



FOREST AT THE EDGE
~ Book Six ~

FLIGHT of
the WOUNDED
FALCON

HIS LEGACY IS UP FOR DEBATE

TRISH MERCER

Flight of the Wounded Falcon

FOREST AT THE EDGE
~ B o o k S i x ~

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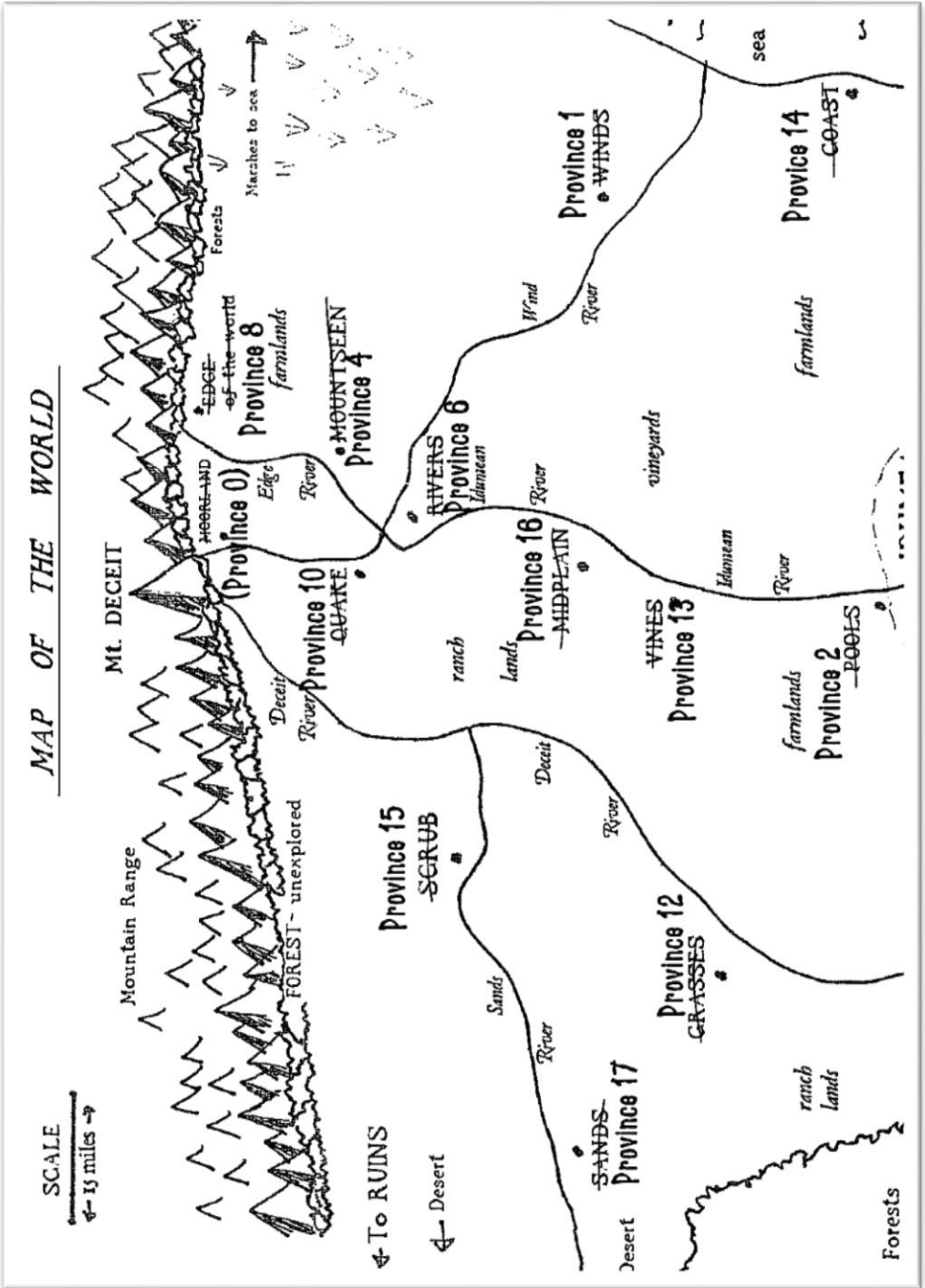
All characters in this book are fictitious, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental but I know they're alive somewhere.

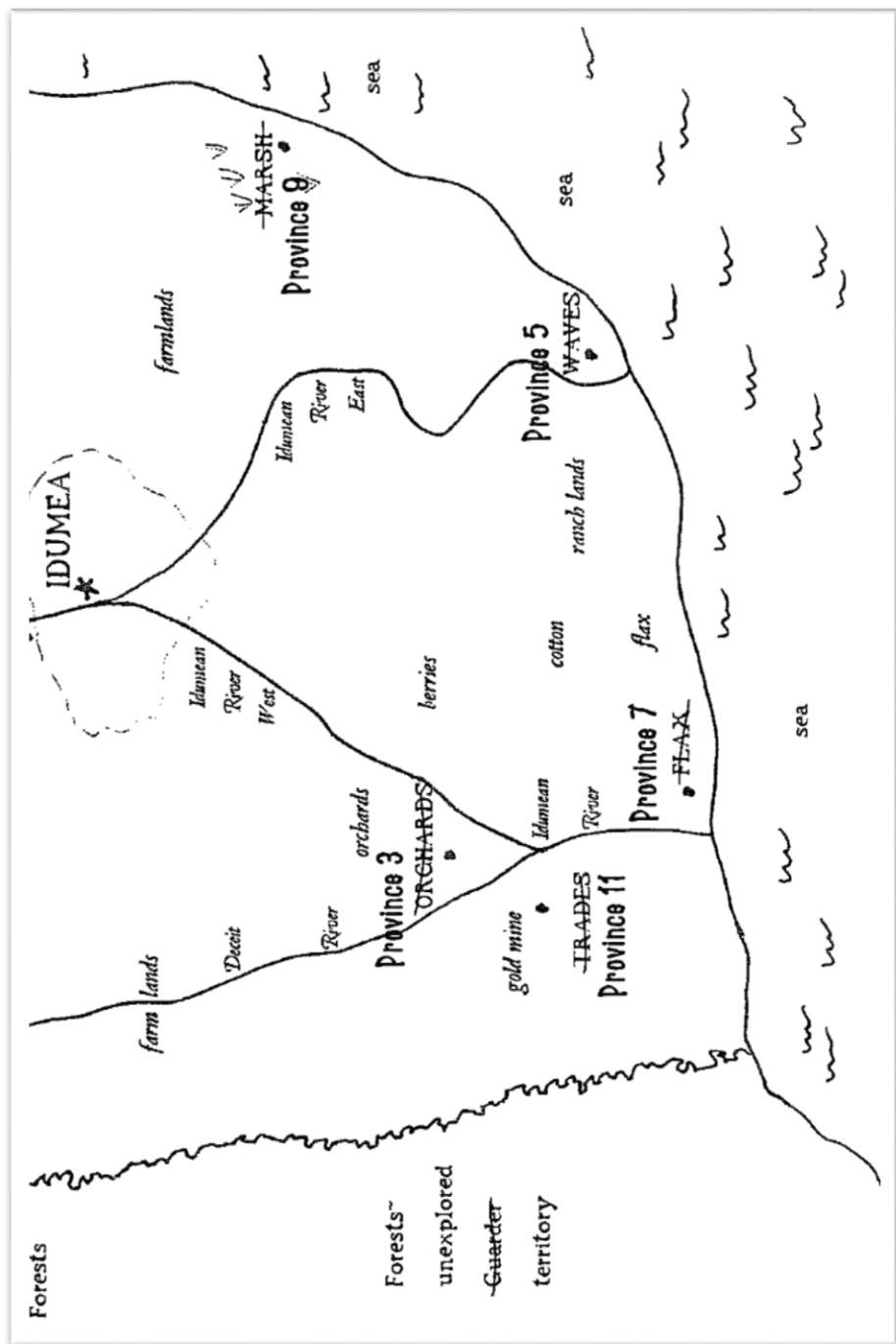
Cover design by Trish Mercer, who timidly asked her daughter's anthropology professor (with perfect hair) to stand in as Perrin Shin. Dr. David Crandall of Brigham Young University responded to my lengthy email with a brief, "Sure, why not?" then sportingly wrangled two little boys running in opposite directions through the trees while I did nothing to assist but took pictures with my son-in-law, Austin Pearce. Dr. Crandall proved to be the perfect Perrin.

Contact author via website: forestedgebooks.com.

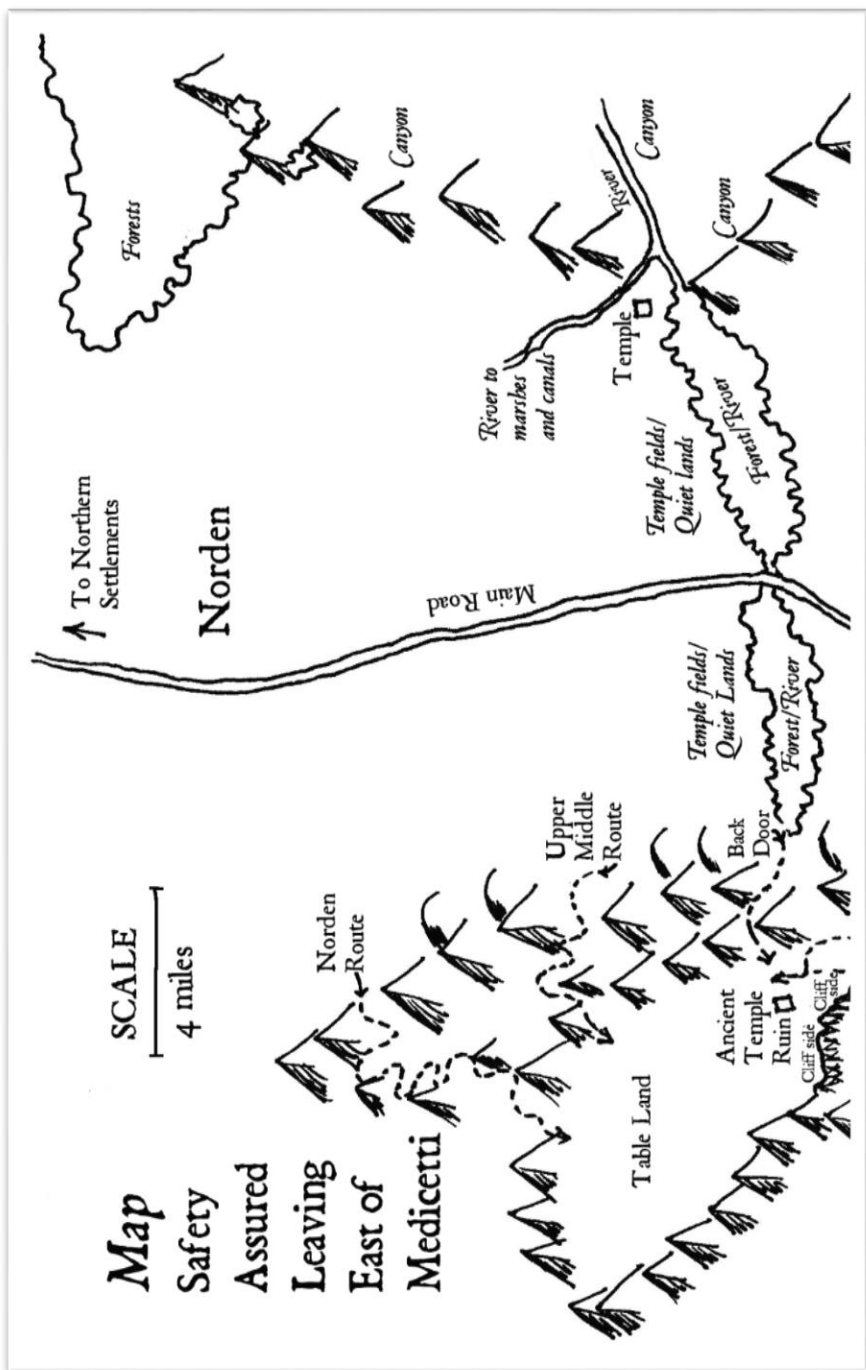
More important than knowing when an answer
is “yes” is recognizing when it’s “no.”

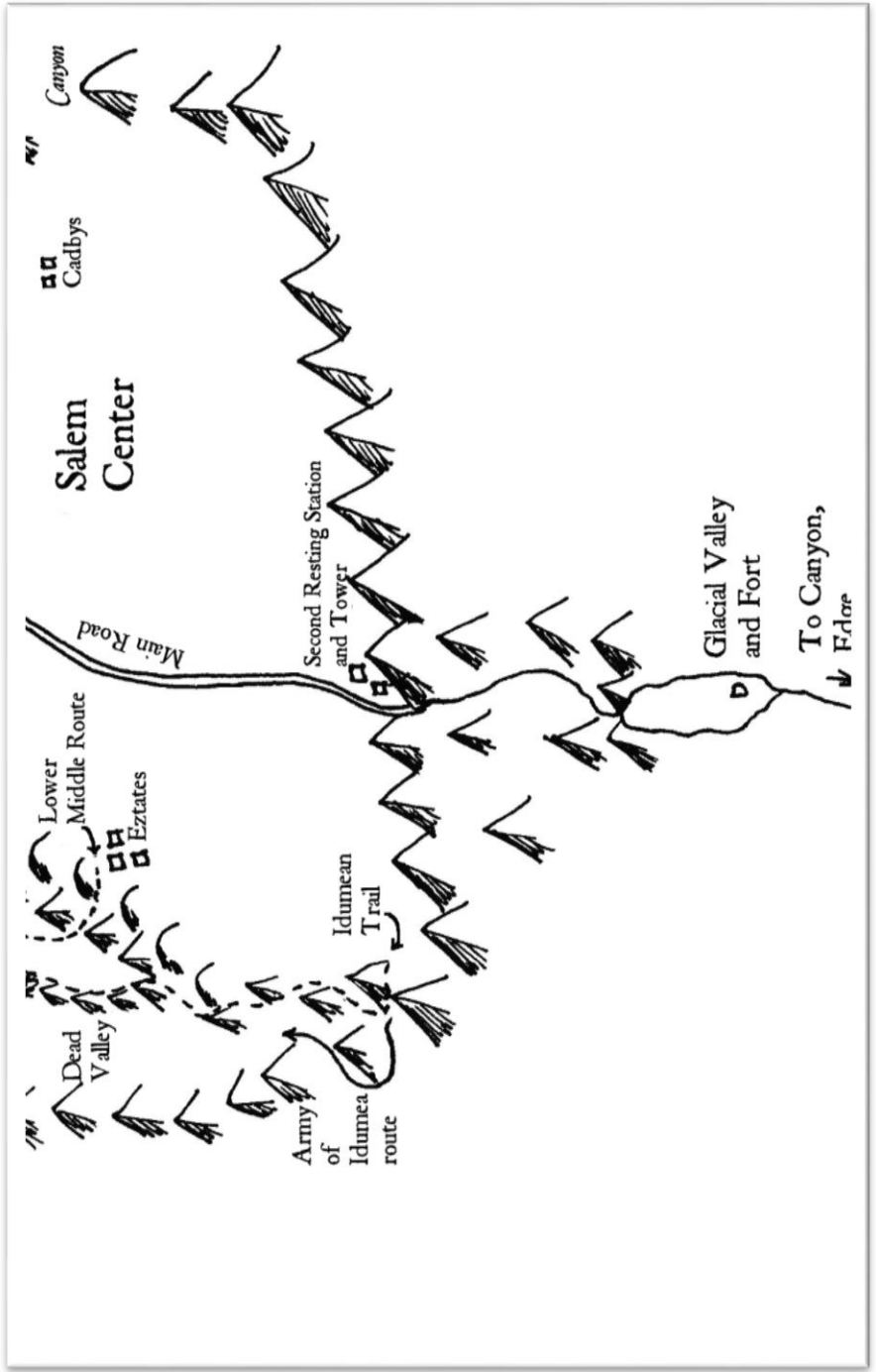
MAPS





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

Idumea	i-doo-ME-uh
Mahrree	MARR-ee
Peto	PAY-toh
Jaytsy	JAYT-see
Jothan	JOH-thun
Asrar	AZ-rar
Lorixania	Lor-ix-ZYAN-ya
Hifadhi	Hi-FAHD-hee
Cephas	SEE-fus
Qayin	KAY-in
Trovato	troe-VAH-toe
Fadh	FOD
Boskos	BOSS-kose
Barnos	BARN-ose

Chapter 1--“Young Pere is . . . an interesting young man.”

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 that crushed an old barn to overlook the parade grounds that were once a farm. The farmhouse 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 maneuvers is a meal. Thorne knew how to treat his men. It was one of the reasons they were so loyal to him.

He quickly calculated how many more troops were to come. Two thousand now 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.

Some older history books said that Administrator/Commandant Genev had been in charge of the fort for two of those years, but Thorne had disposed of those books as easily as he disposed of Genev, and now no one remembered the old administrator or his time in the village that used to be known as the Edge of the World. It was as if he'd never existed.

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, the sergeant major spy, and the loss of the children twenty-five years ago 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, now Province 8, has been the most peaceful in the entire world because of the strong army presence. The future of their area, he would remind them, and indeed of the entire world, depended on General Thorne and his men maintaining peace against the rest of the world that no longer knew order.

But 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 field 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 passageway opened up a valley of immense proportions.

In that valley grew wildflowers, animals, gardens, crops, orchards, vineyards, herds, and a civilization that kept itself unknown and hidden from the world.

To the south and west of the main city stood a building designated for the education of older teenagers. And toward that building another general was jogging in a hurry and wondering if 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 he wasn't quite as brawny as he'd been as a younger officer, he was still as fit as men a third of his age. The only way anyone could keep him down was to pile a mountain on top of him. He had far too many responsibilities, and the men in the towers had just signaled him that the greatest concern of his life was currently standing on top of a two-level building, having hatched yet another less-than-

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brilliant plan.

His grandson was ready to fly.

Young Perrin Shin, named after his grandfather, stood on top of the two-story-high schoolhouse and wondered if the wind would affect his attempt. The breeze was only slight, but it could interfere. Then again, a stronger wind may have been better.

Well, he'd find out soon enough. That was the purpose of today's test—

“You're going to get in trouble!” whined the voice of a cousin far below.

Everyone had an opinion, and he'd learned long ago to disregard them because they were usually wrong. At seventeen years old, he'd pretty much figured out everything already. Young Pere wriggled his back to straighten out his wings. Or rather, the blanket strapped to the poles attached to his back with harnesses that were to be considered wings.

A crowd of children down below, a mixture of siblings, cousins, and friends watched as he fussed with the configuration, trying to shift the blanket back into place as the breeze ruffled it.

Another girl, about fourteen years old, came around the building. “*He's coming!*” the cousin warned Young Perrin.

He knew by the inflection of her voice that she meant *trouble* was coming. Peering over the edge, he saw the white hair jogging to the schoolhouse.

Young Pere felt torn. On the one hand, he wanted to get this over with before any adults arrived. They always complicated matters, pointing out the flaws in his plans and telling him he didn't know enough to do what he wanted to attempt.

On the other hand, he wanted Puggah to see this. There were times Young Perrin was sure he saw veiled approval—or maybe even jealousy—in his grandfather's eyes.

Suddenly there he was, in front of the schoolhouse: large, muscular, and now striding purposefully despite being seventy-two years old. As he reached the knot of children he stopped, put his hands on his waist, and his eyes interrogated each one of them.

One of the boys pointed upward. “There, Puggah.”

The older man didn't move his head but shifted his gaze to the

roof. What he saw made his jaw clench.

“You see these white hairs?” he yelled, pointing to his head. “You’ve given me each one of them! What are you planning now, Young Pere?”

“Puggah,” Young Pere called down. “I know what you’re thinking, but this will work.” He spread out his arms. “I’m going to fly,” he announced grandly.

His grandfather shook his head in disbelief. “Boy, where do you get these ideas?”

“Now Puggah, trust me with this one. I’ve thought this through.”

His grandfather folded his arms. “Since when do you *ever* think things through?”

Young Pere scoffed at the insult. “All the time! Now, I wanted to see what it would be like to jump from this height—”

“Why?”

Young Pere, surprised by the question, held out his hands as if the answer was obvious. “It just seems like an interesting thing to do.”

His grandfather exhaled heavily. “So you think it’ll be *interesting* to crash to the ground and break something you have yet to break?”

“I’m not going to crash to the ground,” Young Pere said. “I’m going to *float* down.” He flapped his arms experimentally. “This will work.”

“If it were that simple to fly,” his grandfather said, “don’t you think others would have done it by now?”

Young Pere knew the strategy: logic. He had a way to counter it. “Puggah, sometimes people are just too cowardly to do the obvious. I’ve researched this, and no one’s tried this before. Probably because they were afraid of falling.”

“Maybe people *have* tried this,” Puggah acknowledged, “but didn’t survive to write about it. Others just found their flattened bodies on the ground, mysteriously covered in blankets, and had no idea what caused their demise. In all your research did you look up ‘Unexplained deaths in Salem?’”

Some of his grandsons snickered. Some of his granddaughters wrung their hands in worry.

“Oh, ha-ha,” Young Pere called down at him.

“Besides,” Puggah went on, “the Creator didn’t design us to fly.”

Ah, logic again. Young Pere held up a finger. “But Puggah, the Creator also didn’t design us to move from one place to another

“Young Pere is . . . an interesting young man.”

quickly, but that’s why he gave us horses. I’m just doing what Muggah says: Test everything. Test what you believe, test what you doubt, find out the truth of all things yourself.”

Perrin closed his eyes, knowing full well what was to come next.

“Well, Puggah, I doubt that the Creator did *not* want us to fly. Therefore, I will test what I doubt!”

Young Pere could read the cynicism in his grandfather’s expression. “You can learn from other’s mistakes, Young Pere. Remember when Mr. Hint fell from his barn roof?”

“But did he have blanket wings?” Young Pere asked knowingly.

“Let me rephrase this,” Perrin said, quietly growling as he always did when he was losing an argument. “The Creator did not design YOU to fly off the roof *today*.”

“And where’s that written?” Young Pere countered.

“It’s Nature’s Law,” his grandfather called up to him. “All things fall to the ground: Law number 1. Look, your mother’s on her way.” He glanced to the side of the building to make sure she hadn’t already arrived, but everyone would have heard her if she had. “Now come down.”

Young Pere grinned. “That’s what I’ve been planning to do!” and fluffed out his wings.

“Not that way, boy!” Perrin bellowed.

“Puggah, didn’t you ever wonder what it’d feel like to fly?” Young Pere called down.

“Briefly,” Perrin admitted, “but then I worry about what it’d feel like when I hit the ground!”

“See, there you go again: assuming my failure. But Puggah, what if I *don’t* hit the ground? What if I can defy Nature’s Law? And even if I don’t, won’t the thrill of falling be worth the pain at the bottom?”

Perrin threw his hands in the air. “Just how many times do you have to hurt yourself to answer that question, Young Pere? Look, I understand your desire for something exciting, so if you want something to thrill you, come down here the proper way and, and . . .” Perrin looked around, trying to find an enticing diversion.

“What, *race you*, old man?” Young Pere sniggered.

Perrin took a deep breath. His grandson had been teasing him about their last race for years now. Young Pere was almost thirteen then, and already larger than his father. Perrin was sixty-seven, and thought he was still quite fast for his age, so he bragged to the family he was about to humble his boastful grandson.

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It was Perrin who was humbled, or rather *humiliated*, in front of the entire family who cheered his grandson's sizable victory. Not even Uncle Shem had any sympathy for him.

Perrin folded his arms and subtly felt his ample bicep. "Come down here and take me on! You have yet to beat me in an arm wrestle. Today may be your lucky day."

His twelve-year-old grandson looked up at Perrin and scowled. "An arm wrestle? Oh, Puggah. *That's* not thrilling—"

"Hush, Hogal."

Young Pere wagged a finger at his grandfather. "Not today, old man. I'll beat you another time."

Perrin's mouth dropped open in feigned dismay. "*Again* with the 'old man'? Get down here, boy. Let's see who the 'old man' is!"

His seven-year-old granddaughter standing next to him grabbed his hand and squeezed it. "You *are* an old man, Puggah. But that's all right. I like your white hair."

He bent over and gave her a quick kiss on the head. "It's only *starting* to go white. But thank you, Morah. Always good to be reminded." He glanced back up at Young Pere. "Look, my afternoon's free, so let's come up with something else exciting, all right?"

Another young man rounded the school house. Cephias was the same age as his cousin and called up a warning when he saw him on the roof. "Young Pere, Aunt Lilla's on her way. Better get down, now!"

"All right, Cephias," Young Pere said with as much sincerity as he could muster for his ever-obedient, ever-perfect cousin. "For *you*, I will."

He backed up along the roof line, and Cephias and Perrin exchanged looks of relief.

Until they heard the running.

They didn't have time to shout, "No!"

Young Pere was the first human on that sphere to feel the sensation of flying. And it was as glorious, as he knew it would be! It made his heart quicken, then stop in amazing joy as the air rushed past his face.

Then . . . he felt the sensation of falling.

He wasn't the first human to experience that. But it was still fantastic in its own right—

Then toppling. All right, maybe not so good—

Then the sensation of hearing his mother scream. Yeah, getting

“Young Pere is . . . an interesting young man.”

worse—

Then the sensation of impact.

Then pain.

Then darkness and silence.

When Young Pere’s eyes opened, he looked into the face of his mother. She was red, puffier than usual, and her dark blond hair was falling untidily out of its bun.

She cried out as she looked up to the ceiling. “Thank the Creator!”

“You don’t have to yell, Lilla,” said someone behind her.

“Yes, I do!” Lilla exclaimed, immediately smothering Young Pere’s face with sloppy kisses. “It’s the only,” *kiss*, “way that,” *kiss*, “my boy,” *kiss, kiss*, “hears me!”

He’d need a washing rag later.

Behind his mother hovered his grandmother. Mahrree Shin looked slightly disheveled, her shoulder-length gray hair dislodged from where it was usually tucked behind her ears. Something about her appearance was weary. Wearier than usual.

“Say something,” she prompted him, not entirely convinced he was all right.

“Hello, my name is Young Pere,” he said, a bit groggily, “and you seem like a charming young woman. What’s your name, miss?”

Mahrree rolled her eyes. “Yes, he’s fine.” She exhaled as if she hadn’t breathed properly in hours. “Young Pere, you’re being preserved, but for what I can’t imagine.” Muggah leaned over and kissed him on the cheek. “Don’t you ever, *ever* scare me like that again,” she whispered fiercely in his ear.

