showed signs of curling. “First prediction: Shem and Calla will have a baby.”

“I can believe that,” Perrin nodded. “Guide Gleace told him that too. Although I don’t know if Shem’s face can take it. I swear he hasn’t quit grinning since their wedding. The man has bugs in his teeth.”

“He deserves to grin. My next prediction—Jaytsy and Deckett will be expecting again by this time next year.”

“Hmm. Maybe, maybe.”

“And here’s my big one. Are you ready? Peto will fall in love.”

“Ha!” Perrin barked. “Now that one I should write down, because that, Mrs. Shin, is the most ridiculous by far.”

“Any new predictions for the next year?”

“I didn’t say get married,” Mahrree clarified. “I just said ‘fall in love.’”

“Peto won’t stand for it.”

“He wants to, though.”

“How do you know?”

“Mother’s intuition.”

Perrin scoffed. “*Mother’s intuition*. Mother’s wishful thinking, maybe.”

“Do you have any predictions, Mr. Shin?”

“Yes. You’ll keep waking me up early for ridiculous conversations when I could be getting another five minutes’ sleep.”

“Just for that I’ll send a message ahead of you to Mrs. Trovato saying you *will* be staying the night so you can get some decent sleep.”

“You wouldn’t dare.”

“I *would* dare, but I don’t want to.”

“Good. I kind of like you. I’d miss you if I stayed away tonight.”

Shem came over as they were finishing breakfast to bring Perrin a report on tower completions in the south. Or so he said.

He sat down at the table in a slump and looked at nothing in particular.

Perrin pushed his plate away. “Well, this is different. Tired of bugs in your teeth?”

“What?”

Perrin pointed at his face. “The Shem Grin is missing this morning. Trouble in Paradise already? It’s been, what, ten weeks?”

“Thirteen,” Shem sighed.

“Thirteen. So you’re actually keeping count.”

“Didn’t you?”

“Not really. And now I’m wondering what *else* you’re keeping count about—”

Shem glanced over to the kitchen where he heard Mahrree moving some dishes. “Perrin, I’m a little worried.”

“About what?”

“Calla. She’s so . . . happy.”

“Happy? That’s a problem? Your wife’s *happy*.”

Shem sighed. “That’s not exactly what I mean.” He glanced at

the kitchen door again to make sure it wasn't opening. "I *want* her to be happy. I'm happy. It's just that she's not . . . she's not . . ."

Perrin held up his hands, waiting for the rest.

"Sick," Shem whispered.

"Sick?"

Shem gestured in emphasis. "*Sick*."

Perrin sat back. "Ah, that kind of *sick*. It's not that pleasant, trust me. The first time my bride was *sick* was when I came home from the first Guarder attack. Instead of greeting me with open arms and a passionate kiss, she gave me a mess all over the stairs."

"That's what I want!" Shem nearly cried before remembering he didn't want Mahrree to hear him. "What I meant was—"

"I know, I know," Perrin said. "But Shem, give it time. This is nature at work, and sometimes nature won't be rushed. Didn't one of your sisters wait nearly four years before her first *sick*?"

Shem leaned forward. "She was twenty when she married. She could afford for nature to be slow. Calla and I can't! I've done the math. You and Mahrree must have already known Jaytsy was on her way by this point in your marriage. Calla's close to the same age Mahrree was. And you had two children before your second anniversary."

Perrin couldn't hide his smile of pride, although he was working on that. "As fast as they came, had we lived in Salem we'd probably have eighteen children by now. Not sure what Mahrree would have thought about that—" He stopped when he saw Shem's dejection.

"So Perrin, what are we doing wrong?"

Perrin didn't have the opportunity to answer.

"Nothing, Shem!" Mahrree burst through the kitchen door and rushed over to him to give him a hug from behind.

Perrin cringed in sympathy as Shem went bright red.

"Mahrree, how long were you listening in?" Perrin demanded as Mahrree released Shem and sat down at the table next to him.

"Long enough. Shem, give it time. Why, there's that couple in the congregation, the ones who lost their spouses and are now on their second marriages? That man just fathered a baby and he's nearly sixty!"

Shem was still red. "I wasn't exactly expecting you to hear any of this—"

"And his wife is forty-five," Mahrree forged on, missing his chagrin. "You have *time*, Shem. Calla probably has fifteen years."

Shem shielded his eyes in embarrassment, hiding from her sympathetic look. Nothing like the presence of a woman to kill awkward man-talk.

Perrin glared at his wife.

She gave him back a questioning look.

Perrin sighed and turned to Shem. “She has a point, Shem. Don’t put deadlines on nature. Just enjoy this time the two of you have together, alone. Once the children come, there goes the privacy. Mahrree and I are *still* waiting to get it back.”

Shem stared at Perrin’s empty dish. “But what if they *never* come?”

Understanding Shem’s real worry, Perrin said, “What do you remember of Hogal and Tabbitt Densal?”

“The Densals?” Shem looked up. “I knew them only a year, but they were probably the best couple I ever met.”

“They were,” Perrin said. “They changed my life. They did a great deal of good for many people. They held Edge together. I can’t imagine a couple who would have been greater parents.”

Shem gazed blankly at the table again. “But they weren’t.”

Perrin shook his head. “Never were blessed with children. I was the closest thing they had to a son. Do you think they weren’t worthy to be parents? Do you think that was the Creator’s punishment?”

“To be stuck with Perrin?” Mahrree added.

Shem smiled briefly. “No. Not their punishment.”

“Just part of their test, Shem,” Perrin said.

Shem sighed. “I was just so sure, you know? Especially since Guide Gleace said I’d be facing my wife’s child birthing in a year.”

“Did he say that as the guide, or as Gleace?” Perrin asked. “Because I’ve seen his eyes when he’s the guide. There’s something different there. Most of the time he’s just Hew, isn’t he?”

Shem shrugged. “I was still thinking about his vision when he mentioned it. I just wonder if we’ve done anything wrong, if the Creator is displeased with us,” he ended in a whisper.

“If children come, they come,” Mahrree said. “If they don’t, you’re still two people who found each other when no one ever thought you would marry! Still miraculous.”

Shem reluctantly smiled. “Thanks.”

“Consider this,” Mahrree said. “If someone like Qayin Thorne can be allowed to reproduce and give the world Lemuel, doesn’t that tell you the Creator usually just lets nature follow its laws?”

Shem scoffed a sad laugh.

“I think the Creator started nature and stands back most of the time to let it run its course,” Mahrree said. “He intervenes when necessary, but otherwise . . . ah Shem! Just wait.”

“But I’ve already waited for so many years—” He stood up abruptly. “I need to be going. Calla asked me to do a few things before I go over to the guide’s. I just wanted to see you before you left, Perrin. Say hi to the Trovatos for us, will you?”

“Of course,” Perrin said.

Shem turned to Mahrree. “Thanks for your concern,” he said with soft eyes. But then they hardened as he pointed at her. “But if you say a word of this—or give any looks, any communication—to my sisters, I will never speak to you again!”

“Not a word, not a look, nothing.”

“And to think” Shem mumbled as he headed to the door, “that I was excited about all of us coming to live in Salem together.”

Mahrree smiled at the door after he shut it.

Perrin cleared his throat.

Mahrree turned to her husband.

“How *could* you?”

“How could I what?”

“Interfere! Didn’t you see how embarrassed he was?”

Mahrree smirked. “He’ll forgive me soon enough.”

“How do you know? Wait,” Perrin leaned toward her. “*What do you know?*”

She smiled smugly. “Remember my first prediction this morning? Calla’s so happy because she isn’t feeling the kind of *sick* Shem’s *expecting*. Not every woman conforms to your little list, Perrin. Shem will be grinning again soon enough.”

Perrin sat back. “Why didn’t you give him a hint? He’s miserable!”

“What, *I’m* supposed to tell him what his wife asked me about in confidence? ‘Guess what, Shem? I’m almost positive you’re going to be a father. From what Calla and I could figure out yesterday, in about thirty-two weeks!’ She came to speak to me since she doesn’t have a mother or mother-in-law in the area, and she *really* didn’t want to talk to any of Shem’s sisters about her suspicions. Believe it or not, I have learned how to keep my mouth shut sometimes.”

Perrin stared at her in wonder. “Salem really is a place of miracles, isn’t it?”



Lieutenant Radan glanced again at the note secreted in his gloved palm. The instructions had been specific, so even though he hadn't been to the garrison in Idumea for a few years, he easily got around.

What confused him, however, was that the anonymous note had been delivered with the caution to not reveal his destination with anyone. He had no idea why he had to leave Scrub to go all the way to the garrison, and in the pouring rain, no less. His commandant didn't seem surprised when he said he was ordered to go. Then again, the man had many friends in Idumea.

That filled Radan with both dread and hope. Dread that maybe he'd done something wrong; hope that maybe he'd done something right. Lately, he couldn't tell which was which.

So he'd spent the last two frigid, wet days traveling, and this morning spent hours following clues sending him from one location to another. Each new slip of paper gave him another destination, and now he was no longer worried, but annoyed.

He trudged up the steps to the fourth floor of the garrison's office building, where there were considerably fewer men in blue suits in the quiet halls. He still wore his overcoat—one of the requirements, to make sure his uniform's label of RADAN was covered—and wished he could take it off since he was working up a sweat.

Down an empty corridor he walked, past rooms which may have been vacant, until he found the door with the correct number.

“This better be the end,” he said under his breath, and opened it.

He was startled to see Advising General Snyder seated at a desk in an otherwise empty room.

“I was beginning to think you'd never get here,” he growled. “Took you long enough. Shut the door.”

Radan obediently did so, but had to say, “Respectfully, sir, I would have gotten here a lot sooner had the original note just said, ‘Go to the fourth floor, room 18.’”

“I had to make sure you weren't followed,” Snyder said, as if that were obvious. “And I had to take an even more circuitous route than you did, I assure you.”

“May I ask why, sir?”

Snyder gestured for him to take the empty chair in front of him. “Because,” he whispered, “Chairman Mal keeps a tight rope on all of us. I have to sign in and out of my own office. If I'm gone for more

than an hour, someone comes looking for me as if I'm a teenager who can't be trusted."

Radan nearly mentioned that it was *because* the Advising General was sneaking around meeting officers on the sly that someone might think he wasn't trustworthy, but he decided to let that go.

"And that's why you're here, Lieutenant, who, I'm sure, is tired of being merely a lieutenant?" Snyder raised his eyebrows.

"What can I help you with, sir?"

"You have information that no one else has, except for maybe another lieutenant who was also serving in Edge."

"About . . . ?"

Snyder sat back. "I'll be blunt. Everything went wrong as soon as they put Qayin Thorne in charge of the army. His arrogance led to his incompetence, which led to his own son's failures, as well as Genev's. Mal's scared of everything right now, but most particularly Qayin Thorne. He needs him *removed*, if you get my meaning."

"Why doesn't the Chairman just *eliminate him*," Radan said, "if you get my meaning?"

"Because Mal doesn't just want him gone; he wants him humiliated and his reputation destroyed. Then with him deposed, it'll be easier to reconstruct the army and government. All the blame for the increased controls, the commandants—everything can be set squarely on Qayin Thorne, who will then crumble and stink like a corpse."

Radan chanced a smile. "And Mal still smells like a rose?"

Snyder scowled at the analogy. "Yes, something like that."

Radan tried again. "And new High General Snyder, in charge of the army, will restore it to its former glory?"

That won him over, for the moment. "Something like *that*, yes. But I need evidence from people who really know. Not 'know' whatever Genev told you to tell everyone, but the *real* truth."

Radan swallowed at that. The 'real truth' was rather squishy in his head. He'd have to remold it, and quick. "Does Chairman Mal know I'm here?"

"No," Snyder said, leaning forward on to the empty desk. "I'm hoping to present him with some *favorable* evidence. I do him a favor, then he does me a favor, then *I do you a favor*." He couldn't get any closer without laying on the desk. "So, what really happened in the forest above Edge that night the Shins went missing? Did you witness Lemuel Thorne beheading Shem Zenos?"

Radan hesitated. He hadn't seen any of that, since he and most

of his men had already left the forest.

But before he could think of how to phrase it, Snyder fished something out of his jacket, an official parchment. The general unfolded it, laid it on the desk, and slid it over to where Radan could read it.

To Whom it May Concern, Be it known that Lieutenant Radan is to be promoted immediately to the rank of major—

That was as far as Radan could read before the general whisked the parchment back into a pocket. “If that helps to jog your memory, that is. As soon as I have that favorable evidence I want, that document gets dated and sent to your commandant, along with transfer orders to anywhere you wish. So, what can you tell me about Zenos?”

Radan had an answer, and he tried not to salivate as he said, “Two of my men helped capture the man Thorne beheaded, and while he was strong, he wasn’t as large as Zenos, nor was he dressed like him. He was wearing green and brown mottled clothing.”

Snyder sat taller. “I knew it! And Perrin Shin—did you see him fall into the crevice?”

Radan had missed all of that, too, but he could honestly answer, “No, I didn’t see him fall. Nor Mahrree Shin.”

Snyder slapped the desk in glee, not caring that someone lost in the corridor might hear him. “Tell me about the Briters: did you see Mr. and Mrs. Briter?”

Radan hesitated, then said, “I saw someone who could have been Mr. Briter, but they used a decoy for Jaytsy Briter. Unless she sprouted a beard. I heard strange things can happen when a woman’s expecting—”

“So you did *not* see her?” Snyder was so eager he was nearly crawling onto the desk. “You didn’t see her die, right?”

“That’s correct, sir. A few men said—but they won’t remember this anymore—that Zenos, the Shins, and their son and son-in-law rode up the hillside and vanished.”

“*I knew it!*” Snyder screamed in a whisper, and did a wiggle dance in his chair that seemed more appropriate for a five-year-old rather than a fifty-year-old. “I knew it, I knew it, I knew it! And, more importantly, Lemuel Thorne knows it, too.”

Radan frowned. “Well, yes, he would. But . . . Genev’s been working on him for several moons now, sir. Don’t you think he might be . . . *misremembering* things?”

Snyder shook his head. “Lemuel’s still pining for Jaytsy. I know, because my wife has been trying to help my niece Druses win him

over. Not that Druses is much to look at, but now neither is Lemuel Thorne. Who wants a cripple like that? But Qayin thinks matching them will create some kind of *unity*,” Snyder rolled his eyes. “And, frankly, it’d do both of us a favor. Since my brother and his wife died of the pox, Druses has been staying with us. It’s time she moved on. And Lemuel can’t be too picky anymore. *But*,” Snyder went on, “Druses and my wife returned from Edge last week quite disappointed. Lemuel can’t get over Jaytsy, and I think it’s because he knows *she’s still out there somewhere*,” he finished in a whisper. “Guess he thought she was rather beautiful, but I wasn’t too impressed when I met her. This is proof that the Thornes and Genev lied about what happened. And that scandal will be their ultimate downfall. So . . . will you help?”

Radan was surprised that more was required of him. “Yes, sir. Uh . . . how do I help?”

“You were in that forest, correct?”

Radan squirmed. “Yes.”

“You’ll go back.”

“What?!”

“Not alone. With someone else who was also in the forest that night.”

Radan’s alarm was exchanged for chagrin. “Sir, you’re not talking about Lieutenant Offra, are you?”

“Yes. I was going to send for him next—”

“Don’t,” Radan cut him off. “Offra’s *weak*. Genev really got to him, and I don’t think Offra could keep everything as well balanced as I can. We can surely use him in the forests—Offra loved Colonel Shin and would be happy to look for him—but don’t let Offra in on your intentions about *using* this information.”

Snyder smiled slyly and said, “You mean, don’t show him a parchment with his name on it also promoting him to major, correct?”

Radan bobbed his head. “Sirrr,” he didn’t realize he was slurring that word again, “however you wish to reward Offra for his service is wholly up to you, but you certainly don’t want to risk diminishing the honorable office of major by allowing just *anyone* to become one, correct?”

“I understand you, Lieutenant. Very well. Now then,” he said, all business, “this is certainly not the season to be traipsing around in the forest. Nor should the idea of an investigation seem to come from anyone but Lemuel Thorne.”

“Any new predictions for the next year?”

“Sir?” Radan raised his eyebrows. “Why?”

Snyd spread out his hands in front of him. “It’ll make the treachery of Qayin Thorne all the more delicious if it’s his son who accidentally betrays him, don’t you think? This all has to be Lemuel’s doing. Or *undoing*.”

Radan wasn’t entirely following it all, but slowly nodding his head gave the appearance that he was in agreement.

“The cat has to be punished, you understand,” Snyd whispered, “for letting the falcon fly out of the barn. The best way to punish him is by kitten ambush.”

Radan kept up the slow nodding, wondering if the Advising General had lost his mind for a moment, and hoping he’d soon change the subject. Fortunately, he did.

“So, Lieutenant, it is you who will plant the suggestion in Lemuel’s mind, then feed it over the next several moons.” The general was pulling a piece of paper from the desk, along with an ink well and quills. “Beginning today. You will write him a letter suggesting that you’ve heard rumors that the Shins are still alive, especially Jaytsy Briter, and that you’re worried those rumors may have reached him. You don’t want him to be disturbed by them, you see, since he’s still struggling with his health. But you wanted him to be aware that word was spreading, quietly, among the soldiers.”

Radan was already writing the words, and snickering. “This will drive him completely to distraction,” he chuckled. “If others think it’s possible they’re still alive, then—”

“—then so can he,” Snyd said. “You’re not as slow-witted as I worried you might be. We have to address this as something dull, and muck it up a bit. Genev’s reading everything interesting that goes through the mail service, so we have to make this uninteresting. Once you get a reply, let me know, and I’ll tell you what to write him next to get him planning.”

“Yes, sirrr,” Radan said, writing carefully. “Then I supposed when all of this Jaytsy nonsense is finally resolved, Lemuel will marry your niece?”

“Most likely,” Snyd said, sounding bored.

“Yes, sir. But sir,” Radan said as he signed the letter, “I have just one concern about all of this.”

“Yes?” Snyd took the letter and folded it.

“What if we find evidence that the Shins or Jaytsy Briter is indeed still alive?”

Snyd stopped in mid-fold and stared at Radan. “Alive? Where?” he scoffed. “No. No, they’re dead, I’m sure of it. But not because of anything the Thornes did. Because the Thornes let them escape, let them fall to some kind of terrible fate . . .” Snyd’s eyes bounced around the room, realizing that he’d never before entertained the thought they still could be living.

“So,” Radan began as segments of the story shifted rapidly in his mind, “the Shins and Briters were *chased away* by the Thornes, which then caused their *tragic* fate. Had the Thornes handled things better, we may still have Perrin Shin, and even his grandson, still with us?”

Half of Snyd’s face lifted into a relieved smile. “Yes, yes something like that. Not bad. Not bad at all. With a bit of working.” He slipped the folded letter into his jacket pocket. “Write to me, Lieutenant,” Snyd said as he stood up. Extending his hand to shake Radan’s, he added, “Good to have this little chat. We here at the garrison like to make sure our junior officers are looking forward to promotion.”

Radan also got to his feet since the interview was clearly over. “Thank you for your concern, sir. And, if I may add, should the opportunity arise, I’d be happy to take over the command at Fort Shin in Edge. I understand they’re looking for a major to be in charge.” He blinked innocently.

Snyd smiled. “If all goes as it should, perhaps Fort Shin will be renamed Fort Radan, in honor of the officer who helped High General Snyd uncover the biggest scandal in the army’s history. Have a safe journey back to Scrub.”

Lemuel Thorne clenched the message in his fist and made his way through the snow to his horse’s private corral. In the shelter of his personal tackle shed, he unfolded the message, dropping it only twice, which was an improvement.

He smirked at the words on the outside, in a sloppy hand which read, “Further details as to saddling one’s horse with only one hand; revised and updated as per Captain Thorne’s requests.”

The message’s contents appeared so dull, and smelled so much like manure, with actual samples smeared across the back, that Genev didn’t even want to touch it. Instead, he flung the message in the direction of Lemuel. “Ask them to wash up before they send you any more advice!”

It was the fourth message from the Stables at Pools. They first started in Harvest, and now continued into Raining Season. Except that the message wasn't from Pools. It was from Radan, who was proving to be far more clever than Lemuel had expected. Disguising his writing, scrawling nonsensically, and filling the pages with drawings of crude, and occasionally rude, horses had convinced Commandant Genev that Lemuel was receiving suggestions about how he could ride again, not how to plan a rescue of Jaytsy Shin.

But that's what they were doing, with sentences buried in the scribbles. Radan had confirmed Lemuel's greatest hopes: a few men had seen the Shins escape, but more importantly, a handful of silenced soldiers had seen Jaytsy getting away, alone. She'd found a cave, someone told Radan privately, and the soldiers lost her in it. But it was a secure cave, perfect for hiding in.

Lemuel had imagined that cave a thousand times in his mind. If she had a food supply and water, she could stay there for weeks, moons, even years. She and her son, awaiting rescue.

And Radan was willing to help. His message today said he'd requested three weeks off, and would be in Edge by the time the snows receded in Planting Season. But he would need a partner.

Lemuel nodded at that. He already knew who to ask: Lieutenant Offra. He'd loved the Shins so much that he'd be stupid enough to venture in the forest looking for them. While Lemuel doubted any of *them* were smart enough to survive, he was sure that his dear, beloved Jaytsy and her son were braving the wilds, holed up in that cave, keeping back the bears and wolves with sticks she sharpened and fires she made, clutching her baby and bravely stabbing at any creature that tried to harm them.

He sat down, again overwhelmed by the images. They were the most vivid during the hour after the surgeon gave him a vial. Not only did the new formula erase the pain, it heightened his thoughts, making them sharp and vibrant. Right now the effect was diminishing again, but still he could see her black ponytail, disheveled and messy; and her dress, tattered and ripped in interesting places; and her son, watching with dark brown eyes as he was pressed against her heaving bosom . . .

If only Lemuel could ride! If only he didn't need the vials every four hours! He'd be there, at that cave, whisking her away from all of that, and embracing the baby, his son . . .

But he was doing the next best thing.

Carefully he pulled out the ink well from his pocket and set it on the tackle cabinet. Then the paper, and the quills, and set to writing as neatly as he could, a letter to Jon Offra.

Hopefully the man was smart enough to read between the lines.

Chapter 30--“Just when I thought Salem couldn’t surprise me with anything else.”

Perrin made another small mark on the map on his wall and sighed in pleasure. It was a good map. Big. Detailed. And it covered nearly the entire third wall of his office.

Professor Carteesh, who helped create it, called it a topographical map, detailing Salem and the mountains to the west. Carteesh had invited Perrin to the university, and at the end of Harvest Season they, along with Peto, had created the astonishing piece of art.

Well, to be fair, Carteesh and Peto, along with a few students with far more experience, had labored several days to draw in and code the elevations, rivers, rock faces, meadows, and any other detail that might be necessary for General Shin to know as he plotted future paths of escape for Salemites.

Perrin was allowed to draw in some of the little trees.

Still, he was quite proud of it. Every now and then he pulled out his quill and inked in a few more trees when no one was looking.

But the smaller maps of possible routes which surrounded the main map were completed by Peto and Perrin themselves. Exploded views, Carteesh liked to call them. So far father and son had been on many camping expeditions, tromping over unfamiliar land, often accompanied by shepherds, trappers, and ranchers who knew better the terrain and could recommend where possible routes could be. They’d eliminated several sections of the mountain range, but had four good possibilities so far. The Snowing Season had halted their explorations, however, and allowed Perrin more time to focus on his map-making skills and train the new tower watchmen.

And oh, were there towers! Salem craftsmen worked far more efficiently than anyone in the world, and its seamstresses were most creative in stitching banners in not only various colors but also shapes and patterns. Now Salem, Norden, and even the dissenter colonies

had towers with signal fires and chimes and dozens of banners. He had to design the towers four times wider than what they had in the world in order to accommodate the fifty banners stacked neatly in shelves. That also meant the towers had more room for men to lay down and take naps, eat meals, and set up a table for a game or two when there was no news.

But when there *was* news, the towers were marvelous to watch. Perrin peered out his window again to gaze in admiration at the imposing edifice which stood between Shem's and his house, convenient for both men. At the top of the long pole flapped the narrow light blue and white striped banner of General Shin. It always waved when he was at home, so people knew where they could find him. Each tower throughout Salem had a General Shin banner in case a message needed to be relayed to him from another location.

Each tower also had chimes which the workers would strike to let the locals know when a new message had been sent up. The week when he trained all of his new watchmen, Salem, Norden, and everywhere else clanged and chimed for hours, practicing. Salemites didn't mind. In fact, several people made new chimes to make the tones coming from their towers more harmonious.

Guide Gleace also had a banner. He chose bright orange with one white stripe as his signal, and when Gleace had a message to relay, first went up his banner. It worked quite well several weeks ago when the guide was at the northern reaches of Norden, and saw a violent storm coming over the mountain range. He rushed to the tower watchmen and told them to warn everyone south. First they sent up the bright red warning banner, followed by Gleace's orange one, then several triangle and rectangle banners in different colors spelling out STORM.

The next tower picked up the message, put up their banners and clanged their chimes, and so the warning spread all the way south within half an hour. Children, animals, and laundry were brought in, windows were shuttered, and when the winds howled and the hail pelted, very few Salemites were without shelter.

A few hours after the storm had passed, Guide Gleace pounded on the Shins' front door. Perrin opened it to find Gleace breathless but beaming.

"It worked, didn't it, General? Everyone got the message about the storm? You got it, right?"

"I did, Guide, and with time to spare. I think everyone now sees

“Just when I thought Salem couldn’t surprise me with anything else.”

the need to memorize what each banner means. But I think we need to run the meaning of the flags in the newspaper again since a few of our neighbors were over here asking what the message meant just as the hail was starting.”

Gleace leaned against the door frame. “I’ve been surveying the damage all the way home, and checking in here and there to see how well the messaging was received. This may sound awful, but Perrin,” he lowered his voice, “despite the destruction of the hail, I can’t remember when I’ve had so much fun! The towers are wholly inspired. And now, if you’ll excuse me, I desperately need a nap.”

But today Perrin’s tower was silent, although one down the road showed a blue banner with white dots flapping. A baby boy had been born that day. Yesterday there was a pink striped banner, just like Hycymum had made, signaling the birth of a baby girl.

Smiling, Perrin turned back to his office, and one map on his wall made him stop, as it almost always did.

Terry’s map.

Not the original, of course. A copy, similar to one he had made. In fact, it was Carteesh who introduced Perrin to Professor Stone, head of the archaeology department, a few moons ago. She had been most eager to meet Perrin.

“Because I want your opinion,” she told him as she led him to a glass case in the hallway. “What do you think of that?” and she pointed to—

“Terry’s map?!” he cried. “Wait, *you* have Terry’s map? I thought *I* did!”

“You may very well have had one of his original maps, General Shin,” Professor Stone told him as he peered at the old parchment, the fading ink, and the familiar handwriting. “Terry suspected King Querul would want the map he made of the ruins, so he made several copies, just as you did, hoping that at least one would survive. Which of the maps was *the* first map, we don’t know. Maybe yours, maybe this one, maybe another one we don’t have. There may have been as many as six, according to some letters of his we smuggled to Salem.”

But Perrin had just stared at what he thought was forever lost.

“Does this map look similar to yours?” Professor Stone queried.

“Oh yes,” he murmured reverently, hunched over to get closer to the small map. “I spent many long nights trying to copy his handwriting. That swoop right there, and the way he crosses the T, and all those little trees . . . exactly as on the copy I had.”

Professor Stone grinned at Professor Carteesh. “Then it’s really a Terryp, I dare say!”

“I agree!” Professor Carteesh beamed. “General Shin’s probably the best expert we’ll ever get here.”

Perrin stood back up. “I never thought I’d see it again. To know that Terryp made more than one copy? On the one hand, I feel that kind of diminishes the importance of the map I had. But on the other hand, I can’t help but admire Terryp’s forethought. I feel like I’m meeting his twin brother somehow.”

“The map will always be very important,” Professor Stone said. “No matter how many copies there are.”

Perrin ran his finger along the glass enclosure, wishing he could touch the actual parchment, just one more time. “I suppose we could make copies again,” he said wistfully. “I still remember when my father found me reading Terryp’s stories, and he told me that Terryp had made a map—of a real place, not the pretend places he made up. Oh, how I wanted that map! I was so disappointed when Father told me it had been destroyed. That’s why I was so thrilled to find the one I did half buried in my father’s storage room. Maybe *that* was the one destined for the fire, yet never made it there. And here’s yet another one! Terryp’s still around and kicking, all over the world!”

He hadn’t noticed that Professor Stone had vanished until she came rushing out of a nearby office, a stack of papers in her hand. “General Shin, I had no idea! But here . . . for the boy you were, the man you are now . . .” Her chin was wagging as Perrin looked down to see what was in her hands.

His jaw dropped nearly to his chest.

Carteesh chuckled. “We had the same thought as you, many years ago. It’s a woodcut, identical to the map under the glass. One of my predecessors made it, in conjunction with an art professor.”

“There must be . . .” Perrin staggered, “must be dozens of prints here!” He barely dared touch the one on top.

“We make hundreds every year,” Carteesh explained, thoroughly enjoying both Professor Stone and Perrin near tears. “The art students make the paper and age it under the sun, then print new copies. They’re presented to those who make the journey to Terryp’s land each year. I understand your family is planning to go once you’ve completed some of your security measures—”

“Don’t wait!” Professor Stone exclaimed, shaking the stack of freshly printed maps that looked decades old. “Take them now. Paper

“Just when I thought Salem couldn’t surprise me with anything else.”

your whole washing room if you like. Most everyone in the world has several copies.”

“Just when I thought Salem couldn’t surprise me with anything else . . . I only need one.” He gingerly lifted a copy and gazed at it.

But every child should have Terryp’s map in her bedroom, he thought.

“And my granddaughter, for her wall,” he said, taking another off the pile.

“And my son Peto, of course.” Third copy.

“Perhaps one for my bedroom, since we all know little boys never really grow up. Mahrree needs to see this.

“And . . . not a bad idea, putting one in the washing room,” he said as he lifted a fifth copy.

Perrin chuckled again as he smiled at his office copy of Terryp and patted it approvingly. He never added trees to it, but his trees looked identical to the ones already there.

Since seeing Terryp’s map, there hadn’t been any new surprises. Well, aside from meeting the men who tried to ride zebras. For his first few weeks in Salem, Perrin had felt that every day and every turn had dumped upon him another avalanche of information. Finally he’d tunneled out of it all and was beginning to feel as if he could get back to normal life, or at least *start* a normal life.

He turned his attention again to the massive map on his wall and traced with his finger one of the four routes he and Peto had established. They’d be usable once all of the undergrowth was removed, which Perrin initially thought would be a huge undertaking, until he remembered where he lived.

Guide Gleace’s recorded vision about the temple site had gone out to all of Salem, and when the people heard about General Shin’s plans, nearly everyone volunteered to help. In the upcoming Weeding Season, the first Clearing Party would go out, removing brush in careful ways as to create a subtle trail. Hundreds of people had signed up to help, where Perrin was hoping that maybe half a dozen would join him and Peto. Sometimes, his job was just too easy.

No, almost *all* of the time his job was just too easy, he thought as he heard a knock on his office door.

“Come in,” he called.

The door opened and there stood four university students, two girls and two boys, beaming.

“We got all of your supplies, sir!” one of them announced.

“They’re downstairs in your gathering room. The storehouse said if you need anything else—”

“Rector Bustani has an open order for me, I know. Thank you. I think that’s everything, then . . .” He hoped they’d pick up the hint.

But the four of them fidgeted.

“Sir,” said one of the boys, “are you *sure* we can’t come and help?”

Perrin tried to hide his smirk. This wasn’t the first group of adventurous youth assigned to be his “interns” for a couple of moons, nor was it the most eager. His office had been nearly overrun for the past eight moons by students who were at the university studying botany, geography, army history, art, and musical poetry.

He still wasn’t sure how he’d ended up with *that* intern—apparently someone thought that trail blazing was poetic, or just had a more sarcastic sense of humor than most—but all of the students had been happy to teach him about the land and vegetation, evaluate how soldiers may react to diversions, draw up sketches of trickier terrain, and write a lyric or two about the whole thing.

Mahrree had her own sets of interns, helping her gather information and interview former scouts for the world history text she was drafting.

At first they’d both found the extra help each morning a bit invasive—they were accustomed to working alone. But soon the enthusiasm of the interns grew on them, and they said sad goodbyes when one group was finished, and happily welcomed the next ones who showed up at their door.

It was Salem’s way, they were told, to let students work side by side with adults in a variety of careers so that they could better appreciate how all of Salem functioned, and discover ways that they wanted to contribute back. Apparently the sign-up list to work with Perrin and Mahrree was four years long.

Perrin looked into the eyes of each of his pleading interns. “Look, I’ve already promised each of you a spot in the Clearing Party. That’ll be in a mere six weeks, and you’ll get to pack in with you not only your camping and food supplies, but hatchets and rakes and shovels and all other kinds of gear that will leave you absolutely exhausted at the end of a week. Yes, look how excited each of you is to work your bodies to the bone. Now, salivate on that for a while, because as I’ve told you before: this first Marking Party will go a lot slower because we have to measure distances and slash trees—”

“Just when I thought Salem couldn’t surprise me with anything else.”

“We can help!” one of the young women declared, and produced seemingly out of nowhere a long knife with a curved blade.

“Whoa,” Perrin said, instinctively stepping back from the girl’s gleeful display. She gave a few experimental swipes to show him she knew how to use it—which she didn’t—while the rest of her group followed Perrin’s cue and sidled away from her.

Perrin licked his lips. He’d heard about the new-style scythe a blacksmith had been making for his neighbors who were trying to clear brush, and he suddenly felt very thirsty. “That’s one of those new machetes, I think they’re calling it?”

“Yes it is, General Shin!”

“And who in the world—I mean, *who in their right mind* gave that to you?”

“My father. I know how to slash the birches and aspens. I’ve been carving up the trees near our house.”

“And I’m sure your parents are most pleased about that. Would you . . . would you just *put that away*, please? And, uh, where’d your father get that?”

“The storehouse,” she said as she gingerly slid the long blade back into a leather belt on her waist. “They just received their first supply, and thought two should go to you. They’re down in the crates. Do you need more?”

A third would have been quite useful, Perrin considered, until then he had another thought. “Who made these?”

“Mr. Herrero,” she told him.

Perrin’s heart sank. It was one thing to take whatever you wanted, just because someone would give it if you asked.

It’s quite another when you know *who* would be giving it to you.

Mr. Herrero had a bad leg, a crooked spine, and a wife prone to illness. Yet the man was blessed with dogged determination, if not an adequate body. Anything he created took him twice as long as it would a healthy man. It must have taken him weeks just to make the first supply of machetes.

Surely there’d be *other* blacksmiths learning how to make them, but until then . . .

Suddenly Perrin realized two would be adequate.

“What about that belt,” he gestured to the girl’s waist.

“A scabbard, sir? Yep, you have two of those as well.”

“And who made those?”

“My father.”

Perrin knew he was a fit man who enjoyed tinkering with leather. The guilt he felt for accepting the belts eased a little.

Even after living in Salem for many moons, he still struggled with the idea of just *taking* things. For a time it became easier, because whenever he went to the storehouse it was a faceless, nameless building filled with supplies just for him, it seemed.

Until he met Mr. Herrero, limping in one afternoon with a bag of nails he'd completed, pleased and winded. "Sorry it took a little longer today," he apologized to the rector on duty. "Had a little problem with the forge this morning." He balanced precariously on his crutch as he unloaded his gleaming nails on the counter.

"Not a problem. And another beautifully crafted set, just in time for Genera Shin," the rector told Mr. Herrero, and poured a small amount of the nails into a bag for Perrin.

He could hardly bear to take them, which he used later for something inconsequential, because he'd never before realized the effort that went into producing something as seemingly simple as nails.

While everything was for free in Salem, he realized that, truthfully, nothing was. Everything came with a price, and he worried every day that he wasn't yet paying his fair share.