Young Pere tried to smile at her often repeated admonition, but every muscle protested in pain. He tried to sit up and realized he was in his bedroom.

“Wait—I’m at home?”

Another face came over, belonging to his cousin Boskos Zenos. At the same stature as his father Shem at age twenty-two, Boskos also had his light brown hair and blue eyes, which now peered deeply and analytically at Young Pere. He picked up Young Pere’s wrist, felt his pulse, and nodded in satisfaction.

“What, I get only the doctor’s apprentice, now?” Young Pere asked.

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Boskos ignored that and looked into each of his dark brown eyes. “How do you feel? Your left shoulder is bruised where you landed on it. Try rotating it.”

Young Pere did so and winced in pain. “Not dislocated this time.”

“Didn’t think so,” Boskos said, peering closer and closer into his left eye as Young Pere tried to lean away from him. “My sister said you bounced when you hit the ground. Are your ribs all right? Your breathing’s been clear and we didn’t feel any breaks.”

Young Pere took an experimental breath. “Nothing feels broken. This time.”

“Good.” His cousin smiled and stood up. “I’ll tell Dr. Toon he doesn’t need to come by again until morning. I can keep an eye on you until then. You need to stay in bed for the next few days if you want to be ready for next week.”

“Sure, Bos,” Young Pere said in his best sincere voice.

Boskos pointed at him. “I mean it.”

Young Pere sighed while his mother resumed her fussing over him, straightening his blankets and brushing aside his black hair.

Boskos turned to the older man leaning against the wall with his arms folded. “Uncle Perrin, make sure he stays in bed.”

Perrin nodded. “I’ll do my best, *Dr. Zenos*.”

“I’m not ‘doctor’ yet—a few more tests still to pass.”

“For as much practice as you’ve had over the years with this family, I think they should grant you your certificate already.”

Boskos grinned. “That’s what I keep telling them.”

Perrin caught his arm as Boskos started to leave. “After the doctor, stop by and talk to your father,” he said in a low voice. “He was worried.”

“I was already planning on it.” Boskos headed down the hall, calling, “Uncle Peto, he’s awake.”

Young Pere automatically stiffened, knowing what was to come, but every muscle ached as he did so.

Almost instantly his father appeared at the door. Unlike Young Pere, Peto was of average height, with light brown hair and pale gray eyes, but his features were the same as Perrin’s, which meant the same as Young Pere’s. He sat down gingerly next to his son, and when he spoke his tone was tight.

“The doctor and Boskos said they can’t see anything that will be permanently damaged. Except maybe your head.” He ignored the unnecessary grooming of his wife who was mopping Young Pere’s head

“Young Pere is . . . an interesting young man.”

with an overly damp cloth. “And hopefully your pride. But I have my doubts about that, son.”

He gripped Young Pere’s hand which felt fine until his father squeezed it.

“I’m just so grateful you’ve come back to us again,” Peto said earnestly. “We’ve been praying for you since yesterday afternoon, you know.”

That surprised Young Pere. “So . . . how long have I been here?”

He heard his grandfather answer. “It’s nearly dinner time now, so since yesterday when your father, Uncle Shem, and I carried you home after your bird-brained idea. You’re getting heavier, boy. I remember when I could carry your limp body home all by myself.” Perrin’s face was stern but he couldn’t hide the relief in his eyes.

“Oh,” Young Pere said, making sure they all heard the twinge of regret he added. “I’m sorry about that. I guess it explains why I’m hungry now, though,” and he looked pleadingly at his mother.

“He’s hungry!” she cried. “Oh, it’s been a cold gravy day, I’ll tell you.”

Young Pere knew how bad a situation was based on the worst meal his mother could think of. The nastier the items, the more worried she’d been.

“—A cold gravy day with moldy biscuits and floppy pickles and runny potatoes—”

“Didn’t he say he was hungry, Lilla?” Perrin mercifully interrupted his daughter-in-law before she detailed the saddest dinner in Salem. It was time to make her son the best dinner, as she always did.

“That’s right!” she said happily. “I knew I was right to make those first peaches into pie.” She kissed him and leaped to her feet to rush down the long hall to the kitchen.

But Peto wasn’t smiling. “And that’s all you have to say, Young Pere? ‘I’m sorry, I’m hungry?’”

“Peto . . .” Mahrree said calmly.

“No, Mother, he’s old enough to understand.” He looked intently at his son. “Whatever you do affects everyone around you. Last night your siblings and cousins were sure this time you wouldn’t come back to us. Morah cried herself to sleep. Lori even came over to keep watch last night. Uncle Shem and Aunt Calla have been here twice. Cephas did your chores this morning. Young Pere, whenever you do something ‘interesting,’ everyone suffers. Can you please try to understand that?”

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He'd heard this lecture before, and while he was lying in bed, too. He looked past his father and counted the wood planks on the ceiling as he usually did. Eventually he came up with, "It's not like I'm trying to hurt other people." He really didn't know what else they wanted him to say.

"Young Pere," Peto put his hand lightly on his son's broad chest. "I worry about you, immensely. I don't want to lose you. I couldn't bear for something truly terrible to happen to you. Can you understand *that*?"

Young Pere nodded, but kept his gaze on the ceiling. Nothing truly terrible had happened to him before. Why should it in the future? He always woke up again, sometimes in casts, sometimes with stitches, but in a few days or weeks or moons, he was fine again.

Peto sighed as if wanting to say something else. Instead, he squeezed his son's hand again. "I'll go tell everyone else how you're faring. Although I'm sure your mother has already sung it to the neighborhood."

Peto looked at his parents since his son wouldn't meet his eyes.

They both gave him a quick nod. That usually meant he was expecting them to say something profound in a few minutes, right after he left.

Peto patted Young Pere's chest. "Remember that I love you, son." He stood up and left the room.

Puggah and Muggah looked at each other, then at their twelfth grandchild who had let his gaze drop to count the boards on the wall. Young Pere wondered who'd go first.

"Do you know how much he worries about you, Young Pere?" Muggah started, because she usually went first.

"Yes," he said dully. Giving them the answers they wanted made the speeches go by faster. He'd learned that when he was fourteen and had run out of the house into a small twister in the pasture to see just how powerful it was. You would have thought by his family's overreaction that it had thrown him further than a few dozen paces.

"He gets frustrated because he knows no other way to tell you how much he fears for you," Mahrree continued. "It's not really his way to smother you in kisses like your mother does."

Young Pere didn't have enough strength to keep the corners of his mouth from twitching upward at that.

She noticed. "Nor would you want *that*, I am sure!" Mahrree smiled broadly. "You have an exuberant spirit, my sweet boy."

“Young Pere is . . . an interesting young man.”

Young Pere blushed at his grandmother’s nickname for him.

“You have the capacity to accomplish great things. But only if you discipline yourself. You need to find a way to harness your impulses, use them in productive ways . . .”

He sighed and started counting boards again. He’d heard this speech before, several times.

And Mahrree knew it too.

She stopped and leaned over to kiss him again on the cheek. “I love you, Young Pere. No matter what you do. Even when you manipulate my words for your own purposes. I would never have told you to test Nature’s Law by throwing yourself off a building.”

“That’s *not* what I was trying . . . oh, never mind,” he mumbled.

Mahrree patted his cheek. “I’ll go check on your dinner. Make sure the gravy’s warmed up.”

Young Pere watched her out of the corner of his eye. She was giving her husband an, ‘It’s your turn,’ look as she left.

Perrin nodded at her but didn’t move from his spot against the wall. Instead, he watched for a while until his namesake finally looked over at him.

“It’s your turn, isn’t it, Puggah?” Young Pere asked his grandfather. He usually began with *I’m concerned about you, son. Let’s talk*. Young Pere assumed that was a leftover phrase from his years in the army.

But maybe Perrin was going for a new approach, because today he only shrugged and said, “Do you need anything?”

“No, Puggah.”

“All right, then.” Perrin pushed off of the wall and came over to his grandson. For lack of something better to do, he ruffled up Young Pere’s thick black hair.

Young Pere wondered if he was envious. Supposedly Puggah’s hair used to look like that. *Everything* about Young Perrin Shin—from his towering height to his massive build to his dark brown eyes—was a copy of his grandfather, or so he was told.

“You need to rest up. The trail marking trip is in less than a week. Your grandmother in Norden is expecting our visit, and if I don’t bring her her grandson in good health, she just might sit on me.”

Young Pere couldn’t hide the smile that surfaced to his lips. Grandma Trovato was a hefty woman.

“I’ll come back and check on you later. If you need anything, remember you can always ask for me.” He patted Young Pere’s cheek

gently and headed for the door.

His littlest sister Morah bounded in, glanced up at Puggah to make sure he was on his way out, then rushed to Young Pere's side.

"You're awake!" she chirped.

"Yes, obviously," he said to the seven-year-old. While he appreciated how she idolized him, it was also quite annoying at times. *Except* when she was useful.

"Sorry I got the wrong blankets for you," she said, her face the picture of disappointment. "I bet it would've worked with better blankets."

He patted her hand, which sat tentatively on his bed. "That's all right. I'm not sure that was the problem, but I appreciate you sneaking them out of the house for me."

Something still worried her, though. "So . . . you're not mad at me? I didn't make a mistake?"

"No, not mad. You did just fine."

"And I didn't tell on you," she blurted. "I don't know who did. But I kept your secret good, didn't I?"

"Yes, you did," he assured her. "You've proven you can be part of *my team*," he whispered the last words, and she beamed like the sunshine. He needed an innocent spy and accomplice, and so far, Morah was showing her worth. Sometimes the adults in the family became too curious as to what Young Pere was up to, and questioned his every movement, request, and effort to sneak off with something tucked under his shirt.

But little Morah? She could charm the claws off a kitten.

"When I'm healed and ready for my next project, you'll be my number one helper."

She couldn't have grinned any wider, showing front teeth which were hopelessly crooked. "All right, Young Pere," and she put her finger to her lips, just as he had when he'd tasked her to sneak him out blankets for his wings.

He winked at her, and added an eyebrow raise, as if they were conspiring on the greatest adventure Salem had ever seen. "Now, go see if Mama saved me any extra pie. If she hasn't, slip one into the cabinet for me, all right, my number one helper?"

Her hand did something odd around her forehead, until Young Pere realized she was trying to salute. But, since they didn't have an army in Salem, and Morah had only met a handful of former soldiers who never saluted—at least, they never did *twice*, since General Shin

“Young Pere is . . . an interesting young man.”

despised it when any refugees tried to salute him—her attempt was bizarre at best.

“Uh, thank you for that,” he said to her. “Dismissed,” he said, more as a question than an order. But when he said, “Check on that pie?” it was clearly an order.

Morah grinned and bobbed out of the bedroom, just as a slew of siblings and cousins came flooding in.

The flow of family visitors continued as Young Pere ate his dinner, and second helpings, in his bed. Mahrree sat in the gathering room with an eye on the hallway to see who went in and out, and if her most troublesome grandson needed anything.

But mostly she was watching for . . . Ah, there he was, with his arms full of chopped wood for her and Perrin’s fire. Cephias Briter, only three days older than Young Pere, nodded once to Mahrree before heading down to her wing to deliver the wood. He returned a moment later and made his way through chatting relatives to check on his cousin Young Pere.

Mahrree caught Perrin’s eye across the room, but already he was striding to the hallway and his namesake’s bedroom.

The boys’ relationship was an application in natural laws, Mahrree had decided some years ago: for as much as Cephias tried to pull toward restraint and care, Young Pere provided an equal, and often greater, opposing push for recklessness. At times Mahrree wondered if there hadn’t been some divine appointment as to who was in each family. The Creator must have known someone like Young Pere would need someone like Cephias to provide some balance. Although they had been best friends when they were little, they became opposites as they aged, and now that they were nearly eighteen, they could barely abide being in the same room.

Still, Cephias seemed intent on making an effort, likely because Young Pere was too sore to put up much of a physical fight.

Cephias went into the bedroom only after a younger brother bounded out of it, and Mahrree and Perrin tiptoed up to the door to listen.

“How are you feeling?” Cephias asked amiably.

“Fine,” was the short response.

An uncomfortable silence followed, then, “Don’t worry about

your chores for the next few days. I've got them covered."

"Don't bother," Young Pere's response was crisp. "I can do them."

Cephas scoffed, likely trying to sound light-hearted, but it wasn't light enough. "No, you can't. Boskos said you need to rest at least a week, and I imagine you can barely walk. How can you take care of the morning firewood?" In his tone, Mahrree could hear his genuine concern.

But that wasn't what Young Pere heard.

"Cephas, just do your own chores. I don't need your charity."

"Charity? It's not charity," Cephas insisted. "I'm doing it for . . . Muggah. She needs the firewood."

"I can take care of *my* Muggah. You stay at your house; I'll stay at mine," said Young Pere firmly. "Take care of your own family."

"Muggah is my family, and so are you, Young Pere."

"And how often do you regret that?"

Cephas groaned, all diplomacy flying out the window. "What, this again? That was three years ago! And I never said I regretted you being in my family. What I said to the lumberjacks rescuing you was that I was sorry that they had to come out all that way. Honestly, Young Pere—you hear only what you want to hear, don't you?"

"What I want to hear," Young Pere said in a measured yet hostile tone, "is you not lecturing me anymore. That's what my parents and grandparents are for."

"Well maybe if you actually listened to them once in a while, I wouldn't have to tell you the same things!"

Mahrree and Perrin exchanged the same look, and Perrin cleared his throat loudly to announce his presence before pushing open the door. "Time for family prayer, boys!"

Cephas stormed out, apologetically patting his grandmother's arm as he passed, and stomped to the bustling gathering room.

Mahrree peered into the bedroom to see Perrin hefting Young Pere, who insisted on getting out of bed. Even now Perrin was still so strong, yet so gentle. He readily hoisted his groaning grandson who matched him in height and bulk, and put a steadying arm around him. After a moment Young Pere nodded that he wasn't about to topple over, and the two of them slowly lumbered to the door. Mahrree stepped back, knowing her grandson wouldn't want her to see him so frail, and sure enough, once they finally made it to the hall, he shrugged off his grandfather and shuffled on his own down the long

“Young Pere is . . . an interesting young man.”

hallway. He had a point to prove to his cousin Cephas, although it was a stupid point.

Mahrree caught her husband’s arm. “I don’t think it’d be a good idea to ask either of them to offer the prayer tonight,” she whispered. “We don’t need another ‘Please bless that my cousin will realize he’s a big dummy,’ prayer tonight.”

Perrin smiled as he likely remembered the prayer recently offered by Morah Shin after she had an argument with Young Shem Briter. “Agreed. Tonight’s my night anyway.”

Perrin kept that family prayer full of civility and gratitude for the welfare of their family. It was nights like that when Mahrree thought maybe he had learned something in his negotiation classes years ago. But it was more likely the tutelage of the Creator over the years that had turned Perrin into the remarkable man that he was now. He had a way of soothing every conflict, of understanding each grandchild, and of always being at the right place at the right time.

“I know I’ve asked this of you before, but any suggestions?” Peto said as he looked at his mug and slowly turned it in his hands. His brown hair seemed to have added a few more gray strands around his temples since yesterday afternoon. They complimented the lines that were etching deeper around his eyes.

He sat at the eating room table with Deck and Perrin. The younger children were asleep, the older children were in their rooms in the western wing, and the women were talking in the gathering room, leaving them alone.

Deck, sitting next to him at the large table, slowly shook his head. “Young Pere is . . . an *interesting* young man.”

Peto stopped turning the mug, looked at Deck, and said, “Well, that was helpful.”

Deck smiled faintly. “I don’t know how else to put it. He’s not a *bad* boy. It’s as if he’s gotten into a batch of bad feed and can’t get it out of his system. If he were a bull I might have more helpful ideas. None of my sons have been quite as *lively* as Young Pere. Yet.”

Perrin chuckled softly from across the table. “If Young Pere were Deck’s bull, there’d be a way to *steer* him to be calmer, I’m sure.”

“Oh, I’m not suggesting *that!*” Deck protested while his father-

in-law and brother-in-law smiled.

“I know you’re not,” Peto assured him. “It’s just that Lilla and I don’t know what more to do for him. We run from one disaster of his to another, praying he’ll survive long enough to learn some sense. Of our thirteen children, we spend most of our time on him.” He sighed miserably. “I just worry how it’s all going to end,” he whispered.

Perrin leaned forward. “You can’t think like that, about the ‘end,’ whatever it may be. You can’t assume it’ll be for the worst. Miracles still happen, all the time. You of all people know that.”

Peto nodded feebly, staring at his mug again. “I know all about miracles. And I’ve been praying for one for Young Pere. But the Creator can’t force anyone to do anything.” He looked up briefly. “It would be a lot easier if He could.”

Deck nodded in understanding. Some of his brood of twelve had given him and Jaytsy many moments of fear and grief, and with Young Shem only seven years old, there were undoubtedly many more years of worry to come. His children didn’t cause his hair to go gray, they just caused it to *go*. By the time his youngest would be a father, Deck was sure he’d be completely bald.

“So, Peto,” Deck said gently, “what would Rector Shin say to a discouraged father?”

Peto scoffed. “Has *anyone* in our congregation had a son like mine? It’s true: the rector’s children are always the worst.”

“But who else in Salem,” Perrin began, “besides a rector who grew up in the world, could have enough patience to handle such a spirited boy? What other grandparents have had so much experience with reckless teenagers? Who else here could possibly help rein in this one before he does permanent damage? Can you imagine if Young Pere was in Edge? Or whatever they’re calling it now?”

Deck shuddered.

Peto remained unmoved.

“This family was prepared to be sent Young Pere,” Perrin assured his son. “The Creator knows you’re the best man in Salem to be his father.”

Peto only shrugged.

“I remember Rector Shin giving a talk not too long ago about choices,” Perrin said, looking off in the distance.

His son looked down at the table and smiled dimly.

“I believe he said, we all make our choices, we all live with the

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consequences. We all mess up. We learn from the mistakes, hopefully, and make better choices the next time around. Some people take a lot longer to learn a lesson than others do. But that’s why we’re here, working the Test, enduring to the end. And so we sit around the table patiently hoping we see the boy get some sense knocked into him.”

Peto examined his mug. “I didn’t put it *exactly* like that. But at least I know someone picked up the general idea.” In a whisper he asked, “What have I done wrong with him?”

“Nothing, Peto!” Deck said earnestly. “You have five older children who have matured very well and they know their Creator. You have . . .” he counted quickly, “seven more children who love you and Lilla and show none of the wild tendencies of Young Pere. Some are watching him, that’s true,” Deck’s eyebrows furrowed in worry, “and some of mine watch him too, but I have to believe that everything he does is because of who he is, not what *you* have done, right or wrong.”

Peto looked to his father for a second opinion.

“I agree. You’re a good father, Peto. Better than I was. Just love him. And make sure he knows you do. But I do have another suggestion. Ask the guide what he thinks about you and Young Pere. He can help you understand what the Creator wants you to know. I think you’re too close to the problem to see it clearly.”

Nodding in reluctant agreement, Peto said, “Huldah was at the schoolhouse yesterday, and she’s quite the informant for her father. I’m sure Shem’s just waiting for me to ask his opinion, but he won’t share it unless I ask.”

Perrin had a look on his face that suggested he had one more thought.

“What is it, Perrin?” Deck asked.

He hesitated before saying, “I’m only going to say this once, because I know neither of you would approve, but I’ve thought this for quite some time.” He paused.

“Well?” prodded Peto.

“With his daring, his ingenuity, and his charisma,” Perrin said, “Young Pere would’ve been a great army officer. He could’ve been the next General Shin.”

Peto and Deck stared at him before turning to each other.

Perrin winced with worry.

But his boys howled with laughter.

“He’d destroy Idumea!” Deck declared.

“Then he’d destroy Salem!” Peto added.

Perrin shrugged. “It’s just that with all the mandatory discipline, the outlets for pent-up energy—”

“You mean forced regulations and trained violence?” Peto restated sharply.

“Yes,” Perrin conceded, “you could put it that way. I think he would’ve responded to the kind of life the army affords. Or rather, *afforded* when I was his age. I can’t imagine what the state of the army of Idumea might be now. Or the factions. It doesn’t matter, though,” he ended quietly.

“Perrin, he’s already a member of your army,” Deck offered.

Perrin scoffed at that. “Even Mahrree’s a member. And it’s only a militia. There’s a big difference between a standing army and a bunch of farmers, children, and great-grandparents with pitchforks.”

Deck looked a little hurt.

“I’m sorry, Deck. You know what I mean, don’t you?”

Deck nodded. “I do. I just didn’t realize until now that you missed the army so much.”

Perrin looked like he had been stabbed with a pitchfork by a rancher. “I . . . I don’t,” he stammered.

“Oh come on, *General*. Not even a little?” Peto asked him, suspicious.

Perrin searched for the right words while his sons eyed him warily. “There are aspects that I miss. But there’s far more that I’m glad I’m rid of. I wouldn’t trade my life here with you boys and your families for any command. Truly. I have my own little army right here.”

Peto and Deck exchanged doubtful glances.

“Uh-huh,” Peto said. “But aren’t there days when it was simpler to rally hundreds of men to arms than to get the entire family gathered together for your nightly roll calls?”

Deck laughed while Perrin objected good-naturedly to what he insisted on as a family tradition, but the rest of the family regarded as a joke. “Roll call is important. What if one of your little ones has wandered off and no one noticed until bed time?”

“That’s never happened!” Peto countered.

“Because of roll call!” Perrin insisted. “It even helped Salema find Lek once, remember Deck?”

“Lek wasn’t missing, Perrin. He was just avoiding you,” Deck declared. “You scared him to death with your little ‘grandfatherly

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talk’ right before their wedding. As if that poor man wasn’t quiet and shy enough as it is. You never gave *me* that talk. He *still* won’t tell me or Shem what you said, and it’s been six years.”

Peto and Deck laughed as Perrin sighed. “We get along fine now, right? All my married granddaughters are treated *very well* by their husbands, aren’t they?” Perrin turned to Peto.

Peto pointed at his father. “Lori’s Sam dared to talk to you again only *after* I told him about Lilla’s ‘Papa Pere’ nickname. You big, old, soft bear, you,” he teased. “Fortunately Jori’s fiancé-to-be was there at the time so Con was prepared for *your little chat*.”

Perrin tried to look stern as Deck and Peto laughed again. But he was glad to see them lighter again, now that the latest storm had passed.

Eventually, Peto sighed. “At least Young Pere has the general as a grandfather, and two uncles who are always neutral parties. Someone else he can turn to when he and I can’t seem to connect. Will you promise me, if either of you sees something we should be doing differently with Young Pere, please tell me?”

“Ah, Peto,” Perrin sighed and ran a hand through his whitening hair. “That’s what our wives are for.”

Chapter 2--“You’re as bad as your father and grandfather.”

Mahrree put the last of the dishes in the cabinet and glanced out the dark window to the barn. Everything was quiet now that Young Pere was going to be fine.

Again.

Mahrree had sent fifteen-year-old Kanthi off to bed, assuring her she didn’t mind doing her chore that night. Mahrree wanted time to think, and somehow washing the dishes always helped. She was wiping off the work table when she heard quiet shuffling coming from the west wing of the house into the kitchen.

“Muggah? I didn’t think anyone was still up.”

Mahrree smiled. “Hungry *still*, Young Pere?”

He bobbed his head guiltily.

Mahrree pulled out a chair and pointed to it.

Young Pere walked uneasily to the table and sat down.

“Sore?” Mahrree asked. “Where?”

“You name it,” Young Pere groaned. “I think, however, there’s a little spot under my left ribs that feels remarkably well. I try to focus on that point.”

Mahrree chuckled, pulled out a piece of peach pie from the cabinet, and placed it in front of her grandson.

“Last piece of pie? Is this Puggah’s?” Young Pere asked before stabbing the fork into it.

“He doesn’t need to grow anymore,” Mahrree said, sitting down across from him.

“Remember, if he gets mad, this is your fault, right?”

“Always is.”

She watched him take a few bites, his body moving awkwardly

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as he tried to force his tender muscles to cooperate.

“So how did it feel?” she eventually asked.

“Which part?” He took another bite.

“The flying part.”

Young Pere swallowed. “Amazing, Muggah! I was . . . *weightless*. Can you imagine? I was part of the air—part of the world that wasn’t the world. I can’t explain it. I know what went wrong, though. I need bigger wings to hold out the blankets. And I think blankets are wrong as well. What I really need is—”

“You want to do this *again*?” Mahrree interrupted him. She was careful to keep her voice calm and unemotional. As long as she sounded like she was trying to help him, he told her all his plans.

No one knew just how many ideas his grandmother had talked him out of. Young Pere most likely would have died years ago, especially when he was twelve and had the idea of turning a small wagon into a device that rolled down the hills with only Nature’s Laws propelling it, and Young Pere’s unreasonable idea of a fifth wheel in his hands controlling the direction. He got as far as putting wagon wheels he modified onto a large crate before Mahrree found him in the barn and reminded him he would have no way of stopping. When he came to her later that afternoon with a plan for stopping his wagon, she told him he might as well call it a break, because that was what all his bones would do when he abruptly ended his forward motion.

While Perrin insisted that many of Young Pere’s ideas came from her telling him to “push the limits of what was known,” even Perrin didn’t know how often Mahrree stopped him from literally pushing *himself* past the limits.

Except for yesterday.

That Young Pere didn’t tell her any of his plans about trying to fly worried Mahrree immensely. He was now acting without her consultation.

Young Pere looked up from his pie. “You don’t think I should try again?”

“No . . .” Mahrree said slowly, impressed with her ability to not show her shock at his lack of reason. She wondered how many times someone could be hit on the head until it started to affect their ability to think clearly. Perrin had been ‘planked’ at least half a dozen times that Mahrree knew about in order to render him unconscious to receive stitches, and his reasoning skills were still intact.

Young Pere had been carried home unconscious about as many

times, but soon some kind of damage would surely manifest itself. Maybe it already was.

“No,” Mahrree said again, noticing the disappointment on her grandson’s face. “Not until at least after the marking trip. Give yourself time to mend and . . . to consider different possibilities to your wing configuration.”

Young Pere nodded slowly, the way he usually did when he agreed with what Mahrree suggested.

It was times like this that Mahrree reflected on the conversation she had with Joriana years ago, days before she married Perrin. Mother Shin explained to Mahrree how Perrin had received all of his scars. Mahrree had taken notes that day but left them in Edge when they left the world. She remembered only a few of the stories now.

As she looked into her grandson’s dark eyes she wondered just how much he resembled his grandfather at that age. They might have been identical. Except that Young Pere had two scars on his forehead, instead of the one Older Pere had. And Young Pere had never been hit with a stick by a girl who wasn’t his sister or cousin.

“All right, Muggah. I’ll not consider another attempt until after we come back.” Something in the tone of his voice suggested his mind was already racing ahead to the day of their return.

Mahrree knew she had to be satisfied with that. “How did the rest of it feel?”

Young Pere narrowed his eyes. “You mean, the falling part?”

Mahrree smiled.

“Actually, quite interesting. I kind of wished it lasted longer.”

“What?”

He took another bite. “Just to feel it a little longer. The sense of weightlessness. Maybe if I wore some kind of padding next time, and jump from a greater height . . .”

Mahrree closed her eyes. The boy would never live to see eighteen.

She felt a light kick under the table and opened her eyes to find Young Pere grinning at her.

“Gotcha, Muggah!”

Mahrree exhaled. “Oh, you! You’re as bad as your father and grandfather.”

“Don’t worry,” he said, finishing off his pie. “I won’t do anything until we get back. I’m not sure I could climb for a few days anyway.”

Mahrree stood, took his empty plate, and gave him a kiss on the

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forehead. “Go rest, Young Pere. And think of boring, dull things. Maybe your sisters can teach you to do something safe, like sewing—oh, never mind. That involves sharp needles.”

Young Pere chuckled as he stood up. His chuckle changed into a groan of pain.

“Need help getting back to your room?” she asked.

“No, that’s all right, Muggah. I think I’m a little past being tucked into bed, even though Mama already did that tonight. I’ll make it.”

She caught his arm. “Promise me? Promise me you’ll *always* make it?”

He gave her half a smile, understanding her real question. “Of course. You can’t get rid of me too easily, Muggah. I bounce too well.”

“You do bounce, I must admit.” She squeezed his arm and he winced. “Oh, I’m sorry. Go to bed, now.”

Young Pere gave her a quick kiss on the cheek and shuffled down to his room.

Mahrree sighed and went back to wiping the table and noticed how wrinkled her hands looked. It was because of the dishwasher, she told herself. It was only rarely that she was vain enough to fret about how she was aging. Perrin still looked at her the same way, just as she still felt her heart skip a beat whenever she saw him.

But then again, nearly every woman in Salem felt the same way about him. She still couldn’t understand how it was that as Perrin grew older, the deep wrinkles around his dark eyes and the whiteness of his hair only made him more imposing and remarkable. No matter the size of the room, every person glanced his way when he entered the door. Then he’d smile and half the women of Salem would try not to swoon.

Well, maybe that was an exaggeration, Mahrree chuckled to herself. But not by much. He received the most stares from refugees coming from the world. Those who still remembered him would do a double-take when they realized the old colonel stood tall and impressive in front of them, more striking than High General Relf Shin ever was. The women would stare at him just a little bit longer, Mahrree noticed, but Perrin never did.

But whenever Mahrree entered a room, she was just another little old grandmother, which was fine by her. There had been incidents in the past when those coming from the world remembered what supposedly drove Colonel Shin to the forests. Seeing that his wife was

still alive surprised them.

But Mahrree received their hardened stares only until Shem Zenos arrived, and the anger was shifted to the poor, innocent man's direction. Those stares would turn into outright shock when they then realized what Salem proclaimed the former sergeant major now to be. For some, it was almost too much.

Then Salem would win them over. Usually.

She wiped clean Young Pere's dish and put it in the cupboard. He was only half joking about wanting to fall further; she could see it in his eyes. She often wondered what was going on in his head, and how he had become the most daring, fearless, and thick-headed young man she'd ever met.

She sometimes wondered if it was one of those 'middle child' cases. They never had this problem in Edge; there *were* no middle children. Of course, in Salem 'middle children' constituted the majority of people, but there was the understanding that some in the *very* middle, like Young Pere, felt a need to distinguish themselves from their siblings.

Mahrree and Perrin didn't understand that. They had frequently marveled at the diversity of their posterity. It never ceased to surprise them that each of their twenty-five grandchildren, and now almost twelve great-grandchildren, was completely different from each other. These children shared the same grandparents, lived in the same area—because the houses were so close together the cousins grew up more like siblings—and were exposed to the same upbringing, education, and beliefs, yet still resulted in so many different personalities.

For some reason, Perrin and she had thought that after the first few grandchildren, the subsequent offspring would be variations on the Briter or Shin themes. But each child was so unique. Some were as tall and broad as their Puggah, others were as slight and petite as their Muggah, and the rest fell somewhere in between.

There were grandchildren with every color of hair, from the straight blond hair of twenty-one-year-old Relf Shin, whose little boy Grunick also seemed destined to be fair-haired, to the black wavy hair of twenty-five-year-old Salema Briter Zenos, whose two little boys Briter and Fennic were remarkable blends of Grandpa Shem and Great-Grandpa Perrin. Every shade of eye color was also displayed in the family roll call, from light gray to nearly black.

But the differences between Young Pere and Cephas surprised Mahrree the most.

“You’re as bad as your father and grandfather.”

Their mothers were expecting with them at the same time, so there was a merry war between the two families as to which baby would be delivered first. While there was no official competition in Salem, the rivalry between Jaytsy and Peto was never fully quelled. In fact, it seemed to escalate in a good-natured way after Peto and Lilla married near the end of 339.

Mahrree knew there was going to be continued trouble—albeit friendly—between her children. When Mahrree went to retrieve Deck, Jaytsy, Salema, and little Cambozola—who they mercifully called Cambo—early in the morning of the 89th Day of Harvest, 340, she was there to announce the unexpectedly early arrival of Peto and Lilla’s firstborn during the night. When the Briter family eagerly arrived at Peto and Lilla’s bedroom, Jaytsy stopped and stared.

Peto lay in the bed next to his half-asleep wife wearing a smug smile. In his right arm was nestled one tiny little girl, and in his left arm was the second tiny girl. Lorixania and Joriana Shin.

“Lilla!” Deck exclaimed in an awe-filled whisper. “I’m thoroughly impressed. In less than one year of marriage and in one expecting, you caught up to us!”

Lilla managed a proud but weary smile before drifting off to sleep. It was the quietest Mahrree and Perrin had ever seen their daughter-in-law. Of course, she had been *quite* vocal for the several hours proceeding. She missed seeing Jaytsy glaring at her brother.

“How did you *do* that?” Jaytsy demanded.

Peto grinned. “Not going to tell you, now, am I?” He sniffed the heads of his babies. “I married a very practical woman, that’s all. Why have one at a time when you can have two? At this rate, we’ll have six children before you have four.”

Jaytsy would have put both hands on her hips, but one of them was holding her six-moons-old son. Her narrowed eyes were challenging enough.

Perrin and Mahrree, standing together by Lilla’s bed, stifled snorts of laughter as Jaytsy gave Deck a very deliberate look.

His eyes grew large.

Eleven moons later, Pere Briter was born. He was called Pere only a handful of times, because Cambo gave him a new name. Since he couldn’t yet say ‘Pere’ or ‘baby’ or ‘brother’ properly, Pere became Bubba. Everyone agreed that Bubba Briter had a certain rhythm that couldn’t be improved upon. And it was rather fortunate that the Bubba name stuck, because shortly after Young Perrin was born, Lilla

called him Young Pere, to go along with Papa Pere, her nickname for her father-in-law. In fact, most everyone had forgotten that Bubba's given name was Pere, and his bride Alixan didn't know he had a different name until the day before their wedding.

Not to be outdone, soon after Pere-Bubba arrived Uncle Peto announced at a family dinner that Lilla was expecting again, and in 342 Relf Shin came to Salem.

So, naturally, in the next year Holling Briter arrived, followed by Barnos Shin a year after that.

Then Viddrow Briter came, and Hycymum Shin arrived two seasons later.

It was only a matter of time until both Jaytsy and Lilla would be expecting at the same time. That's what happened in 346, and it was a race—unofficially, of course—to see who would deliver their sixth baby first.

Each morning their fathers would speak to the bellies to urge them that they needed to emerge before their cousin. Every day the siblings would pat their mothers and tell the new baby to come out and play before the cousin could. In the end, Cephaz Briter was born first that Harvest Season, followed by Perrin Shin the Younger only three days later.

Mahrree and Perrin had thought that when their brood of one dozen grandchildren had arrived, that was the end of babies. But Jaytsy said they still hadn't brought Deck's mother's name, Sewzi, to Salem, and eight-year-old Salema, now with five younger brothers, begged her mother daily for a baby sister.

That's when Peto pulled out the family lines and noticed that while Viddrow, the great-great-great-grandfather who had the dream about recording the family lines before the first King Querul could destroy them, made it to Salem, his wife Kanthi hadn't yet. So shortly after Sewzi Briter was born, Kanthi Shin, as well as her twin brother Nool Shin, made their appearances.

Jaytsy couldn't abide the fact that Lilla and Peto had outdone her by having twins again, so in the next year Tabbitt Briter came to Salem, but was soon followed by Kew Shin.

Peto also realized that while Tabbitt was there, so needed to be Hogal, so in 351 Hogal Shin arrived, followed only two moons later by Banu Briter.

Then Sakal Shin came to Salem, followed by Atlee Briter. Then Centia Shin, and Yenali Briter in 355.

“You’re as bad as your father and grandfather.”

That year Mahrree made family line charts for her, Perrin, and Deck of the ancestors they knew. That way, her grandchildren could see the names they represented, and be the means of bringing some of their ancestors to Salem, at least in name¹.

In 356 the baby race finally ended. Perrin called it a tie. Although Peto and Lilla had thirteen children, it was through only eleven expectings. Jaytsy and Deck, on the other hand, had endured twelve expectings for twelve children.

Perrin said the Briters’ last boy, Young Shem, named in honor of the man who got the Shins and Briters to Salem, should have counted as two babies since when he finally arrived he was so large Perrin declared he could have walked out himself had he been in the right position. The difficulty of that birth brought an end to Jaytsy’s child-bearing, even though she was only thirty-six, and Lilla, at thirty-five, convinced Peto they really had won the baby race with their thirteenth child Morah, named for Mahrree’s grandmother and born several weeks earlier, and they could stop now, too.

Mahrree was quite relieved. She had worried at times that her children were taking her dreams of being surrounded by children too much to heart.

It wasn’t until a few days after Cephaz and Young Pere were born that she finally revealed to them the dreams she had experienced since the night she and Perrin were first engaged. She told them about the large house with weathered gray wood—and by 346, when the boys had arrived, the wood on the house had turned gray, and the house had grown even larger than Mahrree had remembered in her dreams—the window boxes, the gardens, the mountains encircling them, and the children running through it all. With the birth of Young Perrin Shin, she and Perrin now had the twelve grandchildren she had envisioned, and even more. There were actually *two* large gray houses, a garden *and* an orchard, and she told her family that not only had her dreams been fulfilled, they had in many ways been doubled.

Deck had grinned at that. “Well, maybe we should double the number of children you saw, too.”

Peto rubbed his hands together and gave Deck a challenging look.

But Jaytsy and Lilla, both resting on the sofas in the Shins’ gathering room and cradling their newborn sons, regarded each other wearily.

“Remember, boys,” Perrin said sternly, “there’s no competition

¹ See *Mahrree’s charts at the back of the book.*

in Salem. You need to let your wives recuperate and let *them* decide if they can handle more. They each now have six little ones. You need to think about your wives!”

Lilla had laid her head back on the sofa and sighed as she patted her third tiny son. “Ah, Papa Pere, they do. That’s how we end up this way.”

Shem and Calla weren’t left out of the baby race, although the competition wasn’t nearly as fierce in the Zenos-Shin-Briter battle. In the rare years there were no Shin or Briter babies, there were Zenos babies. In 341 they had their second son Boskos, and two years later came their third son Zaddick.

But in 345, when Viddrow and Hycymum came, so did the Zenos’s first daughter Meiki. With no Shins or Briters born in 347, Shem and Calla got a little more attention when their second daughter Ester was born, and their last daughter Huldah came just a few weeks before Tabbit Briter.

The three families went without new babies for only two years, because shortly after Young Shem and Morah arrived, bashful and quiet Lek Zenos, and bossy and loud Salema Briter surprised almost everyone with the decision to unite the Zenos and Briter families officially.

Since the time they were fifteen and fourteen, Salema’s and Lek’s mothers had suspected something might be going on between them. And while Shem and Deck brushed away the suggestion of a potential romance between their oldest children, Calla and Jaytsy watched them closely, looking for signs.

When Lek, at age seventeen, came to Deck asking if he could work the cattle with him, Jaytsy had a feeling it was to be that much closer to the Briter household. Deck said it was because Lek’s grandfather Boskos Zenos was a rancher, too, and on that land.

A year later at a family party, eighteen-year-old Lek shyly announced that he had found a bride, and nineteen-year-old Salema shouted, “It’s ME!” Most of the family was sufficiently stunned that they had managed to keep their courtship a secret, but Calla and Jaytsy had beamed smugly at each other.

A year after their marriage, they made Perrin and Mahrree great-grandparents, and Shem and Calla, and Jaytsy and Deck first-time grandparents to Briter Zenos, with more to follow.

Perrin’s dream to become a builder was also fulfilled during those years. He had just finished the addition to their house for Mahrree and

“You’re as bad as your father and grandfather.”

him, shortly after Peto and Lilla’s wedding, when the Briter house needed another bedroom added. Although many men in the community came to help, Perrin enjoyed doing as much of the work as he could on his own. He made sure new rooms could be easily added on to each house, and even helped Shem with a few additions and renovations to his house.

By the time the house building was ended, both homes had additions with bedroom after bedroom added next to each other, sharing fireplaces.

Then it was time to start building Lek and Salema a house along the lane between the Zenos and Briter houses, so the home building continued. Lori and Jori married brothers who wanted to live near their parents on the eastern side of Salem, but soon enough Cambo announced his engagement, and the housing boom continued.

One afternoon not long ago, Mahrree looked at the houses and smiled to think that if they had been pushed together they would have been the size of the mansion in Idumea, with more ‘guest houses’ than Joriana could have built. The weathered gray wood looked far warmer than the perfectly set stones of the mansion. And they had more extensive grounds here than the mansion had, with more useful plantings than ornamental flowers and budding trees which produced no fruit.

She had once considered leaving Idumea a sacrifice, but she could never have imagined what greater blessings the Creator had in store for her.

Mahrree looked around the darkening and now spotless kitchen, searching for something else to wipe. To her surprise, the door to the garden opened, and her oldest granddaughter peeked in.

“Muggah! I wasn’t expecting to see you here.”

“Well, I live here, Salema,” Mahrree said and nodded at Salema’s enlarged belly. “Everything all right?”

Salema patted her future third child. “Everything’s fine. Papa Shem had noticed a light on here when he came back just now, and he wondered if everything was still all right with Young Pere . . .”

The hesitant quality in her voice told Mahrree that wasn’t the entire reason. Salemites were terrible liars.

“Young Pere’s gone to bed for the night, so no—he doesn’t need any of your lectures.”

Salema chuckled and took a rag from the wash basin. “Oh, but I have some good ones, too, Muggah.” She began to wipe the sparkling

cabinets, and Mahrree smiled. The need-to-clean-when-worried trait had passed down to her granddaughters as well. And Salema had been delivering lectures to the younger children since she was four.

“I’ve got the ‘Do you realize what this does to your family?’ lecture—”

“He heard it,” Mahrree assured her. “From Peto.”

“Ah, well there’s my ‘Do you realize you have siblings, cousins, and nephews watching your behavior?’”

“Hmm,” Mahrree pondered as she wiped nothing off the counters with Salema. “Your Puggah may have given him that one after I left.”

Salema nodded thoughtfully, a lock of her black wavy hair falling into her face from her loose bun. She brushed it back with the impatience of a general.

Mahrree frequently wondered what Salema could’ve become in the world if she were male. Most likely another Shin officer. But she had to be content with issuing orders to her family.

Interestingly, the only person she deferred to, besides her grandfather, was her quiet and gentle husband. Lek Zenos had an unusual calming effect on her which Deck wished he could’ve learned when his oldest daughter became an overly forthright teenager.

“Well, I’ve got a few others—”

“—that you probably should keep to yourself,” Mahrree recommended. “Or write them down, put them in a box, and read them to Briter or Fennic when they act up.”

Salema scoffed. “My boys will never need those lectures,” she declared, only partly in jest. “Instead, I’ll pull them out for Lori or Jori’s boys. Those two are far more troublesome than mine.”

Mahrree laughed and patted Salema’s belly. “What about this one? It might be a very difficult boy.”

“Oh, the Creator and I have been discussing this one,” Salema said with mock piety. “I’ve told him that it’s time I get a sweet, calm little girl—”

“So someone who takes after her father?” Mahrree teased.

“Yes!” Salema agreed. “The Creator knows how I suffered with five younger brothers before I got a sister, so He best not let something like that happen again.” She nodded up to the ceiling, as if giving a notice to the Creator.

Mahrree rolled her eyes. “Just for that, He’s going to send you a boy. You realize that, right?”

“You’re as bad as your father and grandfather.”

Salema winced. “Please don’t say that, Muggah. Mama Calla already told me that! And,” she looked around guiltily, “she’s actually the reason why I’m here. She was wondering about Lilla. How’s she doing?”

“Upstairs and probably asleep already,” Mahrree said. “She didn’t sleep at all last night, so after she tucked in Young Pere—”

“—which I’m sure he was thrilled about,” Salema chuckled.

“Oh, yes,” Mahrree sighed, “he protested enough. After that, I sent her to bed. She looked absolutely exhausted.”

“Well, good—that she’s resting, I mean,” Salema clarified. “Calla was so worried, but didn’t want to look like she was checking up on her baby sister.”

“You can go back and tell her that everyone’s well, and that Young Pere will even be able to hold your belly for you when it’s time to convince number three in there that it’s time to come out.” Mahrree snorted at what she knew would come next.

Salema threw down her rag in aggravation. “Look, Young Pere doesn’t have any ‘gift of nature’ like Mama Calla! Just because he holds his sisters’ bellies, and they went into labor the next day to have their boys doesn’t mean he has Calla’s so-called power to encourage birthing!”

“It worked with Relf’s wife, too.” Mahrree egged on her granddaughter. “Mattilin gave birth to Grunick the next day—”

“We’ve studied this in my midwifery classes,” Salema glared, looking a great deal like Perrin. “It’s just a coincidence! But if it isn’t, it’s because my cousin brings with him so much aggravation that when he touches women’s bellies, they feel great worry that something awful will happen, which then triggers their deliveries. Extreme stress can do that, you know. And I’m not having another boy, anyway, so I don’t need him anywhere near me!”

Mahrree laughed at Salema’s agitation. “You still have what, twelve weeks left? You’ll be spewing fire by then!”

Salema tried to hide her smile but it leaked out anyway. “Oh, Muggah. I’m sorry, but you know what I mean. Besides, I plan to have this baby by the book. No Young Pere or any other odd family customs.”

“By the book?” Mahrree said dubiously. “There’s no such thing.”

“Oh, there is,” Salema assured her. “I helped deliver a baby just this morning that was very predictable. And my last two were also quite routine, so I should be able to handle this one all by myself—”

Mahrree's eyes grew big.

"—with a little help," her granddaughter added.

Mahrree sighed in relief. "Such as your mother, mother-in-law, husband, midwife—"

Salema's face didn't move.

"Oh, no, Salema—"

"Muggah, all I need is Lek. We can do this alone. I really do know what to do."

"It's different from the *other* end, Salema!"

"I don't like bothering Mama and Calla—"

"They *want* to be bothered by this—"

"My husband is quite capable—"

"Salema, Lek passes out when they 'steer' the bulls."

Salema held up an authoritative finger. "But he's excellent at calving. Papa even says so, and that's high praise."

"And what does Lek think of your plan?" Mahrree pressed.

Salema pursed her lips. "He doesn't exactly know it yet, Muggah. And I trust you'll keep this between the two of us?" She arched her one eyebrow as if there was simply no other alternative.

But Mahrree had dealt with stubborn officers. "Salema—"

"Muggah?"

Mahrree's lips twisted. Salem was a city of honesty, and she knew how to circumvent that when the need arose. "You can trust me, Salema."

Trust her to confide in her mother Jaytsy, her mother-in-law Calla, and most especially her husband when the time was right.

But because Salema had been raised in Salem, she didn't understand how someone could *sound* like they were telling the truth when they were actually lying. She smiled at her grandmother, satisfied that she had won that battle. "Thank you," she said with a nod. "You'll be impressed."

Mahrree put an arm around her granddaughter who stood a head taller than her. "Is that what this is all about? Salema, I'm thoroughly impressed by you every day. You have nothing to prove. Just be safe, and make sure this new one is safe, too." She patted Salema's bulge with her free hand. "Please?"

Salema put an arm around her grandmother. "We'll be safe, don't worry. I'm not the one who's causing problems, you know," she added in a whisper.

But Mahrree scoffed internally. Each of her grandchildren and

“You’re as bad as your father and grandfather.”

great-grandchildren gave her plenty to worry about, in different ways.

“Go back to Shem and Calla’s,” Mahrree told her, “assure your mother-in-law that her sister is just fine, then you get home and let Lek in on your brilliant little idea there. Let *him* decide if he can handle you all by himself.”

Salema chuckled and squeezed Mahrree. “He handles me just fine.”

“And none of us knows how he does it.”

Salema laughed, kissed her grandmother’s cheek, and let herself out the door.

Mahrree sighed and put the cleaning rags away, knowing it was time to try to go to bed. It was nights like this that she found it hard to sleep. As concerned as she was about Salema’s overconfidence—and she was sure Lek would balk at her idea—her thoughts traveled back to Young Pere, another overly confident grandchild. Maybe that was a Shin family trait, she considered with a touch of despair.

As Mahrree approached the door that led to their wing of the house—a small gathering room, private washroom, large bedroom, and Perrin’s office—she saw light coming through the bottom of the door. Perrin was still up.

Silently she opened the door to see him sitting in his big chair in their gathering room, reading. The candlelight reflected off his white hair and cast soft shadows on his features. Mahrree stood in the doorway watching him, and sighed in pleasure.

“Why are you awake?” she eventually asked.

He looked up from his reading, his dark eyes brightening when he saw her. “Waiting for you. Talk to him?”

Mahrree came into the room. “Yes. You were right—he came out again for a late snack.”

“Gave him my pie, didn’t you.”

“I knew you wouldn’t mind.”

“Shin men respond well to evening pie. What did he say?”

“That he wouldn’t try anything before the marking party, but I think he’s still planning something. He’s not telling me as much anymore. I’m not sure why.”

“Maybe he thinks he’s outgrowing you.”

“Thanks, Perrin. Just what I needed to hear,” she sighed sadly.

“You know what I mean.”

“Yes, I do. He thinks he doesn’t need his Muggah anymore.”

“But he does,” Perrin assured her.

“But what he needs and what he *thinks* he needs are two different things.” She sat down on the big chair opposite of him and put her feet up on his lap. Automatically he started rubbing her ankles. “What did you men talk about when we were in the gathering room?”

Perrin shrugged. “Nothing new. Peto’s discouraged again. He still thinks he’s responsible for Young Pere’s actions.”

“That’s not what he said to the Tans when they talked to him about their son leaving for a dissenter colony. Mrs. Tan told me Peto gave them great comfort, reminding them that their son’s actions are his own, and that no matter where he went or what he did, the Creator was watching him. Why can’t Peto believe his own words?”

“I’m not sure,” Perrin said. “Perhaps he thinks he’s being held to a different standard. But he’s going out with Shem tomorrow morning to the entrance. I was planning to tell the guide what’s bothering his rector. Maybe Shem can give him some perspective.”

“He usually can,” Mahrree nodded. “And I’d almost forgotten about tomorrow, with all the excitement of the past two days. I’m glad you reminded me. Now I have something else to worry about.” She exhaled with dread.

Perrin chuckled as he massaged. “It’ll go fine, as usual. I’m actually looking forward to this one. Should be an interesting reunion.”

Mahrree rolled her eyes. “For *you* they always are! For *me* there are still days and weeks of analytical glares and careful watching to see if I’m really what everyone says I am. I’m a great-grandmother, for crying out loud! I don’t *run around* with soldiers!”

He stopped rubbing, his eyes developing a familiar glint. “You run around with *me*.”

Mahrree shrugged.

Perrin sighed. “I *am* sorry about that. After all these years—”

“It’s all right,” she assured him. “It really is. I’m not bothered anymore in here,” she pointed to her heart. “Just a little bugged in here,” she pointed to her head.

“But in time, they all remember you as you really were.”

Mahrree smiled, but she wasn’t so sure. This was going to be more personal than any of the others.

To comfort herself, she gazed again at the large painting that nearly covered the wall in their little gathering room. For their anniversary a few weeks ago, Perrin had asked a landscape artist to create for them a painting of the ancient temple ruin where they had trekked so often.

“You’re as bad as your father and grandfather.”

The Shins had expected a small picture, but the artist, knowing how much they loved the site, created an immense painting of breathtaking realism of the entire area, with details and colors that left both Perrin and Mahrree speechless.

But the best part was that she had included both of them in the painting, smiling and leaning on either side of a pillar at the top of the stairs of the crumbling temple. They were only a few inches high, but even then the detail was astonishing.

They discovered later that the artist had been surreptitiously following them. Their grandchildren, in on the surprise, had found occasion to ask them to lean against things so that the artist could quickly sketch them at the correct heights. Mahrree and Perrin had thought something sneaky was going on—their grandchildren giggled too much, and Salemites didn’t do sneak too well—but still they were surprised by the final product.

On nights like this, Mahrree stared at the painting and wished she and Perrin were at the ancient site again, as they had been dozens of times, all alone.

Twenty-four years ago for their anniversary, they’d been all alone in Terry’s vast land, and they enjoyed it so much they went back three more times. But the distance to the massive step pyramid temples was far, the travel long and often arduous.

However, Mahrree and Perrin discovered they could be up at the nearby ancient temple site in just a few hours, wandering the massive table land and speculating about the carvings on the ruins. The ancient temple ruin, where Gleace saw in vision would be the site of their Last Day, became their new favorite place.

Years ago, Mahrree was Perrin and Peto’s “test mule,” as they called her: she tested every route they found to the ancient site, riding on a rickety old mule. If she could make it, then so could just about everyone else.