Perrin kept one of those nails in his desk drawer to remind himself why he was securing Salem. He was doing it for people like Mr. Herrero.

No, *for* Mr. Herrero. For a man who would need extra time and help for himself and Mrs. Herrero.

For every Salemite who willingly offered what they could, and who cheerfully trusted he'd do the same.

Just like the four young Salemites standing before him, smiling in hope that they could tag along.

Perrin knew that he couldn't let these innocent, happy Salemites see him wielding a long blade again. It wasn't as if he didn't have any knives, and in his desk he still had . . . well, never mind.

He just wasn't sure how he'd respond with such a weapon in hand, ready to cut down ferocious, attacking . . . vegetation.

"I appreciate your forethought and earnestness, soldiers—"

They always grinned when he called them soldiers.

"—but this first trip is solely a family affair, and Assistant Zenos, Peto, and I will undoubtedly argue about a few things, accuse each other of making mistakes, and maybe even play a prank or two. Right now you see us as far better than that, and I can't afford such a hit to

“Just when I thought Salem couldn’t surprise me with anything else.”

my reputation among Salemites, so once again, the answer is no. None of you can come along on this trip, because I still want you to look at me with that faint glow of adulation, and hearing me snore at night will absolutely destroy everything.”

The interns laughed, a bit hesitantly because they weren’t sure if it was appropriate. He had this group for only a week, and they still didn’t quite know him. In two more weeks, they’d relax around him. Almost.

“I promise I’ll have lots of tedious, detailed work for you to do when I get back, and I’ll let you know about every step of the Norden Route, all right?”

Their shoulders sagged, and the girl with the machete longingly fingered the handle.

“Again, excellent work on getting me supplied, soldiers. Now, I know how all of you feel about this so . . . just *one* group hug before you leave. And make it brief, please.”

Salemites were huggers; Perrin had to make peace with that. Still he struggled with the notion of such open affection, but when everyone was hugging at the same time, it lent an air of ridiculousness that he could embrace. Figuratively.

“Now out!” he commanded cheerfully, and saluted away his troops.

They headed down the hall and the stairs, and he heard them call out a farewell to Mahrree, who was likely looking at the piles in her gathering room and wondering how they got there.

And the machete. Two of them.

Perrin sucked in his breath and knew he couldn’t jog down the stairs to find them just yet. He hadn’t touched such a long weapon—uh, *gardening implement*—since he gave up his father’s sword to Lemuel Thorne over a year ago.

Now, new blades awaited him. While the machete was shorter than a sword, it was bigger than a long knife, had that deliciously clever curve to it, and was naively sharp on only one edge because it’s only purpose was to hack at vines. Salemites were so good and kind they’d never think of using it to hack off someone’s body parts, but the commander in him thought of that, very first thing, when he’d heard the description.

Still the world was too much with him, and there were days when he wondered if he’d ever fully convert to a Salemite life.

Never mind, he told himself. His job was to secure these tender

folks, not necessarily become one of them.

The first Annual Marking Party would begin tomorrow morning. While Peto and Perrin had decided they should go in the middle of Weeding Season, when the snow even in the highest elevations was melted, this year would be different. Shem, the other member who would always accompany them, according to Guide Gleace's wishes, didn't want to risk missing the birth of his first baby, who would be making its appearance in the middle of Weeding Season, and was already dubbed "Shemalla" by Peto. So the three men were leaving two full moons before that, on the 70th Day of Planting Season.

The timing concerned Perrin a little, as he evaluated the map again. They were starting with the most northern route, just outside of Norden. That way they could drop off Calla at her parents' house, and all of her sisters could fawn on her bulging belly while her husband was stomping around in the forests. Perrin wasn't worried about her delivering early and without Shem; he was worried about snow.

He and Peto had become quite the camping, hiking, riding, and tracking experts over the last year, heading out every other week while the temperatures were still warm in search of viable elk routes to the ancient temple site. Their trips came to a halt when the first snow began to fall. They felt pretty confident about the routes they'd chosen, because they had tested them by taking Mahrree on each one. The theory was that if someone unaccustomed to riding, and on an ancient mule, could make it up there, then most of Salem had a chance. The only problem was getting Mahrree back home again, because she never wanted to leave the temple ruins.

Each time they returned, Mahrree would say to Perrin, "Now can we head over to Terryp's land? I'm doing better on horseback, and I think we could—"

"Later, Mahrree. I promise. There's nowhere I want to go more than Terryp's land, but I need to secure Salem first."

He kept putting her off until the first snows came, and she quit asking.

Then in the middle of Snowing Season, Peto's geography teacher told him about seeing a herd of elk high up in a canyon which he was sure led to the ancient temple plateau. Peto, who was now always eager to be back on a horse and up into the mountains, convinced Perrin they should try to find it despite the weather, because what if Salemites had to travel in the snow?

“Just when I thought Salem couldn’t surprise me with anything else.”

Perrin couldn’t argue with that, and he’d heard about snow caving and ice fishing, which he couldn’t wait to try.

So the two of them headed out in what Salemites told them was a mild snow year, although the “mild snow” was easily three feet deep by the time they reached the climb to the top of the canyon.

The route promised to be serviceable, but only in Weeding Season, since the last couple hundred feet was up a steep and rocky slope which the snows couldn’t completely cover. Leaving the horses below them, Peto and Perrin climbed the uneven surface, noticing that it was easier to negotiate the rocks rather than whatever smooth surface was to the side, and under about five feet of snow at the top.

Even now as he remembered it, Perrin took out a thin piece of charcoal and labeled that route, “Back Door” on his map. The top of the peak was only a few hundred paces from the ancient temple, but the climb was treacherous. It’d be a fifth route, but only for the daring or desperate.

And, as he remembered that trip, he shivered, because while going up took quite some time, going down was shockingly fast.

Perrin had sat down on the summit to the side of the rocky face to catch his breath, shifted his position slightly to be more comfortable, then . . .

Well, it was still a jumble in his head. More of a tumble, really. Straight down. He flailed, he fought, he tried to find ways to stop himself, but he was sliding, fast and infuriated, down the smooth snowy slope—

And hit two young trees which didn’t slow him down at all, but decapitated one of the poor pines—

And then he shot past Clark and his friend who only nickered in question—

Then everything abruptly came to a halt.

Because he was flailing and would have continued shouting, except that falling through the thin ice into the freezing river had completely taken his breath away.

Even now Perrin could feel that cold. He’d *always* feel that cold.

He’d also always hear Peto’s laughter, echoing in that canyon as he hurriedly made his way down to help fish Perrin out of the river.

Last night, when Perrin was over at the Zenoses to finalize details for their upcoming trip, he asked Shem one last time if there was *any* possibility of snow on the trail.

“If there is,” Shem said, “I’ll breathe real hard on it and melt it,

all right?” He’d been amused at hearing about Perrin’s sliding and swimming adventure. Even more amused that one of Perrin’s longer locks of hair had frozen, and Peto had broken it off just to see if he could.

Perrin, in his office, said only, “Ha, ha, Shem. Yes, very funny.”

It was time. He really needed to check his supplies, as well as the, uh, *tools* for marking the trees and cutting out deadwood.

He crept down the stairs, pausing halfway to see if Mahrree was in the gathering room. Seeing that it was empty, he snuck over to the neat piles of crates and carefully pulled the lid off the first one.

Again, that was easy. Sitting right on top were two long, curved blades attached to oak handles. Perrin rubbed his sweaty palm on his trousers before lifting one of the machetes. He held it up so that the sunshine coming from the window could glint along the steel.

Oh yes, that was sharp. He held the machete parallel, and frowned. No, Mr. Herrero—nor any Salemite for that matter—didn’t know much about balance of the blade. And it was kind of fat, now that he analyzed it. What’s the point of a fat blade when all you really need is the sharp bit on the sides?

If only it were a two-edged blade . . .

He sighed and hacked the air experimentally. The faint whizzing sound was similar to what he would hear when he practiced with his swords. But while that sound had had a subtle ring to it, the machete seemed to bang the air.

“But it’s serviceable,” he decided.

“For slicing flies?” Mahrree came into the room. “Because I think you just chopped one in two.”

“For cutting out brush, and *maybe* marking the trees,” he told her. He tossed the machete into the open crate where it clunked apologetically.

“Seems like a nasty piece of steel.” Mahrree peered into the crate. “Could do some damage in the wrong hands,” she said, with a great deal of meaning.

“True, it could. But without style.”

“Not like your father’s sword, then?”

“No, not at all,” Perrin said, before he realized he’d just given himself away.

Mahrree folded her arms. “Why, Perrin? Why were you hoping that it would be like a sword?”

“I wasn’t,” he told her, almost not lying. “I was just . . . curious.

“Just when I thought Salem couldn’t surprise me with anything else.”

Been a year, you know, since we left. I was just wondering if I still had any . . . ability. If I’d know what to do.”

“And do you?”

“I could a great deal of damage with a weapon like that,” he whispered to her. “A great deal.”

“It’s not a weapon,” she whispered back, her tone tight.

“Anything can become a weapon, Mahrree.”

“Yes, I was afraid of that. Just . . . try not to look at it that way.”

“I’m trying. Oh, I’m trying!”

“Look at it instead as . . . what you’d use to mark the trees.”

“This is far too aggressive a tool for that,” he told her.

“So what will you use?”

“Knives,” he said. “Pocket knives. We don’t want the cuts too deep, or the trees will be damaged. That’s what Peto and his professors concluded. Cuts should be only as deep as half a finger’s width.”

“Be careful. You have very large fingers. Mark only fat trees.”

Perrin chuckled. “Kind of the plan, yes. Since there are white-barked aspens and birches along every trail we’ll be clearing, they’re the perfect choice, especially since the markings heal into black slashes which are easily noticed.”

“And look like bear claw slashes,” Mahrree smiled. “But did you figure out what to do for distances greater than fifty paces?”

“Since we’ll make a slash for every ten paces an average person should walk—” he started to explain, until his wife interrupted.

“And you’re using Peto Paces, not the too-long-of-legs-Perrin-or-Shem paces, correct?”

“Yes, yes, yes, you were right about that. The test groups all agreed that Peto’s stride is the most reasonable. The angle of the slashes will tell people in which direction to go. Follow the way the slashes point, take ten paces for every slash, then look for the next marked tree. Getting back to your question, should a distance be sixty or seventy paces, we’ll just go with five slashes, then mark another tree with one or two more so folks just keep going.”

“And no strangers will suspect that Salem has seven fingered bears,” Mahrree added.

“Yes, that likely would arouse suspicion. The hope is that the slashes will be infrequent enough to not seem unnatural. Mahrree,” he began to grin, “I really think this is going to work!”

“Oh, I know it is,” she smiled back. “And then, when you return from this trip, can we plan going to Terryp’s land?”

He hated to see her expression fall. He hadn't even answered her, but she could read it on his face.

"Once Salem is secure, I know," she said quietly, and offered him a forced smile.

"We'll go someday, I promise. I really want to, but—"

She only sighed and headed to the kitchen to leave him with his crates and plans.

Mahrree thought she'd gotten up early the next morning, but Per-rin was already up and in his office, rolling up a few more maps and blank paper. In a way—only a *very* small way, because she didn't see the appeal of sleeping on dirt—Mahrree was jealous. No wonder he didn't feel the need to make the journey to Terryp's land; he was already playing Terryp.

She spied on him for a moment, happily murmuring to himself as he rearranged his pack, then she headed downstairs to make breakfast. That's when she was even more astonished.

Peto was also already up, evaluating the supplies Mahrree had bundled together last night.

"Sure it'll be enough?" he asked her.

"You said you'd be fishing and hunting along the way, remember?"

Peto eyed the small crate of elk jerky. "What if Father's not accurate with his bow and arrow anymore?"

"Well, then, be careful not to lose too many arrows shooting the fish in the river."

Peto chuckled. "I'll get the horses ready, so get breakfast going."

"You're *ordering* me? You're not a real lieutenant, you know," she called after him as he, laughing, headed out the door.

An hour later Calla and Shem arrived by wagon at the Shins' house, and Mahrree could tell it was going to be a difficult time—for Shem.

"You're still fine?" he asked Calla as he helped her down. "No problems?"

"Shem, we rode an entire three hundred paces. I'll feel fine. And yes, I can handle the miles to Norden. Please, do *not* ask again."

As Shem loaded his pack on the horse he'd ride later, Calla confided to Mahrree, "It'll be a little nice to get some breathing room

“Just when I thought Salem couldn’t surprise me with anything else.”

from him. It’s one thing to be attentive, it’s another to shield me like he’s in battle. He wanted to lift me into the wagon! If I can climb the stairs in the house, I can climb into the wagon. What will he be like in eight weeks?”

“That’s when you *will* want him to lift you, and hope he’s strong enough to do so,” Mahrree chuckled. “After the baby comes, you’ll want him to *baby you* for a time. Hopefully he won’t be tired of doing it by then.”

Calla smiled dreamily at her husband who kept glancing over at her as if she’d do some fantastic trick at any moment. “I shouldn’t tease about him. He tossed all of our down comforters into the back of the wagon in case I wanted to lay down and rest along the way.”

“That sounds rather comfortable,” Mahrree admitted.

“It does, doesn’t it? He’s so thoughtful.” She grinned at him.

He grinned goofily back.

Mahrree suppressed a groan. They *were* the cutest couple, but she had to agree with her husband: sometimes they became just a bit too gooeey. Perrin had taken to leaving the room whenever Shem started rubbing Calla’s belly and crooning at it.

Calla turned back to Mahrree. “I forgot to tell you. Exciting news! I got a message yesterday that one of the rectors in Norden thinks a collection of old journals he’s been given has accounts from early scouts to the world, so I plan to read through all of them—”

“Calla, Calla, I appreciate all of your help, but please—take some time to enjoy being with your family.”

“I will. I have only three interviews to conduct, then—”

“Just relax, for once, will you?”

Calla sighed. “I can’t. I just know I’ll miss Shem so much I’ll burst! And not in a good way.”

“Is there a *good* way to burst?”

“But Mahrree, if I’m doing research for your history book, I’ll feel like I’m with him again, in the past. Besides, you’ve met my family. They can be a bit . . . smothering.”

“Unlike here?”

“So you get it, right?” Calla said, her honeyed eyes developing a slightly cynical glint which, Mahrree had to confess, she’d likely taught her. “Hiding out in the cellar of a rectory reading old journals will be the only peace and quiet I’ll have.”

The women laughed, and Peto came around the corner. “You women and your plans. I’m telling you, these poor men are lucky I’m

dragging them away for five days. It will do them some good.”

Mahrree scowled at him. “And what do you know about what men need?”

Peto folded his arms. “Enough. They need time to reconnect with nature, become one with the trees, to not worry about *women*. Next year Deck’s coming with us. I told him and Jaytsy that yesterday. Too bad he has so much calving right now, but that’s why next year we’ll be going in the middle of Weeding Season.”

“So you’re planning to leave us women and babies all alone?” Calla asked with feigned dismay.

“All alone with plenty of male neighbors and brothers-in-law.”

Calla laughed. “That’s true. All right, Peto. You can take away our men each Weeding Season, so you can free them from the constraints of their wives. Remind them what they are missing by not being single.”

Peto nodded curtly. “Knew you’d see it my way.” He mounted on his horse as his mother shook her head.

“So many words he’s going to have to eat, Calla,” Mahrree murmured. “My poor boy will be sick with them.”

Chapter 31--“I think Peto even enjoyed the cook.”

Lieutenant Jon Offra flipped up the collar of his jacket to make sure no one could recognize him. It'd been nearly a year since he was transferred out of Edge, and while many faces in the army had changed, he couldn't take any chances. Even though the sun had yet to rise, someone might recognize his stature and wonder why he was here instead of at the fort at Midplain.

He still wondered that as well. He told his commandant he'd be spending his three weeks of leave visiting a great aunt who no longer remembered him, but instead he was sneaking back to his old fort.

It was only because Lemuel had been writing him. First came the brief, almost indiscernible message addressed to the “Lieutenant over waste and refuse” and, by default, it had landed on Jon's desk, because his lackluster reputation as an officer had preceded him.

He puzzled over the words which discussed not throwing away worthy items, frowned at the terrible handwriting, and wondered who “a concerned officer” could be. But, knowing it was from Edge, he stared at it for a long time before realizing a couple of letters looked familiar, as if someone who used to write with his right hand now had to use his left—

Lemuel?

Writing to the lieutenant he hated?

Initially Jon decided the rumors about Lemuel relying too heavily on the pain mixture vials were true, and that he really was always in a half stupor as if he'd been drinking mead nonstop since the night he'd been struck by lightning.

But Jon didn't disregard the message. Intrigued, he wrote back thanking the unidentified “officer who acknowledged the slag problems in Midplain.”

Then came the next message, hinting about long lost valuables, and Jon began to wonder if Thorne was thinking about Colonel Shin. He wrote back, agreeing that losing something one once admired was tragic, and then he got another message that perhaps one should go looking more diligently for what had been lost.

Jon's heart had stopped momentarily at that suggestion. A few more exchanges convinced Jon that yes, Lemuel was ready to find the truth. The *real* truth, not the one concocted by Genev which he'd yelled in Jon's ear for hours before he was convinced Jon believed the Administrator's version, and he was transferred out of there.

It was only because Jon wanted to know what really happened to the Shins that he was going on Captain Thorne's secret little mission.

That, and because he'd started to feel sorry for the captain. Dealing with Genev every day had to be misery, and the stories about his now-dead arm, and the mild stench of it, were infamous. It occurred to Jon some time ago that Lemuel probably didn't have a real friend anywhere in the world.

Not that Jon wanted the position, but he should do *something*.

Besides, if Colonel Shin was somehow, miraculously, at the end of it all, well then—

Jon walked purposefully through the northeast gates, hoping his old work clothes would make him look like a straw man on his way to the stables, and found himself lost in nostalgia for better days at Fort Shin. His mind was still wandering when he slipped into the back door of the stables and stared in surprise at who stood there, waiting.

“You?”

Lieutenant Radan didn't even blink. “You're late.”

“No, I'm not. I'm early—”

“Whatever,” Radan interrupted in that dismissive manner that always irritated Jon. “Yes, I'm just as thrilled to see you as you are to see me, I assure you.”

“Why are you here?”

“You really think Captain Thorne would send you out alone?”

“So you know about this?”

“Of course I do. Who do you think helped Thorne plan it all? No, you see, *you're* here to assist *me*.”

Now Jon knew this was going to be the worst three weeks' leave ever. Before he could protest, a movement caught his eye. He stepped to the side as Captain Thorne silently came in.

“Keep it down,” he snarled quietly. “Neither of you are supposed

“I think Peto even enjoyed the cook.”

to be here, and if word gets back to Genev, I won't vouch for either of you.”

“Nice to see you again, too,” Radan said, a bit coldly. “How's my year gone? Oh, rather dimly. And yours?”

Jon blinked at Radan's abruptness. Usually he'd been so obsequious, but clearly he didn't think Thorne had any more influence to dribble his way.

Jon managed a smile and nodded to Thorne. “Good to see you up and about, Captain. I understand you've made great progress.” It was difficult to not stare at his motionless right arm, hanging limply like a clothed sausage.

Captain Thorne nodded once to him, and something softened in his eyes. “Been a tough year, yes. But I'm hoping to see it changed. That's why you're here, both of you. We all know things are *not quite right*. It's time to fix that. It's time to find proof. It's time to find Jaysy and her son. *My son.*”

The words, *Oh, you've got to be joking*, nearly bubbled out of Jon's mouth as he realized the intensity with which Lemuel said her name, and the delusions that must have kept him going all this time.

Feeling Radan's gaze on him, Jon glanced over at him.

Radan raised his eyebrows briefly as if to say, *Yes, it's that bad.*

Jon put on another smile, as if dealing with that old aunt of his who thought she lived in a bucket. “Captain Thorne, we . . . uh, will do all that we can.”

“I know you will. Over there,” said Thorne as he instinctively tried first to motion with the dead right arm, but pointed with his left hand instead, “are two horses you may take, along with emergency rations to last you nearly three weeks. I trust you brought your own changes of clothes? Good. No uniforms. Should you be discovered, I'll deny any knowledge of your doings. Should you die, I will also not cover for you. You are doing this of your own accord, and for your own personal reasons. Correct?”

Jon knew his reasons, but he wondered about Radan who crisply declared, “Correct!”

Jon nodded too, and took the opportunity to look deeply into Lemuel Thorne's eyes.

They were hazy, and one drifted slightly.

Jon sighed. *I'm heading into the forest on the errand of a drunk*, he thought. *Still I want to go. So who, really, is to be pitied right now?*

“Well then,” Thorne said, “if there are no further questions—”

and he made a motion as if to cross his arms, until he remembered one wouldn't cooperate, "—get moving. Patrols are changing in a few minutes, and I've given the order that everyone is to come in at the same time for a quick briefing. That'll clear the way for about five minutes, so you'll have time to slip into the forest." He nodded once to each of them, "Good luck."

Jon wanted to return the sentiment. Lemuel needed more luck than anyone.

Five minutes later, Offra and Radan rode their horses east in the dark morning, over to the canal, then up into the forest, unseen.

As soon as their horses reached the edge of the forest, Jon felt his stomach lurch. The cluster of trees reminded him acutely of that man who spouted about them "knowing nothing" just before Thorne sliced off his head. Jon could still see his body slouching over, his head rolling away, and the nausea that gripped him, churning his belly all over again.

Jon had also witnessed two of his corporals go down into the thin crust with their horses, their screams of terror fading as they fell.

The forest meant death; it was as simple as that.

"What's wrong with you?" Radan hissed.

Jon noticed his eyes were closed, and he opened them to see Radan ahead of him about twenty paces.

"Why'd you stop?"

Jon glanced around, realizing he and his skittish horse were just a few feet into the forest.

"Thought I heard something," he salvaged. While it seemed there was no going onward, there was also no going back. Thorne would never let him return without answers, and Radan wouldn't let him hide out in a thicket for three weeks.

Reluctantly, Offra kicked the sides of his mare.

"Seems most logical to go up," Radan suggested as Offra caught up. "We'll look for gaps in the trees and follow those—"

"No, don't!" Jon said. "That's how I lost two soldiers. The gaps between the trees is dead ground. That's why nothing grows there. We need to stick close to the foliage. If trees can survive, so can we."

"Hmph," was all that Radan answered.

They proceeded up through the forest, heading in a northerly direction, but it was slow going. Every whiff of sulfur made them stop to work out where it came from. They circled widely any small gap in the ground. And when that ground moaned and creaked at them,

“I think Peto even enjoyed the cook.”

Jon didn't look at Radan, nor did Radan look at him, but they both froze in place, watched the direction of each other's horses, and scurried out of there like terrified cockroaches.

So focused were they on the steaming ground below them that they didn't notice that they were being watched from above.

But General Shin's scouts in green and brown mottled clothing weren't so oblivious.

One naturally dark-skinned man, perched twenty feet up a tree, twitched a message to his companion.

The companion, seated on another branch with mud smeared on his face to conceal his pale skin, jerked back.

It was hours before they felt the two young men had finally crept far enough away that they could have a whispered conversation.

“Who in the world was that?”

“The taller one I recognized as a lieutenant who used to be under Shin. His running companion?”

“I thought that as well. I'm guessing the one who looks more like an agitated rat was the other lieutenant who used to be here.”

“What do you think they're doing?”

“Nothing smart, that's for sure.”

“We need to tell General Shin.”

“Can't. He and Zenos went out yesterday on their Marking Party, remember? They're way up at the Norden route and aren't scheduled to come back for another four or five days yet.”

The scouts stared in the direction the nervous soldiers had gone.

“How long do you think they'll be here?”

“At this rate, they won't reach the boulders for two days, at least. And then? They'll be trapped.”

“Agreed. But we should keep watch.”

“Oh, most definitely. The upper scouts should spy them soon enough. Wonder why they're here? And now?”

“And to think, just the other day I was complaining that the forest had grown boring again.”

Mahree knew in the afternoon, five days after they left, that the

men were on their way home. The nearby tower notified her as she was walking with little Salema, who kept trying to uncover the seeds her mother was planting in the garden.

“Mrs. Shin?” called one of the tower men. “There’s a message coming,” he pointed to the next tower in the north. “However, I don’t think I should put up *that*.”

Mahrree squinted to the north, chagrined that her eyes weren’t quite as sharp as they used to be, but even she could make out the distant General’s banner flapping, and the square flags under it spelling out—

“SOME?”

“Yes, that’s what we were wondering,” the tower man called down to her, irritated. “We’re training a new man over there. The stack of ‘h’ flags is above the stack of ‘s’ ones. I’m guessing he meant to send up ‘home’.”

His companion chuckled. With his scope he could make out the tower beyond the SOME one. “Yes, the message before is definitely HOME. My guess is that the Marking Party is done and trying to tell you that they’re in Norden and on their way home.”

Mahrree grinned. “That gives me a couple of hours to get something big cooking. Thank you!”

She scooped up Salema and headed back to the house to start dinner. Before she reached the kitchen door, she heard the distant tower chimes clang. They had changed their message to now read HOME, and Mahrree chuckled as she heard a distant and faint call of, “*Sorry*.”

So when a few hours later the side door flew open with a bang, she was expecting to hear Perrin’s bellow of, “HOME! Did you get the message?”

“YES!” she bellowed back, from three feet away. “I got SOME of it.”

He was about to embrace her, but stopped. “Some of it? What does that mean?”

“It means that one of your new men is being retrained, even as we speak. I’d rather stop speaking now, if that’s all right with you?”

He caught her in his arms, and planted a big kiss on her lips.

And kept planting.

“So I have to wait outside until this reunion’s finished?” Shem’s voice drifted from outside the door frame which Perrin blocked.

Neither of them answered him.

“I think Peto even enjoyed the cook.”

Shem sighed loudly. “I know what you’re trying to do, and this really doesn’t bother me as much as it used to.”

When the Shins still didn’t move, Shem began to whistle.

Perrin finally pulled away as Mahrree giggled.

“There are two more doors, you know,” Perrin told him. “You could have used one of those.

“I like this one. Besides, that’s not fair of you since Calla’s father’s not bringing her home until tomorrow afternoon. They didn’t want her riding home in the dark,” he explained to Mahrree.

Perrin put his hands on his waist and faced Shem. “And just how long did you make us wait at the Trovatos while you greeted your own wife, huh?”

Shem sheepishly nodded to Mahrree. “We probably would have been back half an hour earlier,” he admitted.

She laughed. “Come in! Come in!” She pulled him into the house. “Dinner’s nearly ready. I’m sure you will want something different than fish.”

“Yes!” said Shem, taking a chair. “But actually, the food was quite good. *Wasn’t it, Perrin?*”

Mahrree heard his less-than-subtle hinting.

“Yes, I have to admit it was,” Perrin said slowly, sitting down. “Even Peto enjoyed the food. I think Peto even enjoyed the cook.”

Mahrree looked around. “Where is he, anyway? You didn’t lose him days before his 18th birthday now, did you? Wait a minute . . . *the cook?*”

Mahrree knew the look in her husband’s eyes. It meant, *This isn’t going to be pleasant. For me.*

“He’ll be here in a few minutes,” Perrin promised. “They’re delivering our initial report to Guide Gleace.”

“*They?*” Mahrree nearly squealed. “Who is with him to constitute a *they?* Tell me all about it!”

“Well the path was a little more difficult to mark at first—”

“*I don’t care about your trip, Perrin!*” Mahrree cried. “Tell me about *the cook!*”

Shem had been grinning the entire time. “*She is a lovely girl, just turned eighteen herself. By the name of . . . Lilla Trovato!*”

Mahrree clapped her hands. “Calla’s youngest sister?”

Shem nodded. “When we went to drop off Calla at her parents’ house, Lilla volunteered to come along and cook for us.”

“And Peto didn’t put up a fuss?”

“Ha! He was the one who convinced Perrin to let her come.”

Mahrree was flabbergasted. “Peto did? Mr. Let’s-Get-the-Men-Away-From-the-Women?”

“The very one. Singing a new song. Well,” Shem nudged Perrin, “singing *many* new songs now.”

Mahrree pulled up a chair to the table. “What does that mean?”

Perrin growled.

“So Shem,” Mahrree turned to him, realizing he would provide much more information, “tell me about Lilla. I don’t think I spoke to her at your wedding.”

Shem held his hands out to Perrin. “Tell her what *you* think.”

“Descriptions! I want descriptions!” Mahrree insisted.

“Well,” Perrin said slowly, “unlike her oldest sister, she’s broad shouldered, broad chested—”

“—and broad *hearted*,” Shem reminded firmly.

Mahrree chuckled. “Interesting that the first two descriptions sound like a female version of you, Perrin.”

He raised his eyebrows at her. “Comparable to Peto’s size. If she had any skills, she could likely take him in a fight. Let’s just say she’s a *healthy* girl.”

“Much better, Perrin,” Shem nodded in approval. “Before, he described her as, ‘Jaytsy-sized plus two large bags of grain.’”

Mahrree snorted behind her hand while Perrin glared at him.

“She’s pleasant looking enough, I suppose,” Perrin continued, clearly pained to do so. “Laughs *all* the time,” he added with an annoyed tone. “And she sings. In fact, she breaks out into song at the strangest moments. It was really quite *unsettling* sometimes.”

Shem waved away Perrin’s assessment. “She has a lovely voice.”

“And,” Perrin added with reluctant appreciation, “she can do surprising things with trout, flour, and pine nuts and herbs she found along the way—”

“Ooh,” came Jaytsy’s voice from the side door. “Sounds like a practical girl. Keep going, Father! Who is this?”

“It is nice to see you too, Jaytsy. After five days I expect more than that as a greeting. Where’s my granddaughter?”

“Sorry, she’s down for a late nap.” Jaytsy gave her father a quick hug and kissed his cheek.

“So *that* hug is acceptable?” Shem asked Perrin slyly.

Perrin growled again.

Mahrree was growing impatient. Something was up with Lilla

“I think Peto even enjoyed the cook.”

Trovato, and neither man was willing to stomp on it. “Now what does *that* mean?”

“Perrin here has a little problem with Lilla—” Shem began.

“*Not now*,” Perrin warned.

“—You see, Lilla is a very friendly young woman,” Shem ignored the glare. “Innocent, heart of sunshine, but unlike Calla she doesn’t quite understand that some people aren’t as *open* as others.”

Perrin gave him a meaningful eye twitch which Shem ignored.

“And,” Shem added, “I think she has a *thing* for Peto.”

Mahrree and Jaytsy exchanged smiles of meddling glee.

“But what does he think of her?” Mahrree asked.

Shem grinned. “He didn’t even *try* to keep his eyes off of her.”

Jaytsy squealed.

Perrin cringed.

Mahrree slapped the table. “Yes!”

“Every day they lagged behind and laughed and talked and scared away all the rabbits and pheasants we could have had for dinner,” Shem said, “so we were stuck with fish and herbs that aren’t startled by random singing—”

A noise out by the barn stopped Shem.

Mahrree got to her feet. “Is that Peto?”

Perrin shifted nervously. “Probably. Listen, Mahrree, do you mind if Lilla stays with us until her father brings back Calla tomorrow? Not really appropriate for her to stay with Shem alone—”

“Of course!” Mahrree exclaimed.

Jaytsy giggled. “If Peto can’t keep her eyes off of her, maybe she’s not safe here, either. How about at our place? She can have the third bedroom.”

“So is she with Peto?” Mahrree asked.

“Yes,” Perrin sighed. “He took her to meet Guide Gleace.”

“Already?” Mahrree laughed. “This sounds serious.”

“Just to deliver our report! Mahrree . . .” Perrin started.

“What?”

Shem grinned. “Nothing. Let’s go meet her. I’ll do the introductions,” he said, standing up.

“Mahrree” Perrin managed miserably, “she’s a hugger.”

She tried not to laugh, but it came out her nose anyway. “That’s her problem? She’s a hugger?”

With a somber nod Shem added, “And she calls him names—”

“SHEM!” Perrin bellowed.

“Names? Oh, I want to meet this girl!” Jaytsy grabbed her mother’s arm and, without waiting for Shem, they rushed out of the house to the barn.

At the hitching post, Peto was helping Lilla off her horse. Mahrree stopped when she saw him.

“Oh, my. Mother, *look at him!*” Jaytsy whispered.

“I am!” Mahrree couldn’t remember ever seeing her son voluntarily putting his hands on any female’s waist, yet there he was gingerly helping a sturdy girl fully capable of dismounting by herself. She was not nearly as *healthy* as Perrin suggested, but could probably wrestle a sheep back into a corral. Her dark blonde hair bounced in her ponytail, and her happy face glowed from the cool air of the early evening. She beamed at Peto, whose hands stayed on her waist much longer than they needed to.

Lilla’s gaze shifted to see Mahrree and Jaytsy waiting, and she bit her lip timidly.

Mahrree knew Peto could feel her eyes on the back of his head. That was probably why he hesitated to turn and face her. A variety of thoughts must have been running through his mind, and Mahrree smiled to herself that tonight he’d be feasting on a whole buffet of nasty words.

Finally, bravely, Peto took a deep breath and turned around.

“Mother! Jaytsy!” He smiled tightly. “This is Lilla Trovato. Lilla, this is—well, you already heard their names, didn’t you?”

Lilla laughed. Mahrree almost looked up to see if they were being attacked by incoming geese before she realized the noise was coming from the poor girl.

“Isn’t he funny?” she crooned. “He’s *so* funny! My face has never hurt so much!” She grabbed his arm in a hug, and Peto grinned more goofily than Shem ever did as he covered her hand with his.

Mahrree noticed. Oh, did she notice.

And Peto noticed she noticed.

He blushed, his grin faded, and he didn’t seem to know what to do next except to awkwardly remove his hand from hers.

“Yes,” Jaytsy said, delighted to watch Peto squirm. “He’s been known to cause *a lot of pain.*”

Peto paled under the significant squint of his sister.

Mahrree nudged Jaytsy reprovingly before saying, “Lilla, it’s wonderful to meet you. I’m sure we met at Shem and Calla’s wedding, but I’m afraid I don’t remember it.”

“I think Peto even enjoyed the cook.”

“And it’s wonderful to meet you!” she cried as she released Peto’s arm and rushed over. She hugged Mahrree as Peto watched anxiously.

Mahrree hugged her back and winked at her son who remained rigid with worry.

Lilla let go of her and bounced over to Jaytsy. “I heard about your little girl! She sounds adorable. Can I see her? I love one-year-olds. They’re so silly!”

Jaytsy grinned. “Of course! I was going to go get her and my husband soon. They were both taking a late nap when I left the house, but it’s nearly dinner time and the knowledge that I’m not cooking always brings them running.” And with that, Jaytsy shot a challenge to her brother.

Mahrree could feel the air charging between them. Peto was never one to let pass by an opportunity to knock his sister, although he had been trying to cut down on that since they came to Salem.

Peto blinked once, acknowledging that she was trying to bait him in front of a girl who thought he was the greatest thing on two legs. With exceptional sweetness, Peto said, “I hope they’re both doing well, *my dear sister?*”

Jaytsy raised an eyebrow. So that’s how they were going to play it. “Yes, yes they are, *my dear brother.*”

Mahrree worried her face would screw up into permanent paralysis with the force she exerted to not snort at her children.

“Good, good,” Peto said as he walked up to Lilla and put a hand against her back.

No, that snort wasn’t going to be held back any longer, and Mahrree turned it into a believable cough.

“So,” Shem’s voice came from the open door to the house. “You two made it back all right? I was thinking you would take a much longer route to get here. Maybe show Lilla the scenic way to the house? Come on in. And Lilla, Perrin was just saying *how much* he missed your company.”

Perrin’s throat clearing could be heard even outside.

Lilla laughed as she walked with Peto to the house, Jaytsy and Mahrree following, so she could see just how long Peto kept his hand on Lilla’s back. “Well you can tell Papa Pere he doesn’t fool or scare me, no matter how many times he raises that eyebrow.”

Mahrree and Jaytsy stopped in their tracks and looked at each other.