But then there were the days when Perrin would whisper into her ear, “Feel like running away and taking Clark for a *ride*?” and she knew to slip off to the kitchen to pack some food while he grabbed some bedrolls and, like the teenagers in the world who’d skip out of her classes, they’d run away to the ancient temple site, often overnight.

Of course, that was only when Mahrree wasn’t needed to teach her courses at the university, and Perrin’s duties were completed for the day, and they winked at Peto or Lilla so they’d know that Puggah

and Muggah were taking off again.

The last time they did it was just a few weeks ago, for their 44th anniversary, just before they'd been presented with the glorious painting. Since Clark was far too old now for such excursions, they'd taken GrayClark 411—the latest Clark descendant chosen from the horse breeders for their barn. But while Perrin said that animal was sturdy enough, he just wasn't black enough, so he'd swapped it for a new Clark—Mahrree thought its number was 314—to test for a few weeks.

She wasn't entirely sure how the horse breeders came up with their numbering system of Clark descendants, but suspected the first digit had to do with generations away from the original Clark. Salem-ites loved to keep track of family lines, even animal lines, and Clark's family was several hundred, if not thousands, strong. There were the regular black Clarks, the GrayClarks, and the mare Clarkesses, all of which were usually renamed to something more unique by the new owners. However, nearly every Clark that came to their barn kept the number, usually dropping the first digit.

Mahrree sighed longingly as she gazed at the painting. New Clark 314 needed testing, didn't he? Couldn't they just run away tomorrow again and escape the world?

But she knew to not even bring it up, because tomorrow the world was coming by again for a visit, and it was expected for midday meal.



Peto stepped into his bedroom and stopped at the door to watch his wife.

She was sitting on the edge of their bed, brushing out her long light brown hair which she usually kept up in a loose bun. She was still just as *sturdy* as when Peto fell in love with her when they were eighteen, but she had *softened* over the years, mainly because each baby she bore left behind a layer of softness. While Jaytsy was still just as lean and slender despite her twelve expectings, Peto thought women should be curvier. He loved Lilla's shape, but learned years ago not to compliment her "squishiness."

What she added in weight—and how could she not, being the best cook Peto had known next to his grandmother Hycymum—she had lost in vibrancy, primarily because of a certain child who kept her wringing her hands for so many nights.

“You’re as bad as your father and grandfather.”

Then again, Peto frequently reminded himself, he was also far more sober than when he was a teenager. Fatherhood, and being the rector of their large congregation, had the tendency to force a man to look at life through more serious eyes.

“Nool get back all right?” Lilla asked absently.

Peto shut the door behind him. “He just finished putting Clark 314 away. Both Lori and Jori were very relieved to hear about Young Pere.”

Lilla went back to brushing, a little more vigorously. “And what’s Nool’s evaluation of the latest Clark?”

“Well, not that a fifteen-year-old is any authority on horses, but he agrees with Deck and me that this is the best Clark descendant we’ve had. They got to the two Cadby homes in record time, and when I saw him in the barn just now, 14 looked as if he could easily handle another run to the eastern side of Salem and back.”

“Good, good,” Lilla said distractedly. “He’s nice, big and black enough . . . 14 is what we’re calling him?”

Peto smiled sadly. She didn’t care one bit about horses, and didn’t even realize they had a new Clark until he’d been in the barn for several weeks. GrayClark 411, while a beautiful and impressive animal, just didn’t have much horse sense, Perrin decided, and Clark, a very sensible and slightly ornery thirty-year-old, regularly snubbed him.

While the Zenoses had two excellent mares—Clarkess 328 and a GrayClarkess named Silver—and Barnos regularly used another descendant, GrayClark 210, Perrin was highly selective of who replaced the first Clark, who had finally been put to pasture ten years ago. Clark’s approval was also needed as to who he’d share his pasture—and his master—with. Clark 14, a five-year-old great-grandson of Clark, seemed to have been accepted by the herd.

Peto had watched, amused, as Perrin and Clark seemed to evaluate the young stallion a few weeks ago as he trotted around the field. Perrin frequently pointed something to Clark and talked to him as if he expected an answer. Clark nodded and neighed, and seemed to call out to the newcomer. Eventually Clark walked over to Clark 14, nuzzled him in greeting, and Perrin declared they’d found their new horse.

Lilla had thought GrayClark 411 had just gotten sooty.

Peto walked over to her, gently took the brush out of her hand, and gathered her hair in his hands in one large ponytail. Lilla closed her eyes and leaned against her husband with a heavy sigh.

“You all right?” he whispered to her.

She nodded her head, then shook it.

Peto hugged her head into his chest. “Tell me.”

“Oh, Peto! I’ve been all over the place today—weeping for fear, weeping for joy, fearful he wouldn’t come back, almost afraid he would, so frustrated, so angry, so happy, so . . . How can he keep going like this? We can’t! I can’t keep up with him . . . a whole night and day he was out? He’s never been unconscious that long before. And then he gets up and eats and joins family prayer and sneaks pie with Mahrree as if he’s only had a late nap?”

Peto didn’t interrupt her, something else he had learned over the years. There were times she’d lapse into incoherency as she let loose and babbled, but Peto could always figure out the string of her thoughts by the end. When she’d stop to breathe again, he’d be right on track with her.

“Then he just easily apologizes, and Perrin had to help carry him home, and the children were all watching them—why didn’t any of them stop him? Is he now their greatest entertainment? And he didn’t think any of this through, he just went running off . . . What kind of a test is that?! Throw a rock off the roof first, with the blankets, and see how fast it hits the ground! But no, let’s do something stupid to make everyone worry that this time he’s not coming back . . .”

Peto stroked her head as she wept into his shirt. That was why he hadn’t taken it off yet for bed; it would be her handkerchief, again.

“I know,” he soothed, “I know. I’ve felt the same things.”

“Oh, Peto . . . I just dread that, that—”

“That what?” He kissed the top of her head.

“That this will all end horribly for him,” she whispered.

Peto sighed. “Again, I’ve felt the same thing. Said so to Deck and my father.”

She sniffed. “And what did they say?”

“That we can’t think that way, that we can’t think Young Pere will come to some terrible end.”

Lilla sat up and wiped her nose.

“And my father thinks he would have made a great army officer.”

Lilla scoffed a laugh and wiped her eyes. “Papa Pere has some of the strangest ideas sometimes.”

“Deck and I both thought so as well.” He stroked her cheek. “We can’t control Young Pere, Lilla. That’s not our calling. Our duty is to teach him, love him, raise him the best we can, then let him be free to

“You’re as bad as your father and grandfather.”

make his own decisions. The Refuser tries to control us, but the Creator never will. We have to be like the Creator. This life is Young Pere’s test, too.”

“Thank you, Rector Shin,” Lilla said formally. “Been practicing that long?”

“The past half hour,” Peto confessed. “I almost believe it myself.” He sat down on the bed next to her and she put her arms around him, kissed his cheek, and leaned against his shoulder. “That’s the problem, Peto: this life is his test as well. A test I fear he may fail.”

“Shh, don’t talk like that,” Peto told her.

“You’re thinking the same thing, Peto. I know you are. We have to brace ourselves for the worst, I suppose.”

Peto rocked her as new tears fell from her eyes.

Chapter 3--“But even then, the world still saw you as a hero.”

Peto was finishing saddling Clark 14 the next morning when the guide of the Creator rode to the barn.

“Rector Shin! How’s my nephew?”

Peto smiled at his uncle-turned-distant-cousin-turned-brother-in-law-turned-guide. Shem Zenos looked just as he did years ago in Edge, but a little thicker, a little grayer, and even gentler.

“Doing better, Guide Zenos. Bruising colorfully, but mobile.”

Shem smiled in relief. “Nothing can keep him down for long, can it? About ready, Rector?”

“Yes, sir.” Peto cinched a strap. “I saw the tower message. We should get there in plenty of time. I suspect that the late snow on the higher elevations delayed them a bit.”

“That, and the old folks don’t like to travel too fast.”

Peto turned and glared good-naturedly at the guide. Because, under all the titles, he was still just Shem.

“Old folks? Shem, *you* could be considered an *old folk*. She’s only a couple years older than you.”

Shem narrowed his eyes at Peto. “Sixty-two is not old.”

Peto mounted his horse. “You’re a *Grandpy*,” he reminded him.

“But I still have three teenagers at home,” Shem countered. “They keep me young, *Grandpy Peto*.”

“You were a grandpy first,” Peto pointed out.

Shem cocked his head. “True, but Briter is only two years older than Ensio.”

Peto chuckled. “Are you trying to prove I’m as grandpy as you are?”

“But even then, the world still saw you as a hero.”

“Hey,” Shem spread out his hands. “I’m *nearly* to five grandchildren, but you’re already there. And what about Barnos and Ivy?” He raised his eyebrows.

Peto smiled, because at the last family dinner, Barnos’s wife kept excusing herself to run to the washing room. “I think an announcement will be coming soon. No one vomits that much and still smiles.”

Shem chuckled. “Eventually, Peto, because you have thirteen children, you *will* be grandpier than me!”

“*Unless*,” Peto pointed at him, “Zaddick starts getting serious and ends up giving you fifteen grandchildren, then—”

The men stared at each other, their expressions turning sheepish.

“We’re doing it again,” Shem murmured apologetically.

“Yes, I noticed that too,” Peto responded, unable to look Shem in the eye. “Why do we still struggle so much with this? Competing with each other?”

“If I had an answer for that,” the guide said sadly, “I wouldn’t have a problem with it. I *like* to blame it on our time in the world, but now we’ve been here longer than we were in Edge, so I don’t know if we can say that. I guess always trying to outdo someone is just our burden to carry, Rector Shin.”

They eyed each other contritely, and Shem could see in Peto’s eyes a few more burdens.

“Come on,” Shem nodded to his brother-in-law. “I have a feeling there are a few things you want to talk about this morning. We have a nice long ride ahead of us.”

Peto clucked his horse to follow, and they rode in silence for a few minutes before Shem broke it.

“Do you want to know what I see, Peto?” he asked as the horses made their way along the road that left the Shin-Briter homes.

“Yes, I do. Tell me everything so I can know what to do better.”

Shem smiled at Peto’s meekness. He had come so far in twenty-five years from the cocky seventeen-year-old boy he used to be. That’s why Shem had such hope for Peto’s seventeen-year-old son.

“Peto, I see a father and a mother who are doing their best to keep a free spirit from becoming ensnared by his own lack of foresight. I see an extended family who shows their love no matter how much he aggravates them. I see a family who remembers that love is the only thing that will not fail with this son.”

Peto was quiet, pondering.

“Are we *really* doing all that we can do?” he eventually said.

“That’s the question that plagues me, Shem. You say we’re doing our *best*, but are we really?”

Shem let out a low whistle. “What more could you do?”

Peto sighed. “Pray *all* the time. Hover near him every minute of every day like a paranoid hummingbird—”

“You can’t keep that up, Peto. Nor is that expected of you. You still believe it’s your fault, don’t you? That maybe you haven’t taught him enough, or prayed hard enough, or sacrificed enough for the Creator to turn him around?”

Peto bobbed his head helplessly.

“You know that’s not the way it works, Peto. I’ve heard you talking about this very thing, and you were right. But you just don’t believe it applies to your family, do you? Peto, you *have* taught Young Pere what he needs to do and know. Lori, Jori, Relf, Barnos, and Hycy wouldn’t be the adults they are today if you didn’t. And Lilla is a wonderful mother. At some point you’re going to have to accept that Young Pere is exercising his will, and that it’s his choice to do so. The Creator’s eye is always on him. He knows full well what Young Pere is capable of, and what kind of trouble he may cause. That’s why the Creator sent him to your family. You’re the only ones in Salem who can handle him.”

Shem looked straight ahead, a new thought coming to his mind.

“I’ll be honest with you, Peto: Young Pere may have to wander on his own for a while. He may have to suffer some grave consequences before he understands what he should.”

Peto groaned. “Has he spoken to you about *that* again? I made my feelings very clear to him—”

“No, he hasn’t asked again. Not since last year. But Peto, it may be the only way he can learn what he needs to know. And there’s nothing you can do to stop him, but just do all you can to welcome him back home.”

Cringing at the suggestion, Peto said, “That’s what I’m afraid of. What might he have to suffer? I just couldn’t bear to see that. And I couldn’t bear what it would do to my parents.”

“That’s why we’ve been told to put our full trust in the Creator,” Shem reminded. “Young Pere is *His* son. He has a plan for him. Even if Young Pere moves beyond your sight, he’s not beyond the Creator’s sight. He can heal all wounds and all suffering. He can turn it to one’s good.”

“I know,” Peto said quietly. “It’s just so hard to watch.”

“But even then, the world still saw you as a hero.”

“I know that too,” Shem told him. “Being rector doesn’t exclude you from trials, nor does being the guide, for that matter,” he said with a miserable smile. “The Creator never said He’d spare us from problems if we’re faithful, but He has promised He’ll help us get through them.

“I know how you feel about watching him suffer,” Shem continued when Peto remained sullen and quiet. “I had similar feelings about your father, years ago, when we came back from Idumea. I knew exactly what he needed to overcome his nightmares of his family being killed by Guardians: he needed to come to Salem. I knew this place would heal him faster, but it wasn’t his time. It was terrible to watch all of you enduring that season.”

“That was probably the worst year we ever experienced,” Peto said in a whisper that Shem barely heard over the noise of the horses. “We never would have made it without you, Shem.”

“But it was a necessary year, wasn’t it, Peto? Your father came out of that a different man. More humble, more willing to do whatever was necessary to take care of your family. Willing to realize he needed to rely on the Creator and not himself. Willing to abandon the life he knew for something better.”

“Not really High General material then, was he?” Peto said with a faint smile.

“No, not at all! Thank goodness, because that wasn’t the Creator’s plan for him. But he’s a perfect general for Salem now, isn’t he?”

Peto’s smile grew. “I never could have imagined this outcome back then. I was trying so hard to get recruited to play kickball in Idumea . . .”

He stopped, as if alarmed by the memory.

“I know what you’re saying, Shem,” he continued on another track. “We have no idea what the future holds, or why we have to go through what we do. But the Creator does. He’s already provided for a way home—”

Tears stung his eyes, his words surprising him along with the impression that came to his mind.

“He’s already provided a way,” Peto continued gruffly, “for Young Pere to come home should he wander, hasn’t He?”

“He has, Peto,” said Shem soberly. “Whatever Young Pere does, the Creator is already prepared. Just love the boy. Someday knowing that you love him is what will help *him* turn everything around. It has to be *his* choice.”

Peto exhaled. “So we’re looking at some interesting years ahead of us, aren’t we? Shem, please don’t tell Lilla!”

Shem scoffed lightly. “I think she already knows that Young Pere is running headlong into serious trouble. Not just running into forest fires, or falling into frozen lakes, or getting impaled on trees, or jumping off of schools—”

“I know, I know,” Peto cut him off. Even though they still had a few miles to go, listing all of Young Pere’s moments of dabbling with death would take longer than they had. “And Lilla always knows.”

Three chimes in the distance caught their attention, and they squinted at the tower at the canyon entrance.

“Signal’s changed,” Peto said. “They’re making faster time than expected.” He turned to Shem. “Feel like a little race? I need to test Clark 14, after all.”

Shem’s eyes flashed in anticipation before he could fight it down. “No competition in Salem, Rector Shin! How many times do I have to tell you that?”

Peto smiled in a conciliatory manner. “No race then, just an opportunity to let the horses run as they wish for as long as they wish to the tower, all right? To judge Clark 14’s ability, you know.”

Shem growled quietly. “All right, all right. On three, then.” He sighed in aggravation, then suddenly whispered, “*Three*,” and kicked his horse into a run. Peto heard him laughing as his horse Silver quickly pulled away.

“Oh, I fell for it again . . . *Shem!*” Peto yelled as he kicked Clark 14 to catch up to him.

By the time they reached the tower it was a tie. It always had to be, or there would be glares and smirks for the next half hour.

They walked the horses up the gentle slope to the canyon entrance as they had done many times before. Shem once again thought a prayer of gratitude for Rector Shin. When Shem had become guide seven years ago, he assigned Peto to be his official accompaniment when they welcomed new arrivals who had a past in the army. The rumors of how Colonel and Mahrree Shin ‘died’ in the forest because of the alleged betrayal of Shem Zenos so many years ago was considered a pivotal moment in the world’s history.

In the army it was still an oft-remembered and discussed event. Soldiers were indoctrinated to believe that trusting a wife or a subordinate was deadly. The greater power you have, the greater deceit will follow you. No one was dependable.

“But even then, the world still saw you as a hero.”

But no one in Salem had realized the impact of the official story until a few years after the Shins had left, when the routes closed by Guide Gleace were deemed safe to reopen after the Administrators were gone.

Salem scouts returned on a limited basis to the world, and nearly six years after the Shins were “lost,” the first refugees from the world came again, the story still raw and painful in their minds.

Shem felt the brunt of that, quite literally, as he rode with Guide Gleace to greet the first sergeant to leave the army of Idumea, with his expecting wife and two daughters.

The sergeant recognized Shem at the canyon entrance, having been a corporal under him during the Moorland offensive when Shem led a group from Rivers. In a flash, the former soldier leaped off his horse, tackled Shem, and started punching him in the face.

Guide Gleace and the escorts had to pull off the enraged sergeant before he beat Shem to a pulp. They did their best to convince him the story of the betrayal and deaths had been a lie, but had little success until Perrin arrived a few minutes later, to the astonishment of the sergeant. He finally began to believe Shem wasn't the traitor he had been taught he was. Still, it took him a while to see Shem and Mrs. Shin in the right light.

Now the world's official story was discredited for those coming to Salem before they left on the journey, to help them recognize how much they'd been deceived over the years. But actually meeting Shem Zenos, widely regarded as the destroyer of the newly appointed High General of Idumea, and subsequently of the world's peace, whose betrayal was considered a catalyst for starting the never-ending battles?

Well, a smiling Shem was still a bit much to take.

Peto had proved to be the perfect antidote for the poisoned minds the refugees came with.

At forty-two years old, Peto looked a great deal like his father when he was the beloved Colonel Shin in Edge. Although Peto was shorter, slighter, and had lighter eyes and hair, the similarities were enough to make those with memories of Perrin Shin stare in wonder. Seeing Peto first did a great deal to soften hearts before they faced Shem Zenos, the chosen guide of the Creator.

Shem thought many times it was no accident that Peto resembled his father so much. It was just another way the Creator had planned ahead. Still, a Welcome Home like this one tied a knot in his belly.

As they neared the canyon entrance, Peto heard Shem take a deep breath, so he tossed him a comforting glance. "It will be fine, Shem. As usual."

Shem said, with timid hope, "I really don't think she'll remember me."

Peto shrugged. "I don't know. Honestly, you look the same as when we left. Just longer hair, now going gray, and a little thicker around the middle." Peto chuckled as Shem sucked in his belly instinctively.

"I only meant that I met her just a couple of times."

"But you're a very hard man to forget, Guide Zenos," Peto said reverently. "Always were. You always had a presence about you. Now we know why."

Shem looked down, embarrassed, as Peto smiled. Even when he was a young man, people noticed and remembered Shem Zenos. He had a glimmer in his eyes and a sincerity in his smile that struck people as unusual, almost contrived. How could someone be so solid and good?

That was why the rumor had stuck so convincingly, Peto knew. While everyone who met Shem felt drawn to him, when Genev's story broke about Shem having an affair with Mahrree to destroy Perin, the cynicism of the world easily believed that no man could have been *so* genuine, *so* wholesome. It had to be an act. No one tried to be *that* good without an ulterior motive. There weren't wholly pure men in the world.

But Shem had been the real thing, and he wasn't unique. When they came to Salem, Peto realized there were many pure men and women, but they couldn't exist in the polluted world.

Once back in Salem, Shem seemed to lose *nearly* all the little smudges the world had left on him. Although he became softer and gentler and lost his fighting spirit, he seemed to be stronger than ever, in soul and body.

And it was impossible to hide the light in his eyes. It was almost hard to look at him sometimes when he was acting as the guide. The power that came from him reminded Peto of the moment years ago back at the kickball fields when Shem told him his calling lay somewhere else. Back then, he thought Shem was magnified by the power of ten. But now it was sometimes to the power of fifty.

Then there were other times when Guide Zenos was just Uncle Shem, challenging Peto and Deck to yet another wrestling match to

“But even then, the world still saw you as a hero.”

‘educate’ their sons, and fighting the urge to participate in another race. His competitive spirit was the last bit of the world that refused to be easily shaken off.

A horse whinnying in the distance made both men look up. The escorts with their net sling swaying between them were coming into view at the mouth of the canyon. A woman in her late sixties, resting in the sling, sat up as she caught her first view of Salem.

That was Peto’s signal. He smiled, dismounted and waved a greeting at the husband and wife team who had served as escorts this trip.

Shem dismounted, too, and held the reins of Clark 14, along with Silver. He positioned himself behind the horses so that his face was not the first that was seen. Peto’s was always best, and when he grinned, no one could stop themselves from matching it.

Peto walked up to greet the latest refugee from the world with outstretched arms. “Welcome to Salem, Mrs. Yordin! I hope you had a pleasant journey.”

She gasped as she looked up at Peto.

The escorts’ horses stopped and Peto went to the sling to help Eltana Yordin out. She was a formidable female, with a broad build putting her on the tall side for a woman, and making her roughly the same shape as her stocky husband. Her brown hair, mixed with wispy gray tangles, was falling out of her ponytail after her long travels. Her features, while normally sharp and taut, were decidedly softer, especially as she stared at Peto.

“It’s true!” Mrs. Yordin whispered, stunned, as she got to her feet. She grabbed Peto’s face. “Colonel Shin’s family is alive! You . . . you look just like him!”

Peto held her hands and chuckled softly. “My name is Peto Shin. We met at Jaytsy’s wedding. I was only a teenager then—”

Mrs. Yordin nodded vigorously. “I remember you! My goodness, you’ve hardly changed.” She grasped him in a firm hug. “We were so upset about the loss of your family. It was so meaningless. Such a waste. But it wasn’t, was it? I can’t believe you’re real.”

Peto pulled away and noticed a stray tear had slipped from her eye. She didn’t strike him as a woman who’d ever confess to shedding tears, so he subtly wiped it away for her. “Yes, I’m real. Mrs. Yordin, you’re about to discover Salem is a place of miracles.”

She tried to pull her eyes from his to take in all of Salem. “It is!

It is. Look at this valley! It's immense. Gari would never have believed this."

"I'm so sorry about the general," said Peto softly. "We all felt terrible when we heard the news. My father loved his enthusiasm and spirit. I could always tell when he'd been thinking about Roarin' Yordin because he'd slap his desk."

Mrs. Yordin turned to him, her expression resolute and fierce. But she surprised him by saying, "Gari wept for your father. I'd never seen him do that before, nor since. Not even when our son . . ." Her jaw shifted angrily, and Peto decided she needed another hug in order to hide the disobedient tears leaking out of her eyes again.

Shem, watching from behind the horses, smiled at Rector Shin. Years ago no one would have guessed Peto had the ability to be compassionate.

"You'll have a new family here, Mrs. Yordin," Peto assured as he embraced her until she could regain herself. "You'll find an entire community that will make sure you never feel alone again. You'll be living in the boundaries of my rectory, and many people are eager to meet you. There are even a few who served under your husband who you may recognize. You'll find peace and joy again, I promise you."

Mrs. Yordin pulled away, her face once again set and strong. But her red eyes gave her away. "Wait a minute. What did you say? Are you the *rector*?" She chuckled in disbelief as Peto smiled. "The future High General Shin the fourth, a *rector*."

"I never had intentions of becoming a general or going to command school," Peto told her. "How could I follow in my father's footsteps? His strides were just too long."

"You would have been a great general, Peto Shin," Mrs. Yordin insisted. "Much better than Thorne and his like. Do you have *any idea* what they did to the world?" She squinted in fury.

This was where Peto's real work began: letting newcomers express their frustrations with the world while carefully directing them to look forward to their new lives. While he knew the satisfaction of harping about the past, he also knew that satisfaction was short-lived, soon to be replaced with renewed feelings of anger about a life that couldn't be changed, words that couldn't be unsaid, and events that couldn't be erased. The past was to be occasionally remembered, but not lived in.

That was the greatest task of the rectors working with the refugees: helping them leave that past behind. Those who served in the

“But even then, the world still saw you as a hero.”

army seemed to bring an extra helping of resentment with them. That was why almost all of them began their new lives in Rector Shin’s congregation.

“I do have a few ideas as to what’s happened, Mrs. Yordin,” Peto told her. “We’ve received scattered reports throughout the years. But I try not to let the world influence me. There’s too much to do today to dwell on yesterday. And you still have a bit of a journey until we reach your new home,” he hinted.

Something again softened in Mrs. Yordin’s expression. “Peto, I don’t know how to ask this, but . . . your father. Is he *really*—”

“Waiting for you to join him for midday meal?”

“No!” she cried in delight, but still seemingly not ready to believe. “Really?”

“Absolutely!”

“Oh, Peto—what will I say to him? After all these years?”

Peto put on a thoughtful face. “Just say, ‘Perrin, I agree with your grandchildren. That hair *is* going white.’”

Mrs. Yordin laughed and dabbed at her eyes. “I just can’t believe it. I’m really going to see Colonel Shin. They said he was alive, but I—”

“Now,” Peto interrupted as kindly as possible, “before we continue, there’s someone else I’d like you to meet.”

“The guide, right?” she asked, suddenly wary.

“That’s right. Now, Mrs. Yordin, you see me standing before you, and you know that my father is still alive. You understand that the story you learned years ago was a lie. Completely, entirely false. Yesterday and this morning you traveled the same path our family took to come to Salem, to avoid imprisonment and execution by the Administrators. Shem Zenos never betrayed us, Mrs. Yordin. He *saved* us. He brought us out of the world to a place where we could come to better know the Creator. Can you see why the world would want to destroy his name?”

Mrs. Yordin nodded hesitantly. “I’m working on that. I have been for the past eight days, ever since I heard your stories. But none of it felt real until I saw you just now. It may take a little more time to sink in, but yes, I understand about Sergeant Major Zenos.”

Peto doubted that. It was one thing to say one understood, but quite another to meet him face to face. But it had to be done.

He called over to the horses. “Mrs. Yordin is ready to meet you, Guide.”

‘Ready’ was probably a stretch. When Guide Zenos, with his warmest smile fixed in place, slipped out of hiding and walked over to them, Mrs. Yordin gripped Peto’s arm as if it were a handy weapon.

Shem groaned softly to himself. She recognized him, all right.

Peto lightly covered Mrs. Yordin’s hand gripping his arm with his own. “Mrs. Yordin, remember—Shem Zenos saved our family. He has also saved you. When we received word about General Yordin from one of our scouts, Shem sent another scout specifically to find out how you were. The rector, Honri, who you met in Sands a season ago, is one of Shem’s brother-in-laws, sent to bring you home. Shem Zenos never betrayed anyone. He’s worked to save us all.”

Mrs. Yordin’s chin trembled—either out of fury or fear, Peto wasn’t sure which emotion she was experiencing—as she looked into the gentle face of the man who did so much to bring her here. Peto could tell she was pitting against each other the new story she’d been given, and the old one she’d believed for twenty-five years. The battle might take a while.

Smiling, Shem held out his hand to her.

Stiffly, she took it.

“Mrs. Yordin, it’s wonderful to see you again!” Shem said warmly. “I think the last time was when I came by your house looking for Colonel Yordin right after Perrin resigned from the army.”

“Oh, I remember that. I lied to you, too,” she admitted, her teeth gritted. “He *was* there, he just didn’t dare talk to you then because one of Genev’s men was there, too. He told me to send you away, worried about the future of all of us.”

Shem nodded in understanding. “Genev was behind the official story about our disappearance. His office caused a great deal of harm to all of us. But we can leave that all behind. Salem gives everyone a new chance at life. You will find another chance here too.”

Mrs. Yordin nodded slowly again, trying hard to see the face before her as someone else besides the traitor her husband swore he would have killed if Thorne hadn’t beaten him to it.

“Will you give *everyone* in Salem another chance?” Shem asked.

“It’s just that . . .” Again her jaw clenched.

“It’s just that *what*, Mrs. Yordin?” Peto prodded kindly. “Go ahead, say it. You won’t hurt any feelings or surprise anyone. We’ve heard it all by now. This is a good time to get it all out.”

Mrs. Yordin pulled her eyes from Shem and looked back at Peto. Immediately her tension eased as she was reminded of Colonel Shin.

“But even then, the world still saw you as a hero.”

“It’s just that . . . Gari was so sure that Zenos *was* guilty.” She gave a fleeting look to Shem who pressed his lips together. “He said there was a lot of tension between Zenos and Colonel Shin during the Moorland offensive. They always seemed to have something else going on between them. Things they discussed in private. Lots of looks exchanged. That *sort of thing*.”

Peto couldn’t help but chuckle. “Yes, they did! Their whole little language of looks, Mrs. Yordin. An annoying hobby they continue to this day. And there *was* some tension between them,” Peto said more soberly, “because my father wanted to find out the secrets of the explosions, and Shem wouldn’t let him. It was wise that he prevented my father from doing so. He could have created some very dangerous devices that would have been left behind in the world to destroy it further. Shem prevented that.

“But there was also more going on,” Peto continued. “Shem was always like our uncle, like my father’s brother. Living in the world you don’t see it as much since very few men actually have brothers, but once you’ve spent a little time in Salem, you’ll realize that close brothers tend to have *a lot* going on between them! Now,” he continued, “when we get to our midday meal, ask Perrin yourself how he feels about Shem. And also, ask *my mother*.”

There it was. The other half of the story. It was best Mrs. Yordin came to it now, rather than at the doorstep of the Shin home.

Mrs. Yordin swallowed. “Your *mother*,” she repeated tonelessly.

“Yes,” Shem spoke up. “The woman I did *not* have a relationship with, and never tried. Let Mahrree tell you herself. She’s loved Perrin from the first day she saw him, and that never changed. Anyone close to the family could see that.” With a wan smile, he added, “I would never have had a chance.”

“That was the part of the story that I didn’t understand,” Mrs. Yordin admitted, her brittle demeanor relaxing. “At Jaytsy’s wedding, Mahrree seemed so devoted to Perrin. The way she looked at him . . . All I could imagine was that her mind was poisoned by—” She stopped short and looked solidly at Shem.

“So deep inside you had a feeling that the story was a lie,” Shem said quietly. “Your feelings were correct. You just weren’t allowed to hope they were, were you?”

Mrs. Yordin clenched her fists as if feeling exposed.

“It’s all right, Mrs. Yordin,” Shem said. “It’ll take you some time, but soon you’ll understand things as they *really* are. The world makes

up stories to keep us from finding the truth. You'll find no such stories here. I promise.

"Now," he said cheerfully as if there were no sticky past between anyone, "if we want to make it to midday meal at the Shins before dinner, I recommend we get you back into that sling and start giving you a tour of Salem."

Mrs. Yordin allowed Shem to help her, along with Peto, to sit back down in the netting, all the while watching Shem as if waiting for him to slip up in any small way.

As Shem and Peto started walking back to the horses, Eltana said quietly, "Oh Gari, I wished you could see all of this. And know about the Shins."

Shem heard her.

He stopped, turned, and looked back. When her eyes met his, the clarity of his gaze took her breath away.

In a voice that sounded like someone who had died six moons ago, Guide Zenos said, "Eltana, *he does*. You have not been traveling alone."

Mrs. Yordin couldn't say anything as another tear insisted on trickling her face, but she eventually whispered, "Remarkable."



By the time Peto, Shem, the escorts, and Mrs. Yordin reached the lane that lead to the Shins', Mrs. Yordin was warming up to Shem as he told her about Salem and the home she'd be sharing with two sisters, widows of army veterans.

She also recognized three men she knew along the welcome parade route, and choked up a few times as thousands of people lined the miles of road to wave to her.

The crowd ended at the turn onto the Shin and Briters' lane. Under the official road name, she noticed a wooden sign, "Shin-Briter-Zenos Eztates," with an arrow pointing to the left.

Mrs. Yordin nodded at it. "Peto, what's the meaning of the sign?"

Peto turned in his saddle. "One of my sons, Relf—"

"Wait, your son is named Relf? As in *General Relf Shin*?"

Peto nodded. "My sister and I have named most of our children after relatives who never made it to Salem. In a way, they're with us now."

“But even then, the world still saw you as a hero.”

“What a lovely idea!”

“Well, my son Relf, when he was twelve, was interested in carving.”

“He’s quite the master stone-cutter, now,” Shem said proudly.

“Thank you, *Uncle Shem*,” Peto chuckled. “I was getting to that. Anyway, he started by carving in wood, years ago. He made that sign so that visitors would know where we lived.”

“But, I hate to say it, he spelled ‘estates’ incorrectly,” Mrs. Yordin pointed out.

“No, no he didn’t,” Peto laughed. “Mrs. Yordin, were you ever in Idumea?”

“Yes, a few times.”

“It’s tradition that on the anniversary of when we first arrived in Salem that we discuss what we left behind in the world with our children. The year Relf turned twelve, we were telling the children about our trip to Idumea, after the land tremor. That’s when Puggah—”

“*Puggah*?” Mrs. Yordin interrupted.

“The grandchildren’s name for Perrin,” Peto explained. “He didn’t want to be called Grandfather or Grandpa, so he was stuck with the name his first grandchild made up for him.”

Mrs. Yordin laughed lightly. “General Puggah!”

Peto laughed as well. “Just don’t say that to his face! Well, on our trip to Idumea, Puggah had noticed many of the housing developments had been given ridiculous names. The one that made him most agitated was Zebra Eztates. He always liked the idea of zebras, but mangling estates like that really bothered him.”

“Oh, I think I know the development you’re talking about,” Mrs. Yordin said. “Did it have names like Elephant Elms and Lion Lane? Mythical Mystical Mansions?”

“That’s the one!”

Mrs. Yordin laughed. “I’d forgotten all about that!”

“Well, Relf latched right on to that. He thought the name Zebra Eztates was hilarious. And he thought that’s what our corner of Salem should be called. Take a look ahead and you’ll see.”

Mrs. Yordin stretched in the sling to see ahead. There was an enormous plank of wood, hoisted in the air by two tall logs, spanning the entire road. In carefully carved letters, and burned to black, was “Shin-Briter-Zenos Eztates.” In smaller letters underneath, which were more easily read as they neared the sign, were carved the words “Begun—338. End—Never.”

“That’s wonderful,” Mrs. Yordin chuckled. But she quieted as she saw the two large homes come into view. “Oh my . . .”

As they approached the Shin home, Mrs. Yordin sat up anxiously. The horses stopped and her escorts helped her out of the sling while Shem and Peto rode to the barn. She was just straightening her Salem-issued traveling clothes when the front door flew open. Mrs. Yordin looked up quickly and gasped at the sight.

Perrin strode across the front porch, down the stairs, and straight to Mrs. Yordin. He held out his arms and offered her his widest smile.

“Eltana Yordin! Welcome to Salem!”

Mrs. Yordin’s hands flew to her face. “It’s you!” she breathed. “*It’s really you!*” Even with his white hair, he was obviously Perrin Shin. She weakened visibly as he neared. Perrin put his arms around her as she was attacked by sobs she couldn’t fight off. “Colonel Shin, *Colonel Shin . . .*”

“It’s all right, Eltana,” he said, patting her back. “It’s all right. Call me Perrin.” His voice was tender as he held her, trembling and choking. “Eltana, I’m so sorry about Gari. He was a great man. I’ve missed him over the years.”

Mrs. Yordin nodded into his chest but continued to cry.

Perrin looked over his shoulder to the front porch where Mahrree stood, wiping away her own tears at the sight of Mrs. Yordin’s emotion. She gave a smile of approval to her husband and remained on the porch, waiting.

“It’s as if you’ve come back from the dead, Perrin,” Mrs. Yordin said between sobs. “Or I’ve died and gone to Paradise. If only Gari was here with us.”

“Then it really would be Paradise, Eltana,” Perrin said, holding her tighter. He nodded to his wife and gently pulled away from Mrs. Yordin as Mahrree neared. It was time for the handoff.

Mrs. Yordin, hearing someone approach, turned to Mahrree. For a moment she froze in place, but the warm smile on Mahrree’s face, along with her outstretched arms waiting to give another embrace, melted Mrs. Yordin.

“I’m so glad you could join us!” Mahrree said, putting her arms around the surprised woman.

Mrs. Yordin hugged her back. “You really never . . .” She began, then stepped back to search Mahrree’s face for anything that could signal the stories were true.

Mahrree shook her head. “I’ve always adored my husband.”

“But even then, the world still saw you as a hero.”

Mrs. Yordin sighed in relief. “I knew you couldn’t have . . . I just didn’t *want* to believe you could ever . . . have done such a thing.”

“Thank you!” Mahrree said. “You have no idea what that means to me, Eltana. That you didn’t *want* to believe it. That’s the kind of thinking that paved your way to Salem. Come in, you must be starving.”

Mahrree gingerly led her into the large gathering room and braced herself for what was sure to come next.

Eltana didn’t disappoint.

“Look at those paintings!” she gasped. “Why, that’s you and Perrin!”

“Right after we arrived, yes.”

Eltana rushed to the first painting on the wall and ran a finger gently over the frame. “You look exactly as I remember you, so many years ago. And look, there’s a young Peto. And that must’ve been at his wedding? And . . . oh, my. Look at all of those children!”

“Yes,” Mahrree chuckled. “We have a *few* grandchildren. No limits here, and our family just loves to test the limits, you know.”

Eltana shook her head slowly, marveling at the portraits filling the walls, of children at various ages, and of Mahrree and Perrin slowly aging. “What a life you’ve lived here,” she breathed, almost in envy.

The meals with army newcomers were carefully planned. Those in attendance were always Perrin, the great cheerer of hearts, Peto, the rector over those who served in the army, and Calla, the guide’s gentle and welcoming wife.

The presence of those three always provided a strong counterbalance to the presence of the *other two* at the meal. Although most people were starting to have better feelings toward Shem Zenos by the time they arrived at the Shin home, the sight of Mahrree Shin still sent many of them back years ago to relive the anger they felt as they first heard the news of her ‘betrayal’ with the sergeant major.

That’s why seating at the meals was also thoughtfully established. Perrin would sit across the table from the former army member so that his was the face they saw the most frequently. Mahrree sat to one side of him, Peto on the other. Next to the newcomer was Calla, and next to her was Shem. That put Shem and Mahrree at opposite corners of the table, and Shem out of easy view of the army member.

The other seat next to the newcomer was usually for the spouse or, in cases like today, Lilla joined them.

All of the Shins' grandchildren would spend the next couple of hours at the Briters or Zenoses, to be introduced later. There were only so many shocks a person from the world could take at one time.

Mahrree seated Mrs. Yordin at her designated spot across from Perrin and hoped that by the end of the meal the changes in her eyes Mahrree already saw would be complete. She had spent only a few days with Eltana during Jaytsy's wedding, enjoying her company as they prepared the dinner and directed the soldiers in setting up the tables and chairs. But Perrin had thought so highly of Roarin' Yordin, Mahrree wanted his wife to feel comfortable with them.

And she did. By the end of the meal she was talking easily with Guide Zenos about the Moorland offensive, and the table thumped several times as Perrin remembered Major Yordin. Even Mrs. Yordin was laughing as Perrin described to Lilla how Roarin' Yordin received his wounds, and his stubbornness about laying in a position that would alleviate his suffering.

"I wish you could have seen him about a year and a half after you died—I mean," Mrs. Yordin chuckled, "after *you vanished*. High General Qayin Thorne was visiting the fort, and they got into a discussion about the Guarders. Actually, an *argument* would be more like it. Thorne was telling Gari that the Guarder concern wasn't as dangerous as the growing insubordination of the army. Gari told him the insubordination would reduce if Thorne paid better attention to the condition of the world and acknowledged the *real* threats. Remember, at this time we were sure there were thousands of Guarders again in the forest."

She shook her head as if to toss all the details into more correct piles in her mind.

"Their argument escalated until Gari decided to show Thorne just how dangerous the Guarders really were." Eltana blushed at the memory. "So he pulled down his trousers and literally *showed* him," and she patted her behind. "Two full moons that day."

"Yes!" Perrin laughed and slapped the table. "Excellent tactic, Yordin! I'd felt that desire a few times myself."

"So," Peto said thoughtfully as everyone at the table laughed, "the demise of the world could, in a manner of speaking, be traced to one colonel *exposing* himself to a general? It really was the *end*."

"Not like you'd read about *that* in the history texts!" Mahrree said, wiping her eyes.

"I'm sure Thorne was thrilled about that!" Perrin said.

“But even then, the world still saw you as a hero.”

“Maybe that’s really what started the Great War so long ago,” Shem suggested. “Someone showed the king an *unfortunately placed* scar and he took it as a personal insult.”

“Eltana, how many people in the world knew about Yordin and Thorne’s argument?” Perrin wondered.

“Only a handful, I suppose.”

Perrin grinned. “How much of our history do we really not know? We’re given the official stories, but I suspect the real truth is far more interesting.” He slapped the table again. “Ah, Gari! You would have been great fun in Idumea.”

“Well, Karna wasn’t thrilled or amused,” Mrs. Yordin said. “He agreed with you, Peto. He told Gari he thought that act might have been the beginning of the end of the unified world. When Thorne marched out of there that afternoon, he threatened to demote Gari all the way down to lieutenant. That was when Karna, Fadh, and Gari began to send secret messages to each other about a coalition. They were trying to recreate the unity of the Moorland offensive. Then with the unrest in Idumea . . .” She shook her head sadly as she looked at Perrin. “And the distances between them?” She sighed. “They were also missing the most important man. They could have had more success had you stayed.”

Perrin sighed. “I couldn’t have been any help, Eltana. I would have been a distraught widower in the dungeon of the garrison, if they hadn’t executed me as well.”

“They would have broken you out, I’m sure of it!” Mrs. Yordin said with fierce determination. “There are ways, you know.”

Perrin leaned forward on the table. “It does us no good to dwell on what never could have been, Eltana. We can imagine different scenarios until the snows fall and still it changes nothing. We need to let the past rest, and focus on the future.”

Grudgingly she nodded and rubbed her finger on her plate. “Would you have chosen Gari as your Advising General if you had taken the High General position?”

“I considered him,” Perrin said. “To be honest, I never made a final decision as to who I would’ve chosen. I was more worried about the Thorne issue. Qayin would never have stepped aside willingly. There would have been an all-out battle, and who knows who would have been dead at the end of it. I just choose not to think about what could have been, Eltana. Everything has turned out for the best.”

Mrs. Yordin raised her eyebrows at him. “How can you *say* that?”

The world is in shambles!” Table slap. “We had three factions fighting each other in never-ending skirmishes to take one village away from another! If you hadn’t resigned, who knows what condition the world would be in now! We could have had peace for decades with you as High General before you retired.”

Perrin and Mahrree exchanged the same look. They’d had the conversation before with others who came from the world. Why did he resign? Why couldn’t they just continue as they had? Why did they have to fight the world? Let everything happen? Abandon Idumea? Abandon them?

“Eltana, no one knows what might have been,” Perrin said in a low voice. “You’re imagining only the best possibility. But things also could have been *worse*. I’d been disenchanted with the army for a while, even before the land tremor and the passing of my parents. I was looking for a reason to quit. The troubles the Administrators faced afterward were of their own doing, not because of my leaving. They’d been traveling down that road for quite some time. I just leapt from the wagon.”

“But Perrin,” Mrs. Yordin leaned toward him intently, “what if you didn’t abandon that wagon? Couldn’t you have taken control of it? None of us knew then how much internal strife the Administrators were dealing with. If the Sergeants Army hadn’t killed them all, they would have likely turned on each other soon anyway.”

Perrin had had this conversation before, too. “Again, realize my staying *may not* have changed anything. A great deal of their splintering, we were told, started with the passing of the laws to punish Mahrree, Peto, and me. There wasn’t exactly a majority vote that pushed them through. But then how could I, even as High General, have resolved the turmoil among the Administrators?”

“Perrin, you were *exactly* what Idumea and the world needed!” Mrs. Yordin slapped the table again. “The thousands of soldiers who followed Corporal Hili out of Idumea left looking for someone like you! Karna was the best they could find. The people *and* the soldiers would have supported General Shin.”

“To what end, Eltana?” Perrin asked cautiously.

“To making you the new Chairman, Perrin! Or even abolish the Administrators and make you, make you . . .” She faltered, unsure if she should say the word.

But Perrin had a suspicion. “King?” he suggested quietly.

“Yes!” declared Mrs. Yordin.

“But even then, the world still saw you as a hero.”

Peto let out a low whistle.

“But think of the condition of Idumea with you as *king!*” Mrs. Yordin forged on. “I have to tell you, Perrin, Gari mentioned it a few times after the Moorland offensive. He hated the Administrators as much as you did. He thought things could be very different with a change of leadership. With *you* as the leader.”

She ignored Perrin’s slow head-shaking and went on.

“Gari suspected the Administrators feared that very prospect: that you could’ve deposed all of them. That’s why they kept your probation continuing as long as they did, especially after the play ‘The Midnight Ride of Perrin Shin.’ But even then, the world still saw you as a hero. A hero they wanted and *needed.*”

He opened his mouth to retort, but Roarin’ Yordin’s widow, who was too much like her late husband, didn’t give him any opening.

“The people will follow whoever will feed them, Perrin! Feed them and protect them. That’s exactly what you did for Edge, and everyone knew it.

“The Administrators were hoping the desire for Perrin Shin in Idumea would die away,” she continued in a fevered pitch. “When it didn’t, they decided to make you the next High General, to keep you close and under their control. But even when you resigned you were still a threat to them. It took Qayin Thorne weeks, but he finally convinced the Administrators that you were capable of staging a takeover. That’s why they wanted to bring you to trial: to demonstrate to the world you were far more dangerous than anyone imagined. Having you ‘die’ was just as effective, I suppose.” She began to lose momentum. “Even more so, considering how they twisted it.”

Everyone fell into ponderous silence.

Eventually Mahrree whispered, “So they really thought Perrin wanted to become king?”

“Hmm,” Peto said thoughtfully in the uncomfortable stillness. “King Puggah. Doesn’t have a very good ring to it, does it? Sounds like something he’d name his horse.”

Lilla covered her mouth in a vain effort to stifle her giggle.

Calla and Mahrree snorted. Shem started to chuckle. Even Mrs. Yordin began to smile.

Perrin winked at his son in gratitude for breaking the tension. “I would have been a terrible king, I promise you that, Eltana. That’s simply too much influence for only one person to have. For the brief moments I was High General, I felt the strength of the position, and I

have to admit, it made me a little light-headed. Men can't help but misuse power. It's their nature, and the Creator expects them to fight it. The only way one man alone can rule a people is if the Creator selects someone humble enough who will be guided by Him."

Perrin glanced at his friend, but Shem merely pushed a bit of food around his plate without looking up.

"And there's only one man who could ever do that successfully, Eltana," Perrin continued. "But the world, in its short-sightedness, would never accept King Shem Zenos."

Shem froze, his eyes never leaving his plate.

Perrin sighed and turned to Mrs. Yordin who regarded him dubiously. "Eltana, I admit that I've wept for the condition of the world over the years. But it wasn't my fault, nor would have my remaining solved any of it. I would've abused that power as much as any other man. Then it *would* have been my fault. I stand by what I said earlier: everything has turned out for the best." He risked a smile. "Besides, how could I have twenty-five grandchildren in Idumea?"

Mrs. Yordin looked sadly at the table. "You could have changed those laws. Lemuel Thorne certainly did!" But she stopped herself and took a moment to regain her composure. "Just so many bad years, Perrin, after you died. *Left*," she corrected herself again. "I wish it could've been different. But now you've just demonstrated what Fadh said to Gari: the men with the best hearts to lead the people are also the same men with too much common sense to want the position. That's why you would never have done it."

Perrin smiled at Graeson Fadh's assessment.

But Mahrree could see by the look in his eyes that he'd be struggling tonight with the effects of another, *You could've changed the past* argument.

"There are many from the world who play this dangerous 'what if?' game," Perrin said to Eltana, and Mahrree knew she'd repeat that line to him later. "There are never any winners. But, Eltana," he waited for her to look up at him, "I think you'd enjoy our Army of Idumea meetings. One is coming up in three weeks. When word gets out that General Yordin's wife has joined us, we'll have so many come we may have to move the meeting to the rectory."

Mrs. Yordin's eyebrows went up. "Army of Idumea meeting?"

Peto chuckled. "It was the only way for Father to placate all the men who sought him out over the years to rehash their time in the army. Every other moon, the Armchair Generals—"

“But even then, the world still saw you as a hero.”

Perrin rubbed his forehead at Peto’s nickname.

“—get together to talk about their experiences and run through different scenarios. Kind of helps them to get it out of their system, and keeps poor General Shin from having to spend countless hours debating strategies with old soldiers who served for two seasons over forty years ago.”

Mrs. Yordin smiled slyly. “And why do you call them Armchair Generals?”

Shem grinned. “The meetings are usually held here, and they pull out Mahrree and Perrin’s armchairs to Peto and Lilla’s large gathering room. One chair always goes to the standing General of Salem,” Shem gestured to Perrin, “while the other goes to whoever is lucky enough to have his name drawn out of a bowl. He’s the honorary general for the evening and gets to lead the discussion.”

“And how would they feel about the presence of a woman?” Mrs. Yordin ventured.

Shem nodded to Calla. “I think my wife would enjoy the company.”

Mrs. Yordin turned in surprise to Calla. “You attend?”

Calla shrugged modestly.

But Shem’s grin grew even broader. “Of course! The author of *The Army of Idumea: The Shin-Zenos Years* always has Peto’s armchair. When the former soldiers start their ‘creative remembering’ and romanticizing their time in the world, Calla here sets them straight with the facts.”

“Someone needs to sit in my chair,” Lilla nodded to Mrs. Yordin. “I stay far away from this house on those nights!”

Mrs. Yordin chuckled and turned to Calla, regarding her with new admiration. “Guide Zenos told me on the ride over here that you were interested in the army while he served, but I had no idea.”

“Mrs. Yordin, you’d give a great deal of balance to the discussions,” Calla told her. “I stopped following the changes in the army once Shem came home, so you could provide the corrective details for the past twenty-five years for those who were in the world more recently.”

Mrs. Yordin nodded thoughtfully. “Sounds quite intriguing. Of course, Gari would know so much more. So would our—” She stopped, not wanting to say the word.

Perrin gave Mahrree a meaningful look.

She knew what to do with it.

“Eltana,” Mahrree asked carefully, “do you know how your son is? How he might take the news that you’re missing?”

Mrs. Yordin sighed, and when she spoke it was with a stab of bitterness. “He didn’t have much reaction to the news about his father two seasons ago. All I got from him was a message that said, ‘Sorry about *your* loss.’ Can you imagine?” she scoffed. “He won’t think twice about my vanishing, I’m sure.”

“I’m so sorry, Eltana,” Mahrree said. “I’m sure that’s not true. I remember him as a nice boy. I’m sure someday he’ll remember who he used to be.”

Mrs. Yordin exhaled. “Doubtful. It’s not as if he’s even my son anymore. Any man who can desert General Gari Yordin to defect to Lemuel Thorne is not someone I will *ever* claim as kin.”

They were just finishing dessert when the side door opened.

“Oh, I’m sorry, Papa. We thought you were done.”

Mrs. Yordin did a double-take at the two young men who stood there and stared at the dark-haired boy. “Will the copies of General Shin never end?” she whispered.

Peto chuckled as he got up and went to the door. “They end right here. Well, until you meet Kew. It’s all right, boys. You haven’t interrupted anything.”

“Good,” said Relf, with his arm around his younger brother. “Young Pere could use a little rest, I think.”

Lilla was already on her feet, bustling over to her son. “Young Pere, I thought you were still in bed! Where were you?”

Relf gave a sidelong glance to his brother whose face was twisted in pain. When he saw no answer would be coming, he answered for him. “Apparently he felt the need to prove to Cephas that he *could* take care of the firewood today. He was successful until a few minutes ago.”

“Come on, son,” Peto said, trying to take his other side. “Let’s get you back to bed.”

“I’m *fine*,” Young Pere said, out of breath and shrugging off his father’s attempt to help him. “Just need to sit for a moment.”

Lilla pulled out the chair nearest to Young Pere, and he collapsed on it.

“But even then, the world still saw you as a hero.”

“Mrs. Yordin,” Perrin said, “these are two of my grandsons. Relf here, who you can see is *not* a copy of me, has also made me the proud *great*-grandfather of the blondest little boy you’ve ever seen.”

Perrin beamed as Relf smiled appropriately at Mrs. Yordin and walked over to shake her hand. But Perrin’s smile turned brittle as he gestured at the wincing boy at the end of the table.

“And *this* is Young Perrin, who recently had an accident from which he’s supposed to be *recuperating*.” His voice turned sharp.