“Did she,” Jaytsy said, “just call him Papa Pere?”

Mahrree began to giggle. “How is it possible there’s such a girl in Salem?”

Snickering, they hurried into the house to find Lilla already hugging her brother-in-law, whom she’d said goodbye to less than an hour ago.

And there stood Perrin behind the table, looking as unhuggable as possible.

“Hello, you . . .” he paused to find the words, “you two. Reached Guide Gleace all right? Give him our initial report in song?”

Again Mahrree had the impression geese were about to land as Lilla laughed. “Oh, you are such a tease, aren’t you!” She marched right up to him and . . .

Well, if Mahrree hadn’t witnessed it herself, she never would have believed that Lilla actually pinched General Shin on the cheek.

She knew her mouth was agape as Jaytsy next to her gasped.

But Shem folded his arms and leaned back against the wall to enjoy the show.

As for Peto, he looked down at the floor and grinned.

Peto, Mahrree sent the thought, *keep this one, if you can.*

Lilla turned to Mahrree, standing so close to Perrin she was nearly leaning on him. He tried to drift to his right, but the corner of the walls stopped him. To his left was the table. He was trapped.

“You know,” Lilla said, gesturing to Perrin behind her, “he’s been trying to intimidate me since the first day. But I saw right through him. Big, tough, captain—”

“General,” Perrin corrected, and clearly not for the first time.

“—whatever, army man. ‘*Oh, this trip will be hazardous, Lilla,*’” she said in a low voice and furrowed her eyebrows in a surprisingly good imitation of Perrin.

Mahrree slapped her hand over her mouth but she couldn’t stop the laughter in her eyes.

“*We men can walk faster than you, Lilla. You don’t know the dangers here, Lilla!*” But I kept up and poor Peto would have wasted away to nothing if I hadn’t been there to cook for him.”

Lilla gazed adoringly at Peto who desperately wanted to gaze back at her, but that would have let everyone know how he felt. Instead his eyes darted to her, to the floor, and to any other spot in the room that wouldn’t make him squirm, as if he were following an impulsive fly.

“I think Peto even enjoyed the cook.”

Next to Lilla, Perrin’s own eyes were darting, desperately looking for an escape route.

“But then on the second evening we saw a bear, right on our path,” Lilla continued, ignoring the worried gasps from Mahrree and Jaytsy. “This big, growling thing—”

“It wasn’t growling,” Perrin murmured. “It was eating berries.”

Lilla disregarded that. “—and those three just stood there talking about how to get around it. Well, *I* knew what had to be done. I’ve been in those mountains far more often than these three. So I started shouting and waving my arms, and picked up some rocks and kept throwing them at the bear until he scampered off into the forest. That night I decided he,” she jabbed a thumb casually into the side of Perrin, whose patience was being tested considerably, “is nothing but a big bear. Oh, he may growl a lot—”

Mahrree was struggling so hard her eyes were now watering.

Next to her, Jaytsy was shaking.

Peto kept following the invisible fly which landed frequently on Lilla.

Shem grinned at Perrin’s obvious discomfort.

“—but he’s just a big old softy, isn’t he? Then I started thinking, Bear, Perrin, *Perr* as in *Bear*, and he *is* a papa, so there was his new name: Papa Pere! And I’m going to soften him up if it’s the last thing I do!” She wrapped her arms around his unrelenting body and gave him a big squeeze.

Mahrree wiped the tears from her eyes. She didn’t dare say, *And this just might be the very last thing you do.*

Jaytsy’s face was red from suppressed laughter, and Shem was now smirking in empathetic pain.

Perrin looked as if he would topple over, but Peto beamed at Lilla, the bravest woman in Salem.

Suddenly Perrin’s face brightened as he looked to the open door.

“Nice to see some men around here again. Welcome home!” Deck, with Salema in his arms, eyed Perrin and the girl wrapped around him.

Perrin saw his salvation. “Ah, Deck! You have *no idea* how happy I am to see you! Here, give me my little girl.” He carefully pushed Lilla away and strode over to take his granddaughter out of Deck’s arms. “And what do you have to say to me, Salema?”

“Probably not what you want to hear,” Deck said, glancing inquisitively at Lilla.

Perrin sat down with the baby. “*Perrin*,” he said distinctly. “Come on, Salema, you can say it! *Perrin*.”

“Ooh,” Lilla giggled. “Papa Pere already is a big softy.”

Perrin froze in place as his granddaughter’s eyes met his.

Deck smirked. “Papa Pere? Hey, that’s kind of cute, isn’t it?”

“Don’t say it, Salema,” Perrin whispered. “Whatever you do, *don’t say it*.”

“Pewre,” she managed. “Pa Pewre,”

“No, no, no! Pere-*in*. Pere-*in*!”

“It’s useless, Perrin,” Mahrree laughed. “It sounds like it’s either Papa Pere or *the other name*.”

Salema looked to her grandmother. “Muggah!” she said proudly.

“Wow!” Lilla said to Peto who now stood very close to her, “You’re right—she can talk pretty well for a baby.”

“Shin family trait,” Peto told her. “We start to babble early and we never quit.”

“*Now* he tells me,” Deck whispered to Shem.

“So what does Muggah mean?” Lilla asked.

Jaytsy giggled. “Mahrree. These two *grandparents* refuse to be called grandparents, so they’ve been trying to get Salema to call them by their first names. She can’t make a good ‘r’ sound yet, which is rather important to each of their names. So Mahrree comes out as Muggah.”

“But that’s *so cute*!” Lilla gushed. “It’s like grandma, but twisted up.”

Mahrree shrugged. “Yes, I suppose we can’t avoid the labels. It’s starting to grow on me. I keep telling myself it’s only temporary until she can get her r’s figured out.”

Lilla gestured to Perrin. “So what does Salema call him?”

“Puggah!” Deck told her.

“Puggah,” Salema repeated, looking adoringly at her grandfather with her big, brown cow eyes.

He sighed and pushed away a lock of her black wavy hair. “We’ve discussed this, Salema. Even ‘Colonel Cuddly’ would be better than that,” he whispered.

“Puggah.”

“That . . .” Lilla started slowly, “is . . . absolutely *ADORABLE!* Muggah! Puggah!”

Perrin rubbed his forehead with his free hand.

“I think Peto even enjoyed the cook.”

After dinner Peto followed Jaytsy out of the house as she started for hers to ready the room for Lilla. He caught up to her and walked alongside.

“Jaytsy, I appreciate you letting her stay with you, but I’m sure we could take care of her.”

“No, I’m sorry little brother. I saw the way you watched at her during dinner. She shouldn’t be left in such close proximity to you.”

Peto groaned softly.

“Yes, Peto, it’s that obvious.”

“Oh, no, no, no—”

“Don’t worry. She’ll win over Father eventually. Mother seems to like her. She kept watching her with that odd smile on her face. The same one she kept giving you.”

“Jaytsy,” Peto said, “It’s just that . . . it’s just that . . .”

“It’s just what?” Jaytsy said, stopping at her front porch. She saw in her brother’s face what only could be described as agony. Delicious agony.

“Jayts, I know I haven’t been the best brother. In fact, if there were a contest for meanest sibling, I might have had a good chance at winning it when we were younger. Good thing there’s no competition in Salem, right?” he chuckled nervously.

She narrowed her eyes. “True, very true.”

“And I’m sorry about that. Really, I am. But we’ve had some good times, though, right? Covered for each other, got along at times? Please, there’s so much that you know about me, and . . .” He gripped her arms. “Jaytsy, *please*, don’t tell her all that you know about me! Can you just please, *please* for tonight forget some of my stupid stuff?”

Jaytsy blinked. “You just said ‘please’ four times. I didn’t even know you knew that word.”

“Jaytsy, I’m *begging* you!”

“I know. And I love it. You’re positively sick over her, aren’t you?”

Peto staggered helplessly. “It’s so stupid. I know it is. After all the things I’ve said—”

Jaytsy couldn’t stand it anymore. As much as she enjoyed his distress, he was her brother, after all. Perhaps the generous spirit of Salem was finally rubbing off on her.

“Not that you helped a lot with Deck and me—”

All right, Salem needed to rub off on her a bit more.

“—but Peto, don’t worry. She’s adorable, and I love what she’s doing to Father. It takes an extraordinary personality to not be intimidated by him. If she’s the right one for you, I promise I’ll not do anything to ruin this. In fact, I’ll do all I can to convince her you’re the greatest man in the world.”

“Well, that shouldn’t be too hard, now should it?” the old Peto said flippantly.

Then the new Peto cringed. “I shouldn’t have said that. Ah, Jaysy! How do I do this? Help me!”

Jaysy patted him on the back. “You are *beyond* help, my poor Peto. She has to see the real you, little brother. And if she still can tolerate that, then she’s definitely the right one. You best get back to her. I think Deck was planning to administer a ‘practical’ quiz.”

Peto nodded thankfully as Jaysy walked into her house, and he headed back to his. It looked different tonight as he heard Lilla’s laugh drift outside to his ears, as if geese were trapped in the kitchen. His orchard of tiny sprouting trees looked different too, as if eager to grow big enough to allow small children to climb in the branches and throw the bad apples at each other.

As long as they don’t knock down my peaches, Peto thought.

He smiled when he remembered his conversation with his sister just over a year ago. *The world is so different today, Peto*, she had said. *I hope you can understand someday.*

He had thought ‘someday’ would be years from then, when he was twenty-eight and finally finding his wife, or thirty-eight, like Shem. Why marry young when you can go on a Salem expedition or two? He’d been thinking that he could take time off from the university, and since they had the routes mapped, he could leave for a while and go exploring . . .

So why did none of that sound interesting anymore?

He couldn’t shake the words of Guide Gleace when they were at the ancient temple site. What if he didn’t have twenty years to explore the world like Shem? And why was he suddenly so concerned about the health of the orchard he told his mother she was in charge of, or where his parents would want their addition built?

Strangely, the idea of being ‘tied’ to someone now sounded like the greatest adventure he could imagine, not wandering around in the wilderness with a bunch of single men.

“I think Peto even enjoyed the cook.”

He sighed again as he neared the house.

Maybe he could tolerate just *one* more wedding . . .

But he would not—*NOT*—let his father teach him anything about any kind of “art.”

Maybe Shem could, though, Peto considered.

Shem should know a thing or two by now about making Trovato women happy.

“So I was thinking, if Lilla is the girl for Peto, this could make for a very confusing family line for their children.”

“Mahrree, why are you doing this?”

“Because you don’t appreciate me waking you up to talk, so I’m talking to you before you go to sleep,” she told him as he pulled the blankets over his head.

“For five nights I’ve laid on the hard ground listening to the two of them giggling at each other across the fire. Shem and I were on high alert every night. And now that I finally get to rest on my nice, soft bed, you start up.”

Mahrree giggled.

Perrin groaned. “With more giggling.”

“Sorry. It’s just fun to think about.”

“Don’t do this. Just don’t do this—”

“It will only take a minute, I promise. Think about it: Peto grew up calling Shem ‘uncle.’ Then we get here and find out he’s actually a distant cousin, twice! But if Peto married Lilla, then Shem really *would* be an uncle, but to Peto’s children. So if Peto calls Shem ‘uncle’ again, his children could be confused, because Shem would actually be his brother-in-law. Wouldn’t that be fun?”

Perrin just sighed. He’d learned long ago that his wife finished sooner if he didn’t contribute to her monologue.

Mahrree continued. “Yudit told me people sometimes try to draw up their family lines as trees, but she prefers vines instead. You go back a few generations and everyone’s family gets tangled up in everyone else’s. She’s sure she could prove Deck has family in Salem somewhere, if only she could find more secret lines. And I really think that was the Creator’s intent—to get us all interconnected so much we don’t want to harm or offend or judge unfairly because we are all family!” Mahrree finished enthusiastically.

Perrin waited a moment before responding, just to make sure she was done. If he said too much, their conversation, which would have been more appropriate over breakfast, wouldn't end until then.

“When I said, ‘Don't do this,’” he said wearily, “I meant, don't marry Peto off too soon. But you've already drafted the new family lines for him. When are you going to stop making plans for other people?”

“Oh, I'm not making any plans. Just *thinking*. You're the one who makes plans, remember?”

Perrin sighed as The Cat jumped on to his chest and began to purr.

Chapter 32--“This isn’t Idumea coming, is it?”

The next morning Perrin and Shem were in conversation about the routes through the mountains when they heard the loud knocking on the door downstairs. They ignored it, since Mahrree would answer it. But a moment later, another knock came at Perrin’s study door.

“Come in,” he called.

The door swung open and there stood a scout in his green and brown mottled clothing. Perrin and Shem looked up at him in surprise.

“Shem, General,” the scout said hurriedly, “there’s a problem approaching the glacial fort.”

“What kind of problem?” Perrin asked.

“Two men, in civilian clothing. But they’ve been identified as some of your former soldiers.”

“Who is it?” said Perrin.

“We’re pretty sure it’s Lieutenants Radan and Offra.”

“Jon?” Perrin gasped.

They hadn’t noticed Mahrree standing by the door until she spoke. “Offra? Perrin, what are you going to do?”

He glanced at Shem. “I think we need to have a little talk with the lieutenants.”

The scout shook his head. “I don’t think that’s a good idea, sirs. I’ve been sent to find out which method you want us to use to distract them, not invite them.”

“Think about it,” General Shem said to the scout. “Why would they be here? They made it through the forest, I’m assuming?”

“They reached the boulder field yesterday. Took them four days, though.”

“And then *through* the boulders?”

“This morning, yes. Remarkably, they found one of the footpaths. They abandoned their horses at the boulders and now are slowly making their way to the canyon.”

Shem let out a low whistle. “That was too easy. I don’t like it. Not one bit. We should have been warned earlier.”

“Agreed,” Perrin said. “In fact, we’ll create a set of banners just for that very eventuality. The next time someone sets even one foot into the forest, I want to be notified immediately!”

“Yes, sir,” the scout fidgeted. “We didn’t think they’d make any real progress, and we *thought* we moved quickly—”

“Well, you did. Just not quickly enough for my tastes.”

“This isn’t Idumea coming, is it?” Mahrree asked nervously. “What Guide Gleace was telling us about?”

“No, not at all,” Shem insisted. “We knew something like this could happen, someone getting lucky in the forest and boulders. It’s always been our belief that anyone who was brave enough to make it through the forest should be allowed to go untouched. But we’ll never let them get past the glacial fort.”

“Why?” Mahrree asked, panic rising in her voice. “What will your scouts do to them?”

“Nothing!” Perrin insisted. “Because I’ll deal with this myself.”

The scout sighed. “Guide Gleace was afraid you’d feel that way. I spoke to him first.”

Perrin was already on his feet, reaching for his dark leather jacket that was slung over his chair. “He’s also given me the authority to do whatever I see necessary to keep Salem secure,” he said, putting on his jacket. “And if these men are successful, so will be others. And then Salem’s secret is out.”

“So what are you going to do?” Mahrree asked again. “I like Jon Offra,” she reminded him.

“I like him too,” Perrin assured her. “I’m just going to . . . wait for the Creator to inspire me.”

Mahrree sighed and looked at Shem.

Shem shrugged at her. “Sounds like a plan to me.”

The scout exhaled.

Half an hour later General Shin, Assistant Zenos, and the scout were riding hard to the Second Resting Station. There was an updated report from the glacial fort when they arrived: the lieutenants were making their way up the canyon very slowly, unable to recognize the faint paths created by Salemites.

“This isn’t Idumea coming, is it?”

“That’s good to know,” Perrin said. “That means we have time.”

“To do what, General?” one of the scouts at the station asked. “We have ways of distracting, you know.”

“I want to see Jon. Somehow I feel it’s important.”

“But that’s not the way we—” The scout stopped when he saw Shem shaking his head.

“Remember when I told you at one of our training sessions that Shins never do things like everyone else? This is one of those moments. It’s usually just better to sit back and let them go.”

The scout turned to Perrin. “Orders then, General?”

Perrin slowly grinned. “What are Salemites—or Guarders—known best for doing?”

The scouts looked at each other and shrugged.

Perrin grinned wider. “Kidnapping!”

It was their fifth day, and Jon couldn’t have been more astonished at their progress. They survived the forest—in fact, it wasn’t that bad. Given enough time, Jon was sure he could probably decipher all the dangers and even find paths through the trees.

What they didn’t see, interestingly, were any Guarders. There was no evidence anywhere of the masses of men they saw the night the Shins disappeared.

But then again, maybe there weren’t masses of men. That was the story, but Jon already knew much of the story originated in the mind of Commandant Genev. Trying to remember what was the story and what was real was already becoming harder. He glanced up at the sky to see its color. It was mostly blue, but the white puffy clouds shouldn’t be ignored.

Staring up at the mountain filled Jon with new worry. It was massive. Rocky. Steep. He and Radan had been trying for the past few hours to make their way up it. They struggled around rocks, slipped on gravel, and both had scrapes and scratches to prove it.

“Are you sure this is the right direction?” Jon asked as Radan slid down another steep patch.

“No!” Radan snapped, brushing gravel off of him. “I don’t know what might be the right direction for anything. I just know we have three more days of exploring before we can even *think* about returning! And do I need to remind you we have yet to find evidence of

anything?” He wiped his brown shirt and groaned in displeasure at seeing another small rip.

Jon didn’t dare admit that he’d forgotten about finding ‘evidence.’ He was more worried about finding a safe way out of there. “I don’t see another source of water except for that river down there,” he felt he should point out. “Our flasks can hold enough for only one day, and—”

“Look,” Radan said, “unless you have something helpful to say, keep it to yourself. We’re supposed to be—what was that?”

Jon looked in the same direction as Radan but didn’t see anything. “What am I looking for?”

“A movement! Definitely a movement up there on that . . .” he didn’t know how to refer to it, “that jumble of rocks.”

“Maybe deer?” Jon offered. “Seen their droppings—Wait. I saw it too.”

It was a figure in dark clothing, but too far away to see clearly before it vanished behind a tall bush.

Instinctively the lieutenants crouched, trying to use scrubby oaks as flimsy shields.

“Guarder?” Jon whispered. “Finally?”

“Maybe,” Radan said, his voice none too steady.

Radan’s sudden attack of nerves made Jon feel better about his own. He swallowed down an anxious lump and watched the rocks for any movement. He thought he saw something, but it was gone again.

“Over there, beside that boulder,” he whispered to Radan. “Something like a shadow moving.”

Radan only nodded, his eyes scanning.

In dreadful silence the two lieutenants watched the slope above them, waiting for something to happen.

A pebble tumbled down from somewhere far above.

Both men watched it nervously as if it’d grow into a boulder by the time it reached them.

But it stopped at the scrubby oak which poorly hid them, and a few more pebbles began to bounce down the slope. Then more. Then larger rocks, the size of fists, rolled in their direction as if something had disturbed the terrain above.

Or was purposely rolling rocks their way.

“Should we move?” Jon whispered in worry.

“But then we’ll be seen!” Radan said.

“That’s better than dying in a rock slide!”

“This isn’t Idumea coming, is it?”

“True—”

The tumbling gravel turned into a full rock cascade, which made the decision for them. They dove to their left, toward another cluster of trees, and scrambled to the next meager shelter.

Grabbing the trees to steady themselves, they panted to catch their breath.

“See anything?” Jon gasped as he eyed the slope above them.

Radan peered back up the hill. “No. Nothing.”

Jon shielded his eyes from the sun. “Maybe he left?”

“Or maybe he’s *right here*,” said a deep voice from the other side of the trees.

Both lieutenants jumped in terror as the brush moved aside and a large man in black stepped through.

Unexpectedly, he smiled at them. “Hello, men. You both look well. Sorry for what’s about to happen to you.”

Jon would have cried out, “Colonel!” But then his head hurt, he smelled burlap, and the world went black.

“Yeah, he’s starting to come around.”

Jon heard a voice in the haze of his headache. He was lying down somewhere, but couldn’t yet focus.

“Take it slowly, Jon,” said someone familiar. “Whenever they planked me, I couldn’t think clearly for several hours. You got hit pretty hard.”

The voice was too much for him to ignore. He struggled to sit up and rubbed his eyes. “Colonel? Colonel! It really is you!”

Perrin chuckled and took another wet cloth to put it on Jon’s head. “Yes, it really is me. Now what’d I say about taking it slowly?”

“He’s going down again,” another familiar voice said as Jon’s head swirled. “Lie back down, Jon, and we’ll explain things to you.”

He looked to the other side and saw Shem Zenos sitting nearby.

Instantly he recoiled. “You!” he started, but he was cut off.

“Shem’s not a betrayer, Jon,” said Perrin. “He saved us. Don’t believe the stories. None of them are true.”

“I know, sir.” Jon said, trying again to sort all of the different versions he knew about the end of the Shins which, he was thrilled to realize now, was *not* the end. He started to nod but regretted the

movement as he gripped his head. “I saw you in the forest, right before Thorne was struck by the lightning.”

“Is that why you’re here?” Perrin asked. “Looking for me?”

“Yes, sir. Sent by Thorne.”

“Oh, no,” Shem sighed. “Thorne knows they’re here. Perrin, that changes things.”

“I know, I know. But it’s still salvageable.”

“What is, sir?” Jon asked, his eyes more clearly focusing on the colonel. He seemed different, and it took Jon a moment to realize why. His black and silver hair was much longer and even curled slightly, and his clothes more casual. Jon glanced over at Zenos and noticed his light brown hair was also just as shaggy.

Jon could tell he was in a building of some sort, with a high pitched roof that reminded him of the tops of trees. He was on a narrow bed, not in a surgery, but something more rustic. He didn’t even notice the door until he heard a voice come from behind it.

“General, the other one is still out.”

Perrin turned to the man in green and brown clothing. “Thank you, Winter. Tell me as soon as he regains consciousness.”

“General?” Jon ventured.

Perrin smiled easily and waved that off. “Just a title. Makes them feel better about things.”

“And who, exactly, is *them*?” Jon asked.

Perrin pointed at him. “That’s one of the answers you’re looking for, isn’t it?”

Jon pushed himself up to a sitting position again. “Sir, please know that I don’t want to report anything back to Thorne. Spending my vacation weeks searching the forest for evidence of your death, or that of your daughter’s, wasn’t my idea. Although what I found exceeded anything I could have imagined, and I must admit—I’m pretty glad I came!”

Perrin and Shem exchanged a complicated facial tick, and Perrin turned back at Jon. “I believe you. But we still have a big problem. You’re going to have to report something back to Thorne, and Radan’s going to be waking up soon to find himself surrounded by guards. Somehow that’s going to get back to the captain. Thorne’s still only a captain, right?”

Jon dared to smile. “He was sure he’d be made major by now. But Commandant Genev is in charge of the fort.”

Perrin shuddered with Shem. “Genev as commandant. Well, that

“This isn’t Idumea coming, is it?”

can’t be fun for anyone now, can it?”

Jon’s smile faded. “The whole world has changed. You wouldn’t recognize it. But you! You’re still alive!” The urge to hug the colonel—the general—nearly overwhelmed him.

Perrin must have seen that in his eyes. He reached over and squeezed his shoulder. “I’ve always felt badly about never saying a proper goodbye to you. I’m quite happy to see you again, Jon. I’ve been worried about you.”

“Really, sir?” He hoped the colonel-general didn’t hear his voice quavering.

“Of course. Of all my soldiers, you had the greatest potential. Even Mahrree saw that.”

Jon swallowed. “Your wife, sir? Is she . . .”

“Perfectly fine and healthy, Jon. So is my son, my son-in-law, my daughter, and my *granddaughter*.”

Jon’s shoulders sagged in relief. “A granddaughter. Congratulations, sir.”

“She’s a lot like her grandfather, too,” Shem said. “Black curling hair, big brown eyes, and the loudest voice you’ve ever heard.”

Perrin glared good-naturedly at his friend but added, “She’s absolutely adorable. Yes, I admit it—I said adorable.”

“Sir,” Jon said, “you should know that Captain Thorne was most anxious to receive news about your daughter. He was sure you abandoned her in the forest, or that she gave birth somewhere. *To a boy*.” He cringed, worried about the colonel-general’s reaction, and decided not to tell him that Thorne thought it would be *his* son.

“So that’s what he’s thinking?” Perrin scoffed. “We suspected he was after Jaytsy, and probably my *grandson*? And then what?”

Jon shrugged. “Sir, I’m not sure. He’s given us three weeks to find proof of something, and we’ve spent about five days so far.”

“So two more weeks, then, before he expects them back?” Shem said, rubbing his smooth chin. “That gives us time to come up with something.”

“Sirs, please—exactly where are we? And what happened that night in the forest last year?”

Shem shook his head, but Perrin nodded.

“No, Perrin,” Shem said. “You can’t explain it to him. He already knows more than he can handle. When he goes back, he’ll never be able—”

“That’s why he’s not going back, Shem,” Perrin said steadily,

looking Jon in the eyes. “He’s staying here, with us. There’s nothing back in the world for him, right Jon?”

Aside from his bucket-living great aunt who didn’t recognize him? “Well, not really—”

Shem stood up abruptly. “Perrin, I put up with this taking of the lieutenants just to appease you, but we can’t keep them like . . . like kittens! If they don’t return to Thorne—”

“—he’ll assume they died in the forest,” Perrin decided. “We’ll take their clothes and tear them to shreds, sprinkle some deer blood on them, leave them somewhere obvious so the fort will discover them and assume that a bear ate them!” He grinned. “Worked for us.”

Shem threw his hands in the air. “But it *didn’t* work, Perrin! It was a huge mess! And if Thorne’s been holding on to whatever delusions he’s imaging for this long, he’ll keep trying to find Jaytsy.”

Now Perrin stood up and put his hands on his waist. “How many people have you stolen out of the world over the past years?”

Shem cocked his head toward Offra. “Why do you insist on exposing him to even more? What kind of danger are you trying to put him in? I’ve told you before, we limit knowledge to protect—”

“He’s one of us, Shem! I’m not sending Jon back to that world. To Thorne? To Genev? What kind of existence is that? We snatch the worthy ones out of there. No one’s more worthy than Jon Offra.”

Jon, fascinated by the argument overhead, blushed at the compliment.

“I agree!” Shem said loudly back. “But we can’t be sure that—”

“General?” a voice interrupted the argument. The man called Winter said, “The other one is starting to come around. Do you want us to remove the bag from his head?”

Perrin and Shem both sighed and looked apologetically at the other.

“We’ll finish this discussion later,” Perrin nodded to his friend.

Shem nodded back once. “In private.”

Perrin turned to Jon. “What’s Radan hoping to accomplish?”

“He was transferred to Scrub, right after you died—after you vanished,” Jon corrected himself. “He wants to get out of there. I think he’s got some plans, but he hasn’t shared them with me. Actually, he hasn’t shared *anything* with me.”

“So he may have his own agenda, and not just Lemuel’s?” Shem speculated. “Thorne’s being undercut on every side, isn’t he?”

“Good,” Perrin said with a cold smile. “But it sounds like Radan

“This isn’t Idumea coming, is it?”

wouldn’t initially be too interested in staying with us, does it?”

Jon shook his head. “No, but sir, I’ll stay! I don’t even know where I am, but anywhere with you sirs is better than the world.”

Perrin turned to Shem. “Now how can we argue with that?”

Shem rubbed his forehead, for once. “Please, Perrin—let’s deal with Radan right now and leap over one canyon at a time.”

“Just relax here,” Perrin said, putting his hand on Jon’s shoulder and squeezing it. “We’ll get back to you. If you need anything, just ask. Food, water, clean clothes—we can get you anything.”

Jon gripped the general’s arm. “Thank you, sir! I certainly have missed you.”

Perrin winked at him, and he and Shem slipped out the door.

Jon sighed, sat back against the wooden wall, and closed his eyes in sheer contentment.

Perrin headed for the reception area where Radan was being held, but Shem caught his arm.

“No,” he said.

“No what?” Perrin asked.

“You’re not going to see Radan. Not yet.”

“But—”

“Look, Radan’s not Jon. When, at *any* point of serving with Radan, did you find him to *not* be an opportunistic and self-serving rat?”

“That’s rather harsh—”

“Well?”

Perrin shrugged. “Never felt I could trust him further than I could throw him,” he admitted.

“Exactly. Even Jon doesn’t know why Radan’s here. Shouldn’t that give you cause for alarm? We need to find out his agenda first, before he even knows we’re here.”

Perrin fidgeted. “Uh, he *may* have already seen me. And heard me.”

Shem clenched his teeth before saying, “You spoke to them before they were rendered unconscious?”

Perrin swallowed.

“All we can hope,” Shem quietly seethed, “is that Radan won’t remember. So stand back here, where we can listen. And *only* listen,” he emphasized.



Radan could tell his hands were bound with rope, even without seeing them. The old potato bag over his face prevented that. It was obvious what had happened: he and Offra had been captured by Guarders. His head pounded from the blow he'd received to knock him unconscious, and for all he knew he'd been there for hours.

He opened his eyes. Through the rough weave of the cloth he could just make out a few shapes and light. It was still day, but the shadows around him suggested he was indoors. Likely a secret camp.

"We know you're awake," said a harsh voice. "Why are you here?"

"I'm just looking," Radan answered honestly. "My friend and I were exploring, and we—"

"Lies!" the voice bellowed right in his ear.

Radan flinched as the word bounced around in his aching head.

"No one explores! No one gets through the forest! How'd you do that?"

"It took us days," Radan said. "We moved carefully and slowly. We're just interested in exploring. We didn't intend to find any—"

"LIES AGAIN!" the voice screeched. "How stupid do you think we are?"

"I don't know," Radan said. "Stupid enough to bring me to your camp?" He fully expected to be slapped or kicked for that answer.

But instead he heard a low chuckle come from another part of the room. "Good point," that voice said quietly.

So that's how they were playing it, Radan decided. Bad Guarder, Good Guarder. They practiced something like that at the fort in Scrub, ever since the idiot commandant took over. The problem was, no officer ever knew who was supposed to be "good" and who was supposed to be "bad." Everyone wanted their chance to beat the villagers instead.

"How did you get through the boulder field?" the first voice demanded in his ear.

"We found a path. Took us forever to get through, though. Kept getting lost. But we prevailed, because we're explorers."

"Looking for what?!"

"I guess we're looking for you," Radan said as casually as he

“This isn’t Idumea coming, is it?”

could, squinting through the mesh to see his captors. He could almost discern the outline of his interrogator. “Always wanted to know who might be up here, *guarding* this land.”

“It’s enough, it’s enough,” the voice from the corner said. “Release him.”

Radan felt the ropes be untied, and someone help him up, not unkindly. The cloth bag over his head was removed, and he found himself face to face with a little old man, who grinned at him.

“Tell me I at least had you worried for a moment.”

Radan blinked rapidly at the brightness around him. “You’re more fearsome in voice than in appearance,” he said to the tiny grandfather.

“I know!”

“Who are you people?” Radan demanded.

“Well, I tend to do the cooking—” started the ancient man.

“So where the slag am I?” Radan noticed four more men, larger, younger, and stronger, dressed in green and brown mottled clothing, standing guard.

In front of him stood a middle-aged man who said, “Now, now, lieutenant: We don’t allow that kind of language here. This isn’t a profane fort, but a sanctuary.”

“You know who I am?” Radan swallowed.

“We do. My name is Winter, and you’re Lieutenant Radan. We know of everyone in the world,” he said smoothly. “Now, why have you left that world?”

He didn’t know how to respond as he stared up into the five faces watching him closely. The little old man had shuffled off somewhere, and in the distance Radan thought he’d heard pots clanking.

“Where’s my companion?” Radan demanded.

“Here,” Offra said, standing unsteadily at a door. Strangely, he seemed rather happy. “Can you believe it? They actually exist!”

“And who is *they*?” Radan asked sharply, glaring at his captors.

Winter smiled vaguely. “*They* are us. And you are now very far away from home. Would you be so kind as to tell us why you are here?” He said it politely, but his eyes were cold and hard as he studied Radan intently.

Radan’s instinct was to shout and fight and thrash, but something else was tapping at the back of his head, an understanding that *none* of this was expected, *none* of this was right . . .

And . . .

And just what kind of promotion would Snyd and Mal bestow upon the officer who discovered that, under the very nose of High General Thorne, the Guarders were again rising in power?

Radan knew they were waiting for an answer, and he frantically came up with one.

“You say you know who I am. Therefore you must also know about the world I’ve just left. Since Colonel Shin died, everything’s fallen apart. I’ve tried to be a loyal officer, but I was in the forest the night the Shins were lost. I saw things that *didn’t quite seem right*.”

He watched their eyes closely, and thought he saw veiled approval and agreement.

“I need to know the truth,” he told them, with as much sincerity as he could muster, “and I’m willing to do anything to find out what really happened. Even if the truth is seemingly impossible to believe, I want to believe.”

The man called Winter, who hovered over him, relaxed slightly. “Nice little speech there, Lieutenant Radan. We’ll see just how much you mean that.”

In the next room, Perrin elbowed Shem eagerly, and started for the door. But Shem caught his arm and swung him back.

“Didn’t you hear him?” Perrin whispered urgently. “He’s willing to believe the impossible. Let’s show him *me*, the impossible!”

“Opportunistic,” Shem reminded him. “Self-serving. Radan’s going to say whatever he needs to say. *He is not ready*.”

Radan tried to sit up, but Winter shook his head. “You’ve been down for quite a long time. Your body needs time to adjust from the effects of what we did to you.”

“And what *did* you do to me?” Radan asked nervously.

Winter smiled. “Nothing lasting. You may, however, remember a few things strangely, so don’t rely too much on your last memories. What do you remember last, by the way?”

Radan pondered. Rocks, pouring down on him. Then a man in black . . .? He shrugged.

“This isn’t Idumea coming, is it?”

“Boys,” Winter said to his guards, “we need to show the lieutenants just where they are. If you would be so kind as to accompany each of them?”

Winter led the way out of the narrow building, and the guards stood on either side of Offra and Radan as they followed him.

But Radan was plotting, thinking, and memorizing as much as he could. Remember everything, remember everything—

He blinked rapidly as they were led into the blinding sunshine. Shielding his eyes, and ignoring the pounding headache, he stared in alarm at what he saw.

On every side mountain peaks jutted upwards, completely ringing him. The grasses he stood in were damp, and sections were still covered in snow. To his left he saw a large blue pool, similar to what dotted the landscape in Idumea and Pools, but no steam was rising off of it.

“Are we on top of the mountains?” Radan dared to ask.

“Yes. Ever been sedated before?”

He shook his head.

Offra gaped. “This is . . . amazing!”

“This is also,” Winter told them, as their guards stood exceptionally close to the officers, “very far away from anywhere you know. We want you to realize that while we won’t keep you tied up, you are, essentially, our prisoners. There’s nowhere for you to go, so don’t even bother, unless you wish to die. If the elements don’t get you, the wolves will.

“However,” Winter continued, his tone convivial, “can you imagine a more beautiful place for your confinement?”

Radan glanced at him. “And for how long will we be confined here?”

“Well, we’re not too sure about that yet,” Winter admitted. “You see, our *men in charge* are still debating as to what to do with you.” Seeing Radan’s worry, Winter added, “Your life is secure while you are with us. We don’t want to harm you. Just . . . do the best things for all involved.”

Radan knew an ambiguous answer when he heard one. He was the king of them. “So when do we meet these *men in charge*?” The identity of the leader of the Guardians, revealed to Snyder, would, undoubtedly, propel Radan past the promotion of major. He just might be Lieutenant Colonel Radan by next moon.

“In time,” Winter said easily. “In time, I’m sure. Until then, the

men in charge have tasks for you.”

Radan tried to hold back his glower. No doubt he and Offra were about to do with something menial, such as hammering apart some of the boulders around them—

“Do you boys enjoy reading?” Winter asked.

“Excuse me?”

Offra chuckled. “Sure do! What do we get to read, Mr. Winter?”

“History,” he said. “The way *we* know it to be.”

“You mean,” Radan blinked in surprise, “we’re going to do . . . homework?”

“Yep!” Winter said as he led them back to the strangest looking building Radan had ever seen.

Remember that it looks like a grove of trees, he told himself. A grove of trees—

“Because, boys,” Winter said, “your education is just beginning.”



Later that night, as the lieutenants rested in nets in the sleeping quarters, Offra said, “So that historian guy actually made it all the way over to the ruins? And he spent weeks there, making rubbings of engravings and tracing pictures of strange animals and wandering around massive block buildings? King Querul the First’s soldiers were with him, too? Wow. They never told us *any* of that in school.” He chuckled ruefully.

“No,” Radan said shortly. “They didn’t.”

“And that guy Terry? Terrell? What was his name? Who wrote all those stories?”

Radan sighed. “Have to admit, seeing a book that’s over a hundred years old was pretty surprising.”

“Elephants,” Offra whispered. “I remember something about them when I was just a small boy. Never told us in school, though. And those other animals?”

“The stories were pretty *outrageous*,” Radan hinted.

“But I think that was the point,” Offra said, rolling over to see Radan. “Why they showed us that book, to show that what’s real is different than what we’ve been taught. All that stuff is . . .” he yawned. “I’m too tired. Anyway, something like that.”

“Yes,” Radan said slowly, “something like that. Still, making us

“This isn’t Idumea coming, is it?”

draw pictures of those animals the book described? I felt like I was six years old again.”

“Yeah,” Offra said drowsily, “that was kind of fun.”

“To be treated like children? If you say so. I still want to meet the *men in charge*, who think we can’t handle anything more adult.”

“Oh, we will.” Offra’s voice was drifting away. “We will . . .”

Radan stared up into the darkness as Offra began to snore lightly.

That old historian’s name was Terryp. One of the many details Radan recited to himself, to repeat at a later date. He’d taken a few notes, too, and secured them in his sock.

There were a lot of things they’d never been told in school. At east, according to Winter and the guards. Lots of things the world had decided to *forget*.

Why?

That was the question Winter told them to ponder tonight. Why did the world *conveniently forget*?

But that wasn’t the question Radan was pondering. His mind was fixated instead on, *Who is lying, these Guardians or the old kings?*

Who should he believe: these people who want to change everything he knew about the world, or the world which will reward him handsomely for revealing that the Guardians still exist?

He didn’t come up with an answer before he drifted off to sleep, where he dreamed about monkeys and elephants swinging and stomping around the big Administrators’ table in their headquarters in Idumea.

Outside their door, Shem glared at Perrin. “Told you treating them like children would be demeaning,” he whispered.

“But Jon enjoyed it,” Perrin defended. “And so did Radan, he just won’t admit it. You’re the one who told me to take ‘baby steps’ to get them ready for what we can offer.”

Shem groaned quietly. “When I said ‘baby steps,’ what I meant was . . . oh, never mind. You’ll do things your way, no matter what I advise.”

“Tomorrow we graduate them a bit,” Perrin promised. “We’ll implement some of the lessons your scouts teach people in the world, about the Queruls and their true nature, and Guide Pax.”

Shem eyed him. “Will you let Winter teach it as it *should* be

taught?”

“Of course,” Perrin said.

“And what if Radan rejects it?”

Perrin scoffed. “I was spying on them when they were drawing their pictures. You didn’t see how much he got into sketching his monkeys.”

“Just because he likes the idea of monkeys doesn’t mean he’s going to believe and accept Salem. We don’t even HAVE monkeys!”

“It’ll all work,” Perrin whispered. “Just trust me.”

“You’ve never done this before! Trust *me*. We have years of experience—”

“But *I know* how my soldiers think, Shem,” Perrin interrupted. “The entire reason for having an army is to keep people safe. If the world *were* safe, we all would’ve been out of a job, and frankly, I think most soldiers wish they were. We serve only because the world needed someone to do it. But deep down, we wish we could be something else, something more. I always wanted to be a builder, you know that. And even though you were in the army for seventeen years, I knew your heart wasn’t *entirely* in it.”

Shem had to bob his head in reluctant agreement.

“Those men want something more, too,” Perrin insisted. “They want meaning. They came here looking for something else. While I don’t yet fully trust Radan, I believe he’s looking for something more than serving in Scrub under Mal’s commandants. Who, really, would want *that*?”

“No one,” Shem admitted.

“Shem, I serve now as a general because I believe in Salem and all that it represents. It’s like I suddenly see dozens of new colors I never knew existed! I want to do that for these boys—open their eyes, show them something fantastic. These young officers are struggling to figure out what they’re supposed to be doing. Shem, those boys are me, twenty-five years ago. Twenty-five long, miserable, bloody years. If I can spare them that existence, and give them this life instead, then I’ll do whatever it takes.”

Shem could do nothing more but sigh.

In the morning, Radan slipped out of his fishing net before Offra was awake, and made his way to the eating table in the long room.

“This isn’t Idumea coming, is it?”

Because he’d woken up with a plan.

Winter was already up, seated to breakfast. “Have a good night, Lieutenant?” he asked.

Radan hid his smile. He was hoping for an opportunity like this. “Actually, no, sir.” He sat down across from Winter. “I had a hard time sleeping because my mind just couldn’t relax.”

“Understandable. If you’d like, I’ve got a tea I can give you tonight to help with that.”

Radan smiled. “That’d be appreciated, thank you. But why I couldn’t relax was that the world was too much on my mind. Now that I’m some distance away from it—”

Don’t ask how far, don’t ask how far, his brain reminded him.

“—I somehow *feel* it more, how terrible it is.” He made sure to stare at his hands as he said that. “You told us to think about why the world decided to forget about Terryp and the ruins and those strange animals, and I have to be honest—I don’t know *how* to think, about anything anymore. Does this make sense?”

Winter nodded sadly. “Perfect sense. You may not realize this, but I used to be *in* the world. I know a lot of how it works, and I’ve heard a great deal about how it is now. I’m sorry you’ve had to be a part of it.”

Radan wanted to shout, *How do you know how bad it is?* But he had to play this smart.

“I was up most of the night with the idea of different places, different stories, even a *different life*,” Radan said, allowing for a little tremor in his voice. “Like you gentlemen have here. If I could escape the world, and then maybe find ways to help it . . .”

He shifted his focus on Winter, and thought, *Open and honest, open and honest*. That was what he wanted the scout to see, even though Radan was fishing, recklessly and wildly, worried that he’d scare away the trout.

But the big catch across from him wasn’t wary. In fact, he was smiling faintly. “That’s what we want for you as well, Radan. But there’s a lot you have to learn, first.”

“That’s what I want,” Radan said earnestly. “I want you to teach me *everything*. And, sir,” he paused for dramatic effect, “this sounds outlandish, but . . . never mind. I shouldn’t have said anything—”

“No, please, go ahead. You can’t surprise me.”

Radan offered him a weak smile. “But I don’t want to *offend*—”

Winter smiled generously. “You can’t do that, either. Please,

what do you want to say?”

He braced himself and said, not quite looking Winter in the eyes, “Despite my best efforts, I find myself . . . *trusting* you. Not the others, just yet, but there’s something about *you* that I just . . . *feel*. This is embarrassing, but in a way, you remind me of my uncle. Oh, I’m sure I’m blushing right now . . .”

Winter chuckled. “Not at all. I’m quite flattered.”

Ease up, ease up, Radan told himself. “I shouldn’t have said that, I’m sorry. But . . . I’m glad I met you. No matter what happens to me,” he looked up and met Winter’s eyes with a gaze that pinned the man like a butterfly on display, “I’m glad I met you.”

Winter leaned back. “I’m glad I met you, too, Radan.”

On his way to relieve himself in the washing room, with Winter following his prisoner, Radan smiled internally.

One thing he learned from Lemuel Thorne in the time the captain was trying to impress the colonel, was that older men don’t *want* to be impressed. They see that threatening, as self-serving, as one-up-manship.

What older men want, Radan knew, was to be flattered, to be idolized by the younger generation. It worked on General Snyd, it worked on his commandant in Scrub, and it was working on this middle-aged man whistling a happy ditty as he stood on guard outside of the door.

The first words Mahrree wanted to blurt were, “He just got back from five days in the mountains!” But she held it in as Shem gave her the news.

Instead she just whimpered, “*Weeks?*”

Shem sighed. “He thinks in about four weeks both of them will be ready to join Salem. He doesn’t feel he should leave them during their transition time. While Jon knows he’s there, Radan still doesn’t. Until we know his intentions better, Perrin and I will stay in hiding.”

“But this isn’t the way people are normally taught about Salem, is it?” Calla asked, her arms still around her husband. She had come back from Norden yesterday, surprised to find that her husband was now at the glacial fort. Mahrree had invited her over for breakfast and they were commiserating about being husbandless when Shem arrived.

“This isn’t Idumea coming, is it?”

Mahrree tried not to watch them, but she couldn’t help it. Shem and Calla seemed to forget they were still clinging to each other in an awkward embrace, trying to keep her belly to the side. They talked easily with Mahrree as if hugging was a normal part of every conversation.

Shem stroked his wife’s black hair. “No, this is not the way it’s done,” he said, irritated. “I spoke to Guide Gleace before I came here, and he just sighed and said, ‘They’re Perrin’s men. Let Perrin deal with them.’ We’re worried that this won’t end well.”

Mahrree nodded sadly. “Jon is a possibility, but Radan? He can’t be kept here against his will.”

“We tried that once, with Walickiah,” Shem reminded her. To Calla he said, “That was the Guarder lieutenant sent to Edge years ago. He was supposed to eliminate Jaytsy, Peto, and even Hycymum Peto, one at a time, to slowly destroy Perrin. He really believed he was on a noble errand. But I kidnapped him away, and we changed his name to Lickiah and changed his mind, too. Or so we thought. He managed to stay here a few years. But something inside him snapped, and he took off. Those early Guarders took their oaths very seriously, and he was the only one who didn’t commit suicide when he was captured. Still he died, we assume, by his own doing. I’m worried that Radan will be as unstable, but Perrin isn’t.”

Mahrree squinted. “Why? Perrin’s pretty perceptive about people. You don’t think he’ll see—”

Shem was shaking his head. “This morning Radan spoke to Winter, seemingly intent and excited about learning what we have to offer.”

“And you are . . . skeptical?” Mahrree guessed.

“To put it mildly. But Perrin’s convinced, and because Perrin’s convinced, so is Winter and everyone else.” Shem sighed in aggravation. “Winter and the others are good, solid men. But they haven’t been in the world recently, nor were they there as long as I was. I *know* the world. They’re only slightly acquainted with it.”

“If Guide Gleace heard you,” Mahrree began, “he’d be calling you his Cynical Duck.”

“*Someone* has to be cynical,” Shem grouched.

Calla regarded him uncertainly, never before seeing him this irritated. She did the best thing she could to help him, and leaned her head against his chest. “I’m going to miss you.”

He kissed the top of her head. “I’m coming home again tonight,

and every night, because why would I want to sleep in the nets when I could be with you in—”

“*Ahem*,” Mahrree cleared her throat loudly to remind Shem she was still in the room.

He glanced sheepishly at her and nodded once. “Now,” he rubbed his wife’s belly, “should something happen with *you* . . .”

“Don’t worry. Still about seven more weeks, and I’ve got company,” Calla tried to say brightly. “Lilla’s staying.”

Shem’s eyebrows went up. “Really?”

“Papa was up early this morning, ready to head north, but Lilla begged to stay. He reminded her that she was supposed to go on that big youth trip to Terryp’s land in a few days—”

“Everyone gets to go but me,” Mahrree murmured.

“—and Lilla said she could just go with our group here and meet up with the Norden one along the way.”

Shem squinted. “Your father agreed to that?”

“She wasn’t the only one petitioning,” Mahrree said with a smirk. “My son was right by her side, assuring Mr. Trovato that he would *personally* watch out for her.”

For the first time Shem began to smile. “Oh *really*? And where are they now?”

Calla and Mahrree exchanged the same look.

“We don’t know!” Calla admitted.

“Yes,” Mahrree said heavily. “Mr. Trovato gave his permission, Peto grabbed Lilla’s hand and said, ‘Thanks, Mr. Trovato! Lilla, I want to show you something,’ and the next thing we know they’re out the door. They didn’t even have breakfast, which, for Peto, is rather alarming.” She folded her arms.

Shem chuckled. “Remember Mahrree, Salem’s a safe place.”

“Oh, it’s not Salem I’m worried about.”

“Mahrree! Peto is an exceptional young man—” Shem started, but was cut off.

“—who was raised in the world, Shem. Yes, Perrin and I made it very clear to him what we expect, but the world was also just as direct in demonstrating how young men can treat young women. I was counting on Perrin to come home and give my son some unforgettable reminders.”

Calla patted Mahrree’s shoulder. “That’s why I’m here,” she said. As calm and gentle as Calla was, there was a firmness in her eyes that assured Mahrree she knew how to speak to young men as

“This isn’t Idumea coming, is it?”

well as Mahrree.

“Thanks, Calla. I suppose between the two of us trying to keep track of them, we should have enough entertainment while our husbands are living in the mountains.”

Shem nodded. “Perrin wanted a few changes of clothes. If you wouldn’t mind . . .?”

She winked at Shem and Calla. “May take me *at least* ten minutes to gather his things,” she hinted. “I’ll be upstairs.”

She gave them fifteen minutes before creeping quietly down the stairs. She couldn’t help but watch them again, kissing tenderly in her gathering room, Shem’s hand remaining on the bump that was his baby. It was probably a good thing Perrin wasn’t there to see them or he would be in a permanent cringe by now.

Mahrree coughed politely and continued more noisily down the stairs with Perrin’s clothes in a bag, but the Zenoses remained locked in each other’s arms.

It was the rapid pounding on the front door that finally broke them apart.

Mahrree opened it to see a scout in mottled clothing. “Is Assistant Zenos here, Mrs. Shin?”

“He is,” she gestured for the scout to come in. “He’s just . . . explaining the situation to us.” She glanced at Calla who blushed as she untangled herself from her husband.

Shem grinned out of sheer embarrassment.

The scout tactfully remained on the front porch. “Sir, we’re ready to leave whenever you are,” he called.

“I’ll be out in a couple of minutes,” Shem told him.

The scout headed back to his horse while Shem sighed at his wife. “Remember, should anything happen while I’m away, you can send Peto or Lilla—no, you probably can’t. You can send one of my more *reliable* nephews to the scouts, and they can come get me. Within a few hours, I’ll be here.”

“I know,” she smiled bravely. “I always wondered what it would be like being married to someone in the army. I guess I’m getting a little taste of that now. I only wish I could watch you—”

“No!” Shem said loudly, causing his wife to jump. “Sorry, but Calla, I want to keep you as far away from the world as possible. I wish it wasn’t as close as the canyon behind us, and I really wish it wasn’t dragging me away from you right now. I never want you to be exposed to any of it.”

“Not even to see the sergeant major in action?”

“Especially not!”

“I’ll keep a close eye on her, Shem,” Mahrree promised. “She’ll be fine.”

Calla smiled at her husband. “Go, Shemmy,” she whispered. “You have a long ride ahead of you. And I need to put away all the baby things my mother sent with me.”

Shem ran his fingers through her hair one more time. “All right, My Love. I’ll be back tonight. I’m sorry to leave you—”

“Remember, it’s Perrin’s fault!” Mahrree told them.

The Zenoses shared one last kiss, and Shem patted Mahrree gratefully on the back as she handed him Perrin’s pack of clothes.

The two women stood on the front porch watching as Shem and the scout rode off.

Mahrree put her arm around Calla. “Sorry that my husband is taking away yours.”

“It’s all right, Mahrree. I have a feeling this won’t be the last time Shem—”

“You mean, *Shemmy*?”

Calla went pink. “—that *my husband* will be needed by someone else.”

“Calla was fine, right?” Perrin stood smugly in front of the stable doors at the glacial fort, his arms folded. “Just as I said, right? And she had a *wonderful* time in Norden and brought home plenty of baby things to put away.”

Shem glowered at Perrin and threw his pack at him. It smacked him in the face, but not hard enough to wipe off his smirk.

“Not too happy about things, though,” Shem said as he dismounted.

“I think it’s *you* who’s not too happy about things,” Perrin smiled slyly, shouldering his pack. “I keep telling you, it’s good for your wife to miss you a bit. Makes the reunions that much sweeter.”

“I’m going back tonight,” Shem growled. “I’m not spending another night in the nets.”

“Figured as much,” Perrin chuckled. “The lieutenants are reading some of the early histories right now, then they’ll make a list of what’s different from what they’ve been taught.”

“This isn’t Idumea coming, is it?”

“And I’m sure they’re *thrilled* to be up here in the middle of nowhere doing homework!” Shem snapped as he marched into stables, where he and Perrin had been hiding.

Insulted, Perrin jogged to catch up. “Hey, I thought it was a good idea. So did the scouts.”

“That’s because they’re loyal to a fault,” Shem said under his breath.

“What did, uh,” Perrin hesitated, “what did Guide Gleace think of my plan?”

Shem rounded on him. “Again, not too happy about things! But he said they’re your former men, so if you *insist* on being responsible about what happens with them, he’ll let you. He’s planning to come up here, though, to see what you’re up to, but his schedule’s not clear until next week.”

Perrin nodded in what he hoped was a conciliatory manner. “I’ll make him proud of me, I promise. Just like I promised you.”

“It’s not up to you, Perrin!” Shem gestured wildly. “Why can’t you recognize that? You can’t control what they decide to believe. No matter how persuasive, no matter how much they respect you, they can still reject everything you say. That’s their freedom, and in Salem, we don’t take a person’s freedom or try to force our beliefs down their throats!”

“I’m not forcing anything,” said Perrin calmly.

“You’re holding them hostage, do you realize that?” Shem nearly wailed, but kept his voice down so it wouldn’t drift over to the fort to where the lieutenants were studying. “While it’s certainly not back-breaking labor in a dreary mine, but instead reading books in a beautiful setting, they are *still being forced*.”

“So how is this different than the others you stole out of the world?” Perrin demanded. “Like Walickiah?”

“He was out to kill your children and mother-in-law!” Shem told him. “We *had* to steal him away to avoid him murdering your family! But these lieutenants merely wandered too far, and we *could’ve* directed them back without them ever knowing about us, but *no*—you insisted otherwise. So tell me, what contingency do you have in place should one or both of them decide to go back to Edge?”

“They won’t.” Perrin was full of confidence. “They’ll stay.”

“Already you’ve decided their fate,” Shem scoffed.

“No, no, no. I promise you, they’ll want to stay, once they fully understand—”

“What they will ‘understand’ may not be anything you want them to. You may not think you’re forcing their minds, but your mind is already made up! There’s no alternative for them!”

Perrin’s shoulders sagged. “I suppose you had a few in the world who didn’t want to listen—”

“All the time,” Shem said. “More failures than we like to remember. And quite recently, in fact. I didn’t want to tell you,” his voice quieted, “but we’ve had a former rector and some scouts trying to reach Deck’s uncle, aunt, and cousin in Mountseen. We were hoping they might be able to come join us—”

“That’d be fantastic!” Perrin said. “Deck would have family, and—” Realizing that Shem didn’t share his enthusiasm, Perrin asked, “What’s happened?”

“They won’t even talk. Seems his Uncle Holling spent some time discussing things with Roarin’ Yordin after the incident, before Gari was sent to Sands. Our man was moving very slowly with the Briters, and mentioned that sometimes we are fed incorrect information. Well, my name came up, and . . .”

When Shem didn’t continue, Perrin winced. “Didn’t go well?”

“Holling Briter said he’d kill me in a heartbeat for causing his nephew’s death,” Shem whispered. “His wife Lilla and son Atlee were just as bitter. There was no hope of opening their minds, at least not yet. We’ll try again in a year or two, for Deck’s sake, but . . . just don’t tell him, Perrin,” Shem pleaded. “We may never have any success with them, and I don’t want Deck getting his hopes up.”

Disheartened, Perrin said, “Understood.”

“Is it really?” Shem’s gaze turned sharp. “*Is it* understood that some people will refuse to see a light, even if it’s shining in their eyes? People will believe what they want to believe, Perrin. A mind forced against its will is not compliant; it’s just waiting to rebel.”

Perrin grabbed his shoulders. “But not today. This will all work out, Shem—trust me.”

Someone cleared his throat by the doors. “Gentlemen? Perhaps keep your voices down a bit, please? The valley echoes, you know.”

“Sorry, Winter,” Perrin said to his appointed Teacher of the Lieutenants. He brightened up. “So tell Shem what you think—how are the lieutenants responding? Go ahead, be honest.”

Shem watched Winter closely.

The surgeon fidgeted. “Honestly, I wish Varteeya were here, because he’s the only other current scout who served as long as I had in

“This isn’t Idumea coming, is it?”

the world, and I’d like his opinion about the integrity of these boys, but . . .”

He hesitated as he eyed the two men, eagerly awaiting his evaluation.

“But . . . I think there’s potential. Great potential. Offra’s like a child in a sweets shop, and Radan impressed me with his sincerity. He feels disaffected by the world, and he wants a remedy for what aches his soul.”

Perrin beamed. “Spoken like a true doctor.”

But Shem merely said, “Uh-huh.” The glare he aimed at Winter suggested he’d just been betrayed.

Winter shrank a little under Shem’s gaze, and shrugged at Perrin, his new ally. “I don’t know what else to say, General.”

“Say that you think my approach has merit,” Perrin said cheerfully. “Because I think *you’re* right in what you told me earlier—it doesn’t do enough to just heal a body; you have to heal the spirit. And that’s what we’re doing for Radan and Jon. So when we reintroduce ourselves next week—”

“Next week!” Shem exclaimed. “That’s too soon—”

“—they’ll be thrilled to go to Salem because they’ll want to see what other surprises are in store,” Perrin declared. “Just as I enjoyed all the surprises—”

“HA!” Shem threw his hands in the air. “No, *you did not!* Your memory’s as impaired as your judgment! On our first Holy Day here, you were ready to strangle me, or don’t you remember losing your temper just before Gleace appointed you as our general, because you were frustrated with all of the *surprises?*”

“But Shem,” Winter ventured cautiously, remembering the story about these two men getting into a fight in a stable years before and destroying most of it. And while Winter love pulling out his stitching needle, the lieutenants were using the surgery area as a school room right now. “I think General Shin *might* be right, here. Offra, I have no doubt about. I can feel his heart already. I know your worry is about Radan, but I find him very focused, and he asks such deep and probing questions. He’s even taking notes.”

“Which is *exactly*,” Shem rounded on him, “how someone who *wants* to us to think *he’s willing* to join us would behave!”

Perrin rolled his eyes. “And how would he behave if he *really is sincere* about everything? Huh?”

Shem hesitated. “The same way,” he had to admit.

“There you go,” said Perrin certainly. “Believe the best about him. That’s Salem’s way, right?”

“But *he’s not a Salemite*,” Shem fumed. “One of the first things I learned in the world is to expect the worst from everyone.”

“Why are you so skeptical, Shem?” Perrin asked, his own patience growing as brittle as Shem’s.

“Because I spent seventeen years in the world, Perrin, and by your side! You taught me to be skeptical!”

“And you’re supposed to be teaching me about being a Salemite!” Perrin countered.

Winter exhaled in what he hoped was a calming manner, “Voices, gentlemen. Echoes. Narrow valley . . .”

Perrin and Shem glared at each other, so sure of their own ideas that eventually they said, at the same time, “Just trust *me*.”

Winter, shaking his head, walked out of the stables. The lieutenants were a much calmer, safer set of men to supervise.

Chapter 33--“You see what you want to see, Perrin.”

Mahrree was at the Zenoses when Shem rode up to the house that evening.

Calla burst into a grin and Mahrree patted her on the back. “I’ll finish up dinner. You go greet your husband.”

Mahrree giggled when she heard Shem burst into the side door. What he did with his wife, Mahrree didn’t know, but she heard Calla announce loudly, “. . . and Mahrree came over to help me make dinner. She’s in the kitchen, *right now!*”

“But I’ll be leaving,” Mahrree called out, “as soon as I get this bread out of the oven and hear an update on my husband.”

Shem came into the kitchen with a self-conscious smile on his face. “Thanks, Mahrree. I appreciate you, uh . . .”

“Making dinner or leaving you two alone? And Lilla’s over at my house putting something together for Peto. We’re a little scrambled up around here. I’m sure it won’t take much to persuade Lilla to stay at our place for a while so you two can have your privacy.”

Shem was purple with embarrassment as Calla put her arms around him. “Um, you don’t, uh . . . that’s not—”

Mahrree chuckled as she took the bread out of the oven. “I *really* need to leave you two alone . . . So, Shem you still think there’s not much progress?”

Shem shrugged. “And I seem to be the only one. Jon is fascinated and willing, as I suspected he would be, but so is Radan. Personally, I think he’s playing them all, and that he’s just gathering information to share with *someone else* later.”

Mahrree wiped her hands on her apron. “Perrin knows soldiers are duplicitous like that. He’ll see through it—”

“But he’s not. Mahrree, he’s buying Radan’s little act. And he’s got the scouts convinced that Radan’s sincere. We spy on them and

listen in, and every time I think Radan's pulling a fast one, Perrin's convinced he's genuine."

"Oh dear," Mahrree sighed. "I'm really not sure what to think. Perrin's not usually gullible . . . are you *sure* Radan's not coming around?"

She didn't expect to see the antagonism rise in his eyes so quickly. "You too? You, too, don't see it—"

"I don't see anything, Shem," she reminded him. "I'm miles away. I'm merely trying to put together a puzzle for which I don't get to see most of the pieces. All I'm saying is that Perrin's a very good judge of character. *Usually*. Perhaps . . . perhaps *you* are—"

"—Are too skeptical!?" he snapped.

Calla recoiled at his anger, but Mahrree smiled sadly. "Apparently you've been accused of that before, and quite recently. I'm sorry. I don't mean to doubt you, or my husband. Right now, I'm not on either of your sides. You have a difficult situation, no doubt. And I think you need to put all of that aside," she said. "Now sit down to dinner with your dear, sweet wife, and have a quiet evening with only her. The calming benefits of marriage, and all that," she added as Shem blushed. "Tell my husband tomorrow morning that his interns were most upset to hear he won't be back for a while, and that I'm keep myself quite occupied and that I don't miss him one bit. That's the best I can do for you, Shem. And now, I'll leave you two alone."

"Oh, I forgot about my interns," Perrin rubbed his chin the next morning. "And the hundreds of volunteers coming to help clear out brush . . . Well, I guess we'll just push back those plans a few weeks. And Mahrree's really all right with this? Keeping herself occupied?" He asked Shem. "Well, good," he decided. "It's about time she realized there's more to life than just adoring me."

Shem scoffed a laugh. "Keep telling yourself that."

"You seem to be in a better mood," Perrin hinted.

Shem ignored that and took his pack off of his horse. "What's the plan today for Offra and Radan?"

"Understood," Perrin chuckled quietly. "Been enjoying the calming benefits of marriage, I see." More loudly he said, "Winter's teaching them a modified first lesson, like the scouts do in the world. All about Querul and the Great War—"

“You see what you want to see, Perrin.”

“And how’s it going?” Shem asked as they walked into the stables to take care of his horse. “Wait, let me guess: both Jon and Radan are just *so enthusiastic* about it.”

“Of course they are,” Perrin said, a little surprised by Shem’s sarcasm.

“Perrin,” Shem sighed dramatically as he undid his horse’s saddle, “you’ve gone as rusty as those iron balls we buried. Radan’s playing all of you. He’s mimicking Jon’s behavior so that we’ll keep revealing more information. Once he has enough—and he’s got too much already—he’ll make a run for it.”

“That’s not it at all,” Perrin insisted. “He’s learning—”

“—everything he needs to bring back to the world the most compelling report that will get him promoted and placed somewhere more interesting than Scrub. Just think of what Qayin Thorne and Nicko Mal will do with that information.” Shem put a hand on his waist and beckoned to Perrin with the other. “Come on—give it to me. The great comeback.”

Perrin folded his arms and leaned against the wall. “You haven’t been here since yesterday afternoon. A lot can change in an evening. Radan really *is* trying to accept it all. I spied on him when he was talking to the other scouts.”

“You see what you want to see, Perrin. That’s a worldly problem that you haven’t yet left behind. When we look hard enough for what we want to see, we’ll see it every time. You’ll find that evidence, even if it doesn’t exist.”

“That argument could be made about anything!” Perrin insisted. “You could say that about the Creator, or visions of the guide—”

“That’s right!” Shem nodded. “Absolutely. I could be just as deceived by my own hopes and beliefs as anyone in the world. And to the world, I’m sure I appear deluded. But I derive great comfort from my ‘delusions,’ so why would I want to believe anything less?”

“So you think I’m delusional?” Perrin squinted.

Shem sighed. “I think all of us are delusional. Some more than others. But I do think that you’re seeing what you *hope* is there. You want this for Radan because it’s given you so much joy. But the nature of your heart is very different than Radan’s. He may not be ready for this for many years. You can’t change a heart. Only the owner of it can choose to have it changed, and even then he has to let the Creator in to finish the job.”

Perrin rubbed his forehead. “I’m going to prove you wrong,

Shem.”

“I sincerely hope so, Perrin.”



A week they'd been there.

Radan had been counting down not only the days, but the hours and minutes.

A week.

Reading histories and talking about the Creator who these Guarders believed was a real, immortal Being, not some grand manipulator who tried to control the world in the very early days.

Reading The Writings, which maintained that miracles still occurred—

Radan was going to need one, fast.

Captain Thorne would expect them back next week, but as agreeable as Radan had been, as open as he tried to appear, there was no evidence of the scouts letting him or Offra go anytime soon. No, apparently they had at least another two weeks of teaching—which would put them long past the time Thorne expected them to return. But tomorrow they'd meet the mysterious *men in charge*.

Radan had the nagging feeling that those men would decide his fate, and that being allowed to go back to the world would not be one of the choices.

Not that their confinement hadn't been . . . *pleasant*, he reflected reluctantly as he lay in his sleeping net and stared into the dark. Along with studying, they'd taken many walks around the small valley, learning about different shrubbery, terrain, what a glacier was and why it left that pristine body of water no one ever touched, and all kinds of scientific facts that no one in the world knew.

And Radan remembered it all.

Already Winter had provided so much information that Radan was sure he'd be appointed colonel when he presented it all, along with his meticulously recorded notes, to Snyder.

And he needed those notes, because stories and histories of what he knew, and what he was now learning, were swirling in his mind and crashing into each other, creating a chaos of thoughts.

He could now understand why Terryp and his stories were silenced by the Queruls, and the Administrators as well. You can't have bits of information floating around that run contrary to the current

“You see what you want to see, Perrin.”

political river; it would create a flooding mess.

Keeping the world flowing properly was the purpose of government; not trying to discover new things that confused everyone about what they already knew. So much “knowledge” needed to be regulated, or the entire harmony of the world could be in jeopardy.

And it was that so-called knowledge that Radan held suspect. Yes, they read fragile parchments from hundreds of years ago that claimed to hold the truth, but did they? Couldn’t the ancient writers have been just as manipulative as the current ones? How could anyone be sure of any truth?

They couldn’t. That was obvious.

Even Winter admitted it when Radan offhandedly brought up the subject. Naturally he had ready answer: Believe what rings true to you. Open your mind to let out all preconceived notions, then let the new ideas rattle around in there. Consider the possibilities and what they could mean, and why others chose to suppress them. Honestly analyze everything before accepting or dismissing it.

It was a long answer, too. Radan lost interest halfway through Winter’s earnest rambling, but Jon licked it all up.

Radan even caught Offra heading to the stables last evening, after receiving permission from Winter. When Radan asked why he went, Jon blushed and said he was going to pray, to sort out what he was feeling. When he came back, more than an hour later, he was smiling but his eyes were red and puffy. He’d said he’d had a “wonderful talk,” and was even more excited about joining these men committed to nothing. He *felt* it was right.

That’s when Radan knew his companion was too far gone; feelings were never to be trusted because they were too easily imagined and twisted. He’d learned that much from Lemuel Thorne. All you could rely upon were facts which . . . now that he thought about, were often based upon what someone *felt* was proven true—

Radan rubbed his eyes. He knew he was too exhausted, because some of the things they’d been telling him actually made sense.

And that was the trouble: when truth is mixed in with lies, how do you pick out what’s real? It was like trying to separate water from mud, a spoonful at a time.

The problem, he realized, was that he *liked* his life as it had been for the past twenty-five years. It was orderly, because others had decided long ago what was worth knowing. The sky was blue, and everyone knew what was “real.” Why mess it all up because someone

claims it's not "the truth"?

Besides, position and power awaited him in the world. What could these men offer him? Jerky and wildflowers?

Radan rolled over in his net, trying to get comfortable. He'd start looking for a way out, before he learned anything else that would mess up the tidiness of his brain.

There was only so much "truth" a man should have to take.

"Are you absolutely sure about doing this tomorrow?" Shem asked Perrin one more time as Shem readied his horse to head back to Salem for the night.

"Did you see his face this evening?" Perrin said. "The boy was positively beaming!"

"It's not Jon I'm worried about," Shem grumbled. "And I still don't think it's a good idea you two having your secret little meetings here. It makes Jon all too cheerful, and Radan will get suspicious."

Perrin waved that off. "Radan doesn't care. Jon tells him he's going to the stables to pray and meditate, and Radan has no desire to follow—"

"And isn't that telling?" Shem probed. "He's *not* at the same level of readiness, Perrin."

"Tomorrow will get him there," Perrin assured him. "When he meets us again, and Guide Gleace? Faced with all of that evidence, he'll have no choice but to accept what we can offer him."

Shem groaned. "I can't have this argument with you again. I just can't—"

"So don't. Go home to your wife," Perrin said, a little testily. "Complain to my wife, grouse together for a while, then come back in a good mood, because tomorrow, everything changes."

Shem swung up on to his horse. "If Radan's heart is still solidly in the world, no amount of evidence will change that."

"Yes, it will," Perrin insisted. "If his heart's still in the world, I'll just pull it out!"

"That's not the best metaphor, Perrin."

“You see what you want to see, Perrin.”

The next day at midday meal, Radan felt increasingly edgy. This afternoon they were to meet the *men in charge*. He had a suspicion that at least one of them was already there, and that either he or another left each evening and returned each morning. They were never allowed to go to the stables without permission, and at certain times of the day he could hear a horse leave them. He and Offra would be funneled back into the fort if they were outside, and not allowed to see out the windows which way the rider went. But in such a narrow valley, the echoes of the horse made it clear the rider went to and returned from the north.

That’s where *they* were, in some fashion.

Apparently another one of the *men in charge* was coming from a far distance, just to meet them. And then, Radan was sure, the evaluation would begin, and his life sentence to that tiny valley would commence.

He had to escape. Today, somehow.

He hoped that Edge wasn’t as far away as he feared. Yet the *other* place, whose name they still didn’t share, also couldn’t have been too far away because riders went out at night and returned in the morning. The most logical direction for Edge was then in the south.

But logical also meant woefully obvious, so Edge couldn’t be that way.

No, Edge had to lie in another direction. The scouts were too careful with what they said and how they acted. When they left in the mornings to “secure the area,” they went in every direction. While two always went south, others went east, west, and even north.

But which way should *he* go?

One nagging thought kept returning to Radan. While he hoped Edge was nearby, he had to admit the possibility that he could’ve been sedated for days and dragged over all kinds of terrain before reaching that bizarre little fort. That would also mean that Thorne might already be missing him. He may have sent new “searchers” by now, and by some stroke of ridiculously good luck, they’d seen this fort already and had gone back to tell Thorne before Radan could get any credit—

Panic rose in his throat like a bad sausage.

It had to happen today, Radan knew.

The question was, how?

And the obvious next question was, when—

Interrupting his anxious rumination was one of the guards, coming into the eating area. Smiling, he announced, “The *men in charge* would like to meet you in the meadows on the other side of the western ridge.”

Winter blinked at him. “Why?”

“Because,” the guard said, “there’s proof over there about what you’ve been teaching our two lieutenants.”

Internally, Radan bristled at *our*, but he just plastered on a smile as eager as Jon’s.