Young Pere offered a Perrin-like smile and a weak wave.

“Uncanny!” Mrs. Yordin whispered. She turned back to blond-haired, blue-eyed Relf. “The sign maker, right? I would never imagine that such a fair young man is related to Perrin.”

“He takes after his mother’s side,” Peto explained. “Except in one way. Relf, do *the voice* for her.”

“Oh, Papa, really?” Relf blushed pink. “She doesn’t want—”

“Yes, she does.” Peto turned to Mrs. Yordin. “You heard my grandfather Relf’s voice before, right?”

“I did,” Eltana said. “I met him a couple of times, and even heard him yelling at Gari’s soldiers once. Why?”

Peto cocked his head to his son. “You *have* to do it, Relf. She even heard him yelling once.”

“Oh, Papa, I always feel so weird doing this.” He turned to Mrs. Yordin. “I’m sorry, ma’am. I’m like their one-man entertainment. They think it’s funny and scary at the same time—”

“It is!” Shem declared. “And the original Relf really laid into me a few times, so I know him when I hear him.”

“Relf,” Perrin said, with that authoritative tone none of his grandchildren could argue with. “Prove to Mrs. Yordin that you truly are my grandson. You may not have inherited any of the Shin looks, but you certainly inherited *something else*.”

The growing amusement and intrigue on Mrs. Yordin’s face made Relf give in.

He sighed and cleared his throat. “Men—” he began, but his Uncle Shem cut him off.

“No, no, no. Lower, Relf. *Really* hit that deep gravel mark. The one that makes me break out in goosebumps. Come on, now.”

Relf shrugged apologetically to Mrs. Yordin, squared his shoulders and bellowed, “MEN! That is *not* the appropriate way to saddle a horse!” His voice thundered around the room. “I do *not* like riding backward!”

While his family laughed, Mrs. Yordin tried to pick her chin up off the ground. “That was . . . that was fabulously *frightening!*”

Shem showed her his arm, with his hair standing on end.

Relf shrugged and, in his normal soft-spoken way, said, “Sorry. Sometimes they make me call in the younger kids using the General Relf voice.”

Eltana began to chuckle. “I’ve got goosebumps myself!”

“He always has to make an appearance at the Armchair Generals meetings,” Perrin told her. “Half of the attendants never heard my father’s voice, but he scares them, too.”

Mrs. Yordin laughed and she noticed again Young Pere. “And that boy at the end of the table, my goodness!”

Young Pere nodded. “Yeah, I got the Shin looks. And I’ve heard it all before,” he added resignedly. “Perrin’s Shadow, Perrin the Revised Edition, Perrin and Re-Perrin, Perrin’s Little Lieutenant. I’m always open to new nicknames, Mrs. Yordin.”

She chuckled at his pained expression and turned to Peto. “Did you name him after Perrin because he looked like him as a baby?”

Peto shook his head. “No, not at all. We actually had a different boy’s name picked out—Hogal, a great-great-uncle of mine—but the day before he was born, both Lilla and I felt he should be named after my father instead. Since he looks so much like his grandfather, it now seems to be fitting. We still got our Hogal, just a few years later.”

“Perrin, the Salem version,” Young Pere droned on, “Perrin back in time, New and Improved Perrin.” He looked up to the ceiling to see if he had forgotten any. “Ah, and Perrin Squared. Guess that means I’m trouble multiplied.”

Lilla bent over and kissed her son on the head. “No, just a multiple of . . . entertainment, Young Pere! There’s never a dull moment around this boy, Mrs. Yordin,” she said, wrapping her arms around his neck and giving him another kiss.

Young Pere grimaced in pain and embarrassment.

Mrs. Yordin’s smile faded and she looked at Young Pere intently. “Be as entertaining as you want, young man. Just don’t ever break their hearts.” Her voice began to quaver and Calla put a comforting arm around her shoulders. “Broken hearts never mend.”

“They do in Salem, Mrs. Yordin,” Guide Zenos said softly. “Place of miracles, remember? Just wait and see.”

“But even then, the world still saw you as a hero.”

Young Pere lounged on the rocking chair on the front porch, tasked with the dullest duty in all of Salem: goat watching. The nannies had been chewing through their ropes lately, then wandering up the hillside behind the Briters, making it difficult for his sisters and cousins to milk them. So his father declared that if Young Pere didn't want to rest in the house, he could rest outside in the shade of the porch while the day heated up, and make sure no grazing goats escaped.

Young Pere was still trying to figure out if this was punishment or reward for trying to chop the wood and show up Cephas. Sometimes, his father's assignments felt like both.

Mrs. Yordin had been brought to her new home not long ago, and Mahrree and Lilla were cleaning up the kitchen while discussing Mrs. Yordin's comments with Perrin, Peto, and Shem who took care of the leftovers and washed a few dishes.

Young Pere had headed out the door at the earliest opportunity since he didn't know any of those old or dead people whose names they were tossing about, and now his eyes were drooping in exhaustion and boredom. But then he heard the giggle. Or rather, giggles. His head jerked up with the beginnings of a smile.

Quietly he counted, “One, two, three . . . nine. Well, that's a fair amount today.”

It was a group of girls, the oldest maybe eighteen, the youngest around fifteen, and a few of them were carrying items covered with cloth.

He sat up a little, wished he could make sure his hair wasn't mussed up—it likely wasn't, but if it were, it'd only add to his rugged appeal—and he smiled.

“So,” he said casually as the flock of females turned to approach his porch. He raised his voice in relation to their volume of giggling. “What's all this, then?” He would have addressed them by their names, but he couldn't remember any of them. He never bothered anyway. They all kind of blended together, with their long braids and their coy mannerisms. Some dark, some light, some in between, and all of them gooey-eyed and tittering.

“Hi, Young Pere,” a couple of them chorused, and a few others hid behind their hands like silly things.

“We heard you were hurt but improving, so we, um, baked you things. To build up your strength again,” said a braver girl. Her eyes roved over his broad shoulders and lingered on his defined chest, his

light cotton tunic clinging to him because he was sweating in the heat of the afternoon. The girl blushed a violent purple, and nearly dropped the plate of cookies she carried.

He grinned. Not his usual grin, but his narrower one, which made his eyes squint and the girls' knees knock.

"Well, that is *awfully sweet* of you all. Wow, with such attention, I'll be back to normal in just hours. That certainly looks good," he gestured to another girl, and in her excited nervousness she stumbled on her way up the stairs.

"Ooh, careful there," he said, extending an arm to catch her, and holding on to her wrist longer than he needed to.

It worked. She nearly turned into a puddle on the porch before handing over her sweet rolls.

"Sit down, sit down," he indicated for them all to find a place around his chair, and for a moment he wondered if the old kings of the world on their thrones ever were surrounded by giddy girls. "So what's the latest news around our corner of Salem?" And he nibbled on a strawberry tart someone handed him.

Beyond his flock, he could see his older sister Hycy coming down the road. She paused, shook her head in disgust—she was tired of him asking again and again what their names were—and took the long way around to the side door. Apparently, she'd been trying to dissuade some of his followers, telling them he wasn't as great as they thought he was.

It didn't work. They trailed after him all the more. Someone dangerous in Salem was a rare treat for the excitement-starved girls of the valley.

They stayed for an hour, chatting inanely while Young Pere emptied each plate they brought. Their gossiping stopped abruptly when Puggah opened the door, looked over the scene with veiled amusement, and said, "So what'd you bring me?"

He sat down right in the middle of the gaggle of girls, causing all of them to hurriedly get to their feet, surprised and anxious that the general of Salem had decided to get so friendly.

He chuckled as they snatched up their empty plates and rushed down the stairs, calling back farewells to Young Pere who glared in annoyance at his grandfather.

Only after the girls were out of earshot did Perrin's smile fade. "Young Pere, it's not fair to them, and you know it."

"What, making them feel appreciated? Eating their treats?"

“But even then, the world still saw you as a hero.”

Perrin pivoted on his spot and looked up into his grandson’s eyes. “Using them like this. Don’t do it, son. They are daughters of the Creator, and they deserve better than to be led on by you.”

Young Pere scowled. “I’m not leading them on,” he said, not quite sure what that meant, but knowing it wasn’t good, based on his grandfather’s hardened eyes.

“You’re making them think they have a chance with you. I know you’d never physically take advantage of any of them—”

Young Pere fidgeted at such a worldly idea.

“—but emotionally, you’re being cruel. Each one’s going to go home tonight and fantasize about you choosing her.”

He shrugged at that. “Wouldn’t it be crueler to ignore them? To be rude?”

“I’m not saying that. I’m suggesting you turn down that charm a notch. Save it for the girl who you really want to win over, and not just because she can bake . . . What is that, a piece of cake?”

Below Young Pere’s chair was half a slice, forgotten. Perrin picked it up, nibbled on it, and frowned. “No, not that one. Whoever she was—not that one.”

Young Pere chuckled.

Perrin didn’t. “I mean it, son—quit treating them like your adoring servants. If you’re not going to court any of them, stop flirting with them.”

Court them? Young Pere was stunned by the thought. It’s true, most young men his age were courting girls, but . . . No, he wasn’t ready for that. For any of *them*.

He had adventures to plan . . . *Court a girl?*

His distaste for that idea must have been evident. His grandfather shook his head sadly at him, got to his feet, extended a hand to his grandson to help him out of the chair, and said, “Dinner will be ready in about an hour, in case you might still be hungry. That’ll give you enough time.”

“To do what?” Young Pere asked.

“To chase after two females,” Perrin winked. “While you were nibbling away on your treats, the goats were nibbling on the ropes. They left about ten minutes ago. You have my permission to charm *them*.”

With a groan, Young Pere stiffly and slowly made his way down the steps after the bleating goats, his grandfather’s low chuckle following him.



Perrin's chuckling lasted only until his grandson, calling uselessly after the goats who never responded anyway, broke into a lumbering and painful trot.

"They named you all too accurately," he sighed, almost in despair. "You're too much like me. Please," he whispered, "*stop being me.*"

Chapter 4--“I didn’t sleep much last night—”

That evening, Mahrree sat at the small table in their gathering room going over the notes she took during her chat with Eltana Yordin. Each year Mahrree updated the *History of the World* book she wrote and taught out of at the university three times a week for the first-year students, all of the information coming from Salem’s scouts in the world and the world’s refugees.

She pulled out clean sheets of paper: one, she filled with details to include in the next edition of the *History of the World*; on another, she made notes about those individuals she and Perrin still remembered.

Many details that they’d been missing for decades were filled in today, only making the story of the world more tragic. There was no way Mahrree could ever see a happy ending for them, no matter how long she waited.

Idumea and the world had continued after the Shins “died” for nearly two years, with commandants appointed by the Administrators heading up the forts, and unrest growing throughout the world.

Gari Yordin, who was transferred to Sands, immediately deposed his commandant and set up barricades to keep away anyone from the Administrators or Idumea.

His open defiance gave others encouragement, and soon after Brillen Karna, who was sent all the way south to Waves, and Graeson Fadh who was transferred to the east at Coast, kicked out their commandants. It wasn’t an accident that the three remaining leaders in the Moorland offensive were now at the distant points of the world, no longer able to coordinate the takeover that High General Qayin

Thorne and new Advising General Snyder had convinced the Administrators was imminent.

Chairman Mal likely thought sending those three commanders to the furthest edges of the world was a clever idea, but all it did was spread their influence over a greater area.

Taxes? They wouldn't pay them.

Curfews? They wouldn't enforce them.

Idumea? Who cares what they think.

In the rest of the forts, it was clear that the Administrators-appointed commandants had no idea how to run anything except the soldiers in circles. In some villages, commanders sat back and let the commandants do their best, which was dismal, and resulted in insubordination, flagrant rule breaking, and massive desertions.

By the time the Sergeants' Army, which was led by Grandpy Neeks and Chef Gizzada, destroyed High General Thorne and the Administrators, and the citizens burned down Chairman Mal's mansion with him in it, nearly every village had chosen sides, aligning themselves either with forts associated with Yordin, Karna, and Fadh, or forts loyal to Idumea.

The enlisted soldiers under thirty, who fled from Idumea following Poe Hili and met up with Jon Offra, were divided among Fadh's and Karna's forts, and then suddenly that was the end of the united world. It became as violent and fractured as it was before the rule of kings.

General Snyder aligned Idumea with the fort at Pools, Edge, and a few other central and northern forts. Those in the west followed Yordin, and those in the east and south followed Karna and Fadh.

No one ever could tell the Shins what happened to Commandant/Administrator Genev in Edge. Shortly after the Administrators and Mal were killed, Genev, the sole remaining Administrator, simply wasn't there anymore. But Lemuel Thorne was, wearing a new major's jacket and declaring that he was now in charge of the fort; everything that Genev had done was to be erased and forgotten. No one dared ask any questions about what happened to Genev. Then again, no one was disappointed that he disappeared.

A couple of years ago Mahrree and Perrin, again updating their notes, mused about that. "Interesting," Perrin said, "that the last refugees we asked didn't even recognize Genev's name. No one in the world now remembers him. He really was erased from memory."

Mahrree scoffed lightly. "None of those administrators are ever

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thought of. For as self-important as they all were, they weren’t important to anyone else in the world. Not even . . .” She was surprised it took her a moment to recall his name, “Gadiman!”

Perrin chuckled. “You *forgot* Gadiman’s name?”

Mahrree folded her arms. “And how many of the administrators do *you* remember off the top of your head?”

“Brisack,” he said easily. “Then . . .” He blushed as no other names came immediately to mind.

“I have them written in my textbook,” Mahrree snickered, “in case you ever want to review the names of those to whom you were presented a few times, and who feared you’d overthrow them.”

Perrin peered at her. “Is that the only way you know their names? From your textbook? *You’re* the head of the history department at the university, and met all of the administrators as well, you know!”

“Met them,” Mahrree acknowledged, “but never had any use for them.”

The world fumbled along for a while after Mal and the administrators fell, stumbling around like a drunk on a dark night, trying this door, trying that. Citizens were irrational, and even burned down the grand orange-and-red Administrative building, which had reminded Mahrree of a massive pumpkin with red tendrils curling around it. After the blaze, it was reported to the Shins that all that remained was the orange and red stones, like a massive burned out pumpkin which had bled. Idumea now had its own ruin.

Chaos erupted after that. No one who came to Salem years later could give Mahrree any specific details of what happened two-and-a-half years after they left because no reliable records could be kept. For several seasons, the world was a scene of nonstop violence. Only the frigid Raining Season that year cooled tensions long enough for everyone to look around and see what had happened.

General Snyder had taken over Idumea and proclaimed himself High General of Idumea, although only a handful of villages were loyal to him, including Edge and Major Lemuel Thorne, who had married Snyder’s niece.

Since Karna already had a large force down in Waves, the southern forts of Flax, Trades, and Orchards pledged their loyalty to Karna and declared him their High General, of sorts. Fadh agreed to support him as well, bringing with him the allegiance of the eastern forts of Coast, Marsh, and Winds. General Karna promoted him to General Fadh, to serve as his advisor.

Over on the western side of the world in Sands, Yordin was rallying forts to him as well. He secured Grasses, Scrub, and Quake, and sent messages to Karna and Fadh that they had friends in the west. General Yordin didn't bother with appointing an assisting general to aid him.

But cutting through the three generals' new alliance was Snyder's forces, all the way north to Fort Shin in Edge. That swath, many miles wide, effectively cut any efforts Yordin could make to join with Fadh in the east to undermine Snyder's control. Snyder also established a strong presence south of Grasses, cutting off Yordin's ability to communicate with Karna.

For the next two and a half years, until 343, Karna and Fadh's faction tried to destroy Snyder's hold, while Yordin's forts did their best to irritate from the west. The commanders were finally using the power given to them years ago as the ultimate authority in the villages.

There were no more governments, only the forts. There were no more magistrates or chiefs of enforcement, only commanders and soldiers.

It was then, with the armies of the world battling each other, that Guide Gleace received the prompting that no one was watching the forests, and that scouts could again slip into the world.

Moving through the forests was quite easy during those years. The soldiers were so busy engaging each other that no one was worried about Guardians. In fact, no one even seemed to mention Guardians for a few years, even though the thieving and looting hadn't slowed. In villages controlled by Karna and his coalition, rector were allowed to resume their teachings again, and tiny congregations began to form. All the rector came from Salem, and the routes north through the remains of Moorland were re-cut. Going through Edge was far too dangerous with Thorne still keeping an eye on the forests—the only person who did—directly north of him.

Eventually, a few refugees began to trickle north again. Not in the numbers they had before under Shem and Perrin, but a couple dozen each year were found by the rector and made their ways to Salem for a peaceful life.

For the next few years the world limped along this way, Snyder and Thorne's forces against Karna, Fadh, and Yordin's. Until General Karna went to confront General Snyder about a temporary truce in 352, thirteen years after the Shins left. From what Perrin and Shem could

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piece together with the reports that reached them, Brillen had been set up by one of his own officers, Major Sargon. He’d been in secret talks with Snyder, seemingly promising him to deliver the southern factions if Snyder would let Sargon control several of the forts.

And so General Brillen Karna went to the border, thinking he was to establish peace with Snyder. Instead, he was assaulted by a barrage of arrows to the chest from Snyder’s delegation. With his sudden death, Major Sargon *nobly* took over those forts while General Fadh dealt with unrest in Marsh and Waves.

But General Fadh suspected Major Sargon of duplicity, and in the meantime, Snyder’s army was moving east to take advantage of Fadh’s weakening position.

It was less than a year after Karna’s brutal death that Fadh faced Snyder’s armies in open battle, and Sargon rushed up from the south to help. That was when everything took a disastrous turn.

It was meant to look like an accident—one of those hazards of war when blades and men and horses get all confused, but too many soldiers said Sargon’s sword plunge into Graeson Fadh was deliberate.

Most of the soldiers who witnessed Fadh’s murder defected and headed north, especially when Fadh’s wife Shaleea turned up dead the day after her husband’s death. With both Karna and Fadh now gone, Sargon took over the southern coalition himself and sent a message to Yordin that he was now on his own in the west.

All of that left Snyder furious, realizing that Sargon was never about to yield any forts to him. But General Snyder didn’t get an opportunity to get his revenge on Sargon. A year later in 354, Snyder and Thorne had a conflict themselves. Years before, Thorne had married Snyder’s niece, but after she produced only daughters, she vanished. Exactly what happened to her and her girls, no one knew. Shem was sure Lemuel’s wife was still alive, just in hiding.

But there was probably more to Snyder and Thorne’s conflict than just a disappointing marriage. No one knew exactly what happened, but soon the news spread all the way up to Salem that *General* Lemuel Thorne was now in control of Idumea and the world northeast. Snyder had vanished, and his men were suddenly loyal to Thorne. Not only did Thorne take over Idumea, he changed many laws, including abolishing any laws pertaining to marriage.

As for Snyder, Perrin suggested that he likely had fallen into the same cavern that swallowed him and Mahrree fifteen years earlier.

Genev was probably down there, too.

The rectors went into hiding again, and the few, tiny congregations that had existed dissolved, because neither Thorne nor Sargon tolerated any teachings from The Writings, and Yordin didn't lend the rectors any assistance when his soldiers bullied them.

But still the rectors from Salem remained, working quietly in the world, chatting with people here and there, checking up on names the Shins remembered and finding a few people each year wanting a better life.

A handful of brave midwives also continued to go down to the world—always with three or four security scouts—but disappointingly found few women who needed their services. Fewer women were having babies, and many of them elected for the services of sedation and an attendant to catch the baby after a day or two of mother's unconsciousness. Still, there were always a dozen or so babies they could deliver each year, and occasionally they found other women to teach. The trickle north to Salem continued.

General Thorne had two major problems when he took over the northern forts: Yordin in the east, and Sargon in the south. And for the past ten years, the three factions had battled each other over control of the world. Villages and forts went to one faction, then to another, then back again. One year Yordin nearly conquered the world, but in the next Thorne took away half of his holdings and reclaimed Idumea. Then Sargon reared up and smashed both of them for several seasons.

Perrin suggested once it was like watching squirrels fighting over the same collection of nuts, but greatly slowed down.

What really perplexed the Shins, however, was that no one seemed to want to abandon that pitiful collection of nuts and go in search of a better tree. It didn't seem that anyone had any desire to explore beyond 'the world,' even though the route to Terryp's land was wide open. For far too long the people had been accustomed to believing that this bit of land was all that was habitable, and it seemed no one was willing to look elsewhere.

But there was an 'elsewhere'. The explorers that Salem had sent to the west the year after the Shins arrived came home nearly four years later, appearing in the eastern mountains. They had found the world was large, *far* larger than any of them had imagined, and the distant ocean in the west *did* connect to the ocean in the east. Some of the professors estimated the world was nearly 24,000 miles around.

“I didn’t sleep much last night—”

Another group of explorers sent out the next year to retrace the route came to the same conclusion, and also came back with a wide variety of fruits, nuts, grasses, seeds, and vegetables no one had imagined before.

They also returned with the news of hundreds of more ruins, bringing back crates full of pages of rubbings that kept Mahrree and others fascinated and speculating.

It was that realization that the world was so vast, yet only a tiny fraction of it was populated and fought over, that struck the Shins as so tragic. None of the violence in the world to the south had to happen. There was plenty for everyone. But no one wanted to leave what they knew.

Each time new reports reached Salem, Perrin and Shem were tempted to make hash marks on the wall as to who was prevailing that season. After the first few years, they quit paying too much attention to the dizzying and disturbing changes to the world they no longer knew. Instead, they asked newcomers for references of who else was tired of the fighting and wanted to come “home.”

Now, in 363, there were only two factions in the world. When Yordin fell, so did his forts. Thorne’s men swiftly moved in and secured all of them. Now there was Thorne in the north, and Sargon in the south.

That was when Eltana Yordin went into hiding. A soldier who came to Salem a season and a half ago brought the news about Mrs. Yordin’s plight. The soldier had helped secure her in a small house on the outskirts of Sands before he ‘vanished’.

The day after he arrived in Salem and told Guide Zenos and General Shin about her situation, Shem sent word to Nan’s husband Honri to find her. Honri had been serving as a rector in the northern half of world for a couple of years, ever since his wife Nan died, and had found Mrs. Yordin ready to leave everything her husband had lost.

Honri would return to Salem before Snowing Season, trying to find anyone else who wanted to come home first, and also working with some troubled young men to get them into better situations.

Mahrree looked at her notes and sighed. There were still many years unaccounted for, many names whose ends she didn’t know.

Mrs. Karna was too far south to safely send anyone to find her, *if* she were still alive. Guide Zenos had already inquired that of the Creator and received the answer that attempting her retrieval would cost many lives, with none saved.

Mahrree wondered also about Mr. Hegek and his family. She knew his wife had died a few years ago, but nothing more about Mr. Hegek or his son, daughter-in-law, and grandson.

She also worried about Qualipoe Hili. He'd served in the south for many years under Karna, but after that faction fell to Sargon, no one heard anything more of Poe. Either he'd left the army—citizens were much harder for the scouts to locate—or he, too, had passed away.

Then there was Teeria Rigoff and Milo. Well, not Milo anymore. He'd been killed, too, by Sargon's allies, shortly after Fadh had been lost. Teeria was somewhere in the south, alone in enemy territory, just as Eltana had been. It was harder to get scouts into the south, especially females and midwives.

And then there was Jon Offra. He'd returned to the world, promising Shem and Perrin he would keep their secret, and he did, most admirably. The fear of the woods north of Edge had never been greater. The stories Offra told were very effective.

In the years that followed, they heard of Offra's rise in the army, all the way to colonel, under General Fadh. But he was unstable, always moved from one fort to another, where he'd start off strong, then end up terrifying soldiers by screeching that the forests were haunted.

Since Fadh died, Jon Offra had been something of a colonel-at-large, still wearing the uniform, and still rushing into forts all over the world to shout his warnings. Sargon, Yordin, Thorne—none of them knew what to do with him, nor could any of them catch him. And, in a way, he was doing all of the commanders a favor by reminding their soldiers about loyalty and devotion and death.

Some years ago, Shem and Perrin decided to bring Offra home. Four times now they'd tried to bring him to Salem, but failed. He recognized the scouts for who they were and beat them off. Still, they weren't giving up. Jon would come home, one way or another. First they had to *find* him.

Eltana said she'd seen him in Sands about a year ago, but couldn't carry on a coherent conversation with him. But where he was now? Since the man seemed to wander from village to village with no discernible pattern, sightings were sporadic, and predicting where he'd turn up next, impossible.

Mahrree sighed at her list of "Where are they?" putting yet an-

“I didn’t sleep much last night—”

other small question mark next to Jon Offra, and drawing another final line under Yordin.

“Thorne did that,” said Perrin behind her, startling her. “I’m sure he had Yordin killed off.”

He bent down and looked at her notes.

“Ironic, isn’t it,” he said quietly. “Of all the officers I knew, I was the first to ‘die,’ but now I’m the last one alive. Yordin was the last of the greats from the offensive at Moorland. I still can’t believe his son left him for Thorne.”

“Many people have been deceived over the years, Perrin,” Mahrree said. “Who knows what he was thinking, and how long Thorne had been working on swaying him to Edge. Province 8. Whatever it’s called.” She rolled her eyes. “What was the point of that, giving each village a random number? The numbers aren’t even in any logical order.”

Perrin shrugged. “I have to confess the random numbers are rather clever on Thorne’s part. If the south tries to invade, they’ll be confused as to which village is what, since they don’t follow numerically. Province 13 comes after Province 2 along the Idumean River, and before 16? Maddening. As for the renaming of all the villages, I can take a guess. Thorne’s trying to force unification again. He has to have all seventeen villages labeled in a way that sounds like they belong together. If you’re missing one-third of the numbers, it means you’re missing part your kingdom. Or whatever he plans to call it should he succeed.”

“Or general-dom? Now that really would be ironic, Perrin, if Lemuel Thorne tries to make himself head of everything. In so many ways he tried to follow in your footsteps, but he kept misreading the directions you intended to go.”

Perrin whispered so quietly he didn’t think his wife heard him, but she did, and his words chilled her.

“I should’ve let that Guarder kill him at Moorland.”

Mahrree knew it would be a rough night. He never slept well when someone brought the world back to his house again.

Only part of the Shin family was seated to breakfast in the morning when the knock at the door came. Some of the older children were

already doing chores or picking the berries from the bushes along the orchard. But at the table, eating breakfast later than usual, was Perrin and three of the younger grandchildren.

When thirteen-year-old Kew escorted Mrs. Yordin into the eating room, Perrin stood up in surprise.