“Ooh, what is it, sirs?” Jon was practically bouncing in his seat.

The guard grinned. “Elk!”

The lieutenants frowned. What in the world was elk?

But Winter chuckled. “The western herd’s returned?”

“Rather poor timing, though,” the guard said. “The cattle are on their way up today to feed for the season. The elk will be moving on rather quickly today and return later when the cattle have dispersed. But since the cattle aren’t due in for another hour or two, *the men in charge* thought our boys would enjoy seeing the elk.”

“And what are *elk*?” Radan said, growing impatient.

Winter put a hand on each of the lieutenants’ shoulders. “It took our ancestors a few moons before they realized that the animals they labeled as *elk* were actually the same animals Terryp talked about in that book we read your first day here: elk are wapiti!”

Jon gasped in surprise, and Radan tried to match it, but it came out more as a coughing fit.

Winter slapped him on the back, which didn’t help. “We’ll head over there as soon as we’re done eating. Are all of *them* here?”

“The *two* are already on their way over to the meadow. The third is coming up with the cattle,” the guard told him vaguely. “You know how he likes to ride up with the herds.”

Winter nodded. “Well, then—boys, would you like to meet some not-so-mythological creatures?”

“Yes, please!” Jon said.

Radan grinned. A genuine, heart-felt grin. “Absolutely. On the west side of this ridge, you say?” West was as good a place as any to start searching for Edge. “*I’d love to.*”

While Jon wolfed down the rest of his sandwich, Radan subtly slipped a chunk of cheese, jerky, and several slices of bread into his jacket pockets.

He didn’t plan to be back for dinner.

“You see what you want to see, Perrin.”

Perrin rubbed his hands eagerly, eyeing the elk herd sedately feeding and chewing their cud in front of him. Frequently he glanced behind him, up the slope he and Shem had just come down. It wouldn't take Winter, the lieutenants, and their guards long to come down it. While it was steep grasses, interspersed with jagged rocks, there were plenty of safe footholds. He assumed the young officers would want to jog down here as soon as they saw the elk. He was sure Jon would. He'd told Jon on a few occasions, during their secret talks, that wapiti were real, and soon some would come through the area on their annual migration. The lieutenant could hardly wait. Perrin so wished he could have arranged for an elephant to wander through, just to astonish Jon. But when he'd come to Salem next week, Perrin would take him to the university and show him the life-size paintings on display

But before all of them could see the wapiti, the group had to climb the slope which rose from the glacial valley, which might take about half an hour, depending upon how eager and in shape they were.

It'd been about that long since Perrin estimated the scout had delivered to them his proposal of meeting on this side of the mountain, and he could hardly wait to see their reaction to the wapiti, then to see Radan's reaction to him.

That would be the test, and the determiner: how would he take to meeting the dead colonel, who wasn't so dead?

Perrin already knew how it'd play out. Radan would gasp, stagger in surprise, then his shock would eventually morph in to a grin, and he'd readily accept Perrin's embrace, because what could be more powerful evidence of the world's lies than him and Shem, alive?

Shem, however, standing next to Perrin with his arms folded, brooded and glared at the meadow.

Perrin gently elbowed him. “Trust me—it'll be good.”

“If you say ‘trust me’ one more time,” Shem quietly boiled, “I'm going to punch you.”

Perrin chuckled, then stopped when he realized Shem wasn't smiling. He scooted a few protective inches away from him. “Would Guide Gleace be coming up to meet them if he didn't think today was the day?”

“He’s coming,” Shem hissed under his breath, “because *you* insisted today be the day. He’s coming only to see what you’ve been up to, not because he endorses—”

“Look! There they are!” Perrin pointed to the top of the ridge several hundred yards away, where the shapes of several men appeared.

“Over here, over here,” he pulled Shem into a cluster of trees. “I want them to see the wapiti first, be fully enthralled and amazed, then we make our presence known.”

Shem rubbed his forehead and sighed.



It didn’t take them long to jog down the slope. The moment they recognized the herd, they were in a hurry, with Jon leading the pack.

“They’re . . . they’re amazing!” he exclaimed, but in a hushed tone so as to not alarm the bull elk and his harem of twenty. They stopped at the edge of the meadow.

Radan cocked his head. “Not quite as big as I imagined—”

“But they’re real! Don’t you get it?” Jon tried to hold back his squeal. “If *these* are real, everything else can be real!”

The elk, still a hundred paces away, trotted gracefully through the wide meadow to the edge of the trees. It was the loud mooing from the far side of the meadow that was driving them away. A cloud of dust obscured the view, but the thundering sound of an enormous herd of cattle was unmistakable.

“Don’t go!” Offra murmured at the elk, as Winter and the four guards chuckled in understanding.

“There’ll be more, Jon,” one assured him. “They’ll return when the cattle have dispersed.”

“Nice rack on that bull, though,” another guard commented.

But Radan didn’t notice. He was too busy surveying the area. It wasn’t ideal, but it was going to have to do.

He had an idea, and it was this: run.

Just run and run and run through the meadow to the other side of the trees, then hide somewhere until dark. Then . . . he’d pick his way back to Edge, wherever it may be.

He was glad he didn’t have anyone to share the idea with, because they surely would’ve looked at him as if he claimed to be king

“You see what you want to see, Perrin.”

of the elk. But this was the best opportunity, and desperate times call for stupid plans.

Still it was remarkable, he told himself, how often a seemingly stupid plan worked—

Someone to the side of them cleared his throat.

“Offra and Radan,” said a strangely familiar voice from a cluster of trees, “I’m glad you see that they really are *real*. And that because wapiti are real, so can be a great many other things . . .”

Radan’s jaw dropped as he recognized the voice, deep and rumbling, and the hair on his arms stood up as, through the trees, came—

“Oh, slag. You’re alive.”

He didn’t realize he said the words out loud.

Or that he’d actually shouted them.

They’d filled his entire head, so naturally they had to blast out of his mouth.

Perrin Shin chuckled, a bit surprised at Radan’s response. “Uh, yes—always have been. Good to see you again, Lieutenant—”

“Colonel Shin!” Jon Offra cried, and ran to embrace him.

Oh, *of course* he would, a small part of Radan’s mind commented as he watched Shin and Offra hug. The rest of Radan’s brain was far too overwhelmed with the thoughts of *Slag. He’s alive. He’s alive, he’s alive, he’s alive . . . And so is Zenos?! Zenos is alive, too? Doesn’t look too happy about it right now, but—*

General Snyder! His brain screamed, but this time he kept his mouth shut, *They’re slagging alive! Now what?*

But fortunately at that moment the small, coherent part of his brain took over, because Shin had finished hugging Offra, who was now embracing Zenos, and Shin was staring intently at Radan.

Radan knew exactly what to do. He held out his hand to shake the former colonel’s, mostly to make sure he was flesh and blood and not some strange manifestation.

Yes, Shin’s grip was still bone-crushing, and he smiled expectantly.

Radan returned it, even though his stomach was twisting and his head was churning. Despite the open air, Radan was sure he was suffocating, and panic grew so rapidly that all of his appendages began to tremble and quake—

General Radan.

The title popped into his head as soon as he released Shin’s hand.

He’d been promoted immediately to General Radan as soon as he

handed over these two traitors—

Shin started to speak, and Radan forced himself to concentrate on him instead of the title of general which bounced around his head.

“Radan, I’m sincerely sorry I startled you, but I hope you’ll forgive me, eventually. I was hoping that meeting us again like this would help solidify in your mind the many ways Idumea has deceived you, and has withheld from you all kinds of marvelous ideas and potential.”

Except for the potential to become the youngest general in the world.

Shin turned to gesture to the meadow. “Look at this place! No one in the world can even imagine this exists, but it does. The world is so vast and holds so many incredible wonders that you’re only beginning to learn. Next week, you’ll see what I’m talking about. Because I plan to take you—”

“Hey!” Shem shouted, cutting Perrin off. “HEY! Where are you going?!”

Radan was sprinting.

He’d picked his spot: a gap between two trees just beyond the herd. The forest thickened again behind it, and he could easily weave through and find a hiding spot. And, he decided, he could run through the herd just to confuse things a bit.

It’d have to do.

He’d made his decision, at the moment Shin had said he’d be taking them away somewhere next week.

But General Radan had different plans for next week.

Perrin blinked in shock to see Radan running straight for the herd. “What does he think he’s do—”

“Dear Creator,” Winter gasped. “He’s escaping!”

By the time Shem, Perrin, Winter, Jon and the four guards started chasing Radan, he was over a hundred paces ahead of them, making quick time across the meadow.

And the elk didn’t appreciate their human invaders. The bull, insulted, began to charge at Offra, but was distracted by a guard shouting to draw his attention. That’s when Offra hit a muddy patch—choosing not to believe it was something worse—and slipped on the grasses. Another guard, trying to keep his eye on a disappearing Radan, nearly collided with an angry cow as she stepped to defend her calf.

Perrin and Shem were more successful, however, dodging and

“You see what you want to see, Perrin.”

darting and finally breaking through to the edge of the meadow to see—

Nothing but trees.

Shem twisted to Perrin. “I TOLD YOU!”

But Perrin stared hopelessly into the forest, as Jon, Winter, and the four guards caught up to them.

“Which way?” one guard asked.

Another shook his head. “It’s useless with the amount of men we have.”

“But we have to stop him!” Jon insisted. “We have to—”

“We all know what needs to happen, Lieutenant Offra,” Winter told him, frustration thick in his tone. “We’ve also been working the forests for many years, and we know how many men we need to flush out someone in hiding. No sense in us blindly running in there without a plan.”

Perrin said nothing, but stared in bewilderment into the trees.

“The ranchers!” another guard exclaimed. “There should be at least thirty men coming with the cattle. In just a few minutes they’ll be here.”

“Most of them aren’t trained,” Shem said, “but it’s the best option we have. Men on horseback can cover more terrain. But Radan still has that much of a head start.”

“But how far can he get in these trees?” Winter asked. “He’s clueless as to where to go. We’ll flush him out like a pheasant in the back garden.”

“I hope you’re right,” a guard mumbled.

Perrin remained motionless, gaping at the forest before him, disillusioned tears building in his eyes.

“We plot an area to search, based on how fast Radan can move. And I’ve seen him run,” Shem said grimly. “He likely spent all his strength on this dash. He’ll be progressing far slower now.”

Radan slipped into a gully—accidentally. But as he found his footing at the bottom of it, he decided this place was as good as any for a well-deserved rest. He looked around, saw nothing but dense undergrowth, towering pines, and a few rocks, and slumped to the ground.

He did it! They didn’t even follow him into the trees. Just like

everyone else in the world, they stopped at the forest line.

And Perrin Shin and Shem Zenos were still alive.

Slagging idiots.

Oh, if General Snyder could see this.

No, he'd said, back in Harvest Season. *There's no way they could still be alive.* Snyder was as stupid as the rest of them. When Radan returned with the notes stowed in his socks and the directions to finding Shin and Zenos, not only would the Thornes lose their positions, but so might even Snyder.

And who would be in position to replace the Advising General? Or even the High General?

Radan tried to slow his panting, and his planning, in order to hear if anything was around, but all that was approaching was the sound of cattle mooing, and they were closing in.

He leaned against a log to catch his breath, and looked up at the sky above him.

Today, it was a cloudless blue, just as it always was.

"Lost a man, did you?"

The rancher in his sixties shook his head admonishingly, as if his grandson had just confessed to dropping his pie on the ground. "And now you need some help?"

Shem's arms were still folded as cattle swirled around him.

On Shem's order, Perrin had moved up into the forest to keep the arriving animals from stampeding. Perched on a large boulder, he crouched anxiously, like a guilty mountain lion.

Shem nodded to the mounted rancher. "We have a rat of a man who escaped the world and now has escaped us. I need everyone you can spare to conduct a search in the forest west of here."

The man smiled easily. "I'm sure we can assist our Assistant Zenos. We have about twenty men, with ten more bringing in the strays. Guide Gleace is back there, with his son. Should we find your lost rat before he arrives?"

"That would be ideal, yes," Shem sighed.

The rancher nudged his horse away from Shem, then put his fingers into his mouth and whistled a complicated pattern.

Back along the tree line, Perrin leaned over to Winter standing with him. "What was that all about?"

“You see what you want to see, Perrin.”

“The ranchers have a system of whistles to communicate with each other. Can’t even bring your cattle up here unless you know how to whistle,” he said.

Perrin watched in fascination as a few more men rode up as quickly as the growing herd would allow. In the distance he heard the whistle repeated, likely calling in riders from the edges of the broad meadow. Within a few minutes Shem was surrounded by men of all ages on horseback. Perrin watched Shem gesturing to the forest beyond, pointing out landmarks and indicating who should go where. Moments later, the men began to head into the trees beyond Perrin.

Feeling it was now safe, Perrin hopped off the boulder to pace along the tree line.

“I’m going after Radan,” he told Winter.

“No, sir,” he said patiently, sitting down on a log. “We’re to wait here, remember? We escort Radan back to the fort. I stay here in case he’s injured; you stay here in case he’s belligerent.”

“Shem’s doing this to punish me, you know,” Perrin decided, continuing his pacing. “He knows how badly I need to reach Radan, and he doesn’t want . . . wait a minute. Where are the cows going?”

“Cattle,” Winter corrected him. “Cows are females, and there are several bulls as well as many calves among them. And they’re going wherever they wish. Except, interestingly, not over here.”

Perrin stared in amazement as the cattle broke up into their own groups, some heading east up the ridge toward the glacial valley, some turning to the trees in the west, a few seeming to go back north, and a large group headed south, making a wide berth around him.

“But you’ll lose them!” Perrin pointed out.

“For the season, yes,” Winter said. “They graze and get fat, and just before the Harvest Festival we come back and retrieve them. The cattle know when Snowing Season is coming, and they’re happy to follow us back to Salem.”

Perrin watched the parade of beef. “Guide Gleace said something once about using me to chase the stragglers back to Salem.”

“There are always a few young bulls who think they’d prefer to stay out here all Snowing Season. Those are the ones who know little about wolves and their appetites. We just need to nudge those rebellious boys back home.”

Perrin sighed in exasperation as he stood there, useless.

“This is ridiculous!” he declared a minute later. “Now the cows—*cattle*—are invading the forest! All Radan has to do is hunker

down for the day, then sneak away between two bulls at night.”

“Not *between two bulls*, surely—”

“You know what I mean, Winter!” General Shin snapped. He immediately held up both hands in apology.

Winter nodded his acceptance.

“I can’t just sit here!” But he did as he watched another wave of roast-on-the-hoof complain their way up into the trees and to where the ranchers were searching for Radan. Within minutes, the meadow in front of him was nearly emptied of animals.

“I think it’s safe for you to step out of the trees,” Winter informed him. “I also don’t see any reason why you can’t head up the mountain in search of Radan. The cattle are ahead of you now. Perhaps you might find something?” He winked at Perrin.

Perrin nodded gratefully and started in an awkward, slippery jog up the hill. Cattle had no sense of hygiene.



Radan was pinned.

Curled up in a ball, in the cavity under a boulder, with a large wet nose sniffing him. Radan kicked at it.

The calf jumped back and bleated angrily, which brought his mother to investigate, which meant an even larger, wetter nose snuffing and spraying at Radan, who tried to shield his face.

“Just get out of here!” Radan bellowed. “Disgusting!” He didn’t worry about anyone hearing him, because the mooing was deafening. He’d made it to the top of the ridge on the west side of the meadow and paused to see what was happening down below. That’s when he saw the first cattle come up, and the men on horses.

It was a mad scramble after that, to find a hiding place while hundreds of smelling creatures searched for the ideal places to drop their offerings. There were several steaming samples in front of Radan already. Soon the stench would drive him from his hiding place, if his need to vomit didn’t force him out earlier.

“This is insane!” he declared as he peered between cow legs to see what might be happening beyond the top of the ridge. All he saw were more cow parts. And bull parts. It turned his belly.

“I’m running out of time,” he mumbled. “These things could be here for hours! Days! Who deliberately loses their cattle in the forests?”

“You see what you want to see, Perrin.”

A horse and rider trampled suddenly in front of his boulder, paused, then moved along.

Radan swallowed down a terrified lump in his throat. “They couldn’t have heard me,” he whispered, then slapped his hand in front of his mouth just in case.

He had to get out of there.

Shem stood high on a ridge and scanned the terrain. Trees, shrubs, rocks, logs, and cattle, as far as the eye could see. He sighed in frustration and closed his eyes to clear his mind.

Somewhere, Radan was hiding. Where? Where—

Struck with an idea, Shem opened his eyes and looked down the slope behind him again. There was a distinct openness in the terrain a few hundred paces below him, where no cattle wandered.

That’s because Perrin was.

Shem grumbled as Perrin glanced up and caught his eye. He waved guiltily and continued to pick his way around the evidence that several hundred cattle had working digestive systems.

“That’s why you’re wearing boots,” Shem called down to him. “And I told you before, tuck in your trouser legs! Why are you here?”

“Winter thought it was safe now,” he said as he made his way up to Shem “For the cattle, that is.”

Perrin joined him to look around. His sigh said it all.

“No, it’s not hopeless,” Shem read his mind. “Although it’s seeming quite impossible at the moment. Chaos is exactly what he needs to give us the slip, and nothing says chaos more than a thousand head of cattle.”

“It may be early for this,” Perrin began hesitantly, “but yes—you told me so.”

“Save the apologies for later.” Shem stared out at the terrain. He slowly pivoted, looking for any sign that someone had found Radan.

Perrin peered deep into the shadows as well. “*I am* sorry.”

“Save it.”

“I realize now—”

“*SAVE IT!*”

Perrin clamped his lips shut.

“There!” Shem whispered and pointed down the slope they had come up. “Do you see it?”

Perrin squinted. "I'm trying to . . ."

"By that boulder," Shem gestured again, as if that would make what he saw clearer. "Near the ground."

Perrin squinted harder. "I think—"

"And don't just *pretend* to see it," Shem snipped. "Tell me if you *actually* do."

Perrin nodded obediently, but his eyes bounced from one large boulder to another.

Shem exhaled in exasperation.

"Losing patience with me, aren't you, Shem? I understand—"

"Save it!"

Perrin opened his mouth but then shut again.

Because he *did* see something, moving parallel to their position, below them on the slope. It was a crouching figure, but too far away for positive identification. He seemed to be using a black cow as cover. Since he was wearing brown clothing, the animal wasn't the best choice.

"Stay close to the trees," Shem whispered to Perrin above the mooing behind them. "I'll jog ahead to catch him from the front, while you stay back to cover his retreat."

Perrin nodded and began to creep quickly down the slope while Shem trotted in a line perpendicular to him.

Follow the cattle.

It was his only chance. They stank, they moved awkwardly, they stank—

Radan couldn't get the stench out of his mind. He'd likely never eat beef again.

But they were just the right size to conceal him.

Follow the cattle . . .

Perrin had lost sight of the figure that must have been Radan, but still he trotted in the same direction. With any luck, Shem or a rancher would already have apprehended him. Perrin didn't want to be the first, because his first words would be, "Why?"

“You see what you want to see, Perrin.”

Why couldn't Radan just try? Just listen to what Perrin had to offer? What was so alluring about the world that Radan was willing to give up all of *this* for something so much less?

To Perrin, rejecting this life was like throwing away a beautiful cake to snatch a shriveled bean. And beans were revolting.

But Perrin *had* to understand this. How could he defend Salem against the world if he couldn't comprehend what made the world so obtuse?

He continued along the side of the slope, realizing that he was the “Guarder” now, looking for the soldier.

And then he spotted him.

The man, who Perrin was now sure was Radan, had swapped cows and was traipsing along with a brown one, doing a half-squatting, half-loping movement to keep up with the animal that didn't appreciate his new-found affection for her, or for her camouflage.

Radan was about three hundred paces away from Perrin, with all kinds of terrain between them.

Perrin searched for a scout or rancher who might be nearer, but found no one. Everyone had headed over the ridge and were going down the other side. No one had suspected Radan would double back.

Rather clever, Perrin hated to admit. But worse than that, Radan was headed in the direction of Mount Deceit. If he continued northwest, then went up and over the ridge, he'd find himself in the canyon next to it. And at the end of that canyon was the dead village of Moorland.

Should Radan recognize Deceit, he could make it to Moorland in just a couple of hours, and be back to Edge before nightfall.

Thorne would have his report by bedtime.

Frantically Perrin looked around for a strategy—

And then it found him.

A bull was coming back over the ridge, apparently deciding it was too crowded on the other side. Behind him was a mass of his friends—cows, calves, and some younger bulls—and they all spied the meadow below them looking like Paradise.

Perrin sighed. It was cruel, but he had no other choice. They poured over the ridge, maybe a hundred strong, and just for him.

Perrin spotted Radan, glanced again at the approaching herd, and made a few quick calculations.

Jon stood at the bottom of the slope in the meadow, but all he saw was livestock. Radan was headed back to Edge, and everything would fail.

That thought made him sick. He massaged his hands and paced, looking up, looking around, looking down to see what he had slipped in, then looking up again. Nothing. Absolutely noth—

No, *something*. Nearly at the top of the ridge he saw a figure, but its stance was different than Radan's. The man raised his hands high above his head, then he started to run at a mass of animals on its way back down. When Jon heard the distant yelling, he knew only one man's voice could carry that far.

General Shin.

And he was chasing the cattle.

Shem knew the sound, and it sent shivers down his back. The ground trembled, and he spun to see the source.

The stampede of a hundred head of cattle barreled down the slope to the meadow. Shem was grateful he was to the side of it. Maybe there were wolves up there, he mused as he climbed on top of a stack of rocks for a better view of the panicked animals.

Or maybe it was just . . . Perrin?

But why? He was running, shouting, and waving his arms like—

Shem spun to scan the terrain below him. There, sprinting faster than he ever had in his entire life, was Radan, leading the stampede to the meadow.

They'd come out of nowhere! He was jogging next to one solitary brown beast, then suddenly they came like an avalanche of mooring boulders, and all Radan could do was run.

Jon scrambled to the top of a boulder for a better view, and to

“You see what you want to see, Perrin.”

avoid being trampled, and noticed Radan sprinting into the meadow in the lead of a very noisy, very swift parade.

But he wasn't fast enough. How the cattle could lumber so swiftly was astonishing. They caught up with Radan, then surrounded him, then Radan stumbled—

Shem gripped his head when he saw Radan go down. There was no way—no possible way—any of this was going to end well.

He'd seen stampedes before.

Nothing survives.

Perrin had put his arms down a while ago, feeling badly for causing so many creatures to think the end of their lives was running straight for them. He slip-slided and jogged down the slope on his way to the meadow. He was sure he'd seen Radan flushed out of hiding. Now it was a matter of finding him in the swirling panic of steak.

Jon strained to see the lieutenant in the swarm, but there were simply too many animals. They continued to run to the east through the meadow and up the other side. If they continued over that hill, they would descend on the glacial fort in just a few minutes. But the race up the hillside would tire them out, Jon hoped. The fort would be safe.

The meadow, on the other hand, was a trampled mess. As the herd thinned, Jon saw Radan lying on the ground.

Motionless.

Perrin broke through the tree line. Everything before him was moving except for one brown lump in the middle of the meadow. A calf stumbled over it, causing Perrin to flinch.

“No, no, no,” he whispered as he rushed to the body, his presence having the effect of scattering the last of the animals. He dropped to his knees next to his former lieutenant.

“Oh, Radan. I’m so sorry. This wasn’t how it was supposed to go.”

He heard someone approaching, and turned to see Jon stop a few feet away.

Perrin turned back to Radan and winced. His legs were obviously broken, twisted at odd angles. That was probably why Jon was now retching into the grasses behind him. Radan’s arm was flopped over his face, and Perrin leaned forward to gently move it aside to see the young officer’s face—

—and found himself staring at an army-issued long blade digging into his neck.

Perrin gulped.

The ferocity of Radan’s expression startled him. His teeth were clenched and his other hand gripped Perrin’s shirt so tightly around his throat that he could barely breathe.

“Why’d you have to still be alive, Shin?!”

Astonished, Perrin didn’t know how to respond.

“Why couldn’t you just let me go?!” Radan rasped. “You’ve ruined everything! Everything! Why couldn’t you just let me live my life?”

“You’re alive?” Jon exclaimed, rushing over to him.

“I don’t know,” Radan snarled, forcing the point of the blade into Perrin’s neck, nearly piercing his flesh. “I can’t feel anything from my chest down.”

Perrin had to fix this, right now. “Give me the—” he was trying to say, *knife, son*. But Radan had other ideas. With the last of his strength he hauled himself up on Perrin with one hand, and attempted to plunge the knife into his neck with the other.

Perrin’s brain never had a chance to give its suggestion as to what to do next, because his training took over.

General Shin wrenched the knife out of Radan’s hand and plunged it into his heart.

That’s when his mind finally caught up, and he stared in horror at the lieutenant who went limp.

“Dear Creator . . .” was all Perrin could whimper.

Jon finished emptying his stomach in the grasses.

“What did you do?!” was the next thing Perrin heard.

“You see what you want to see, Perrin.”

Shem, who’d been running across the meadow, arrived to see the long knife protruding from the dead soldier.

Perrin sat clumsily. “I just . . . I just—”

“He had no choice!” Jon declared loyally as he wiped his chin. “Radan tried to kill him!”

Perrin only dimly heard the argument which ensued between them. He stared at the knife, wondering where it had come from, and wondering how it got into Radan’s chest.

Perrin didn’t do that.

No.

He’d never kill a soldier, an officer. One of *his*.

He had killed many men before, but none who he had chatted with and eaten with.

“—not like he was going to *jump up* and *chase* him!” Shem was shouting, but in Perrin’s head he sounded hazy.

“You didn’t see what happened! He nearly slashed Shin’s throat! He had to defend himself!” Jon shouted distantly back.

Perrin only stared.

Until a distant movement on the eastern hillside caught his eye.

Someone had come over from the fort on a horse, and he was sliding off of it. Although he was far away, Perrin immediately recognized the man’s stance—or, more accurately, his presence—which seemed to fill the entire meadow.

It was Guide Gleace.

Perrin wasn’t sure where the words came from, but they streamed from the guide straight into Perrin’s mind.

It couldn’t have been more dreadful if it were the Creator Himself saying, “Oh, Perrin. What have you done?”

Chapter 34--“The Creator will provide us with a solution.”

It was Gleace who first got Perrin moving. For a while all he could do was sit in the damp grasses staring at the long knife. When he first kidnapped the lieutenants, he'd thoroughly searched their unconscious bodies for long knives. He wasn't surprised they each had two, which he confiscated.

But apparently Radan had three.

Even when Shem pulled out the knife, and Gleace, who had ridden down to the meadow, had covered Radan's face and chest with his own jacket, Perrin still stared at the ugly blade, now lying next to the body. He was only dimly aware of Gleace asking Jon and Shem about what happened, and couldn't focus on what the two of them shouted at each other. Only much later would Perrin realize it was the first time he'd heard Jon Offra raise his voice to anyone.

“—only needed to *disarm* him, Offra; not kill him!”

“You didn't know Radan like I did, Zenos! You don't know what he was capable of—”

“Even paralyzed?!”

Perrin vaguely noticed other men arriving on horseback, asking questions and keeping an excessively safe distance away from General Shin.

He just stared at the broken body. The body *he* broke.

Eventually he felt someone tugging on his arm. “Come, Perrin. Let's get you cleaned up.” It was Guide Gleace gently but firmly pulling him to his feet.

Perrin never looked him in the eyes. He couldn't look at anyone. He obediently stumbled along with Gleace, keeping his blurring eyes fixed on the ground, but not quite seeing it. Twice he nearly planted his face in the filth of the landscape, but somehow the elderly man kept him from falling completely. He put an arm around Perrin to

“The Creator will provide us with a solution.”

nudge him in the right directions as they slowly climbed up the eastern slope, then lumbered together down to the glacial fort.

At one point Perrin noticed a couple of riders from the fort go past, with shovels strapped to their saddles, but Perrin couldn't be bothered to know why.

Finally the two men staggered into the empty fort, Gleace guiding Perrin to the eating/surgery area. He pulled out a chair from the table, but Perrin just slumped against the wall and slid down to sit on the floor. He stared at the table legs while Gleace sighed and sat down in the chair instead.

Perrin didn't move, and Gleace didn't speak.

After a while the guide stood up, went to the water pump, and came back a minute later with wet cloths. “Wipe your hands, Perrin.”

Dutifully he did so, trying to rub off the drying blood mixed with mud. It wasn't until then that he realized the blood was his. Wrenching the knife out of Radan's grip had caused a gash in his palm, and, not feeling any pain, he dabbed mindlessly at it while it continued to ooze.

Gleace replaced the cloths with fresh ones a few times, until Perrin dropped them on the floor.

Silently Gleace picked them up, subtly wiping away the puddle of blood Perrin's hand had left, and put the cloths away. He returned with a long bandage which he wrapped tightly around Perrin's still-bleeding hand. Neither man spoke as Gleace tied it securely and again sat down across from Perrin.

Why he still sat there, Perrin didn't know. Waiting for his confession to everything the guide had already witnessed? Waiting to exile Perrin for the murder? Waiting for him to come out of his stupor so he could properly yell at him?

Unable to bear the silence any longer, Perrin finally whispered, “I know. I failed.”

Gleace nodded slightly. “Yes. You did.”

“I really thought . . . I really thought he was seeing. Trying. Seeing. All that you've given me and my family.” Tears streamed down his cheeks.

Gleace listened.

“But I failed. I don't know how, or why—”

“Yes, Perrin,” Gleace said gently. “You do.”

Perrin nodded once. “You can't force a heart. You can't change someone else's mind.”

Gleace nodded again.

Perrin gripped his head with his hands. “I’m so sorry,” he whispered and sniffed. “I’m so sorry, I’m so sorry, I’m so sorry—”

It took another five minutes for him to regain himself.

Gleace sat patiently waiting. “The Creator knows, Perrin. He knows you meant well. You always do. You just didn’t *listen* well. A little thing we call pride.”

Perrin wiped his face with a clean cloth Gleace handed him. “I wanted to share . . . I wanted to change . . .”

“That’s the calling of a scout, Perrin. You’re not a scout; you were called to be our general. Our defender. Today you demonstrated quite well—albeit overzealously—why you were extended that call.” Then, as an afterthought, he added, “Rather like using a tornado to nudge a calf.”

But all Perrin heard was that Gleace had said *were. Were extended that call.*

He took a deep breath and knew it was time to stop acting like a humiliated child and behave like a humbled man. He forced himself to look up into the guide’s eyes.

To his surprise they were filled with compassion and even a few tears of his own.

Perrin knew what had to happen next. No sense in postponing it.

“How long do I have, Guide?”

Gleace cocked his head. “Have for what, Perrin?”

“Have until I need to leave Salem?” His voice cracked and he struggled to steady it again. “I realize you can’t have a murderer living here, but may I have time to say goodbye to my family first? Before you send me to a colony?”

Gleace sat up. “Perrin, we never send anyone away. Walickiah was a true killer, but we allowed even him to live among us for several years. And Perrin—you’re not a murderer. I heard Offra’s explanation. You were reacting, and in self-defense. You didn’t pull that knife. While you acted hastily, you didn’t act evilly. It was your conditioning that kicked in, and I think Salem needs a man who knows how to automatically defend. You’re still our General Shin.”

It took Perrin another ten minutes to compose himself again. Gleace joined him on the floor to embrace him as he sobbed in regret and relief.

Eventually he quieted down, and Gleace said, “I understand the earnestness with which you tried to turn Radan. I don’t know if you

“The Creator will provide us with a solution.”

realize this, but it was my idea to bring Walickiah to Salem. I, too, was convinced that if someone from the world could just *see* what we have, he would want to be part of it. I suggested we change his name to truly change his character, and I worked with him to erase his previous indoctrination and substitute our own. And when he was changed—or so I thought—I helped him move to the north to begin his new life.”

Perrin listened in dreadful fascination.

“I still don’t know what went wrong,” Gleace whispered. “He seemed so happy. He seemed to really believe, then—he stopped responding to my letters. He refused to see me. Then one day I received the message that he was missing . . . I failed him, too.”

The men sat in silence until Gleace spoke again, his voice shaky. “I may not have plunged a knife into his chest, but my actions still caused his death. Somewhere, somehow, I failed to teach, or to notice, or to see, and Lickiah wandered away from us, trying to reach the world. He likely suffered a slow, painful death alone in the wilds. At least Radan went quickly.”

It wasn’t until then that Perrin realized he was leaning against Gleace’s shoulder, as if he were a boy again listening to his grandfather tell him stories.

“You and I are a lot alike, Perrin Shin,” Gleace said sadly. “Maybe I experienced Lickiah so that I would feel compassion for you today.”

“I don’t deserve compassion,” Perrin whispered.

“I agree,” Gleace said simply. “None of us deserve anything we get. Yet still the Creator gives it to us.”

Perrin swallowed. “Guide?” he said as he sat up, “What does . . . what does *He* think of me right now?”

Gleace smiled feebly at him. “The Creator feels your sorrow. He’s pleased you feel such depth of regret, because that will move you into better directions. And . . .” he hesitated. “Radan didn’t have much time left in the world. His days were numbered. With or without your interference he wouldn’t have lived to see tomorrow.”

“Why?”

“Had you not caused a stampede, Radan would have escaped. He would have made his way over the ridge, recognized Deceit, and understood just how close he was to the world.”

“That’s what I feared,” Perrin admitted. “I think that’s why I reacted as I did.”

“I was also impressed with the idea,” Gleace continued, “that Radan would have run straight to Lemuel Thorne and told him select details about what happened here.”

“*Select* details?”

“While Thorne sent him on this errand, Radan didn’t intend to report everything he learned to Thorne,” Gleace explained. “He planned instead to reveal his best information to Snyder, who would’ve used it to his advantage.”

“The Creator *told* you this?”

“Showed me. In His own way. He knows everyone’s hearts, Perrin. Nothing is secret or hidden from Him.”

“So Snyder would have killed Radan instead?”

Gleace shook his head. “Radan never would have left Edge. You see, what Radan would reveal to Thorne would so shock and anger him that he would—in a fit of fury—have killed Radan.”

Perrin closed his eyes. “What would set off Lemuel like that?”

“The fact that Jaytsy was still alive, and had given birth to a girl.”

Perrin’s eyes flashed open. “What?”

Gleace shrugged. “My best guess is that men like Lemuel think immortality comes from creating another ‘self.’ People in the world have forgotten that we’re already immortal, that this life is just a temporary school of sorts, and that we graduate on to greater experiences when it’s over.

“Lemuel wanted a son, Perrin, preferably your grandson as his legacy. He never imagined a granddaughter. Radan would have died simply because he brought bad news.”

Perrin held his hand over his mouth and slowly shook his head. “What madness.”

“Lemuel would’ve been furious with himself for killing his informant before he was fully informed, but—”

“Such a mess,” Perrin murmured. “And now what do we do with Offra? Lemuel’s still expecting the lieutenants to return, and Jon was under the impression that Lemuel may send up even more men, looking in case they didn’t come back. Suddenly I’m thinking that leaving their bloodied clothes at the edge of the forest won’t deter the captain any more than it did last year. Oh, I’ve made such a mess . . .” He buried his face in his hands as the failures of the past week pressed on his heart.

The guide sighed. “The Creator will provide us with a solution.

“The Creator will provide us with a solution.”

It may not, however, be an easy one, or anything *you* may have desired,” he hinted. “Things may become very *uncomfortable*.”

“I’m so sorry,” Perrin said yet again.

After a moment of silence Gleace said, “There’s one more thing. Something I’ve decided about you, if you’re interested.”

“I am. Let me have it, Guide,” said Perrin meekly.

“Well said. But Perrin, I’ve decided that in Harvest Season when we need to round up the stray cattle, I *don’t* want your help.”

Perrin was glad he was still hiding his face, because he found himself embarrassed to almost be ready to smile.

Gleace patted him on the back in a fatherly manner just as they heard a noise at the back door. Perrin looked up to see Shem and Jon Offra standing at the doorway.

Shem’s brow furrowed to see both men sitting on the floor. “How’s everything going here?” he ventured cautiously.

Jon bit his lip in worry.

Gleace produced a small smile. “Perrin’s going to be just fine. General Shin has some new understanding which will cause him to be an even more effective defender for us.”

Shem’s shoulders visibly relaxed, likely worried about the same thing Perrin had been: he would no longer be Salem’s General.

“And how is everything,” Gleace said, “on the *other side*?”

Shem and Jon sat down at the table.

“We took care of everything,” Jon said ambiguously.

“Found a safe spot at the edge of the forest,” Shem said. “Buried deeply, covered by rocks. Shouldn’t be disturbed by wolves. I asked the blessing over it myself.”

Gleace nodded. “Well done, boys.”

“There’s something else,” Shem said reluctantly.

Jon nodded for him to continue.

“We found another knife on him, Perrin. Strapped to his thigh. It seems . . .” Shem hesitated, glanced apologetically at Jon, then continued. “Jon was right. He may actually have been able to do some damage to Perrin, even after he took the first knife.”

“That still doesn’t make me feel any better,” said Perrin.

“Well it makes *me* feel better,” said Shem miserably.

Gleace got to his feet. “Lieutenant, I’m afraid we didn’t meet properly earlier.” He extended his hand. “Name’s Hew Gleace. I used to work with the scouts here, and I came up with my son’s herd hoping to meet the young man they’ve been trying to teach.”

Jon shook his hand. “Good to meet you, sir. Are you one of the *men in charge*?”

Gleace smiled amiably. “Oh, I don’t know that I could ever be in charge of Shin and Zenos.”

As they discussed what Jon had been learning, Perrin realized that Gleace hadn’t revealed to Jon who he was. He glanced at Shem who raised an eyebrow in warning. Perrin twitched back: message received. Jon didn’t need to know that Salem still had a guide.

“—which brings us to a problem,” Gleace was saying when Perrin paid attention again. “What might your commander do if you and Radan don’t return?”

“I’m not sure, but Radan seemed to believe that Thorne would send up more men after us.”

Gleace rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “More soldiers roaming in the forest.”

“Possibly resulting in another situation like we just experienced,” Shem pointed out.

Perrin didn’t have anything to contribute.

But Jon did. “Sirs? I have an idea. I think I know a way to keep your secret and prevent additional soldiers from wandering up here.”

“Go ahead, son,” Gleace said.

Jon reddened to be the center of attention. “It has to do with stories. Until now I never realized the power of them. I believed all kinds of stories before, and now I know new ones—true ones. But see, that’s what we need to do: present the world with a new story. They believed the one about Zenos and Mrs. Shin. We can give them another one just as convincing. We can make them think the sky is blue, even when it’s black!”

Perrin couldn’t help but smile. Jon was perfect for Salem.

“All right,” Gleace said slowly. “What kind of story, exactly?”

Jon took an eager breath. “If someone were to come staggering out of the forest half-starved and traumatized, it would have a great effect on the soldiers. Sirs, they were terrified of the forests the night we chased the Shins away. Many still are leery, even though Captain Thorne wants to start patrolling in the trees. If enough of them balk, then he won’t find any volunteers. If the story is that the remains of several horses and people were found, ravaged and scattered by wild animals, and terrible noises fill the area, they’d believe it. Some thought the trees were haunted by strange beings, well let’s tell them

“The Creator will provide us with a solution.”

someone saw them! Someone witnessed everything, saw his companion die, and barely made it out alive himself. They’d leave the forests alone for years.”

He grinned broadly, and Gleace smiled back at him. “I think it’s a most intriguing idea.”

Shem bobbed his head back and forth. “It has merit. I could see where this could work.”

But Perrin shook his head. “I don’t like it.”

“Why not?” asked Jon.

“Because who’s going to be the one staggering out of that forest half-starved and traumatized?”

Jon blushed again, but stood tall. “I will, sir.”

Shem’s mouth dropped open in understanding. “Oh, Jon. I don’t think you—”

Gleace’s raised hand silenced him. “Jon, why? Why would you volunteer for this?”

Jon looked at Perrin’s bloodshot eyes, filling with tears again. “Because I’ve always wanted to do something great. Protecting a secret society? Keeping my colonel and his family hidden? Making sure the forest remains as a safe buffer? What could I do that’d be better?”

“Come to Salem!” Perrin insisted, without realizing that was the first time he’d told Jon its name.

But Jon was solid. More solid than he’d ever been. “Salem. Knowing that it exists and keeps you safe is good enough for me. No, sir. This is what I must do, I know it.”

Gleace regarded him solemnly. “It will be exceptionally difficult, Jon. You can’t live a lie and not have it affect you in some deep way. You’ll have to forget all that Winter and Perrin have taught you. You have to believe and live the story you tell yourself. The consequences of that? I don’t know what may happen to your mind. If you were more deceitful and duplicitous, you might succeed. But you’re a good man, an excellent man. Jon, this may destroy you.”

“I don’t care!” Jon exclaimed. “I want to do something, just for once in my life. No one’s ever expected much from me. I was never going to be a great leader, or a powerful soldier, or even a memorable person. I’m quiet, stable, predictable Jon Offra. I answer messages and move papers. But don’t you think that would make the story seem even more convincing? Coming from bland, inconsequential me?”

The lieutenant was absolutely right, and Perrin hated that.

Shem sighed. “No one would ever know the sacrifice you’re

about to make.”

“But you sirs would,” he said.

“Yes,” Gleace said, “and we would never forget it.” He clapped his hands. “I believe this is settled. Shem, we need to get him ready.”

Shem nodded. “Write it three times?”

“We don’t have time for more.”

“Write what?” Jon blinked in surprise.

“Sorry if you thought your homework was over,” Shem said to him. “But to remember your story convincingly, you need to write it out at least three times. Let’s get some paper and start drafting the details. We have to plot your every moment of the past two weeks so that it becomes your new reality.”

“You really have this all figured out, don’t you?” Jon marveled.

“I lasted for seventeen years in the world without giving away who I really was,” Shem said. “I did a lot of writing over the years.”

They chuckled as they went to the front room for paper.

Perrin took that moment to stand up and grip Gleace’s shoulders.

“Bless him! Please, Guide—bless him like Hifadhi blessed Mahrree and me so many years ago. A blessing of protection?”

Gleace gently pried Perrin’s hands off of him. “I will do what I can, Perrin. I can only give what the Creator allows. But I was already planning on doing that. Something subtle, so that he doesn’t realize I’m a guide.”

“Why haven’t you revealed that to him?”

“The poor boy already knows too much,” Gleace said, looking through the door to Shem and Jon huddled together at the desk. “No sense in his knowing what he’s about to leave. This is a good plan, Perrin. The Creator inspired him; I could feel that as he spoke. But I want you to be warned: this may be that very uncomfortable way out of our mess I was talking about.”

Perrin watched Jon working happily with Shem. “But all the discomfort will be on poor Jon,” he pointed out.

“Oh, no. We’ll get to feel tremendous discomfort too,” the guide whispered, “hearing about his sacrifice and knowing he’s suffering only to protect us.”

Perrin blinked back the water building in his eyes.

By the time Shem and Jon had finished plotting his new “truth,” and Jon carefully wrote it out three times, the rest of the scouts had returned, along with a few ranchers. They smiled sadly at Jon for what he was about to do, but he was too excited about his plan to notice

“The Creator will provide us with a solution.”

the pained sympathy in their eyes.

As far as Lieutenant Jon Offra was concerned, he was about to do something heroic.

Perrin could hardly bear to look at him.

It was well before dinnertime when Gleace announced to Jon, “You best be going. You need to spend the night in the forest.”

Shem raised his eyebrows. “Not even let him stay one last night with us?”

“Authenticity is crucial here,” Gleace said. “So much is riding on your performance. You not only have to appear hungry and terrified, you actually need to be so.” He removed a mug from Jon’s hands, the last of his water. “Being thirsty helps, too. Sorry, son. I don’t know how good an actor you are, so we’re going to have to make it real.”

For the first time Jon appeared apprehensive, and he shared a look of worry with Perrin.

Gleace set down the mug and held Jon’s shoulders with both hands. Because of his height, Gleace had to look up into his eyes.

Perrin knew what was coming, and he exhaled in relief. Guide Hifadhi had held Mahrree and him in a similar way so many years ago when he bestowed a blessing of protection on them.

Jon watched Gleace earnestly.

“Do you know much about the Creator, Jon?” Gleace asked him.

Jon shrugged. “Just the little I’ve learned here. I’ve tried talking to Him a couple of times, too.”

Gleace smiled. “Well, the Creator knows a great deal about *you*, Jon Offra. You are His son, and He loves you. He knows you have a good heart, and a loyal spirit, and a strong mind. He blessed you long ago with those traits, because He knew someday you would do a great thing for us. We just figured that out today, though, didn’t we?”

Jon smiled back, but also fidgeted. Gleace’s intensity when he was acting as guide was palpable. Jon could feel it, but wasn’t sure as to *what* he was feeling.

“Jon, don’t worry too much about tonight,” Gleace told him. “You will be safe in the forest, and you will deliver your message to Thorne with appropriate terror. Your story and your efforts will secure Salem for a long time, and will be remembered by Salemites until the Last Day. May the Creator—”

And then Gleace paused, and Perrin stared at him in dread. Those

were supposed to be the words, the words that would protect and preserve Jon—

Protect and preserve! Perrin frantically thought at the Guide.

“—always be aware of your sacrifice, your efforts, and your pain. I assure you, Jon, that when your work for us has been completed, you will be immediately embraced by the Creator Himself in the Paradise that you so faithfully earned.”

Shem and Perrin’s faces were tear-streaked, but Jon just cleared his throat awkwardly as Gleace released him. “Uh, thanks, I suppose, Mr. Gleace. Never quite heard words like that before.”

Gleace nodded and said, “Go to the stables. One of the scouts there will dirty you up a bit more. The blood on your clothing is a nice touch, but I think we can do better.”

Jon grinned and turned to make his way to the stables, not noticing the expressions of anguish on Shem and Perrin’s faces.

They both rounded on the guide as soon as Jon was gone.

“What was *that*?” Perrin asked, trying not to sound panicked.

“I thought you could give him some protection!” Shem almost accused.

Gleace stared out the door where Jon had left. “I couldn’t do it, boys,” he murmured apologetically. “I wanted to. The words were on my lips, but they stopped moving. I can’t force what isn’t the Creator’s will. Jon’s going to suffer.” He sighed heavily. “I could see it, but I couldn’t prevent it. None of us can. The path has been set, and I saw his end.”

Perrin rubbed his forehead, but Shem said, “I’ve never heard you say what you did at the end, though. About Jon being embraced by the Creator?”

Surprising both Shem and Perrin, Gleace’s mouth turned into a slight smile. “That *was* remarkable! That’s not exactly how things happen in Paradise, you know.”

But neither of the men really knew.

“Very few people are ready to face the Creator at the moment of their deaths,” Gleace explained. “There’s usually a period of adjustment, of reflection, of understanding, of contrition—even for the very best of souls. Eventually all will stand before Him, but not immediately. But not Jon!” The guide’s voice trembled. “His suffering will be instantly wiped away. And after that?” Gleace let his tears fall.

“Envy him after his end, boys. I certainly do.”

“The Creator will provide us with a solution.”

Jon stood at the top of the boulder field just before sundown, shaking his head. “Seriously? Edge is this close? You only brought us a few miles?”

Shem shrugged guiltily. “We’re still working on developing sedation, Jon. But we have the knowledge of where to hit a man to keep him unconscious for a time.”

“Unbelievable!” he chuckled. “So where you live isn’t that far either?”

Shem raised his eyebrows.

“I remember. The less I know, the easier it is to tell the lie.”

“So you’ll wander around the forest until tomorrow evening,” Shem said. “No food, no water. You’ll be sufficiently weakened and a bit dehydrated. No one will suspect you’re deceiving them.”

“Don’t worry,” Jon said, rubbing his face to work extra dirt. “I’ll be starving by tomorrow. When I crawl out of the trees begging for food, I won’t be acting.”

“You have the cloth?”

Jon pulled it out of his trousers’ pocket—a shredded piece of dark fabric, dirtied with dried blood. “Just like the cloaks the Shins were wearing, right?”

“Same cloth,” Shem assured him.

“All I could find,” Jon sighed dramatically, “next to the bones of the horses.”

“Very good. You know, I’m beginning to think you can pull this off.”

“I can, Shem,” Jon assured him. “Nothing’s more important. Will you please tell Perrin that?”

“I will.”

“And will you also tell me why he didn’t come with us?” Jon asked, wondering why Perrin Shin gave him a firm hug and a quick kiss on the neck as they left, refusing to go any further than the glacial fort.

“He’s afraid he’ll kill again,” Shem said. “He told me he felt the influence of the world coming up the canyon, and he thinks that the further he stays away, the safer everyone is. Gleace agreed.”

“Gleace is one of your *men in charge*, isn’t he?” Jon guessed.

Shem nodded. “Kind of our own Chairman, but a much better man.”

“Kind of like a guide, I’d say,” Jon hinted, “*if* they still existed.”

Shem couldn’t look Jon in the eyes. Instead he surveyed the darkening forest below them. “You best be moving, Jon. Find yourself a decent place to camp for the night before it gets too late. Then tomorrow you wander out of there a broken, terrified man.”

“I will, Shem. And you’ll be safe.”

Shem caught Jon in an embrace. “This is as far as I go. I never want to set foot in that forest again. The scouts will see you through the boulders. And Jon? Thank you.”

Jon flashed him a rare grin, saluted, and followed the scouts into the maze of boulders.

Shem sighed. “You’re never going to be the same.”

Winter sat in the reception office staring out the open front door of the fort. That’s why he was surprised by the eager teenager bounding in behind him.

“Hey Doctor Winter! I’m here for my two weeks!”

Winter sighed. “Oh, Woodson. I’m so sorry. I forgot you were coming up today. Look, this may not be the best time. I don’t think you’ve heard, but—”

“I heard,” the young man said, his enthusiasm dampening. “I ran into Guide Gleace on the way up, and he filled me in. I really am here to help. Scouting lessons can wait. When Zenos and the others come back, their horses will need tending to. And, to be honest, sir, you all look pretty worn out.”

Winter smiled darkly. “It’s been an eventful day, to put it mildly. Of course you can stay. We’ll start scouting lessons tomorrow. Tonight, we watch and pray.”

Woodson pulled up a chair next to the surgeon and sat down. “Someone need stitching up today? I saw your needles soaking on the surgery table.”

Winter nodded once, still staring out the front door and not shifting his gaze. “General has a slashed palm, from grabbing the long knife. I don’t think he even noticed me putting in the stitches. Of course, the numbing agent is quite effective, but . . .”

That’s when Woodson noticed what Winter was watching. Or rather, who.

“Is that General Shin out there?” Woodson asked. “Sitting on the

“The Creator will provide us with a solution.”

log?”

Winter nodded. “He planted himself there as Shem and the others took Offra down, and he hasn’t moved since. Been a few hours now.”

“Maybe he wants company?” Woodson said cheerfully. “We’re pretty good friends now. I’ve helped him a lot with his maps, and he even told me to call him Perrin—”

Winter’s sharp look silenced Woodson. “He’s also told me to call him Perrin. I was nearly close to doing so, until I saw the general in action today. Never knew a man could move so quickly, nor kill so efficiently. We’re all a bit wary of him. I think he knows that, too. He put himself out there, almost as if in self-banishment, and none of us feels like bothering him.”

“But,” Woodson tried valiantly again, “maybe he needs a mug of water, or he wants to talk—”

“Woodson, there are ways that nature says to leave something alone. The stench of a skunk, the growl of a wolf, the spikes of a cactus, and the brooding of a general.” Winter leaned back in his chair. “I’m watching him, son. Don’t worry. I’m keeping an eye on him should he need anything. But I also know when to leave a man to work things out himself.”

Woodson sighed.

After a quiet minute, Winter said, “Actually, Woodson, we’re having a scouting lesson right now. The hardest part about being a scout is realizing that often you can’t do anything to alleviate the suffering the world causes itself. All you can do is watch and pray for them. Watch and pray.”

Woodson’s shoulders sank as he saw General Shin hold his head in his hands.

Dusk had fallen as Shem rode into the glacial valley. He’d left the rest of the scouts to keep an eye on Jon, but couldn’t bear to be so close to Edge again. He felt its influence, too, and had to escape it.

Before he reached the fort, Shem spied the large shadow sitting on a log. It rose quickly, and a bit stiffly.

“Offra’s gone then?” Perrin asked, his voice thin and shallow. “He’s safe for the night?”

“Yes,” Shem said shortly. “He’ll be all right. The forest scouts will help him make a camp.”

Perrin nodded and shoved his uninjured hand into his pocket like a nervous ten-year-old. “Shem, I need to say . . . I’m sorry, and I know that’s horribly inadequate, and I just wish . . . I just wish—”

Shem didn’t offer any help. Too drained by the day, he remained mounted on his horse staring down at his friend who couldn’t even look him in the eyes.

“I just . . . I wish someone had explained better—”

“I didn’t explain things to you?!” Shem exploded.

Perrin held up his hands as if to hold back Shem’s onslaught. “No, you explained plenty to me. I mean, explain my position of general better. I’ve realized something this evening. I may be the general, and the guide is over everything and everyone, but you—you’re really my commander, aren’t you? I should have listened to you. I should have recognized that you’re issuing the orders now. I’m merely the guard dog for Salem, and you’re . . . my master.”

At any other moment Shem would have humbly demurred, but not tonight. Not after that week. “I suppose I am, although I can’t imagine issuing you any order that you’d obey.”

“Try me,” Perrin said, with such submissiveness that Shem was startled. “Try me, and I promise I’ll obey. Even a general needs to be accountable to someone. That’s how stewardships work, right? Everyone is accountable to someone else?”

Shem stared at him in amazement. “We’ve never had a general before, and I suppose we’re still working out the kinks in our chain of command. But you’re right. And tonight you sound like a true Salemite.”

Perrin’s chin quivered.

Shem had so much more to say to him. Or rather, to yell at him. But it was impossible to be furious at a man so broken-hearted and so deeply contrite.

All Shem could do was sigh and say, “First order, General: go get something to eat, go to sleep, then tomorrow go home to your wife. You need her.”

“Yes, sir.”

Chapter 35-- "Stay far, far away from those trees."

The soldiers on patrol the next evening squinted in surprise when they saw the man crawling out of the trees.

"Help me! Someone!" he gasped. "Captain Thorne?"

The two soldiers stared as the man struggled to get to his feet.

"No food, no water . . ." He collapsed against a bush. "Death—"

"Are you . . . a Guarder?" one of the soldiers asked stupidly.

"Of course not! I'm Lieutenant Offra," said the ragged man.

"But . . . how did you get *in there*? What did you see?"

The man, struggling to stand up, stared up at them with empty eyes. "Neither of you," he said in a voice that chilled both of them to their bellies, "would ever sleep again if I told you. Now get me back to Fort Shin. And that's an order!"

Captain Thorne's mouth dropped open. "Offra's here?" he whispered to the sergeant who gave him the news. He glanced at the door to the commandant's office to see it was still closed. "Where is he?"

"Back treatment room of the surgeon's," the sergeant whispered. "The surgeon agreed to keep his condition quiet."

"And Radan?"

"Radan? He went in too? Only Offra came out."

"Let's go!" Thorne whispered, and he and the sergeant silently trotted down the stairs, rushed through the compound, and over to the surgeon's. A minute later they burst into the surgery and marched to the private treatment room, ignoring the surgeon who hastened after them.

Thorne swung open the door, eager to interrogate Offra, but stopped.

Offra was filthy, bruised, and resting on the cot. Lemuel noticed the blood stains on his torn clothing.

The surgeon barreled in after Thorne. “Exactly what have you done to him, Captain?! Why was he in the forest?”

“I don’t know,” Thorne said in a stunned monotone. “That’s why I’m here. You’re relieved, Surgeon.”

“He is my patient, and I will—”

It was Captain Thorne’s long knife that startled him into silence. It was pressing at his gut.

“You are relieved, Surgeon,” Thorne repeated steadily. “And you will never reveal what you saw here, especially to Genev. Is that clear?”

The surgeon licked his lips nervously, but the look in his eyes was defiant. “It’s clear, Captain. *It’s clear* nothing’s ever going to be clear again!” Before the surgeon stormed out of the room, he tossed an apologetic glance at the lieutenant who, with great effort, was opening his eyes.

Thorne spun to Offra. “Well?” he demanded as he slipped his long knife into his belt again.

“Sir, the news isn’t good,” he whispered. “Found bones—horses. Probably four. Some other bones, too. Far up by the boulder field. Likely human. Some very small ones, too. They didn’t make it, Thorne. Here.” He fished around in his trousers’ pocket and pulled out a strip of black cloth. “Found this among them. Like the cloaks they wore. That may be blood dried on it.”

Gingerly Thorne took the torn cloth and examined it, his eyes stinging. “Almost like teeth marks . . .”

“I saw bears up there,” Offra murmured. “And wolves. Heard something like a mountain lion screaming one night. And other noises, I couldn’t figure out what caused them. Like . . . wailing. Terrible place, Captain. I’ll never get over it,” Jon whimpered, tears beginning to dribble out of his eyes. “I was sure I was next . . .”

“Where’s Radan?” Thorne seemed to regret asking.

Offra’s shoulders began to heave. “Slipped into a crevice. I didn’t even hear him hit the bottom. A sudden cry, and then nothing. The ground just gave way under him. Just emptiness, darkness . . . he’s gone, sir.”

“When?” Thorne whispered.

“Yesterday morning. We were still looking for remains, and then he was gone!”

“Stay far, far away from those trees.”

Thorne nodded once. “So did you find anything else? Any sign of Jaytsy or a baby? Caves?”

“I never saw any . . . evidence of life in any of the caves we found.” Offra rubbed his eyes and shook his head. “It’s been over a year, sir. There are bones scattered everywhere. Big ones, tiny ones—could have been a baby. I don’t know, I don’t know. Nothing can survive in the forest, Captain. Not for long. I barely made it out alive. Don’t ever go back there—EVER! The noises, the sounds—not natural or normal.”

Thorne put down the cloth and awkwardly patted the trembling Offra on the shoulder. “Well done, soldier,” he managed. “Not the news I was hoping for, but . . .”

Offra was obviously upset. That he found something was really quite remarkable and unexpected.

And disappointing.

For a brief moment he wondered if Offra might have been faking it, but his terror was real, and the cloth, which Lemuel picked up again, was very similar to the cloaks the Shins were wearing. Wolves could do that much damage. So could bears . . .

“Look, Lemuel,” Offra said, his quiet voice struggling to be steady, “I didn’t go up there for you. I went hoping to find the Shins.” Offra turned to stare in Lemuel’s eyes, and the captain was taken aback by his intensity. Perhaps terror created clarity. “I know you don’t think much of me. I’m expendable, and that’s why you sent me. And frankly, I hate you. But Lemuel, I wouldn’t force even my worst enemy into that forest, and that includes you. I’m warning you now, and not as a friend by any means—stay far, far away from those trees.”

Astonished, Lemuel could only nod back to Offra who sighed and closed his eyes in an uneasy rest.

Thorne squeezed his own eyes shut, trying to keep the wetness back, and held the torn cloth close to his chest.

So they were gone.

Completely gone.

No more Perrin, no more Jaytsy, no more hope. He couldn’t pretend anymore.

Thorne patted Offra’s shoulder in as genial a manner as he could. “Rest up, soldier. Genev doesn’t know you’re here, and once you’re up to it, I’ll sneak you out again.”

Offra looked up at him with what seemed to be gratitude, as if

his last warning and declaration of hatred had never been uttered. Indeed, something odd was going on in Offra's eyes as he said, "Thanks, Captain. I really could use some sleep now."

"Understood," Thorne said, and once more something in Offra's demeanor seemed to shift. He almost appeared to be smiling as he wearily rolled over.

Thorne made a mental note to tell the surgeon to watch for instability in Offra. Surely no man could come back from such an experience without some degree of madness.

Lemuel stared at the cloth in his hand, shoved it into his jacket pocket, and left the treatment room.

He was going to need another story, if only for himself.

And a few more vials.

Mahrree had been adequately warned by the scout who brought her the message, by Guide Gleace who visited with her for an hour last night, and even by Shem who had returned in the morning and came to see her first instead of his wife.

She knew the entire story, she knew where Jon had gone, and she knew how Perrin was dealing—or not dealing—with it all.

Still she was startled to see the depth of distress in his face when he finally came home on Clark that evening. He had stayed at the glacial fort until he received word from the scouts that Jon had been observed heading back to Fort Shin, carried by two soldiers who discovered him.

Mahrree had been waiting on the front porch when she saw him coming down the road, his head low. He wouldn't meet her eyes after he dismounted and started for the front door, so she blocked his way with a fierce embrace.

Reluctantly he wrapped his arms around her too, and once he held her he didn't seem as if he'd ever let go again. Only after a long time did he finally speak, his words muffled in her shoulder.

"Please tell me honestly—have I destroyed your life too?"

"Every single day," she said into his chest, "has been a joy and an honor to share with you."

He sighed into her neck and she felt his tears leak down her back.

"You could be a scout. You lie as well as they do now. But thank you."

“Stay far, far away from those trees.”

Perrin didn't sleep well that night, nor did Mahrree. It wasn't her husband's tossing and turning that affected her, but the sullen darkness that came flooding back from Edge where he had banished it a few years ago.

By the morning he was as red-eyed as her, and wordlessly they ate their breakfast. Peto had left yesterday with Lilla Trovato and a hundred other teenagers and leaders for Terryp's land, and Mahrree was grateful he wasn't around to see his father so low again.

A knock came at the door, and Mahrree got up from the table. She intended to send whomever it was away, but she was startled instead to see Rector Bustani.

“Good morning, Mrs. Shin,” he said brightly, although it seemed to her that his eyes were puffy as well. “May I come in and speak to you and General Shin?”

“Oh, dear,” she murmured before saying, “Rector, I don't think you know what's happened—”

“I do,” he assured her. “That's why I'm here.”

Mahrree surprised herself by whispering, “But he's so fragile right now.”

“I know,” Bustani assured her. “I haven't come to knock him down, you know. Only to brace him up.”

“Of course, of course,” she said, still not wanting to let him in so that he could see the condition of Salem's general, but she couldn't think of a way to refuse him.

Perrin was already in the gathering room, standing stiffly. “Rector?”

Bustani smiled warmly. “General and Mrs. Shin, it's my honor to tell you that it's been over a year since you were baptized as members of Salem—”

Mahrree's heart flopped. They hadn't done too good a job at being Salemites.

“—and because of your efforts, you have been deemed worthy and ready to enter the temple.”

Perrin sagged, and stumbled over to a sofa where he sat and buried his face in his hands. “Obviously you don't know. You don't know what's happened—”

Bustani was over to him in a heartbeat, kneeling before him. “But I do, sir. Guide Gleace called me and Rector Yung to his home last

night, and together we prayed to know how to help you. Then Gleace sent us home to ponder what to do next. As soon as we had an answer, we were to visit him. Before sunrise, I was awoken with the answer. General Shin, only the Creator can help you, and He wants you in His temple. While you didn't intend to do anything wrong, you feel as if you've destroyed everything."

Perrin stared at him with both surprise and hope. "Yes," he said. "I do."

"He sees things differently, and He wants to soothe you. I rushed over to Gleace's with my impression, only to find that the guide was already awake and waiting for me. He said he felt the same way—that you and Mrs. Shin needed to go to the temple—and he'd already sent a message to Rector Yung to be ready to meet you there. Before I left the guide's, Yung had sent back word that he was hoping Gleace was going to say that. So there's three of us, sir, who all got the same impression that you are worthy and needing to go to the temple. Will you?"

Perrin could only nod his head.

Bustani smiled at Mahrree. "It's our custom that you bathe first, then come dressed in white clothing. White for baptisms, for marriages, for funerals, and for the temple. Every sacred moment calls for purity. Can you be ready in an hour? What you wore to your baptism will suffice. I'll drive you there myself, and Guide Gleace said he hopes to be there as well."

After he left, Mahrree and Perrin wept quietly on the sofa next to each other before gently arguing who would bathe first. They were barely ready on time—spotless in white and feeling rather self-conscious about it—when Bustani pulled up in a wagon. Soon they were on their way north into Salem.

The site of the temple was remarkable in that the stone edifice—mimicking the ancient site before its ruin—sat on the eastern most edge of Salem. But what was so astonishing to the Shins, since the first time they saw it, was a swath of land completely untouched in all the years Salemites had been there, bisecting Salem entirely. Kept as pristine and pure as when Guide Pax first gazed upon it, a twelve-mile-long and quarter-mile-wide section of potential farm land was left to remain as wild grasses and flowers, from the temple where it was perched on a slight rise before the eastern mountains, all the way to the rise of the mountains in the west.

“Stay far, far away from those trees.”

Perhaps most meaningful to Perrin and Mahrree was the approach from the south. One of the many rivers which meandered through Salem took a sharp turn near the temple and continued west, helping to divide Salem’s southern and northern halves. Along the river grew a lush and dense forest of trees and brush.

Another river meandered a quarter of a mile to the north, creating the other border to the temple land, as they called it, but that border was populated with tall grasses, marshes, and occasionally moose.

It was as Bustani’s wagon neared the southern border that Mahrree fully took in the symbolism: they had to go through a forest to reach peace.

Not that the forest was very wide. The wagon went through it and over the river in much less than a minute. But it was the idea, and the irony, that the world was terrified of the trees which could lead them to the safety they craved.

“I kind of wish we could walk through the forest to the temple,” she whispered to Perrin. “Like the Zenoses told me they frequently do, to remember what their ancestors went through.”

“You mean what *we* went through a year ago? Next time,” Perrin promised her. “Right now, I think Bustani is worried he might lose us if we walk.”

Mahrree instinctively she held her breath as they emerged from the trees and turned onto the simple tracked lane which led to the temple, still half a mile away.

There was nothing else in front of them except for the meticulously carved white stone building, the mountains behind it, and the lush meadow full of wildflowers before it. They’d been here before, driving past on their way to a northerly destination, speculating about what the building contained. Now they were headed there, and Mahrree could take in the chiseled stone, the columns in two rows, the spanning roof, the three-foot thick stone walls.

A wide stone portico, open and inviting, ran the entire width of the temple. Below it on the ground were a variety of small boulders and jagged stone: leftovers from its construction, and reminiscent of the boulder fields their ancestors passed through to reach Salem.

It was a good thing, Mahrree considered, that children weren’t allowed. While beautiful, it wasn’t the safest place for children to play. The grandmother in her wanted to construct a protective railing along the edge before the rock garden.

But adults were careful, so no railing was needed before the rows

of columns, rising as high as at the ancient site. Supporting the roof above, the columns created an imposing yet friendly front porch with even a few rocking chairs—painted white, of course—for those waiting for friends or family to join them.

As they neared, the Shins saw there were several people dressed in white waiting for them at the top of the stairs. Someone short got out of a rocking chair, and Mahrree immediately recognized Rector Yung. She matched his soft smile, and noticed that Guide Gleace stood there too, with an air of anticipation.

Rector Bustani halted the horses, and Perrin helped Mahrree out of the wagon. Gleace and Yung came down the stairs to walk up with them.

Neither Mahrree nor Perrin had said anything, unsure of what was appropriate, so when Yung whispered to them, “So happy to see you here!” they knew that silence was the rule, and one of the reasons children weren’t admitted.

The gentle stillness of the temple put into Mahrree’s mind a fluffy pillow, which was in odd contrast to the sharp and hard stone. However, even the stone seemed warm and inviting as they walked through the wide walnut wood doors with their escorts.

Mahrree hadn’t ever reached the point of speculating what was inside, but this wasn’t what she expected; however, it was entirely appropriate.

Before they’d left the world, she’d heard rumors about what “temples” in Terry’s land were for. For some reason, every conjecture was full of violence, sacrifice, and strange rituals. Why no one in the world could imagine temples were for peace, for love, for escape, she didn’t know. She supposed the world simply preferred to believe their ancestors were necessarily debased and debauched. The idea that the current civilization wasn’t the most sophisticated never occurred to them. They were always on an upward trend; the notion that their ancestors used to live better than them was unimaginable.

As Mahrree looked around the vast and silent temple, she realized the imagination of the world was woefully inadequate.

Before her was an immense space, immaculate and beautiful, and Mahrree realized she had just entered the Creator’s Gathering Room. A few hundred people were there, seated among the many sofas and chairs, or talking in hushed tones along the walls or near tables filled with floral arrangements. Only a handful glanced over to see who had come in, before going back to their muted discussions or

silent ponderings.

What surprised Mahrree the most were the trees. Yes, only Salemites would fill a temple with evergreens by the dozens, planted in massive pots which, she discovered later, could be silently rolled on ball bearings to new locations. The ten-foot high trees were used to create natural walls and quiet alcoves, and a sense of being outside while being inside.

Many windows flooded the temple with sunlight—even some in the ceiling, pitched at various angles to channel the light and keep off the snows. Along the walls were curtains dyed in deep reds, an intense hue which Mahrree hadn’t seen used anywhere else in Salem. The wooden chairs were elegantly and elaborately carved, in contrast to all of the simple chairs she’d seen in the valley. And woven intricately into the cloth covering the sofas was a design similar to the flowers and trees they’d passed. Hanging from the ceiling were elaborate wrought iron candelabras which could be lit at night. Beneath her bare feet—they’d been instructed to leave their shoes at the entrance—were soft, warm rugs covering sections of the polished stone floor.

Indeed, nothing in the world—not even the High General’s mansion—was as fine and sumptuous as the temple.

And here Mahrree had spent the last year thinking Salemites weren’t capable of making something luxurious. They could. But they reserved it all to share with the Creator.

Mahrree was surprised to see Mrs. Gleace in front of her. “Welcome,” she whispered, “to the closest you can be to the Creator while on this sphere. Now, come sit and learn.”

And they did.

And Mahrree understood why children weren’t allowed, and why only those who truly wanted and needed to be there were admitted, because she began to learn how to listen—*really* listen—to the Creator, and how to speak—*really* speak—to Him. There was never a sound above a whisper, and she realized later that even the grand wooden doors were muffled so as to not squeak or thud as they shut, and the rugs were thick to mute the sounds of footsteps.

They sat there for hours after the Gleaces and Rector Yung taught them, fully enveloped in a place that felt wholly other worldly. Wholly perfect. Wholly safe. She didn’t notice, as she thought deeply and fully, that others came and went, that Yudit had been by, offered some prayers in their behalf, then went on her way again. Mahrree didn’t even notice that midday meal time came and went, because she

was so fully wrapped in peace that she never wanted to leave it as she poured out every last worry to the Creator, and had the sensation that He sat nearby, listening and responding to her every word.

But eventually her stomach growled.

And Mrs. Gleace assured her they could return any time, and stay for however long they wanted to. The afternoon was already half gone when Mahrree finally looked around her to realize Gleace and Yung had left some time ago, and new happy faces dressed in white were there to assist and worship with them.

Often Mahrree had paused from her own thoughts and prayers and watched her husband.

Some time ago Perrin had positioned himself in an armchair of dark blue, which struck Mahrree as similar to the color of the uniforms he used to wear, but was intended to be reminiscent the waters of the river nearby. He sat by a window of thick, wavy glass which distorted the scenery outside, and two pines had been rolled over to give him some privacy. But what Mahrree worried about was that when his head wasn't bowed in prayer or thought, he was staring at the deep red curtains which seemed to Mahrree arteries of blood.

That color choice bothered her, and she wished the curtains were instead a delicate green like the rugs, or perhaps a cheery yellow.

Until she remembered something Guide Gleace told them as he pointed out the symbolism in the room. He must have noticed the Shins glancing at the red curtains, because he said, "Yes, they look like blood. That's not to put into mind violence or rage, but to recognize that even blood is cleansing, just like water. Blood is present in birth, and quite frequently in death.