“Eltana. Everything all right? Don’t tell me you’ve changed your mind and want to go back already.”

She smiled. “No, not at all. The women I’m staying with are absolutely delightful.” She motioned for him to sit back down. “Perrin, I want to talk to you.”

Perrin remained standing. “Shall we go to my office? We can speak in private.”

Mrs. Yordin shook her head. “I don’t want to interrupt your breakfast. Besides, what I have to say may be of interest to your family.” She looked in earnest at the three children at the table.

Perrin gestured at the chair opposite of him, and Kew stepped over to pull it out for her. Mrs. Yordin sat down and Kew darted out the side door to do his morning chore.

“That one must be the other who’s becoming another Perrin Shin,” Mrs. Yordin said, nodding to where Kew had been standing a moment ago.

Perrin smiled. “But he’s more sober and less brash, so he’ll become like me in looks only, fortunately.”

Mrs. Yordin nodded politely at Morah next to her, and opened her mouth to address Perrin, but Morah said, “Potatoes, ma’am?”

“No thank you, dear. Perrin, I did some thinking about—”

“Applesauce, Mrs. Yordin?” Morah held up a bowl.

“Uh, I already ate, dear. But thank you, anyway. As I was saying, Perrin—”

“Bread?”

Centia, her nine-year-old sister, leaned over. “She said she already ate, Morah! Leave her be to talk to Puggah.”

“But it’s really good,” Morah said, giving Mrs. Yordin her best brown-eyed fawn look. “I helped Hycy make it.”

Mrs. Yordin sighed and smiled. “All right, I’ll take a slice.” She turned back to Perrin again, ready to speak, but not fast enough.

“Wheat or barley?” Morah asked.

Perrin's shoulders began to shake with silent laughter as he offered no help to Mrs. Yordin.

Mrs. Yordin sighed at the little girl. “What, *dear*?”

“I didn’t sleep much last night—”

“Which do you like better, wheat or barley?”

“Well, which did you help make, *dear*?”

“Both!”

Perrin chuckled as he took another bite of his bread.

Mrs. Yordin narrowed her eyes at him. “I’ll have what *Puggah* is having.”

“Are you sure? Because I might have sneezed on the barley bread. Before it was baked, though, so it’s all right now.”

Twelve-year-old Hogal rolled his eyes and pushed the basket of wheat bread to Mrs. Yordin. “Then this one’s safer, ma’am,” he told her.

The kitchen door opened, and Mahrree and Lilla came in.

Mahrree sat down next to Perrin and nodded to Mrs. Yordin. “Everything well, *Eltana*?”

But Lilla put her hands on her waist and looked at her daughter. “We heard you through the door, young lady. You have chores to be doing. I’m sorry, Mrs. Yordin. *Morah* tends to be an over-eager hostess.”

Perrin smiled. “She gets that from her *other* grandmother. I gain weight just thinking about Mrs. *Trovato*.”

Mahrree patted his belly and smiled. When he tried on his old colonel’s jacket for their families’ anniversary discussion last season, there was some considerable breath-holding that occurred as he attempted to fasten the middle buttons. But at least *Shem* had the same problem with his jacket. They agreed the tightly woven wool must have shrunk over the years.

Mrs. Yordin chuckled politely as she took some of the wheat bread. “She’s fine.”

Morah watched her expectantly, waiting.

Perrin smirked. “See why we didn’t have the entire family to mid-day meal when you first arrived?”

Mrs. Yordin took an experimental bite and nodded enthusiastically at *Morah*. “It’s very good.”

“Want some more?”

“*Morah*!” Lilla said sharply. “Eggs!”

Morah sighed as she pushed away from the table, then her face brightened. “Mrs. Yordin, I could make you some eggs when I’m done gathering them. I’m doing better at keeping the shells out.”

“Oh,” said Mrs. Yordin, “I think I’ll be *quite* filled up with this delicious bread.”

“Now!” Lilla said to her youngest child.

Morah picked up her plate and brought it to the kitchen before leaving for the chicken coop.

Through the swinging door of the kitchen came in Young Pere and Peto, both looking weary. They sat down at the table and nodded a welcome. “Mrs. Yordin,” they both said politely.

“Does it ever end around here?” she asked as Young Pere and Peto pulled plates toward them and started helping themselves to the food on the table.

“Of course it does,” Lilla smiled. “This morning is just unusual. Normally we’re all up and out of the house by now and taking care of work, but we had a bit of an unsettled night. Still, it’s good for us to have a lazier morning every now and then,” she said cheerily. “Listen to the birds sing!” She patted Perrin’s shoulder as she passed on her way to pick up some dirty dishes someone forgot to bring to the kitchen.

Perrin gave her an appreciative smile.

“Then perhaps this isn’t a good time?” Mrs. Yordin said hesitantly.

But Perrin shook his head. “For you, I’m available anytime.”

“Thank you. As I was saying, I’ve been doing a lot of thinking. I didn’t sleep much last night—”

“There’s a lot of that going around,” Perrin said quietly.

Mrs. Yordin looked at him carefully for the first time. She hadn’t noticed until then how baggy his eyes were, as if he had been up half the night. Mahrree wore the same look, as did Peto and Lilla, who came back into the eating room from the kitchen. They all smiled encouragingly at her.

Mrs. Yordin leaned forward. “Well, then . . . Perrin, how many grandsons do you have?”

Perrin sat back, startled by her question. “Thirteen.”

“How many are legal age, or close to it?” She glanced over to Young Pere who sat only slightly more easily in his chair this morning.

Perrin’s brows furrowed. “That would be about . . . eight.”

Mrs. Yordin nodded. “And granddaughters with husbands? How many?”

Now Perrin was mystified, but he still answered. “Uh, three. Will be four at the end of the season when Hycy marries.”

“Good, good. And Guide Zenos? How many sons? Legal age for

“I didn’t sleep much last night—”

the world?”

“Three.”

Mrs. Yordin nodded, looking vaguely at the table. “But one’s married to your granddaughter, so he’s already been counted. Could still be enough . . .” she mumbled.

Perrin, Mahrree, Peto, Lilla, Young Pere, Centia, and now fifteen-year-old Kanthi who came into the room all looked at each other in confusion.

Hogal shrugged, picked up his plate, and left for the kitchen. He wasn’t anywhere near adulthood.

“With Peto and the other one . . . Deckett was his name, I believe,” she continued to murmur, “that makes . . . eighteen men. *Eighteen* would be enough, since Moorland’s gone, although Thorne inanely named the ruins Province 0, plus Idumea—”

Perrin leaned forward across the table. “Eighteen men for what, Eltana?”

She looked up into Perrin’s eyes. “I know what must be done now. The time is right. Perrin, *you need to go back to Idumea!*”

Someone at the table dropped a fork.

Perrin’s eyebrows shot up. “Go *back*?”

Mahrree couldn’t even gasp in surprise. She just stared at Mrs. Yordin who had eyes only for Perrin.

“Yes! Back to the world, Perrin! The time is right to reunify the world, and the world *would* come together under Perrin Shin!”

Perrin sat back and scoffed. “Eltana, that’s absurd—”

“No, no it’s not! Think about it, Perrin: Thorne took over Gari’s forts, but no one was happy about it. They were looking for someone to rebel against him, but everyone’s terrified of Thorne. But Thorne would be terrified of *you*. What if General Shin suddenly came back to the world, risen from the ‘dead’ with an immense army from Salem behind him? Guide Zenos could help. You could kill the stories as effectively as they killed you. Just seeing you would convince the world that Thorne was a liar and undermine his credibility. Then with the north forts and provinces behind you, you could easily take over the south forts and lead Idumea as it should be!”

Perrin shook his head slowly. “Eltana, Eltana. I told you yesterday I would be a terrible king—”

“But with the guide next to you?” she said, full of enthusiasm. “You said he was the only one that could do it. So let him help!” Table slap. “And each of your sons and grandsons and in-laws could

lead the different villages. Just think if there was a descendant of the Shin and Zenos families in every village raising their children, representing their fathers—think of the peace you could bring! Perrin, you could be the greatest general the world ever saw!”

At the end of the table, Peto put his hand over his mouth, as if to stop Eltana’s words, or hold in his own. His eyes locked with Lilla’s as she slowly sat down to stare back at him.

Perrin reached over and took Mrs. Yordin’s hand. “Eltana, look at me—I’m seventy-two. As much as I hate to admit it, I’m not exactly a young man anymore. I’m not even middle-aged. I’m old.”

“I *am* looking at you, and I’ve never seen such a fit seventy-two-year-old man,” she declared. “You haven’t seen the quality of soldiers the world now has—flabby, lazy, weak, undisciplined. Look at your grandsons!” She glanced at Young Pere again and her eyes lingered on him for a moment before she turned back at Perrin. “I met many of them yesterday, and they’re in far better shape than any soldiers I ever saw. In just a few weeks you could teach them enough to march down to the world—”

“No!” Perrin said decisively. “That’s not the Creator’s will. Eltana, we don’t even have weapons. Only long knives used for butchering animals and pitchforks used for cleaning their stalls. We’re not a war-like society, nor should we be. I’m here to secure Salem, not take over Idumea. I’m General Shin in title only. *There’s no real army*, Eltana. Just citizens who can defend their houses from lost soldiers who might accidentally wander over here. Maybe.”

Mrs. Yordin was not to be deterred. “Then *make* an army! The sisters I live with and I were talking about it last night. They told me how much everyone in Salem loves this family, loves *you*. Say the word and you’ll have an army at your disposal, we’re sure of it!”

Perrin sat back and rolled his eyes.

But Mrs. Yordin plowed on. “There are plenty of men here who served for a time who could help train, lots of scouts who know how to get in and out, and every young man I’ve seen so far in Salem is as strapping as Young Pere there. Arm them with pebbles and they’d still win against the clumsy swords and aimless arrows of the current army! By the beginning of Harvest, you could be ready. Perrin, how do you know securing Salem doesn’t mean destroying the threat of the world? You did it in the Moorland offensive. You saw the threat, and you went after it. Do it again! For Gari, for Karna, for Fadh! For all of us who have suffered—”

“I didn’t sleep much last night—”

Perrin pushed away from the table and stood up. “This is madness!” He ran his hands through his hair and paced the floor. “You want revenge, don’t you? For what happened to Gari and your son. And you’re trying to use me to get it!”

She slapped the table. “Yes, I want revenge! I deserve justice—we all do. Your family as well, for all the slander against you. This is why I had to come here: to find you and convince you of your duty to the world.”

He stopped in midstride and pointed at her. “Don’t you *dare*,” he snarled, “try to tell *me* about *duty*, Eltana!”

Anxiously his family watched him rub his forehead, turn sharply, and pace again. They weren’t accustomed to seeing their Puggah so agitated.

“You . . . you don’t know what you’re suggesting,” Perrin waved uselessly. “I can’t do this!”

“Why not?” Mrs. Yordin demanded. “Because you’re afraid you’re rusty after twenty-five years?”

“No!”

“Because you’re too comfortable here in Salem, sitting in this easy life?” her voice grew louder.

“NO!”

“Because you really wanted to abandon us? You live here in luxury—”

“*Luxury!*?”

“Yes, luxury!” she insisted. “Not of gold, but of family and home and *peace*. We’ve had none of that! That’s it, isn’t it? You’re afraid to see just how horrible the world is, what condition you left us in!”

Perrin stopped his pacing and glared at Mrs. Yordin.

Mahrree shrunk in her chair. She hadn’t seen that expression on his face in many years.

Mrs. Yordin seemed to get a little smaller too, but living with Roarin’ Yordin for so long had taught her how to hold a steely gaze.

“I did *not* abandon Idumea,” Perrin seethed quietly. “It *betrayed* me and killed my father and mother. It passed laws illegally in order to *kill* my wife and planned to *imprison* me and my son.”

He ignored the shocked looks on his grandchildren’s faces and leaned across the table toward Mrs. Yordin, who admirably didn’t budge.

“Captain Thorne, we found out later, gave an order to *my* former soldiers to *murder* my son-in-law so he could *take* my expecting

daughter—”

Now the grandchildren exchanged stunned looks, and Lilla bit her lip. She wished she had sent all of them out for eggs. The younger ones didn't know all of these details.

“—and all of that gave us no other choice than to leave. I told you before, Eltana: Idumea destroyed itself. I did *not* cause it, nor can I fix it now!”

“How do you know?” Mrs. Yordin challenged hotly. “How can you be so sure?”

“*Because I fought that battle LAST NIGHT!*” Perrin roared.

Mahrree hid her face behind her hand.

“*And I LOST.*”

Peto looked down at his plate, as did Lilla.

Their children exchanged uncomfortable looks. They knew about their grandfather's occasional ‘unsettled nights’ which occurred each time someone from the army came from the world. A few of the children in both families had been unfortunate enough to wake up to find their beloved Puggah standing over their beds holding a stick or broom handle as if it were a sword.

Last night, Young Pere was terrified awake by a shouting General Shin in his bedroom.

“I know what will happen if I go back, Eltana,” Perrin struggled to keep his voice from trembling. “We won't be successful. And they always go for the most vulnerable ones first,” his voice cracked.

“Perrin!” Mahrree said sharply. She offered her grandchildren what she hoped was a reassuring smile. But by the looks of horror on her granddaughters' faces, she needed more practice.

She reached over, took her husband's hand, and gently pulled him back to his seat.

He sat down slowly, still staring at Mrs. Yordin.

“My home is Salem,” he told her. “I will not leave it. Not for the whole world.”

Mrs. Yordin's chin quivered. She obviously was hoping for a more agreeable response. “What if Guide Zenos told you to go?”

Perrin sat quietly as every pair of eyes watched him. Finally, he said, “Eltana, you must excuse me now. My sons, grandsons, great-grandsons, brother, nephews, and grandnephews leave in just three days for one of our trail marking trips. There are still many preparations that need to be made. I hope you enjoy the bread. I'm fairly certain that's not the batch Morah dropped on the floor. But she baked

“I didn’t sleep much last night—”

it after, so it doesn’t matter.”

Perrin stood up and walked out of the house.

That afternoon at a small and neat house north of the Shin-Briter Eztates, a young man knocked at the door.

It was opened by an elderly woman.

“Is Mrs. Yordin in?” the young man asked.

The woman smiled at him. “Eltana,” she called behind her, “we should have had you move in long ago. We’ve never had such a steady stream of men at our door before!”

The young man turned pink and the elderly woman chuckled.

Eltana Yordin came to the door and sucked in her breath. “I don’t think I will *ever* get used to seeing your face. It’s like going back in time. Come in, Young Pere, please. Somehow I knew you’d be coming by.”

Young Pere hesitated as the elderly woman stepped aside to let him in. “Only if you have time—”

“For you, Perrin—I mean, *Young Pere*—I’ll always have time.”

Young Pere followed her into the gathering room and sat down on the chair she gestured to.

Mrs. Yordin’s elderly housemate closed the gathering room door behind them as Mrs. Yordin sat on the sofa opposite of Young Pere. She smiled in anticipation.

“To what do I owe the pleasure of this visit, *Lieutenant Perrin Shin*?” She winked.

Young Pere opened his mouth, but then didn’t know how to begin. He wasn’t expecting that wink.

Mrs. Yordin sat back. “Can I say something first, Young Pere?”

He nodded. Maybe her comment could get him started.

“I have to confess, seeing you actually fulfills a fantasy I had as a girl.”

No, Young Pere decided, this wasn’t going to help him much.

“You see, when I was twelve we lived in Orchards, and my parents took me on a trip to Idumea to visit the greatest city in the world. But all I wanted to see was one particular young man who every girl in the world knew about—Perrin Shin.”

Now Young Pere’s eyebrows went up and he felt himself growing

hot.

“He was about seventeen years old at the time, just like you, and was rumored to be the most handsome—”

Young Pere was now fully red.

“—and eligible young man. The future High General of the world: tall, dark, and *built*, with shoulders out to here. An older girl in my school had been at the garrison with her father earlier and saw him. She said all the stories about him were true. She tried to get close enough to meet him, but apparently he had several girls following him around, each hoping for a private moment with him.” Mrs. Yordin narrowed her eyes. “No girls follow you around, Young Pere?”

He decided to tell her, “Only with bandages. Usually my sisters and cousins.”

Mrs. Yordin laughed. “Oh, if only I were fifty years younger!”

Young Pere shifted on his chair, beginning to rethink his visit.

Mrs. Yordin noticed. “I’m sorry. You know, I never did glimpse him when I was twelve. But I sure do see him now. I thank you for that, and I apologize for embarrassing you.”

Young Pere smiled, aware that she was watching for his grandfather’s grin. He might as well let her have it. “That’s all right, Mrs. Yordin. I never realized . . . there were *stories* about him?”

“There have *always* been stories about him. From the time he was a teenager until now. No man is more storied in the world than your Puggah. Is that what you came to talk to me about?”

“Sort of. Mrs. Yordin, I haven’t been able to stop thinking about what you said this morning at breakfast, about Pugg—about General Shin returning to the world. Do you really think he should?”

Her hand slapping the sofa didn’t sound very loud but it caught Young Pere’s attention.

“I never thought I’d see the day when Perrin Shin would back away from a fight!” she declared. “Salem has made him *weak*. Have you ever seen him with a sword?”

“We don’t have swords here, ma’am.”

She blew out in exasperation. “He was *born* to wield a sword, Young Pere. Gari told me about his strength and his speed. When he set his sights on a man, he might as well have dropped dead before Shin ever got to him, because he wouldn’t survive the encounter.”

Young Pere leaned forward, realizing he’d found what he’d been looking for. “They don’t tell us those details on the rare days when

“I didn’t sleep much last night—”

we talk about the world. I know he took out a few men—”

Cushioned slap. “And how! Dozens and dozens! He was great and deadly. Even with a bow and arrow, and long knives.” She leaned forward to match his pose. “You *really don’t* know?”

“He likes to leave the world in the world.”

“Have you read your Aunt Calla’s book? I was thumbing through a copy last night, and it’s all there, up until he left.”

Young Pere shrugged guiltily. It never seemed interesting until now. “I suppose I should check our shelves for a copy. Mrs. Yordin, this morning he said something about Thorne?”

“You *really* don’t know?” she repeated.

“I know a Thorne served with him for a little while, and that his father became the new High General, but it sounds like there was a lot more. You see, Puggah and Muggah tell us the story of when they came to Salem when we’re thirteen. But I always felt they glossed over a lot of details.” Young Pere hesitated. “Mrs. Yordin, how much do you know about my grandfather, about some *sleeping problems* he had in the past?”

She sat back, her brow furrowed. “Only more stories, Young Pere. But by the look on your face, those were true.”

Young Pere nodded. “Whenever someone from the world comes here, he relives it. He thinks he’s in a battle and he acts it out in the middle of the night. Usually he’s shouting about Guardsers.”

Mrs. Yordin covered her mouth. “I thought he’d be over that by now,” she whispered. “Karna told us what Zenos reported to him, about his nightmares of his parents. Oh, Perrin. Must be terrifying.”

Young Pere wondered who the Perrin was to whom she referred. “You could say that,” he scoffed lightly. “Usually he’s shouting or he thinks we’re dead and he tries to revive us. That’s not the most pleasant way to wake up, I assure you. My cousin Holling Briter used to have nightmares about Puggah having nightmares. Last night I woke up to find him standing over my bed with a fire poker, yelling about Thorne, something about him staying away from his children. So what more is there to him besides being Puggah’s captain? And was he really after my Aunt Jaytsy?”

Mrs. Yordin looked as if someone had let all the air out of her. “Oh, Young Pere . . . I don’t know everything. And if your father and grandparents have never told you the details, then I shouldn’t—”

“Please, Mrs. Yordin, I really want to know.” He sat back and sighed. “I’m old enough to know about my family’s history. All of it,

not the washed and dried version Muggah teaches at the university.”

Mrs. Yordin tipped her head. “You have a reason, don’t you?”

“I do, Mrs. Yordin.” And now he pulled out his *ability*, as he liked to think of it. He hadn’t thought he’d need it on an elderly woman, but realizing she had information and connections—and a lingering crush on someone who looked a great deal like him—he decided it couldn’t hurt.

So he tipped his head to the side, dipping it down a bit so that when he looked up at her, it’d be through his dark lashes. Raising his eyebrows slightly always helped, too. At least, it did on females fifteen-years-old.

“I need to construct an argument,” he began, making sure to lower his voice even deeper. He could hit that gravelly spot, too. “You see, when a man finishes a year at the university and turns eighteen, he starts looking for a wife and begins studying for his first profession. The wife can wait, but my father won’t let me do what I want to do. There’s only a season left until I’m of age and I need to convince him.” Eyebrow raise.

Mrs. Yordin watched him intently, amusedly. “So what do you want to do?”

He leaned forward and hiked up one side of his mouth into an impertinent grin. “I want to be a scout. I want to go down to the world, but,” he sighed sadly and blinked a few times, “Papa and Uncle Shem say it’s too dangerous for a Shin, and that I should never mention it to my grandparents. Uncle Shem said I could go on the expedition he’s sending to the eastern ocean, but that’s not what I want to do. I want to go south. *You understand, don’t you?*”

Mrs. Yordin nodded vaguely, just like the girls.

“I don’t care about unexplored lands. I want to see what your world *really* is all about. I’ve always suspected they never told us everything, and now I know they haven’t. I just want to know for myself, Mrs. Yordin. And I’m hoping that *you*—” he flashed what he considered a full, yet subtle, grin, “can help me.”

Mrs. Yordin exhaled as if coming out of some unexpected trance. “Oh, you are good!” she declared with a chuckle. “You are certainly your grandfather’s boy. I’d heard *those* stories about him, too.”

Young Pere tipped his head the other direction. “What stories?”

“That he could charm the bloomers off a gi—” She stopped, seeing Young Pere’s bemused and innocent expression. “Um, off a goat, if goats wore bloomers,” she said hurriedly.

“I didn’t sleep much last night—”

Young Pere knew there were strange customs in the world, and he supposed dressing up goats was simply another one.

“Besides,” Mrs. Yordin continued uneasily, “I’m sure Perrin hasn’t been *goat charming* for many decades now, and I’ve always felt one’s youthful indiscretions should be allowed to die along with one’s youth.”

Young Pere, following only bits of what she was alluding to, picked up on the last of it. “So you agree that a youth like me should have the opportunity to have a few indiscretions?” He hoped it sounded right.

By the growing smile on her face, it did. “Indeed I do. Especially a charmer like you. I suppose Salem is too virtuous to allow for such adventurous dalliances?”

Slowly Young Pere nodded, still not understanding what she was talking about, but knowing his response was what she was looking for.

Then she seemed concerned. “Oh, but with that face, that body, those shoulders, that name of Perrin—there’s some danger, I have to agree with your uncle and father. Then again,” she tipped her head to match his imploring gaze, “only people in my generation might recognize your heritage, and there are very few still alive who would have seen and remembered your grandfather when he was young. The chances of any of them seeing you and making the connection . . .” She sat taller with fresh hunger in her eyes. “You know, you could change your name. You could be a scout at my husband’s fort in Sands and find out what’s happening!”

Young Pere sat back, only so that he could focus his gaze fully on Mrs. Yordin. She was, after all, only a young girl at heart, meeting the young man of her dreams. “I could do a *great many* things, Mrs. Yordin,” he said self-assuredly. “I just need the opportunity.”

“Yes, yes, you could.” Her gaze turned almost condescending. “But I don’t think you realize how easy it is to be confident in a cozy place like Salem. You know nothing of the world, do you?”

He held in his cringe, tired of hearing that from his elders. “But Mrs. Yordin, why can’t you tutor me? Surely no one has such expertise as you.”

It was working. She was blushing with pride.

“You could prepare me. Teach me all about what it means to be an officer in the army, to be like your husband.”

That one definitely hit its mark. She was now beaming. Maybe if

he nudged just a tiny bit more—

“What kind of man did you expect your son to become? Teach me to be that man.”

Mrs. Yordin scoffed a chuckle. “Oh, indeed you are slick. Already you know how to manipulate your audience, almost as deftly as Lemuel Thorne. Yes, you could do it, but I still worry that you won’t understand the world. You have no idea just how easy you have it here.

“Many would give their lives—*are* giving their lives—to have what you have,” she told him, staring deep into his eyes. “Your people have so much more knowledge. Why, just this afternoon I started to read a book written by one of your scientists. I had no idea there were other spheres like ours going around the sun.

“No one in Idumea knows how to look at the night sky and tell the difference between a sphere—planet, I think it’s called—and stars like our sun. The best the world can do is identify constellations like the Great Turnip and the Sideways Swordsman. The world is obsessed with survival, Young Pere, and nothing beyond. That scientist has even calculated how fast light moves? I just thought it *was*. I never before considered that light travels at a certain speed!”

Young Pere nodded wearily. “Must be Oromer’s book. He teaches at the university. Every year he and Professor Eints try to get the first year students to debate what the world would look like if someone could travel at the speed of light on the back of a horse.”

“Such ideas!” Mrs. Yordin breathed.

Young Pere rolled his eyes. “Eints asked me what I thought it would look like, and I told him, ‘Blurry.’ He said that was a very *unoriginal* answer. I mean, what’s the point? It’s all just thinking and speculating. Mrs. Yordin,” he leaned forward to hold her gaze, “it’s just not real. *It’s dull.*”

She tipped her head, almost like a flirting girl. “That’s just not Perrin Shin’s style, is it? Men with that name need excitement, a challenge, a *conflict*. Idumea used to be relatively peaceful under your great grandfather, but with just enough conflict to keep men like you entertained. You need that now, don’t you, Lieutenant Shin?”

“*You know what I need*, Mrs. Yordin,” he told her earnestly, almost feeling bad for manipulating her so, but the old woman seemed to be enjoying herself. “I need to get out of here. Just for a couple of seasons to stretch my wings. Sometimes I feel so trapped. You get it, right?”

“I didn’t sleep much last night—”

Mrs. Yordin squinted at him. “Wings? Trapped. Like a falcon in a barn?”

Her phrasing caught him off guard. “Yeah . . . I guess you could say that. Interesting analogy.”

“You have *no idea*, boy,” she whispered.

“So tell me? Please? Teach me what I need to know so that I can go back to Roarin’ Yordin’s forts and begin to turn this world around. For my family name, and for your revenge.”

Mrs. Yordin grinned and slapped the sofa. “*There’s* my Perrin Shin!”

Chapter 5--“I got to watch a falcon for quite a while.”

It was late in the evening when Mahrree came home from the Briters' house where she and Perrin had dinner. Perrin was still there, going over maps with Deck and Peto for their trip in a few days.