"But in ways that we do not yet understand, the Creator has revealed to us that blood can cleanse us, and can free us from the mistakes and burdens and pains we carry. Someday we'll understand how and why, but for now He tells us to trust Him. The shedding of blood isn't always wrong, Perrin. Sometimes it's necessary. Sometimes it's even purifying. You're here to understand that for yourself."

And that's what he was trying to do.

Eventually Mahrree stood up from her sofa, went to his side, and placed a hand on his shoulder. He turned his unfocused gaze from the window and smiled faintly at her.

"They said you can come back," she whispered to him. "It's nearly dinner time."

He blinked. "It is? I thought we'd been here only an hour."

“Stay far, far away from those trees.”

He went back the next day, without Mahrree who had a house to maintain and a history text to write, but rode Clark and tethered him in the forest where he enjoyed a quiet day of drinking from the river and nickering softly at passing Salemites. Perrin walked slowly, Mahrree found out later, along the river to the temple, relishing the metaphor.

He didn't return again until dinner.

The next day he did the same thing.

And again the next.

Shem came over that evening, asking Mahrree how Perrin was doing.

“He comes home quiet and pensive, but I *think* he's figuring things out,” she told him. “He barely picks at his dinner, which is always a sign his mind is elsewhere. I get the impression he's on a very long walk, and when he reaches his destination, he'll let us know.”

“It's just that we've never known anyone to spend so long at the temple, and every day,” Shem explained. “Gleace is a little concerned about him. The volunteers there let him know what's going on, and they asked if they should try to feed him.”

Mahrree smiled at that. “It's just that you've never had someone with such a heavy burden to unpack. I think he's working through the details of many years and many lives lost. But he'll let us know when he's done. Or when he's hungry.”

Perrin went again in the morning the next day, but came home earlier than usual. Mahrree noticed that as he walked from the barn, he had a slight smile on his face and his step was lighter than she'd seen it in a long while.

When he came in the door, he could see the question on her face.

“It's good,” he said. “It's all good. I think . . . I think we can get a handle on living like Salemites. All we have to do is keep trying. We don't even have to succeed, just keep trying. Perfection doesn't happen in this lifetime, anyway. The Creator will fill in the parts we can't manage. And Mahrree?” he said to her joyful expression, “For some reason *I'm starving*. Can dinner be early today?”

She made him sandwiches. Lots of them.

It was as they were eating that he said, “I finished at the temple a while ago, but made a stop on the way home.”

“Oh?”

“I needed to talk to Professor Stone about ancient sites,” he said

off-handedly.

“She didn’t go with the big teen expedition?”

“No,” Perrin said. “She sent other archaeologists since she’s too busy planning another expedition later in Weeding Season.”

Mahrree sensed there was something more to this, because Perrin was never very good at being nonchalant. “To where?” she asked. “And why?”

“It seems some of the senior students were approaching Terryp’s land last year and came across what they think may be undiscovered ruins.” He tried to sound indifferent, but his eyes were dancing too much and giving him away.

That’s why Mahrree was bouncing on the edge of her chair.

“And?”

“Well, I learned a lot over the past few days,” he drawled, even though he never drawled, “and one thing is that the Last Day isn’t coming tomorrow. I’ve been putting off some things needlessly, and now I understand that I have some time. It was made clear to me that there’s one thing more important than securing Salem.”

Now Mahrree was thoroughly confused. “What could be more important?”

“You. Professor Stone is putting together a team of students and archaeologists to try to find those ruins, and she said she’d be happy to take along some middle-aged assistants, if you’re interest—”

“YES!”

Chapter 36--“I can’t believe we’re here.”

Mahrree lay on her back and let the sun cook her.

Not so long ago she hated the heat. The hard, hot stone beneath made her feel like she was slowly simmering, but she didn’t care. Today, she loved every moment of it.

She glanced to the side to see where the sun was in relation to her position. She really wasn’t being lazy, taking a late morning nap in the middle of Weeding Season. She was there for a purpose, albeit a thoroughly relaxing and marvelous one.

Realizing she still had least an hour until the sun was where it needed to be, she rolled over on to her belly and took in the scenery.

From eight levels in the sky, the world took on an entirely different perspective, one that she could stare at for hours.

And she had been.

Admittedly, the very first time she climbed the step pyramid, as Professor Stone called it, she was quite terrified to focus on the distant terrain. She’d beaten Perrin up there, too excited to pace herself and thoroughly enjoying wearing breeches again, as the crowd of thirty archaeologists and students below cheered. But it was an exhausting climb. Maybe the civilization that built this temple had longer legs, because the steps were truly massive, and even Perrin struggled over some areas where the shorter carved steps had crumbled away, and they had to scale instead the precisely cut blocks of stone.

But when a panting Mahrree scrambled to the last set of blocks before the platform on top, which Professor Stone told her could hold up to forty people, she decided they must have been forty very small, skinny people. She waited for Perrin to join her before climbing to the platform on the pretext of doing it together, but in reality a case of nerves had overtaken her and she could no longer move.

A moment later he was by her side, slightly winded. “Go on,” he told her. “One more block to the top. I’m sure it’s safe.”

“So what was all of that they were saying earlier, about sending up the newest visitors first to check out its stability?”

Perrin chuckled. “They were joking. This is solid stone. It really is a tradition to send up the newcomers first. Peto told me about that from his visit here. Besides, Professor Stone’s son was already up here before the rest of us arrived, to sweep off the top. He told me he made sure there weren’t any giant spiders up here.”

Both of them eyed the surface anxiously. Just the week before they’d learned about tarantulas.

“He was also only joking, too,” Mahrree whispered. “Right?”

“Pretty sure,” Perrin said, not sounding not very sure at all. “Well, we’ve waited our entire lives for the very best view in the unknown world. Stable or not, spiders or not, I’m getting on top of this.”

“Me to!” Mahrree said, and together they stood up to the renewed cheers from far below.

But she could barely hear them. She could barely breathe.

Terry’s land was more than she could have wished for, and it was truly immense.

Beside her, Perrin murmured in reverent astonishment. “Over one thousand miles that way until you reach the southern sea,” he pointed. “I can’t imagine that great a distance. Between us and it—just land and rivers and trees and animals. No humans.” He pointed to the west and said, “Two hundred and fifty miles that way—”

“Actually two hundred fifty-*four*,” Mahrree managed to whisper.

“—fifty-*four* miles that way, and there’s another mountain range, far more massive than anything we know, and then even more land. Behind us, it’s barely over a mile to the mountain range that borders Edge. And then, to the left of us, and less than ten short miles from here is two miles of desert then the village of Sands,” he whispered, as if they would hear him if he spoke louder. “We could walk there today. I can’t believe we’re here.”

“I don’t think I ever want to climb down,” Mahrree said. “Besides, my legs feel like jelly, my bottom is so achy from sitting on that old mare for three days, and I’m not entirely sure I could get down right now even if I wanted to.”

He chuckled and kissed her. “I’ll set up our tent. You sit up here and soak in Terry. Remember, we’ll be here for more than a week.”

And so, guiltily, she’d sat up there with silent tears of joy dribbling down her cheeks, while everyone else below set up tents, corralled the horses in the stone enclosure they’d made decades ago, and

started dinner.

That was . . . oh, three, maybe four days ago? A week?

She didn’t care. She was in a land where time held no reckoning. And, once again, she was on the tallest temple pyramid in Terryp’s land.

Alone.

She would have thought that sounded frightening, but it was the very opposite. Before her lay the most remarkable land she and Perrin had been exploring, all by themselves, while Professor Stone and the rest of the archaeology party were creeping along, inch by inch, among the vines about two miles to the northwest hoping to find evidence of new ruins.

To Mahrree and Perrin, it seemed quite tedious, especially when there were buildings and walls and tablets and pits for them to explore, and an entire stack of paper for Mahrree to make rubbings of each and every one of them. Long ago, when Perrin had first suggested to Mahrree that he bring her here, he promised he’d arrange for a second horse just to carry extra paper and charcoal for her to make rubbings of all the engravings around. For their trip, he did just that. Mahrree would be coming home with enough blackened pages to paper their entire home, and eventually she’d use most of them for kindling in the fire, but for now she was living her dream, and even privately gave herself the name Terryp-ee, as if she were him.

This morning, though, Perrin had gone with the excavating team to help move some fallen logs. They both suspected a reason the Shins were invited to go on the trip was so they could use Perrin’s muscle when the pack mules were tired or they couldn’t negotiate the terrain very well. But he would be returning by noon, when the measurement needed to be taken.

It happened every year, the same day, the same position of the sun. Usually someone from the archaeology team would be there to check, once again, that when the sun was precisely above the step pyramid that day, the shadows on the corners disappeared. Today was significant for that ancient civilization.

But the team felt they were close to a discovery, and Mahrree assured them that she and Perrin could watch the event.

And so Mahrree sat up there soaking in the sunshine, waiting for the correct hour, and keeping an eye on the distant north for when Clark and Perrin would emerge from it. They still had time so, unworried, she watched in a dreamlike state the world moving before

her.

Byson, Terryp had called them. Terryp's story was told to visitors in detail as they sat on the lower levels of the step pyramid as if at an amphitheater. On their first evening it was Mr. Stone who explained to them what Terryp did, even acting out sections of the story, and Mahrree realized Professor Stone's husband was a lot more dramatically inclined than his wife.

Mahrree smiled faintly as she understood the reaction of the king to Terryp's description of the byson—they really did look like malformed, grotesque cattle. These animals, grazing in herds by the thousands in the vast plains before her, were the evidence King Querul claimed that this land was poisoned. Why, look what it did to the cows! Imagine what people would look like in just a few generations, all humped back and shaggy haired!

But it wasn't just the byson that so alarmed Querul. They were just a convenient excuse. When Terryp returned, having been dragged away by the soldiers and forced back to Idumea to make his report, he pulled out hundreds of pages of rubbings that he made of the carvings. He laid them out all over the floor of the newly constructed mansion to show Querul what he had discovered.

One of the king's servants at the time was a man who later escaped to Salem, and he witnessed what happened. The king and his servants stared openmouthed at the display, but Terryp saved the best for last.

"This, your Highness, this is the most remarkable of them all!" Then he pulled out a rubbing that he had preserved in his coat, and reverently unrolled it. "Sir, look at the writing on this one. It's *ours!* That land—*that* was where the Creator first put us down. These words aren't carved as skillfully as the others, but that's because it was the mason's first attempt at cutting stone. *Our* story, sir. *Our* ancestors. This describes how the Creator placed our first five hundred families here, how He taught them, how He established the guides, how He told them to create a government—"

"You're mad!" King Querul declared. "We've never been there!"

And that was the end. The etchings were all gathered up, Terryp was whisked away to be treated by the doctors, and many weeks later a mysterious fire engulfed all of Terryp's findings along with the collected family lines. All evidence was destroyed.

“I can’t believe we’re here.”

Even Terryp’s mind was severely altered. He was to have escaped with others who followed Guide Pax, but the surgeons at the garrison kept such a close eye on their crazed patient that no ‘guarders’ could retrieve him. By the time they released him, after nearly a year of clarifying to him what *really* happened in the western lands, there were no more people left in the world who knew the way to escape. And over in Salem, they had been sure Terryp must have died after so long, so no one went to try to rescue him.

It wasn’t for another twenty years that Salem dared to send out scouts to find those who wanted to leave the world.

Terryp had died the year before.

He’d finished out his days a broken man, writing only a few stories for children hoping to excite someone’s imagination enough to think about their confining world in liberating ways.

“We are, Terryp,” Mahrree whispered to the air. “You freed my husband and me, and our family. You didn’t fail.”

She watched the herd of byson below and beyond, grunting and snuffing and kicking up dust as they grazed. But what fascinated Mahrree more was what she could see just beyond the herd, in a thick ribbon of forest several hundred paces away.

Wolves.

Yesterday evening she and Perrin had watched with rapt and horrified fascination as a pack of wolves, two adults and three pups, came out of those trees intent on finding their dinner. They singled out a slower byson and began their pursuit, the pups not yet as effective as their parents in chasing and goading. For several minutes Mahrree was conflicted as to who she wanted to win.

Perrin chuckled at her clenched fists and worried expression. “It’s nature, Mahrree. *Something’s* going to die. Either the old tired byson, or the young pups from starvation.”

The mother in her decided she didn’t want it to be the pups, so she began to cheer for the wolves. Within fifteen minutes the wolves had won, their prize falling at the tree line. Mahrree watched between her fingers as the family of wolves gorged themselves on the carcass while the rest of the byson herd moved on. This morning about half of their kill still remained for their midday meal, and the wolf pack sat around it, satiated and rested. Before them walked another thousand temptations.

Mahrree considered that had the wolves been people, they would have spent day and night trying to kill more and more byson, never

satisfied with what they had for the day, but feeling the compulsion to possess it all. That was the way of the world.

“How unprogressive!” Mahrree sarcastically said as she watched the distant wolves. The pups wrestled each other and yapped as playfully as regular dogs. Their parents panted contentedly in the shade of the trees and watched their young enjoying the day.

“Look at nature,” Mahrree chided. “Relaxing because they have *enough*. You’ll never get ahead in the world!” she called down to the wolves. “Being satisfied isn’t progressive.” She giggled as she thought one of the wolves turned its head to her. She was much too far away to tell, but in her mind she imagined it winked at her.

Peto hadn’t mentioned there were wolves when he came back from his excursion to Terryp’s land. Then again, there were a couple hundred teens and leaders, so the wolves probably stayed far away from that noisy pack.

And, also again, there was a young woman on the trip who Peto was stuck on to like sap, according to Mrs. Bustani who had gone along as a chaperone. When Peto came home from his two weeks, his demeanor was a mixture of happiness and hopelessness. Mahrree didn’t understand it at first, and when she realized he’d forgotten to bring home his sleeping pack, she went over to the Bustanis who were unloading the wagon.

Mrs. Bustani said, “There’s always a few who forget half of their stuff. Check the pile of unclaimed items on the porch.” Mahrree soon found Peto’s pack, and Mrs. Bustani asked her, “Did Peto enjoy the trip?”

“I’m not sure,” Mahrree said. “He’s bathing now, thank goodness, but when I asked him, he sighed and said, ‘It was wonderful. I loved everything about it. *Just loved it.*’ But he certainly didn’t *look* happy.”

Mrs. Bustani smirked. “Would you say he looked a bit *lovesick*?”

Mahrree smacked her forehead with her palm. “Yes! That’s exactly how he looked!”

“Mrs. Shin, I’m not sure he or Lilla Trovato saw anything of the ruins. They saw only each other. Every hike, every exploration, every lecture they were paying more attention to each other than anything. I kept a close eye on them, don’t worry.”

“Oh dear,” Mahrree murmured. “I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t be. There are frequently romances that result from these trips.” She blushed as she added, “It’s how Rector Bustani and I first

“I can’t believe we’re here.”

found each other thirty-five years ago.”

“How serious do you think it is between them?”

Mrs. Bustani shrugged. “Serious enough that as we dropped off the Norden group, he took her behind a barn and stole a kiss. Well, not really *stole*. She donated it quite readily.” She chuckled when Mahrree’s eyebrows flew up, “I kept a close eye on them. And they knew it, too.”

Mahrree had watched Peto after that as he moped around the house. Every day he sent a letter to Norden, and every day two came back.

Perrin refused to believe anything serious was going on until one morning he came back from the barn looking shaken.

“What’s wrong?” Mahrree asked when she saw he was pale.

“It’s Peto,” he said gravely. “He was . . . *he was singing*. Did you know he could sing?”

Mahrree snorted. “No. What was he singing?”

He shuddered slightly. “Something Lilla Trovato made up on our Marking Party.”

“You need to face it, Perrin. Your son’s in love. With a singer and a hugger.”

“I never sang when I was courting you.”

“And I thank you for that.”

Three long, depressing weeks after Peto came home, he suddenly became happy again, because Shem came over to announce that the Trovatos were coming down to visit Calla and her massive belly, and they were bringing Lilla along. And she was staying—supposedly, to help with Calla and the baby.

The day they were due to arrive at the Zenoses, Peto watched their house from the front window like an excited puppy. Mahrree didn’t need to ask when their wagon drove down the lane, because she heard the door slam as Peto raced down the road, and even in the kitchen Mahrree could hear Lilla’s squeal of, “Petoohhhhhh!”

That was the second time Perrin came into the house, pale. “She’s here, isn’t she?” he asked dully.

“She’s a very nice girl, Perrin.”

“She’s a very loud girl, Mahrree.”

“So are we. I thought you once said, ‘Loud means passionate.’”

He swallowed down a lump in his throat and, without another word, headed upstairs to his office as Mahrree laughed.

The Trovatos were just in time, because early the next morning

Boskos Zenos knocked on their door, full of grandfatherly pride. When Perrin opened it, Boskos announced, “In the middle of the night my newest grandbaby arrived. Mrs. Trovato has gone over to her cousin’s place for a nap, but Calla and Shem want you to come over as soon as is convenient to meet their son—”

Perrin and Mahrree cheered.

“—Lek Zenos.”

Their smiles froze in place.

“Lek?” Perrin said as merrily as he could. “After my great-great-grandfather, Lek Shin?”

Boskos nodded. “They’ll explain it when you get over there. Bring the Briters, too.”

Perrin closed the door and met Mahrree’s perplexed gaze.

Peto, coming down the stairs, said what they were both thinking. “Who in Salem would want to name their son Lek?”

They found out less than an hour later, as the Shins and Briters quietly crept into the Zenos house and up the stairs to the bedroom where Calla, looking far more beautiful and peaceful than any woman who just birthed had a right to look, grinned at them from her bed.

“He’s here!” she announced quietly.

Shem sat in a rocking chair next to bed, cradling the bundle in his arms. He didn’t even look up as they filed in, but gazed at his son.

“I can’t believe it,” he whispered. “I’m finally a father. He’s so amazing. Just look at him. And Calla was . . . so amazing.”

Perrin leaned over to Calla and gave her a congratulatory kiss on the forehead. “And how long has Shem been sobbing about this?”

“Since the baby was born, so on and off for about five hours. Lilla’s downstairs getting him a mug of water so he doesn’t dehydrate.” She must have noticed Peto looking around for her.

“Usually it’s the new mother who needs the extra water,” Mahrree pointed out.

Perrin went over to Shem and said, “Time for inspection, Sergeant Major.” He extricated tiny Lek from his father’s arms.

As Shem watched Perrin cuddle him, fresh tears trickled down his face. “What do you think, General?”

Perrin grinned at the newborn who had light brown peach fuzz for hair. He cleared his throat gruffly, and Mahrree interpreted.

“That means, He’s perfect, Shem. We’re so happy for both of you!”

“Yeah, that,” Perrin said, gently kissing the newborn.

“I can’t believe we’re here.”

Lilla bounced into the room with a two mugs of water. “Ooh, Papa Pere is *such* a big softy!”

It didn’t help that at that moment Perrin sniffled.

Only the Briters in the corner dared chuckle out loud.

“Calla,” Jaytsy said, “our children will grow up together. How fun will that be?”

Already Salema, in Deck’s arms, was straining to see what her Puggah was holding, and called out, “Baby! Baby!”

When she held out her arms to Perrin, Mahrree realized she was jealous. She knew how to fix that.

“Take Salema, Perrin, while I take little Mr. Zenos here. Aunt Mahrree needs to inspect him as well.” She couldn’t yet bring herself to call him ‘Lek’ as she took the newborn from Perrin and sniffed in his wonderful scent.

“All right, if no one else is going to ask,” Peto said, leaning against the wall, “then I will. *Lek?* You’re really going with *Lek?*”

Lilla plopped on to the bed next to Calla and said, “Where *did* you get that name?”

Shem and Calla met each other’s eyes.

“Tell them,” she said.

Shem turned to the Shins. “I know it seems odd, but we were talking about how it was because of Lek and his wife Lorixania that I eventually went to Edge to bring you all to Salem. Somehow, it seemed important that Lek’s name come here as well. As if . . . as if he’s been *waiting* to come here. I can’t explain it, but we both felt it. Lek needs to be here.”

Nobody spoke, but let the notion sink in.

Eventually Perrin said what Mahrree was thinking. “And now I love the name. I think you’re right. Thank you for bringing him here.”

“Oh, I love that idea!” Jaytsy squealed quietly. “Deck, we should do that too. Bring your parents to Salem as well. Shem, I think we’re stealing all of the Zenos baby naming ideas.”

Although Mahrree’s attention was wholly consumed by the newborn in her arms, out of the corner of her eye she noticed that Jaytsy had a hand on her belly.

Deck nodded. “I think we should bring my parents here, too.”

Now Mahrree stared at Jaytsy’s belly and . . . was that a slight bulge?

Calla noticed. “So . . . Jaytsy?”

She grinned. “Guess what, Calla? They didn’t guess it this time!”

“What?” Mahrree said.

“When I was expecting Salema, I think all of you figured it out before I could announce it. Well, not this time!”

“You’re expecting too?”

Jaytsy and Calla laughed together.

“Good job, Jaytsy!” Calla said. “You *did* keep it a secret for a while.”

“Calla, you knew?” Perrin exclaimed, and Shem blinked in surprise.

“So did I,” Deck mumbled, and blushed a deep red.

“We expecting mothers can sense these things,” Calla said proudly.

“I’m about three moons along,” Jaytsy announced. “So this little one will be either Sewzi, or Cambozola.”

As Mahrree watched the three distant wolf pups playing, she sighed in anticipation. She named them Salema, Lek, and Sewzi/Cambo. In her mind was a list she’d created when Salema was born, and it was titled, “Getting to my dozen children.” She loved to think of the future when she’d sit in the garden weeding, and would be able to count a dozen grandchildren and nieces and nephews around her. So far the first two places were check-marked, and the third would be in less than half a year.

And then Mahrree burst out laughing because she could, because no one was there to hear her, and because she remembered what happened with Lilla and Peto right after Jaytsy’s announcement.

Lilla had started to snigger at the name Cambozola, even though her older sister elbowed her.

“Cambozola,” Calla said, with excessive diplomacy. “That’s an . . . *interesting* name, Deck.”

Deck bobbed his head. “Naming children after their ancestors was a tradition on my father’s side. He was named after four ancestors. Probably more, I’m not sure. But I think we could probably just call him Cambo. Or Zola? Probably not Bozo, though—”

“Definitely not Bozo,” Jaytsy agreed, and she noticed her brother chortling none-too-subtly. “Peto, it’s not as if *we* don’t have a few unusual names in our line.”

“True, true,” he admitted. “But someone’s daughter is really going to hate them someday if you all keep up this tradition.”

Lilla frowned at him. “Why?”

“Didn’t you hear the name of Lek’s wife?”

“I can’t believe we’re here.”

“No.”

“Lorixania!” he told her, with an accompanying sneer. “If Lek’s here, someone’s got to call a daughter Lorixania. The poor girl won’t even be able to spell her own name until she’s twelve.”

Lilla tipped her head thoughtfully. “Could do like Deck will with Cambozola. Call her something shorter, like Lori. Lori Shin doesn’t sound bad—”

She stopped herself too late.

Everyone in the room stared at either her or Peto, and both of them turned purple.

The loud silence that followed was soon filled with muffled snorts and concealing coughs, and Mahrree glanced over to Perrin who wore the most pained of smiles.

Even though Deck whispered it to Jaytsy, everyone heard him. “We weren’t even *discussing* baby names until *we were married*.”

Mahrree, high on her perch on the temple, laughed. She sat up—yes, she dared to do that much by herself—and turned to face the north where her husband was somewhere in the dense thickets dragging logs and shifting rock. “Sometime we’re going to have to discuss this,” she announced. “So I’m practicing now. Perrin, it’s going to happen. The Trovatos see it, as do the Zenoses and Briters—”

Then, remembering, she pivoted to the east. “By the way, you Zenoses and Briters, you’re supposed to be keeping a close eye on those two while we’re away. Remind Lilla she’s there to take care of her sister and nephew, not hide in the barn with my son who really should know better.”

Turning back to where Perrin may have been, and giggling that she was talking out loud and enjoying it, she continued, “Now, Perrin. Brace yourself. I give them only until the end of Snowing Season. By the first of next year, I’m sure they’ll be married and moving into our house, so start planning our addition, and yes—you may make the walls extra thick so you can’t hear the newlyweds singing to each other at night.”

Laughing, she turned back to watch her wolf family take a nap in the trees.

In just a few more days she’d have to head back to where time existed again, and so did tasks and projects which she loved . . .

Except for one.

She’d put off thinking about it, but at odd moments it popped into her head—the history text of the world she was writing for the

university. Calla had been such an excellent assistant, finding journals and conducting interviews and giving suggestions for revisions, that Mahrree knew she never would've been able to do it without her.

They had only one chapter left to finish before little Lek arrived, and it was the toughest of them all: how Mahrree and Perrin Shin "changed the world."

One always dreams it'd be in the best of ways, Mahrree thought. Not in ways wherein a new set of laws are named after and because of you.

It was the balance of how much to record and how much to ignore for the chapter that was vexing Mahrree, along with having to relive in her head the lies the Administrators spread about her and Shem. No matter how much she told herself it didn't matter what the world thought, it did. She hadn't realized before how hard it was to let go of certain aspects of the world, such as its opinion of her. The world had dug its claws deep into her, and she couldn't pry herself free of it.

So she'd gone to her rector for suggestions, and Bustani, who seemed to know some of the story, likely from Gleace, recommended that Mahrree plow through that chapter with only the bare details, then burn all of her notes from it, a page at a time, to watch it all vanish in front of her.

She would do that, along with Calla who had been exceptionally tactful about the entire thing, so that Calla could witness the infamy of her husband and her new best friend dissolve into ashes.

For now, Mahrree shoved all of that away, because she was in a place where time didn't matter, and no one had ever heard of a chairman or any administrators. They thought their influence was so great, but it didn't even extend past the narrow desert. The wolves and byson and trees and carved stone didn't care one lick about any of them.

And because of that, and for a few thousand other reasons, Mahrree loved Terryp's land.

In the north she heard a horse approaching, and she turned to see Perrin on Clark, riding hard for the temple. He was shouting something, but she didn't understand him until he got closer.

"They found it! They found it! Pillars! Carvings! Walls! Massive!"

That almost got Mahrree to her feet, but instead she leaned over the side and called down, "Where?"

He reined Clark to a stop, tethered him, and started climbing up

“I can’t believe we’re here.”

the stone blocks. “I’ll tell you,” he panted, “only if you agree to go with me there.”

Already she knew what her answer would be, but she was never one to make things easy. “That means getting back on the old mare.”

“Yes,” he said, hefting himself over a section where the stairs had crumbled away, “but it also means that you, Mrs. Terryp-wanna-be, would get to really play Terryp.”

“Meaning?”

“Professor Stone wants you and your papers and charcoal so that you can make the first rubbings of the never-before-seen engravings.”

He must have heard her excited gasp, still six levels above him, because he looked up and grinned. “Got you with that, didn’t I? Thought you wouldn’t be able to say no. We’ll watch the shadows disappear here, then we’ll head north to help finish digging and excavating. You should be able to get the first rubbings by dinnertime.”

Mahrree bounced on her knees in excitement. “I can’t believe it! Are there words?”

“As far as they could see, but none that look like ours. Perhaps yet another new language we won’t be able to decipher. But some interesting shapes, nonetheless.”

Mahrree’s hands trembled in anticipation. She might not even need the mare. She might just run—or even fly—there all by herself.

But first . . . she glanced up at the sky. “The sun’s almost at its zenith, and the shadows are diminishing. Hurry, Perrin!”

“Working on it,” he grunted as he heaved himself over another massive stone.

Soon Perrin pulled himself to the top of the pyramid and easily stood up. The height didn’t bother him. And when he was near, it didn’t bother Mahrree either. She stood up too, but stayed close to him.

He glanced over the edge.

“We have another minute, I’m guessing,” Mahrree said. “So . . . if you wanted to . . .?” She raised her eyebrows at him.

A little nervously, but more excitedly, he looked around. “True, no one around for miles . . . I suppose I could.”

“Do it,” she prodded him. “You know you want to. Do it now!”

He grinned at her, turned to face the southeast, and stretched out his arms. “I’M HERE, IDUMEA!” he bellowed as Mahrree laughed. “COME GET ME! I DARE YOU! WE’RE STILL ALIVE, SO HA!”

Perrin elbowed her. “Do it—shout at the world!”

“I can’t,” she said, giggling nervously. “I’m too embarrassed.”

“By what?! Come on! Then I’ll do it for you. GUESS WHAT? MAHREE’S RIGHT HERE, NICKO MAL! YOU DIDN’T DESTROY US! WE WON!”

Mahrree was able to add a loud cheer to that. Laughing, they peered over the edges.

“And . . . there it goes,” Perrin nodded, watching the shadows of the pyramid shrink back along the edge.

Mahrree checked the other side. “Gone on this side, too. So, what do you think the significance of this day was for this civilization?” she asked him, glancing up at the sky to see the sun directly overhead, bathing them in scorching heat.

“Well, since Terryp wasn’t here in the Weeding Season, he assumed it was some kind of planting signal. But it’s far too late in the year for that. He knew about history, but wasn’t too keen on the movements of the cosmos,” Perrin said. He glanced over another edge while Mahrree checked the opposite side.

“Perfect alignment!” Mahrree announced. “I like the guides’ theory that this was either the day the Creator brought them to the world, or left them. Probably the same day, three full years apart, just like with our ancestors. They wanted a symbol of Him to always remember Him and His days.”

Perrin nodded. “There may be other meanings, but I agree—I like that one the most. All of the carvings leading up to here suggest the presence of a Great Being teaching the people.” Then he smiled. “There’s also another significance for this now, but only for us. And because of that, I’m glad we’re alone.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You don’t know?”

She shook her head.

“Seriously?”

She gave him an apologetic look.

“Lost track of time, didn’t you. Well then, let me be the first to say it—Happy 20th Anniversary, Mrs. Shin. I hope Terryp’s land was all you ever expected it to be.”

She grinned and stretched on tiptoe to kiss him. “Everything always exceeds my expectations when I’m with you. You just have that kind of effect on me.”

Perrin narrowed his eyes at her. “I think I said something like that to you when we got engaged, didn’t I?”

“I can’t believe we’re here.”

“See? I do remember a few things, such as, you’re the most perfect man in the world, and I love and adore you more than words can say.”

“It’s amazing the kind of power you still have over me.”

She chuckled.

“You know,” he said, “*this* was what I wanted for us. When I first started making the copies of Terry’s map? I wanted Mal to open up the area, so that I could bring you here for our 20th anniversary.”

“I remember that conversation,” she said. “You promised to not take me to the boring, old seashore, but to the exciting, old ruins.”

“It didn’t quite work out as I originally planned—”

“When has *anything* in our lives worked out as we planned?” she reminded him.

He chuckled. “You have a point, there. But we made it, Mahrree. We made it *anyway*. The Creator got us here in a different way, but now that I think about it,” he glanced around at the expansive plains and ruins, all for just them, and sighed in sheer contentment. “His plan was a lot better than what I came up with. You know, it was Him who reminded me in the temple that our 20th was rapidly coming up.”

Mahrree laughed. “Good thing He remembers everything. I can hardly wait to see what the next twenty years bring us,” she said. “Or thirty! I suggest we come here again, for our 30th, 40th and 50th anniversaries. I’ll make some more predictions today and we can see how accurate I was. First prediction, in another twenty years we’ll agree that our lives have been more perfect than we ever could have imagined.”

Perrin laughed. “We’ll be sixty-eight. Do you realize that?”

“Yes, I do. It’ll be harder to make it here for our 60th, I suppose, when we’re eighty-eight.”

“We better hope we have lots of grandsons who can carry us here, then.”

“I think we’ll have more than enough,” she said. “And Perrin, I didn’t really forget. While I did lose track of time, I never forgot what today was.” She wrapped her arms around his neck, and he put his around her waist. “Happy Anniversary, Mr. Shin!”

“It always is.”

Chapter 37--“ . . . and we all lived happily ever after.”

“Did you *have* to end it with kissing?” thirteen-year-old Vid sneered. He’d stopped pulling weeds some time ago, as did his cousin Hycy.

“I didn’t say anything about kissing,” Muggah pointed out. She’d never moved from her position in the pumpkin patch, but had pivoted in a circle in the dirt as the cousins moved around her, clearing the weeds.

But Hycy sighed and smiled. “Oh, they kissed! They always do.”
“Yeah,” Vid said, his sneer intensifying, “*I know.*”

Muggah smirked as laughter ringed her. More children had joined them in Jaytsy’s extensive garden, mostly teenagers but also some younger children, although they weren’t entirely sure why. The older ones knew what the story would be today, because this was how they’d learned it too, as thirteen-year-olds, and it had become a tradition to come sit and hear it again.

Of all the histories Salem’s official historian had written and lectured on, this was the version she had never formally recorded, with details only the family should know. And even then, some of those details were glossed over so quickly the younger children didn’t *really* catch them. Even the older ones, raised innocently in Salem, usually didn’t understand their Muggah’s insinuations, because she was deliberately vague.

But this was the way they were to hear about it—on a warm Weeding afternoon in the garden.

Muggah glanced around her. More than a dozen children. Some were weeding, one was cradling black and white kittens, another was nibbling on fresh green beans, a couple younger ones were chasing each other through the corn field and, in the distance, still others filled water troughs for the cattle in Deck’s field. Behind her she knew at

“ . . . and we all lived happily ever after.”

least one more grandchild was counting peaches in Peto’s orchard, waiting eagerly for the fruit to ripen, and probably tossing a handful of berries in his mouth.

And beyond her were houses, weathered gray with window boxes growing herbs.

Surrounding them all were magnificently towering mountains, shielding them from the world and reinforcing Muggah’s belief that mountains were beautiful.

The complaining of her grandson brought her mind back to the garden. “They’re always kissing,” Viddrow Briter was saying with horrified contempt. “Old people. I mean, there should be *limits*, you know? Especially in front of impressionable grandchildren?”

It was all Mahrree could stand. She threw back her graying hair and laughed in the sunshine.

“So Muggah destroyed the world, and we all lived happily ever after,” said Hycy’s older sister Lori Shin.

Her cousin Salema Briter rolled her eyes. “It wasn’t that easy,” she said authoritatively. As the oldest grandchild, she took it upon herself to keep everyone else in line, even if they didn’t want to be. “It took a few more moons before the world destroyed itself. Or rather, the version of the world Puggah and Muggah knew.”

“That’s right, Salema,” Mahrree began, “because—”

But Salema wasn’t done. In a voice as loud as her grandfather’s she continued her own lecture. “It was nearly two years after they all left the world that everything finally fell apart—”

Mahrree made herself comfortable. Once Salema started, there was no stopping her. She had too much Shin blood in her.

“—Chairman Mal and the Administrators had put the commandants in the forts, but not all of the forts obeyed the commandants. Especially Puggah’s friends. Those three commanders, Yordin, Karna, and Fadh, scared their commandants away after only a few weeks. Villages started to go back to how it was before the Great War: fighting with each other and ignoring Idumea. They stopped sending taxes and goods, and started making their own laws. That made Mal and the Administrators mad.

“So Mal instituted curfews—everyone had to be inside once it became dark, and tax collectors went to every house. Some villages paid, but others didn’t. Yordin’s village even chased the tax collectors out of Sands and set up barricades not allowing anyone in unless they could prove they weren’t from Idumea. Other villages got word that

Sands was rebelling, then other places started to rebel, too. Sometimes the soldiers supported the villagers, sometimes they supported Idumea. Everything turned chaotic.”

Salema’s siblings and cousins shook their heads in amazement. They’d heard the story before, but a society of anarchy was something they simply couldn’t wrap their sweetly naive minds around.

“Finally it all got out of control, even worse,” Salema said to her captive audience, while Mahrree listened to the washed version her grandchildren knew. “Soldiers started choosing sides. Some left Idumea for villages while others left their villages for Idumea. When Mal sent out notices that the entire army would be reorganized, and that villagers needed to pay yet another tax to fund the change, that was the end. Some people say soldiers and villagers everywhere began to fight, but most noticeable was what Gizzada did. He closed up his fancy restaurant, put on his old uniform jacket—”

“Although we got reports he had no hope of buttoning it,” Mahrree said with a small smile.

Salema went on, but Mahrree’s mind wandered. Over the years Salem had rescued hundreds of refugees from the world, and each of them had a version of what was going on. Mahrree interviewed all of them, even the several soldiers who, upon seeing her, were stunned—and then were furious—that she still lived, until they realized that Perrin Shin had survived too. Within a few weeks of arriving in Salem, all of the former soldiers gladly told to Perrin their version of what was happening in the world, while Mahrree sat quietly to the side, taking notes.

After those interviews, she and Perrin pulled out *The World Book*, as they referred to it, and updated details about its collapse.

Gizzada had indeed closed up his restaurant, after holding a meeting with enlisted men who packed his back room. He struggled into his old sergeant’s uniform, told his stunned employees to find other work, then left Pools with nearly four hundred enlisted men following him to Idumea.

Because in Idumea, the enlisted men were also plotting, thanks to Grandpy Neeks who had been exchanging letters for some time with Gizzada. Apparently they had been planning, even before Perrin’s remembrance ceremony in Idumea. Neeks and Qualipoe Hili had been reassigned to the garrison in Idumea, so they had a front row seat to the unrest.

Pinning down exactly what was the cause of the upheaval was as

“. . . and we all lived happily ever after.”

easy as catching one specific mosquito in a swarm. The commandants hated the officers, the officers hated them back, along with the enlisted men below them, and the enlisted men hated everyone above them. And, not to be left out, the citizenry hated the Administrators for imposing more controls, and the Administrators hated the army for not doing a better job in controlling the angry citizenry . . . well, it was a boiling pot of water just waiting for a splash of oil.

From what Mahrree and Perrin could gather, Grandpy Neeks planted ideas into the heads of the thousands of enlisted men at the garrison. He told them there was enough of them to walk away, and the outnumbered officers could do nothing to them. He reminded them that back in the Great War there had been several generals, and if the soldiers didn't like one general, they defected to another leader.

Neeks also told his soldiers that the last great officer who cared about his soldiers had been Perrin Shin, but there was another colonel who was a great deal like him—Colonel Brillen Karna—and if they started walking, in just three days' time they could be at his fort in Waves, and pledge their allegiance to him. Surely he, and Lieutenant Colonel Graeson Fadh, would also agree that it was time for new leadership.

There were whispers after lights out, there were nods during patrols, and one day during breakfast when the garrison mess hall was packed, someone whispered into Grandpy Neeks' ear.

Friends from Pools were marching, with Gizzada in the lead.

Neeks looked at Poe sitting across from him, nodded once, and Poe nodded back. He stood up, packed his breakfast into his pockets, headed to the main aisle, and announced, “Friends of Perrin Shin—walk with me in honor of the Great War!”

As far as battle cries go, it was an odd one, Perrin pointed out to the soldier who related the story. Perrin didn't have anything to do with the Great War, and the phrase didn't make a whole lot of sense.

But that was the state of mind at the time, the soldier explained. Not a whole lot made sense, and in the emotion that had been building for the weeks leading up to it, that statement, shouted by Poe at the top of his voice, resonated with the soldiers.

As one body, the enlisted men—hundreds of them—stood up and marched out behind Poe. In an adjoining room, a dozen officers, hearing the commotion, came out to see the mess hall emptying. Stragglers were filling their pockets with food, and a few snickered at the officers as they ran out behind the rest of the soldiers.

And that's when the chanting began, which Perrin heard about later and was wholly embarrassed by. In fact, for weeks after he heard about it, he composed additional chants the enlisted men could have shouted as they marched through the garrison, gathering more to their cause.

But Mahrree told him to leave it alone, because it was now history that nearly four thousand soldiers, as they jammed the main road leaving Idumea in the south, called, "Friends of Perrin Shin—walk with me in honor of the Great War!"

An hour later, General Qayin Thorne ran through the garrison trying to find any enlisted men still left, but there were none. Even the soldiers who were ill or injured had abandoned him, and those out on patrols never returned.

But only the young men. Grandpy Neeks had wanted the army—and the world—to start fresh, and that meant clearing out the dead wood, as he put it. So while Poe gathered, then led out of the wide main gates all of the soldiers under age thirty, he saluted to the barracks where all of the enlisted men over thirty were gathering, those who were taking it upon themselves to "clean up."

From the window Grandpy Neeks saluted back to young Poe, and after Thorne had run through the garrison screeching and shouting in fury, Neeks and his cramped group of five hundred slipped out the back door. Ignoring the officers who tried to stop them or command them, they marched in silent formation to the Administrative Headquarters, with another fifteen hundred older soldiers joining them along the way. Many had come out of retirement, like Gizzada, just to lend a hand, or a sword.

Thorne, in a panic, had taken his coach to the Headquarters ahead of them.

Neeks and company were only a few hundred paces away from the wide front entrance when they noticed the citizens of Idumea pouring into the green expanses before the Headquarters. They'd seen the thousands of younger soldiers leaving, and ran to the Administrators to see what it meant.

But the sight there startled them even more. The 2,000 Sergeants Army, as they were later dubbed, were standing in line, waiting . . .

And then they heard them, coming down the road from the north, Gizzada and his troops. They had hired dozens of wagons, procured many more horses—probably using all of Gizzada's savings, Perrin

“ . . . and we all lived happily ever after.”

guessed—and there they were, four hundred strong, seasoned and angry sergeants from Pools and surrounding forts, ready to join with Grandpy Neeks.

At that point, the citizens of Idumea drew back to give the soldiers a wide area in which to do whatever it was they were about to do.

Gizzada dropped off of his wagon, marched, or rather lumbered, up to Neeks, and the men saluted each other. Then they hugged each other—

And then they drew their swords.

The gasps and shouts from the growing crowd were loud enough to alarm those in the Administrative Headquarters. Besides, the two young pages on guard at the doors had already abandoned their posts and were running through the marble halls yelling that something was about to happen outside.

As Neeks and Gizzada strode up to the wide white stairs, with twenty-four-hundred soldiers behind them, Qayin Thorne rushed out of the front doors and stopped abruptly. Say what you will about the man, Mahrree thought, at least he caught on quickly. He drew his sword and demanded to know what was going on.

“The end,” Grandpy Neeks said as he continued to stride up the stairs. “In memory of Perrin, the only officer worth his weight.”

Qayin still had faithful guards, and they pushed out of the doors behind him, creating a perimeter of twenty.

It didn't take long, another former soldier reported to Perrin and Mahrree, but it was messy. The battle on the front steps lasted all of two minutes. Apparently Neeks took down three of Thorne's guard, although by the time he reached Thorne there were hundreds of soldiers trying to get in on the fight. But one of Qayin's guards cut down Neeks before he got in a swipe at Thorne.

Gizzada got closer during the melee, though, and Thorne reportedly yelled at Gizzada that his restaurant was overrated and overpriced. Gizzada yelled back at him that Thorne was stupid to eat there and pay for it. That was all Thorne was going to take, and he stabbed Gizzada right there, a death blow to his ample gut.

It was only moments later that the swarm of enlisted men overpowered Thorne, dozens of men bragging later that they were the ones to end his life. Since he had dozens of stab wounds, it was probably true.

With Thorne and his guard slumped in pools of blood on the

white stone steps, the rest of the Neeks-Gizzada Sergeants Army stormed the Administrative Headquarters. Someone respectfully propped up the bodies of Neeks and Gizzada against the columns where the rest of the sergeants could see what Thorne had done to them. Infuriated, the soldiers trampled Thorne's body as they rushed through the doors.

Workers fought their way out of windows and other doors, but stayed with the growing crowd, which hung back at what they hoped was a safe distance, to watch while the soldiers took revenge. Later, people talked about the spectacle for weeks, calling it the best entertainment they'd seen in years.

The sergeants found the Administrators hiding under the grand teardrop-shaped oak table in their Conference Room. The guards outside of it had unlocked the doors for the sergeants before they fled the building.

It was short work, dispatching of the Administrators. Before they set fire to the room, they searched the corpses for Chairman Mal, but he wasn't there.

He had run away, like a thieving teenager, to his mansion.

The sergeants headed over there next but were surprised to find that the anger which inflamed them had also leapt to the citizens, and from there to Idumea's largest mansion. Idumeans, posted outside of every door and window, were waiting to flush out the Chairman, but no one ever came running out of the smoke before the flames, except for the maids and a cook.

When the smoke finally cleared and the glorious stone edifice was reduced to Idumea's own ruin, they scoured the remains. They found a scorched skeleton surrounded by what had been crates of paper and parchments in Mal's library, in what used to be the kings' old throne room. Mal's guards said he'd barricaded himself in the library, hiding behind his very flammable research, as if somehow those words had power to protect him. But Mal had been destroyed, along with everything he'd ever written.

When Perrin heard that news he said, "Nicko died in the same room where he had King Oren assassinated, and where I'm sure he plotted the deaths of many others. Fitting."

In the meantime, Poe continued to lead thousands of soldiers south, and many joined from other forts. When he saw a captain ride up to him, accompanied by nearly two hundred soldiers, he became understandably nervous, until he saw the name patch.

“. . . and we all lived happily ever after.”

Captain Jon Offra.

“Interested in a few more recruits for your army?” he asked Poe, and playfully saluted him.

By the time the new army reached Colonel Karna, having scavenged food from other forts and generous citizens along the way, it was eight thousand strong. Brillen had stood at the open gates of his fort watching with pride, and some worry.

It was a good thing Lieutenant Colonel Fadh stood with him.

“I can take about three thousand of them back with me,” he reportedly told Karna. They’d received word about the desertion headed their way and had been scrambling to get ready. “But I don’t think I brought you enough extra supplies.”

“We’ll make do,” Karna assured him. “In the spirit of Perrin Shin, we’ll make do.”

When Perrin heard that, many moons later, he rubbed his forehead. “Except that the spirit of Perrin Shin was still *in* Perrin Shin!”

The former soldier who told them this part of the story chuckled. “Everything those days was done ‘in the spirit of Perrin Shin.’ Now that I understand about the Creator, I realize it was His spirit influencing those men and inspiring many of the local women to bring so much food. They realized that if they fed the massive army, the army would defend them from whatever Idumea would do next.”

What Idumea did next was call for reinforcements—immediately! General Snyder, now taking control of what remained of the army and the government, sent messengers to all of the outer lying forts demanding they send the bulk of their soldiers to Idumea to stop the looting. General Thorne’s mansion—which used to be the Shins and Dormin’s—had been stripped of every last item. Versa Thorne and her servants had fled just before the citizens invaded, and reportedly she wept far more over the loss of her possessions than she did over her husband.

In fact, the rumor was that when she was told Qayin had been killed, she said only one word: “Good.”

When the frantic messengers reached the forts, most of the commanders reacted in the same way as Karna and Fadh: they held the messengers for a week, and no one went to Idumea. Apparently Yordin, up in Sands, laughed at the messenger who burst through his doors, and immediately locked him up. Yordin then threw a huge party for his fort, supplying his men with as much mead as he could personally afford, and the celebrations lasted for four days.

In Edge, Commandant Genev sent only fifty soldiers to Idumea, and then . . .

“Well, then,” the soldier who told this part to the Shins hesitated, “Genev just vanished.”

Perrin had squinted at that. “Vanished?”

“The next day, Lemuel Thorne stood before what remained of Fort Shin and announced that he was commander again, and whatever Genev had done in the past two years, Lemuel Thorne was reversing. He promoted himself, too. Had on a new major’s uniform.”

“Genev would have been the last surviving Administrator,” Mahrree had pointed out.

“Apparently Thorne decided he shouldn’t have survived either,” the soldier suggested. “No body was ever found, but the forest above Edge was a violent, terrible place. Oh, wait,” the soldier corrected himself as the Shins chuckled quietly. “Offra’s stories grew over the years, didn’t they?”

And that’s what bothered Perrin and Mahrree the most about the latest history of the world.

Jon Offra wasn’t doing well. In fact, he had grown quite mad.

At least, that’s how he appeared.

Out of pity or out of guilt, what remained of the army loyal to Karna and Fadh had promoted him up to Lieutenant Colonel, and while he served sporadically in different forts devoted to the two commanders, no one could handle him for more than a year. Always the same pattern occurred: he’d come in solid and eager, and the younger soldiers regarded him as a hero for trying to find the Shins and surviving so long in the forests.

But then he’d start saying things. Worrying things, such as that the Shins were still there as angry spirits, and that the forest grew and shrank and spoke and taunted.

Within eight or nine moons he’d become more unstable, shouting in the dead of night that “They’re coming!” After a few moons of terrifying the younger soldiers, the commander would discretely move Offra to the next fort, hoping that a change of scenery or a better surgeon could help him, and for a time he improved.

But only for a time.

After ten years Salem sent scouts to Offra, trying to bring him back to Salem. He’d sacrificed enough, Guide Gleace decided. He’d terrified half the world, and fear of the forests had never been greater.

But Offra wouldn’t come. On three occasions scouts had caught

“. . . and we all lived happily ever after.”

up to him and told him his duty was over, that he was welcome to retire and come to Salem.

But he'd shake his head and say, "Oh, I can't. You know I can't, don't you? My duty!" Then he'd wink theatrically, and something would come over his face and he'd run off, or punch a scout, or literally kick them away.

It was his manic smile that confused them. Was it real or an act?

Mahrree chose to believe that Jon was enjoying playing his part too much to leave it. Never before had he ever had so much attention, or so much respect.

But they were going to bring him home, one way or another. They had sedation now, too, and while Offra was a big man, Salem had a few even stronger who could carry him, unconscious, home.

Just in case it wasn't an act.

“. . . and that's how the world turned into a mess.”

Mahrree heard Salema's announcement, and she blinked out of her thoughts to smile in approval at her granddaughter's lecture.

Salema turned to her. "Did the latest scouting group find Uncle Jon yet?"

Mahrree's chest tightened. She still wasn't sure how it was they came to think of Jon Offra as their uncle, but the families felt such a connection to him that there didn't seem to be any other way to refer to the man none of the children had ever met.

"No, but he's very sneaky, you know. Just a matter of time."

"And Thorne got married too, right?" a Briter girl said. "You forgot that, Salema."

"No, I didn't, Sewzi," Salema told her younger sister, with hand-upon-hip superiority. But little Sewzi always needed assurance that the man who was after her mama was no longer interested in finding her. "Thorne married Snyder's niece, remember? To create some kind of cola . . . coal—"

"Coalition," Mahrree supplied. "Pretend friends," she added in explanation. "So they would fight other villages together instead of fighting each other."

Her grandchildren could never understand that. Why pretend? Just be real friends.

Salemites were so innocent. How Mahrree loved them, and how she worried for them.

"But Thorne's wife isn't with him anymore," Salema added, with just a hint of worry. "She birthed only girls, so he sent her away."

Sewzi frowned. "What's wrong with baby girls?"

Salema shrugged, along with her female cousins and little sisters. Her brothers and male cousins didn't react because they had quit listening after the word "married."

"The world's still a mess," Vid nodded as thoughtfully as a thirteen-year-old could. "Too many generals, too many borders, and it was all caused by our Muggah because she wouldn't believe a lie, told the world it was all a lie, and Puggah resigned because he wouldn't support lies, and then they ran away and the world thought they died and were really mad about that and blamed the Administrators and killed them all, and now different officers each thinks he's in charge of the whole thing and everyone keeps fighting. Except for the few we rescue out of there every year. And *then* they all lived happily ever after."

Mahrree was cringing during his entire explanation, even though several older children were chuckling. "Well," she said slowly, "that's one way to sum it up. I wouldn't put it in such terms but . . . I suppose that's it."

"And why our Muggah is the most dangerous woman in the world," said Hycy proudly.

"Well, not exactly—" Mahrree started, always uncomfortable by that declaration of her husband. "No, really what it means is—"

"Come on, Muggah," Hycy said, tilting her head. "You don't think you're dangerous? You're the only one who can make Puggah do what she wants. *That's* dangerous."

Mahrree threw back her head and laughed.

Leaning against the fence a few dozen paces away, and shielded by the shade of a peach tree whose branches were heavy with green fruit, a man in his late thirties chuckled quietly at the scene before him. His brown hair had the first touches of gray on the sides, suggesting age and a bit of a burden, but his pale eyes were brighter than the color gray had a right to be.

Behind him he heard the approaching footsteps of another man too large to be silent, but still he attempted to creep quietly so as to not interrupt story time in the pumpkin patch.

Peto Shin turned to him. "You must have given a pretty good version this time. Vid and Hycy were positively gray. So what did

“. . . and we all lived happily ever after.”

you tell them, General?”

“Just the truth, Peto. Isn’t that scary enough?” Perrin grinned as he watched his wife laughing in the middle of the garden.

Peto nodded, keeping his father in his peripheral vision. The years suited him, turning his black hair gray, then recently into a shocking white. In a couple of years he’d be completely white, still imposing, still massive, and now with an almost ethereal quality that made the man who had hoped for a life of anonymity stand out even more among Salemites who held him in reverent awe.

The same went for his wife who, on the other hand, looked like every other older woman with iron gray hair. Until you looked into her eyes. Few women had such fires burning. Mahrree Shin was as well-recognized as her husband in Salem, especially since for the past seventeen years she’d been the head of the history department at the university, and every student in Salem had sat enthralled in Professor Shin’s History of the World class, fascinated by her stories, her interpretations, and her occasional sarcasm.

Peto nudged his father. “So tell me, honestly—do you think *she*’s the most dangerous woman in the world?”

“Well,” Perrin started analytically, “as far as women go, she’s right up there—”

“No, I mean *really*. Do you think Uncle Hogal got that right?”

Perrin sighed. “I’ve wondered that frequently myself. For a rector, Hogal Densal certainly told a lot of lies—”

“Really?”

A corner of Perrin’s mouth went up. “Oh, really. And always for good reasons. But as I was saying, he told a lot of lies, but Peto, he never exaggerated the truth.”

“I don’t think I understand.”

Perrin watched his wife. “Did I ever tell you that Hogal told me my second baby was to be a boy? It was right after I was injured, when the Guarder slashed my back. Your mother was expecting you, but you kept threatening to come early. I didn’t want to upset her with the news that she and your sister had been targeted, so I kept my going into the forest a secret.”

“Yes, I know that story,” Peto said. “There were fourteen Guarders that night. And if you were to head into the forest now in the snow, your hair would fit right in,” he teased.

Perrin smiled, running his hand through his shaggy shock. “I’ve

thought of that too,” he said. “But the next day, as I lay on my stomach and Hogal tended to my stitches, he told me he had impressions about our family, that we were all in this fight together. My wife, my daughter, and my future son.”

“No, you never mentioned that before.”

“When you were born three moons later, and were obviously a son, I had to admit that Hogal was right about that. He was right about a few other things, too, and so when he told me that my Mahrree was likely the most dangerous woman in the world . . . well, maybe she is.”

Peto blinked. “Wait a minute—maybe she *is*? Not *was*? The world’s in chaos, controlled by warring generals right now, because years ago she couldn’t keep her mouth shut in the amphitheater at Edge. That’s why she *was* dangerous.” He hesitated. “Right?”

Perrin smiled at his son’s uneasiness, his dark eyes cavernous with possibilities. “I hoped that was why, but actually all she did was set into motion a collapse that was going to happen anyway. To suggest it’s her fault that the world has been warring with itself gives her far too much credit and blame. No, she may *still* be dangerous.”

“But she’s a gray-haired grandmother!”

“Don’t tell her all of her hair is gray,” his father warned him. “She still thinks some of it is brown in the back. But so what if she’s a grandmother?”

Peto gestured lamely. “How can a little old woman be dangerous?”

“Peto, Hogal once told me we were in this battle together. Battle suggests a war, doesn’t it?”

“Well, yes, I suppose it does,” Peto said reluctantly. “A war with the world, in a way.”

“And is that war over, son?”

Peto stared at his father. “I suppose . . . no?”

Perrin turned to watch his wife, whose hands were surprisingly free from dirt for someone who had supposedly been “weeding,” and was now holding a small child and a kitten on her lap as she chatted with her grandchildren.

“Then Peto, I don’t think she’s done earning her title just yet.” He cheerfully slapped his son on the back, which meant there’d be a red mark there for the next hour, hopped over the fence, and strode through the garden to his wife and grandchildren.

Peto stared after him. As Perrin bent to kiss Mahrree, with

“ . . . and we all lived happily ever after.”

enough drama to make his granddaughters croon and his grandsons groan, Peto came to a conclusion about an old parchment envelope still secreted in his dresser, with a prediction from his grandfather that only he—and his wife Lilla—knew about.

“So if *she* 's not yet finished earning the title of ‘Most dangerous woman in the world,’” Peto murmured under the peach tree, “then Father, I don’t think *you* 're yet finished earning the title of ‘Greatest General in the world.’”

Peto vigorously rubbed his forehead.

Sneak Peek--Book 6

Year 363

General Lemuel Thorne straightened his already erect back and reviewed the next two hundred troops that paraded before him. He stood on the crest of the manmade hill, which crushed an old barn, to overlook the parade grounds that were once a farm. The old farmhouse with yellow curtains had been demolished to make room for the large mess hall that stood near the new main gates of the expanded compound. The first thing soldiers want when they returned from drills is a meal. Thorne knew how to treat his men. It was one of the reasons they were so loyal to him.

He calculated how many more troops were to come. Two thousand had already passed him, and five thousand still needed to go by in celebration of his 25th year as commander of Province 8 and the surrounding areas. The sun beat down exceptionally warm for the 35th Day of Planting Season, but at least it wasn't pouring rain as it had been for the past three celebrations.

Already the retelling of Thorne's defeat of the impotent colonel, his traitorous wife, their children, and the sergeant major spy had been recounted by a major in a loud and dramatic voice, complete with reenactments by troops in appropriate costumes.

Special emphasis was given to the fact that their general had been only a captain at the time, received a crippling injury, yet continued on to defeat all those who destroyed their peace. Only through General Thorne's tenacity and perseverance did he eventually overthrow the commandants themselves, who caused so much chaos which still plagued their splintered world.

The speech had been honed for years to motivate the young troops to feats of their own glories despite hardship and pain. The greatest moment of the Celebration would be when General Thorne would draw his sword and remind the men of the growing threat of the other sectors, and how for years Edge, renamed Province 8, has been the most peaceful in the world because of their strong army.

The future of their area, and indeed the entire world, depended

on General Thorne and his men maintaining peace in a world that no longer knew order.



Past the gates of Fort Shin where General Thorne stood, through the forest littered with scalding water spouts, deadly gas pockets, and lethal mud volcanoes, beyond the boulder fields that could take a full day or more for the average man to scale, up the rocky ridges and slopes of the great and impassable mountains, past the high mountain meadows no one in the known world knew existed, through narrow and confusing canyons that swallowed many stray cattle, and beyond a narrow passage way opened up a valley of immense proportions.

In that valley grew wildflowers, animals, gardens, crops, orchards, vineyards, herds, and a civilization that kept itself hidden from the world.

To the southwest of the city called Salem stood a tall school-house, where another general was jogging in worry that *this* time he'd be too late to prevent a catastrophe.

Had he lived in the known world, he would have been forced into retirement two years ago. But the only ones who retired here were those who were infirm or dying.

This general was neither.

While not quite as bulky as when he was a colonel in his forties, the seventy-two-year-old was still tall, lean, and as fit as men a third of his age. The only way anyone could have kept him down was to have piled a mountain on top of him. He had far too many responsibilities, and the men in the towers who kept an eye on his progress by following his white hair, had just signaled to him that the greatest concern of his life was currently standing on top of a two-level building, having hatched yet another less-than-brilliant plan.

General Shin was on an important mission.

Because Young Perrin Shin was ready to fly.

About Salem . . .

It's not socialism.

It's not communism.

It's not Marxism.

It's not any kind of *-ism* practiced in the world today, at least that I know of.

But it used to be.

People chose this lifestyle—willingly and openly. And there's the key: choice.

It cannot be imposed from the top down. It cannot be forced by any leadership or government. The choices cannot be made by someone elsewhere, and then the masses are compelled to follow. It cannot work that way, and *actually work*.

That's a dictatorship, no matter what happy label you slap on it.

What I'm talking about is something much different.

Anciently, it was a form of Utopianism. Plato and Sir Thomas Moore both wrote about the idea.

Perhaps you've heard of Enoch's Zion, the first known civilization to live like this, successfully for 365 years.

It wasn't the only one, either. King Melchizedek, to whom Abraham paid his tithes, ruled over Salem (the forerunner to Jerusalem, from where I took the name). They also lived this way for many years.

As did Peter, James, and John after Christ's resurrection, and all the disciples and Christians who followed them.

As did a group of several thousands in the Americas, called Nephites. They lived this way for more than three generations after the resurrection of Christ, and never was there a happier people, according to their accounts.

And they all did so by choice. I can't overemphasize that. Choices, always.

Many other groups have attempted this collective sharing and cooperation, with varying approaches to family and communal life. (In this book I depicted what I think is ideal: the family unit as the basis for the community—father, mother, children, and extended family as the fundamental building stones of society.)

Some more recent examples of cooperative groups are the Transcendentalists, Shakers, the Jewish kibbutzim, and smaller groups of

Mormons, who tried to live the United Order in the 19th century, but failed because of the same reasons most attempts eventually fail: envy and pride.

The *notion* of a Salem-like life is widely appealing, I think, along with seeing everyone as equal. The problem, to paraphrase George Orwell, is that many of us want to be “more equal” than everyone else. Yes, let’s share everything, but give me just a tad more because I deserve it.

This cynicism doesn’t mean we should abandon the ideal.

In fact, every generation has had a few clarion calls for a community that truly acts as a community, as *a family*. Gene Roddenberry created Star Trek as a utopian-style society, where no money is exchanged, where everyone’s needs provided for, and where the purpose of life is to explore (except when those pesky Romulans invade the neutral zone).

My writing this series is also a call for another try. An attempt to plant in your mind the idea that this has worked in the past, and it can work in the future, and can work even today.

I reject the skepticism of the argument that while this worked in the past, and could possibly work in the future, it certainly can’t work *today*. I dismiss that because I know of a few people who already live as if they were in Zion/Salem. They willingly live with less in order to give more. I know of people who donate up to half, or more, of their incomes to those in need, and I’m sure there are many more out there who do so, but one of the most remarkable traits of such people is that they donate anonymously. They never call attention to their philanthropy, nor do they boast of their generosity.

They have no pride, and no envy.

The only reason I know about such people is because as I’ve researched this Zion-like lifestyle, I’ve been blessed to encounter those who live this way, who quietly choose to donate, or consecrate, all that they don’t need (and what they’ve decided they don’t “need” is truly inspiring and humbling).

This has been their choice.

They take to heart Christ’s admonition to not let the left hand know what the right hand is doing. They’re not the kind to want stadiums or university buildings named after them, because they don’t donate where their beneficiaries will ever know who they are; they donate to those who can never give them anything back.

They live modestly, wearing untrendy clothing and driving old

cars and not worrying about remodeling their homes (an attitude I greatly admire since I covet a new kitchen), because the majority of their incomes go to provide for those who struggle to pay hospital bills, or are out of work, or are rebuilding after a catastrophe.

Occasionally you hear about them in the news, after they've died. The unknown millionaires in the small houses who lived unassuming lives and never did anything extravagant, but then willed their astonishing fortunes to something like an orphanage in a third-world country. (The only reason we know about it is because there are *those relatives* who are contesting the will because they want the money.)

There are people among us now who live Salem-like lives, and they are my heroes. I personally can't do this yet, because we're still trying to become stable, and to pay off a massive student loan debt.

But I'm trying to cultivate a Salem-like heart, which I think is the first step. And there are little things I can do, such as offer my books for free. Occasionally I do make a few dollars off of them, because of various promotions run by those who distribute my series, but then I donate every last penny to a humanitarian fund. I've been told that a few American bucks go a long way in India.

This life *can* be lived. This community *can* be built. Many *are* already trying. Many have chosen to live for others, rather than for just themselves.

I would love to see a real-life community of Salem/Zion, and I sincerely believe someday it will happen. I hope you choose to meet me there.

To read more, noted scholar Hugh Nibley lectured extensively on the subjects of Zion, stewardships, and consecration. His speeches, which I borrowed liberally from, can be accessed here (for free, of course):

<http://publications.mi.byu.edu/book/approaching-zion/>

Safety Assured Leaving East of Medicezzi

Acknowledgements

If you've read my other books (and I can't imagine why you'd read this one first), you know my rigmarole; I've combed over this puppy eleventy-samillion times, and there are likely still a few errors, like tiny fleas hiding in the tufts. I believe I think dyslexically, and in my earnestness to get the message across, I assume all of the words have, too. Even though half a dozen sharp-eyed friends reviewed this as well, there likely remains a few minor problems for the critics to pounce upon. (I have to give them *something* to complain about, after all; it's not enough to have 99.99% perfection. They must call "Foul!" when there are .001% errors. Every grammar nazi knows that. That's why I quit being one.)

However, without these sharp-eyed friends, and those who encouraged me to get this completed, it wouldn't be here now. So massive thanks to David Jensen, Paula Snyder, Kim Pearce, Cheryl Passey, Stephanie Carver, Jennifer Merrill, Debbie Beier, who finished reading just before she passed away from cancer, and Barb Goff, my favorite sister who made it into this book as a midwife. The character is completely her.

I also want to thank my family, who indulge my hobby because it doesn't cost anyone anything and I still usually get dinner ready on time, and my husband Dave, who told me it was fine to invest a new laptop since my ancient desktop was shutting down every hour.

I especially want to acknowledge my dad, Rudy Strebel, who first introduced me to the idea of Zion. When I was seven, we moved to a suburb north of Salt Lake City. Our modest house on the hill had an extravagant view of the distant Great Salt Lake and Antelope Island, a decent-size mountain range in the middle of the lake where the buffalo (bison) literally roam. Every evening Dad, an artist obsessed with clouds, would observe the sunset. We hadn't been living there long when Dad announced one evening, "Oh, it looks like Enoch's returned, and he's made Antelope Island disappear."

Thoroughly puzzled by that strange proclamation, I asked, "Enoch? Mountains disappearing?" All I saw was that a cloud bank had descended over the island, concealing it.

My dad lived for moments like those. He was the greatest amateur scriptorian I ever knew, with a tall bookshelf filled not only of scriptures, but of commentary and analyses and testimony. I think I developed my love of the ancient prophets from him.

He loved to delve into the scriptures (I inherited his last set when he died last year) and proceeded to tell me all about Enoch, who lived before Noah, and was a timid, slow-of-speech prophet. But he bravely preached repentance before civilizations who hated him, and even wanted to kill him.

But there were those who believed and followed him, and he collected them into a safe haven which was called Zion. There, everyone shared equally in their work and in their possessions, so that there were no one poor among them. Anyone who threatened Zion, Enoch and his great faith simply took care of. He shifted rivers and even moved mountains to keep Zion safe. Zion was so pure in its collective heart that even God walked among them.

Zion existed on the earth for 365 years until God took it up to Himself, ahead of the floods which would destroy the earth except for Noah, his family, and a zoo.

Well, I was astonished at this account, and asked something like, “So why don’t we do that now? Take care of everyone equally now?”

My dad, who had known a great deal of suffering as a child in WWII Germany, and had immigrated to America to begin a new life, regarded me with tender eyes. “I wonder that, too. We’re supposed to, you know. That’s the way God wants us to live. Many groups have done it in the past, and we’re supposed to do it again.”

We had many talks over the years about Zion and what it could be again, and my dad had always hoped to live there before he passed away.

I forgot some of that as I got older, though. But I was reminded again, at the end of my undergrad studies, in a class taught by Don Norton at Brigham Young University. The subject was to be language usage, but we always strayed off course which, any college student will tell you, is when a class really gets interesting.

One day, Dr. Norton mentioned something about a book he was finishing editing—Dr. Hugh Nibley’s work, *Approaching Zion*, for which I provided a link in the section above. The discussion drifted to the notion of Zion, and stewardships, and consecration, and quickly dissolved into what completely astounded me: a fight, with students yelling and shouting that they should *not* have to share their hard-

earned money or talents with those who are suffering.

Never had I been in a classroom where anger manifested itself so instantly and purely. Never had I felt the power of the adversary so immediately, trying to kick away the notion that anyone should voluntarily sacrifice their possessions for anyone else. Oh, if you've got a few extra bucks sitting around, sure—hand it over to some charity before you take your two-week Mediterranean cruise. But give up that cruise to help the family next door who lost everything because of a flooding river? Why? They're the ones dumb enough to live next to the river while you were a few inches higher.

Granted, this was 1990—the height of wealth-chasing and stock market-investing and preppy-living, and everyone was after those three magic letters behind their name: MBA. But still I was astonished at the lack of empathy and the unapologetic greed displayed that day.

I was also surprised that Dr. Norton simply smirked at the responses. Many years later I contacted him again, and asked him about that day. As I suspected, he initiated an argument like that every year, in every class, trying to gauge the attitudes of the rising generation.

I told him that day was the most memorable of my entire education, and I felt it was the whole reason I was at BYU. He graciously agreed to read an early draft of my descriptions of Salem, gave a couple of suggestions, then told me what I was really hoping: I'd got it just about right.

I also wish to acknowledge Larry Barkdull, whose *Three Pillars of Zion* fascinated and inspired me; and Brigham Young, who wrote and taught extensively about the United Order, and was immensely frustrated with its failures.

Last but not least, I acknowledge Dr. Hugh Nibley, whose vast and thorough research to help others approach Zion made my own study a lot easier, although it took me nearly a year to get through and digest his deep and rich essays my first time around. (Subsequent feastings have occurred slightly faster.) I wish I could have met the man, who reportedly wore such a ragged, old coat to campus that occasionally BYU students thought he was a homeless bum, and who didn't bother remodeling his small, paid-off home when all around him his neighbors were building McMansions.

He had better things to do with his money and time.

Safety Assured Leaving East of Medicezzi

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 now adding grandchildren) 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.



(This page left intentionally blank so I could write that this page is left blank, which it no longer is.)

BOOK 5 IN *THE FOREST AT THE EDGE* SERIES

"REJECTED BY THE WORLD?
THAT'S PRECISELY WHY WE WANT YOU."

It's been three weeks since Mahrree publicly denounced the Administrators about Terrypp's land being poisoned, and since Perrin resigned from the army instead of becoming its High General. The world's been shunning them ever since.

But the Shins have been fine with that, busy with making their own plans to sneak away to Terrypp's land . . .

Until one night when mysterious visitors in dark mottled clothing tell Mahrree and Perrin about a new land and an unknown civilization where they need to take their family, because Chairman Mal is planning to arrest the Shins and try them for sedition.

The Shins and Briters have to trust these secretive people to help them escape before the Administrator of Loyalty arrives.

But seventeen-year-old Peto, the last Shin thinking clearly anymore, is agreeing to go along only so that he can rescue his family from the rescue of Shem Zenos--the duplicitous spy--and his "Guarders."

WHAT READERS ARE SAYING ABOUT THE
FOREST AT THE EDGE SERIES:

"Outstanding storytelling. Exemplary values. Enlightening depictions. Just downright good reading."

"Mercer develops characters that you literally fall in love with and have to remind yourself that these are only book characters, not your friends, and that their lives will be there after the dishes are done or you wake up in the morning. I found myself laughing, crying, grieving, worrying and basking in victories with the characters."

"Fun, fun read, but done in such a way that teens and older readers are awoken to what's happening in our world today."

FOREST AT THE EDGE SERIES
BOOK ONE:
*THE FOREST AT THE EDGE OF
THE WORLD*
BOOK TWO:
SOLDIER AT THE DOOR
BOOK THREE:
THE MANSIONS OF IDUMEA
BOOK FOUR:
THE FALCON IN THE BARN

FOR BOOK UPDATES, BACKGROUND INFORMATION, AND
RANTS ABOUT THE WORLD, VISIT TRISH MERCER AT

forestedgebooks.com