Mahrree looked with disappointment at the clean sink. She really needed something to wash. Elтана's breakfast discussion had sat on Perrin and her all day like a rash they both tried to pretend wasn't there, annoying and itching at them. It was going to be another sleepless night, she knew it already.

Taking up a dish rag, Mahrree began to wipe the already clean surfaces and cabinets, trying to wash away the memory of her husband's agitated face. They had lived so peacefully here for so many years. It seemed wrong that someone should come and challenge him to return.

He had never expressed a desire to go back. Even when the family went a few times on the routes near the glacial fort to see the wildflowers and waterfalls, he stayed behind in Salem. “I see those in the mountains here all the time,” was his excuse.

He didn't want to travel south, ever again. Especially after he had killed Lieutenant Radan who had been trying to escape from the glacial fort to return to the world, to tell Thorne what he had discovered. The further south Perrin went the deadlier he felt, and he never wanted to be deadly again.

But it was that word Elтана used on him. *Duty*. That flashed something in his eyes, but he refused to talk to Mahrree about it. She would have to trap him on the sofa again as she did years ago to try to get him to talk it out before the trip, or many little boys would be traumatized in the middle of the night by their Puggah.

“I got to watch a falcon for quite a while.”

He always said how satisfied he was with their life here, how he couldn't have wished for anything else—

But on the nights when his Armchair Generals came by, Mahrree spied the faint longing in his eyes. He'd been taught all his youth that his destiny was to be High General, and he wasn't.

Eltana's challenge had pierced him. Maybe now, as he was entering the last stretch of his life, he was hoping to leave behind a greater legacy—

“I'm pretty sure that's clean now, Muggah.”

Mahrree smiled as she looked up to see Young Pere.

“I suppose you're right. I haven't seen you for a while. Have you been resting?”

Young Pere pulled out a chair to sit down at the work table. “I promise you, Muggah, that all I did this afternoon was rest comfortably.”

She pulled out a chair opposite of him, because she'd heard how carefully he'd phrased that. “Honestly?”

“Yes.” He looked at her in a way she couldn't interpret. He seemed to be analyzing her deeper than ever before.

“But you weren't around here,” she hinted. She'd checked his room a few times to find it empty.

“I needed some time alone. I went instead to where I could rest and . . . *listen to the world.*”

Again she noticed the judiciously selected words. “Listen to the world?”

Young Pere nodded. “It was such a warm day, perfect for stretching out in the grasses and seeing the clouds float by, watching the birds fly, listening to the bugs . . . bugging around.” He was trying to be light-hearted, which meant he was trying to draw her away from her suspicions.

“Did you go beyond the pasture lands?” she pressed. “Lying in cattle muck would definitely bring a lot of bugging bugs.”

He cracked a smile. “Yes, I went north. And all I did was sit and listen and think.”

Something sounded deceitful. While Salemites were hopelessly honest, Young Pere had picked up the worldly trait of lying while speaking what sounded like the truth. He probably learned that from his grandmother.

Mahrree sat back. “So what did you think about?”

“Flying. For a time, I watched the birds and their wing configurations. I got to watch a *falcon* for quite a while, circling above me.”

She didn’t like the way he said that word. “A falcon?”

“Yes,” he said slowly.

Something in his tone suggested multiple meanings.

“When it circled closer I realized it was far more *complex* than I anticipated. Lots of details I never realized before. I’m going to have to make some modifications to my design.” He turned up a corner of his mouth, and she recognized his teasing, almost flirtatious, smile. It always meant something was up, but she never let him know she was on to him.

She attempted a real smile in return. “I hope it takes you a very long time to do that, Young Pere.”

“Now that I know what to do, I don’t think it’ll be that difficult at all. I really wish I could see a falcon up close, though,” he mused. “Maybe find a *wounded* one somewhere.”

Mahrree tried to pretend his choice of words didn’t hit her upside the head with such dizzying force.

Her grandson was watching her closely again.

He knew. Somehow, he knew. She’d never written about it, never discussed Qayin Thorne’s attitude toward Perrin as a wounded falcon in a barn, but her grandson knew.

And the most likely person to have told him would have been Eltana Yordin, who, through her husband, would have known just about everything.

“Young Pere, even a wounded bird of prey is very dangerous,” she told him. “Probably even more so, because it’s hurt. It still has sharp talons and a beak. Please don’t try it.”

Young Pere gaze softened as he grinned, suddenly easy. “Don’t worry, Muggah. What are my chances of finding a wounded falcon? I’d have a better shot at finding a dead one.”

“There you go!” Mahrree said with forced brightness. Maybe it was all just a mistake, an unfortunate coincidence that he referred to a wounded falcon.

Why would he be talking with Eltana Yordin anyway?

“Examine a plucked chicken before it’s cooked for dinner,” she suggested.

He scoffed. “A *chicken*? Muggah, they have wings all right, but they can’t fly more than a couple of feet before flopping to the ground.”

“I got to watch a falcon for quite a while.”

“Precisely. Just like you.”

“Thanks, Muggah. Thanks a lot.”

That night Peto sat on the edge of his bed. He stared at the wardrobe and thought about the old parchment envelope hidden under the sweaters.

His wife came into the room, got into bed, and watched her husband.

“You’re still thinking about what she said, aren’t you?”

Peto nodded once.

Lilla sighed. “I couldn’t imagine leaving these houses. Sending our children in different directions around the world? Not living next door to your sister, or down the road from my sister? None of this sounds right to me *at all*, Peto.”

Peto nodded again.

“So why are you still thinking about it?”

“Why did she use those words, Lilla? ‘Greatest general the world ever saw’? What if this is the way it’s supposed to happen? Sometimes the right thing doesn’t sound right at the beginning. That’s what I thought about our coming to Salem.” He sighed heavily. “What if our time here was just *for now*, and not forever?”

Lilla pondered that. “Then Relf would have to remake that sign above the road. He wouldn’t be too happy about it.”

She leaned toward him when she realized that it was one of those rare evenings when her husband had no sense of humor.

“Peto, think about it—do you *really* think Mrs. Yordin was receiving a revelation when she used those words? You said yourself she knew very little about the Creator. She hadn’t looked at The Writings since she was a child. She just happened to choose words that echoed your grandfather. That’s all. Not really a lot of different ways to say ‘greatest general in the world’ now is there?”

“No, I suppose not.” He was quiet for a moment. “I just hadn’t realized until today that my father thinks he’s *old*. I was a boy when Grandfather Shin died, and I thought then that he was an old man. I just realized that my father is four years *older* than High General Shin was when he died. And now I’m the same age my father was then.” He paused again. “There really isn’t a lot of time left for him to . . .”

Lilla crawled over to Peto and put her arms around him. “To become the greatest general the world ever saw? Wasn’t it you who told me that often we put our own interpretations upon the Creator’s words? That we force our ideas onto His plans? Nothing ever works out the way we hope when we do that. But if we surrender to the Creator, then we see how much better His will and plans are. Does *any* of this sound familiar, Rector Shin?”

He kissed his wife’s arm. “Yes, and you’re right, as usual. I couldn’t imagine leaving here for Edge or anywhere else. I’ve been thinking about it all day and have felt very uneasy. That’s always the Creator’s way of telling me to forget the idea. I was positively agitated all afternoon. Tomorrow I’ll have to ask Shem how Mrs. Yordin took the news there would be no invasion. He was planning to have a little chat with her.” Peto chuckled. “Do you think Mrs. Yordin’s related to your family? She and Calla could’ve probably planned the offensive all by themselves.”

Lilla laughed. “We’ll have to look in the family lines.”

Peto finally pulled his eyes away from the wardrobe and turned to his wife. “Deck set up for the night?”

“Yes. Your father’s asleep already so he didn’t hear him come in. Deck put together the two armchairs.”

“He’s not alone, is he?”

“No, he brought Viddrow with him. He’s sleeping on their sofa.”

“Good,” Peto said. “The only one better at calf wrestling and hog tying is Bubba, but Viddrow’s eighteen now, and should be up to the challenge.”

“Do you really think Papa Pere will have another problem tonight?” she asked. “I never remember two nights in a row.”

Peto shrugged. “There never was a visitor bringing back so many memories before. Shem offered to come over tomorrow night with Zaddick if we think there’s a need.”

Lilla leaned against her husband. “I don’t know how your mother did it. How you and Jaytsy handled it when he first was like this. He terrified me last night, and he was armed only with an iron poker. I can’t imagine what it must have been like for you at Kew’s age.”

“He was terrifying,” he admitted quietly. “And he had *that sword*. At the time I didn’t think much of it, but now I have even more respect for my mother. Going to bed each night knowing there was a disturbed man sleeping next to her with an affinity for blades? If Shem hadn’t been there some of those nights, I’m not sure if we’d all be

“I got to watch a falcon for quite a while.”

here now.”

Peto sat lost in thought, Lilla waiting, before he continued.

“There was one night when I heard him come down the stairs, before we had Shem staying at night. Father went to Jaytsy’s room. By the time I got there he was holding Grandfather’s sword over her. He heard me and turned around. I could tell by his stance that he didn’t recognize me as his son. Lilla, I was so scared. He took one step toward me . . .” Peto shook his head. “My mother moved right in front of me and ordered him to lower his weapon. I don’t know what he heard in her voice, but he put down the sword. I think he would’ve killed me if my mother hadn’t been there.”

Lilla squeezed her husband tighter.

“I knew how deadly he could be. I had watched him just weeks before defending our coach and caravan of food on our way back to Edge. Lilla, he was amazing! Even as much as you hate violence, you would’ve been impressed. Sixteen men. He seemed to barely touch them and they fell to the ground. One swipe, one thrust, one pass-by and they were dead. I was so proud of him. Then a few weeks later I was so scared of him.

“My mother took to hiding Grandfather’s sword each evening when he came home from the fort. A few times she hid it under my bed, and I never slept well those nights, even when Father was sedated. A teenager’s imagination can be overly active, Lilla. It was as if I could feel something coming from that sword through my bed. I thought it had a life of its own.”

Lilla kissed his cheek and snuggled up to his chest. “I’m so sorry you had to go through that,” she whispered.

He kissed the top of her head. “I’m sorry the Briters and our children have to see it as well. But it served a purpose for our family then. We learned to not focus so much on what the world thought, and worried mostly about getting Father well. And staying out of his way!” he scoffed sadly. “I think all our children handle it better, though. It’s been good for them to be of service *to him* once in a while. At least we have a good idea when another incident may be coming. He just feels so badly that it still happens. He pulled Young Pere and me aside to apologize to us this morning. He said he wishes he could be released from this trial.”

“What did you say to him?”

“I told him I thought the trial was for a reason. He certainly didn’t feel like leading an army to Idumea now, did he? Perhaps this was the

Creator's way of warning him against doing something rash. Maybe he needs such vivid reminders as to what he left behind, so he keeps it behind. He seemed to appreciate that answer."

"I thought he would, especially since some of that insight was mine," Lilla reminded him.

Peto chuckled. "Then Young Pere told him he was so used to waking up to see Puggah's face over his bed that he simply thought he had been in another accident he didn't remember."

Lilla laughed softly. After a moment she said, "So you don't believe your father is to be a general in Idumea."

"No."

"Does that make you worry about your grandfather's dream?"

"Slightly," he admitted. "But I keep reminding myself that my mother had dreams of a large home and a dozen children. Our families have actually doubled her dreams. I couldn't figure out my calling in the world and certainly didn't want to be the fourth General Shin. Then I came here, met you, discovered my love of mountains, and now I work part of the time with my father and part of the time with Shem. When I was a teenager I simply didn't have enough imagination—all right, I had a *very* active imagination I'll admit, just not in the correct directions—to see what my future could hold. How can I now assume to imagine how my grandfather's dream will be fulfilled?"

"Do you ever doubt what your grandfather dreamed?"

"No, Lilla, I don't."

Lilla smiled. "Nor do I. From the first time you showed me the parchment before we married, I knew it was a gift from the Creator. I could feel it. Somehow, someday, the world will still know Perrin Shin the General. Just . . . not this season."

In the morning Deck and Viddrow slowly walked home, exhausted from wrangling the orneriest bull they had ever dealt with.

"I don't remember any of the other nights being so violent," Deck told his son as he stretched out a kink in his back. "I hope no one else comes from the world for at least another year."

"Maybe next time we should bring your whip," Viddrow suggested.

“I got to watch a falcon for quite a while.”

“I doubt it would help. The rope barely held. I just hope I’m that strong when I’m an *old man*,” he confided, “because clearly I’m not that strong now. The two of us could hardly contain him.”

“So do Uncle Shem and Zaddick have Perrin-wrestling duty tonight?” Viddrow asked.

“Yep.”

“Better give them your whip.”

Perrin sat in his office going over lists of supplies and maps for the trip. Tucked in his left arm was Jaysie Briter, the six moons’ old daughter of Holling and Eraliz Briter. Eraliz had brought her over so that she could visit the storehouse for supplies without additional “help.”

Perrin was used to it; he counted on cradling someone small nearly every day. Little Jaysie had immediately cuddled into the favorite sleeping position of every baby born to the families: nestled into Puggah’s strong arm and chest. She’d sleep soundly until her mother returned. Even then, Perrin wouldn’t readily surrender the infant unless pressed.

He heard the knock at the door. “Come in,” he called, quietly so as to not wake the little girl.

The door opened. “Do you know how much I get a kick out of hearing you say that? ‘Come in!’ As if nothing’s changed in the forty-two years I’ve known you.”

Perrin smiled. “What can I do for you, Shem?”

Shem walked in and sat in a chair opposite of the desk. “Is that Jaysie?” He nodded to the bundle in his arm. “She’s getting big, isn’t she? I think every baby we get somehow grows faster than the last.”

Perrin gazed down at his softly snoring great-granddaughter and ran his other hand gently over her wispy brown hair. “That’s why there’s always a replacement around the corner. Jaysie will be getting too big for this when Salema’s third is born. I guess I’ll have to fight you for that one, though.”

Shem chuckled softly. “You will. So, planning the trip?”

“Yes. I’m a little worried about that steep section approaching the ridge. But we’ll see how the little boys handle it this year.”

“That’s not what *I’m* worried about, Perrin.”

Perrin exhaled. “So I repeat my previous question—what can I do for you, Shem?”

“The question should be, what can *I* do for *you*?”

Perrin leaned back in his chair, patting the baby unnecessarily. “What do you mean?”

“Don’t give me that blank look, Perrin. I can see it in your eyes. Your tired, baggy, eyes that haven’t seen sleep in the last two nights.”

Perrin’s face twitched. “Who told you?”

“A few worried people. But I already knew.”

A smirk developed around Perrin’s mouth. “That Creator is one nosy Being, isn’t He.”

Shem didn’t smile. “Yes, He is. He’s greatly concerned that you’re not getting rid of these ideas planted by Mrs. Yordin. That’s why I’m here.”

Perrin sighed and let his gaze drift to the desk.

“Perrin, she doesn’t know what she’s talking about,” Shem said. “She’s had a very difficult life. She’s seen her husband wounded over and over again battling for villages. Nothing in her life has ever been secure. She’s witnessed the betrayal of her son and then had to endure the loss of her husband. To have him die on the battlefield is one thing, but to have him stabbed to death by Thorne’s spies while he sat at his desk—”

Perrin fidgeted uncomfortably behind his.

“—that’s just too much for any woman to take. That’s why we brought her here. But Perrin, she’s unstable. Both Honri and Woodson noticed it as they prepared her, concerned that she’s not yet ready for Salem life.”

“But I insisted she be brought here, anyway,” Perrin said, apologetically.

Shem nodded. “And that’s all right. I agreed, if you remember, and so did the Creator. We can handle her, and she needed to get out of Sands. But she’s likely never going to be *one of us*,” he warned. “I went to check on her last night, to see how she’s adjusting. She wasn’t interested yet in talking about baptism, and again, that’s all right. But I was struck by something else. She still wants revenge, as if that will somehow restore her family, and she seemed very calm as we talked, as if she’s already planning something.”

Perrin tried to shrug that off. “Oh, I doubt that. Sometimes you can be a little too cynical.” But Perrin’s tone wasn’t nearly as sure as his words.

“I got to watch a falcon for quite a while.”

And Shem noticed. “That cynicism I learned from serving by your side for so many years,” he reminded. “And I know I need to pull it out every time someone from the world shows up in Salem.”

“Salem would be surprised to see this side of you, Guide Zenos,” Perrin chided. “The ever hopeful, ever cheerful guide of the Creator—”

“General, quit trying to change the subject,” Guide Zenos said in that tone that always made his general go quiet. “Look, I don’t want you to get caught up in whatever she’s plotting. In time I’m sure she’ll give it up after she learns how to grieve for all that she’s lost. But until then . . .”

Perrin stared at his desk again. “All that she’s lost,” he repeated quietly. “And what have I lost, Shem? She was right, you know. I live in luxury. She lived in misery.”

“Well,” Shem said, “you *did* have a few trials in the world yourself, you know. Parents killed, Mal’s Guardians out to destroy you and your family—”

“And then twenty-five years of easy living in Paradise.” Perrin sighed and kissed the baby’s forehead.

“Perrin,” Shem said quietly, “that’s no reason to feel guilty for anything. You’ve had your share of trials here, too. And remember, Salem’s not a place of comparison or competition. Don’t compare yourself to Eltana, or to anyone. Will you let go of this guilt and stop thinking about Mrs. Yordin’s ideas?”

Perrin ran his hand over the baby’s head again.

“Look at me, General,” Guide Zenos said in a commanding, yet quiet, voice.

Perrin’s head snapped up.

“Will you lose these ideas, Perrin?” he asked more gently.

“Shem, I want to. I really do, but—”

Guide Zenos leaned forward onto the desk. “When I came in I said it was as if nothing has changed in forty-two years, but *everything* has changed. You know it as well as I do. You have a duty to the Creator and to your family. Not to Idumea and what’s left of it. What happened to Eltana is tragic. We can’t change her past, we can only help her build a new future. You owe her nothing. It’s not your fault that you’re still alive and Gari Yordin isn’t.”

“I’m the last one, Shem,” he said quietly. “The last of the commanders of the Moorland offensive. Do you know what a weight that is?”

“Why are you here, Perrin?”

“What?”

“Why are you *here*? Do you remember?”

Perrin waved his hand at the maps on his walls marked with routes and trails and tower placements and warehouses for emergency rations and supplies. “How could I forget?”

“Then tell me. What is your duty . . . to the Creator?”

“To secure Salem and to mark the path for His people’s safety.” He easily paraphrased the words of Guide Pax’s prophecy from more than 160 years ago. He could have quoted them because they were seared into his mind and heart.

“And General, have you done that?”

“I suppose—”

“Not suppose, Perrin. *Have you secured Salem?*”

Perrin sighed. “Yes, Guide. I have done all that I know how to secure Salem.”

“I agree. You have. Then, General Shin, why wish for anything else?”

“I . . . I don’t *wish* . . .” he faltered.

“Yes you do, Shin! You wish for more.”

“No one wishes for more in Salem, Guide,” Perrin said smartly. “We all have more than enough.”

“But you don’t believe it, Perrin.”

Perrin looked at his great-granddaughter, then, feeling the penetrating gaze, finally looked up into the eyes of the guide. It was no use trying to hide it. Guide Zenos could read him like a book.

“What have I done, really, Shem? I’m a general of nothing,” he whispered. “We both know Guide Gleace gave me that title just to make me feel better about coming to Salem. I’ve trained a few people in how to use farm implements against stray soldiers. I’ve put up a few towers with colorful banners. I’ve hacked out four trails in the forest. I’ve had a few emergency areas stocked. And the rest of the time I sit here staring out the window as a useless old man.”

Shem’s mouth opened, stunned. “Perrin, is that *all* you really see?”

His friend shrugged and caressed the cheek of the sleeping baby.

“You’ve ensured the safety of the Creator’s people!” Shem exclaimed. “Your tower and banner system has allowed us to send messages to even the furthest reaches within half an hour! You’ve devised ways to evacuate tens of thousands of people within two days or less!

“I got to watch a falcon for quite a while.”

You’re the patriarch of a fantastic family that grows every season! No one in Salem is more revered or respected than you!”

Perrin looked out the window, as if not hearing any of that. “I know I shouldn’t feel this way, but I have to confess that I do: I’m a disappointment as a general. I haven’t fought a battle, haven’t trained an army, and the only time I held a real weapon I used it to kill one of my former lieutenants. You and I spar occasionally in the barn, and while I’m a bit slower than I used to be—”

“Oh no, you’re not,” Shem interrupted him. “You’re still astonishingly quick.”

Perrin licked his lips, almost hungrily. “See? I *could* still make a difference in the world. I’m still useful. I sometimes wonder why I was given such a natural ability if the Creator never wanted me to use it again. I sometimes wonder if . . . I’ve missed something,” he finished quietly.

“You’ve never missed anything, Perrin,” Shem whispered earnestly. “The only men with more forethought and insight than you have been the guides. You learned how to use a sword to preserve your family and to get you safely to Salem. No one I know would accuse you of being useless, Perrin!”

“Eltana would,” he reminded him. “What if I *could* have changed the shape of the world, Shem? What if there is some element of truth to what she said?”

Shem exhaled heavily. “To be honest, I’ve wondered that as well. I even asked Him about it. You weren’t the only one who didn’t sleep well last night.” He paused. “I got an answer.”

Perrin sat up taller, ready to do anything the guide was going to say.

“Perrin, the powers that control the world are too great to conquer at this time, even if we tried together. We like to think we could change the world, but Perrin, the Creator made it very clear to me that the world would change *us*.”

Perrin groaned softly. He’d suspected that answer. That was why he didn’t pray about it. Having the Creator verify it meant he had to abandon the possibility. But—

“We were successful in Moorland, Shem.”

“Because we had to be. It was the Creator’s will that we destroyed it. What they were developing there, that black powdery explosive? That was too dangerous for the world to have. It wasn’t the Creator’s will that they be successful in mastering those secrets, so He was

working with us then.

“But if we pursued going back to the world now, we’d be working without His assistance. There’s no success without Him. And Perrin, had we stayed in the world, we would’ve destroyed each other. We would’ve been no better than any other leaders there. We were simply wiser to leave an unwinnable situation. We did all we could for as long as we could. Sometimes getting out is the only solution.”

Perrin nodded reluctantly.

“This sounds,” Shem began carefully, “as if a bit of pride is involved, too. Your past twenty-five years of service haven’t been nearly as dramatic as Gari’s.”

Perrin tipped his head in guilty acknowledgement. “Perhaps a tiny—very, *very* tiny,” he emphasized, “part of me is *perhaps* a little bit jealous. I have missed it, just a small part. But the vast majority of me has been much happier here,” he added in a hurry, as if eager to get away from his confession.

“So will you *please* let go of these ideas?” Shem asked one more time. “Let go of the world and all you think is important in it?”

“Yes, Guide Zenos. I will do my best,” he said humbly. “As Salem’s guard dog, I am accountable to you, the master of Salem—”

“You know *I hate it* when you put it like that,” Shem said, irritated. “Guard dog, master . . . that’s not *us*, you know.”

Perrin cracked a small smile. “But I need to remember *us* in that way, so I remember my place.”

“But your place is as my best friend and brother, Perrin. Isn’t that enough?”

“It is,” he said. “But you’re also my guide, and you issue the orders now.”

“Then I order you to remember how desperately Salem needs you, how important you are to all of us, and I order you to *not* forget your duty to *us*.”

Perrin could only nod back to him, a lump in his throat not letting out any words.

The men fell silent, lost in thought.

After a moment, Perrin chuckled sadly. “We’re too old for this kind of nonsense anyway. Can you see us trying to sneak up on the fort in Edge through the forest? With your cracking knees and my stiff back?”

Shem smiled. “They’d hear us coming a mile away. ‘Where’s my walking stick? Shem, I want that stick back!’”

“I got to watch a falcon for quite a while.”

“Then there’s the hollering of the boys . . .”

“And their singing . . .”

They chuckled.

Perrin looked out the window and watched two of his grandchildren running to the Briter house. A third child chased them. In his arms, Jaysie sighed loudly against his chest. He instinctively bent over and kissed her small head.

Why would he want to have an office with any other kind of view?

“Thank you, Shem. I needed that.”

“The laugh or the straightening out?”

“Both, as usual.”

“So no more bad nights coming? Because I have to tell you, they wouldn’t be good on the trip.”

“Agreed. No, I’m pretty sure you won’t need to spend the night at my house.”

“Good. Then I’ll return Deck’s whip.”

Peto peeked into the office.

His father still sat behind the desk, staring out the window, mindlessly stroking the baby’s head.

Shem had left a few minutes ago, but had given a meaningful look to his rector: *Talk to your father.*

Peto cleared his throat quietly.

Perrin shifted his gaze to his son. “Come on in. What do you need?”

“Just . . . you know,” Peto said as he took a chair. “Eltana. Everything. Just wondering . . .”

“What I’m thinking about her?”

Peto raised his eyebrows.

“Remember shortly after we came to Edge, and Guide Gleace took you, Shem, and me up to the ancient temple site?”

Peto rolled his eyes. “And he saw a vision about the Last Day, a vision we watched him receive? Yes, I *think* I remember *something* about that.”

Perrin smiled at his son’s sarcasm. “Gleace said something about the army being scared away.”

“And that immediately worried you,” Peto remembered. “And it still does, doesn’t it?”

“Yes,” he admitted. “How can we scare away a third of the attacking army? And remember in The Writings the passage about the aged striking fear in the hearts of the army?”

Peto already saw where he was going with this. “Seeing you ‘come back from the dead’ surely could strike fear and scare away a great portion of the army. But they’re not attacking right now.”

Perrin looked out the window again.

“So what’s the problem, General?” Peto prodded.

“Shem told me it wouldn’t work,” Perrin whispered. “The world’s too much for us now, the Creator told him. This isn’t our path.”

“I agree,” Peto said.

Perrin looked over at him quickly. “You do?”

“Of course. Nothing Eltana suggested matches what’s in The Writings. That’s not the general you’re supposed to be.”

“And how would you know what kind of general I’m supposed to be?” Perrin asked with a subtle sneer.

Peto sighed. He really didn’t know either, despite his grandfather’s prophecy of sorts. But this wasn’t *it*, and Peto couldn’t explain why. Not to himself, not to his wife, and certainly not to his father who didn’t even know that the parchment detailing his own father’s dream existed.

“All I know,” Peto decided, “is that Salem is our home, and Lilla would hate moving far away from Calla. We’ve simply got to stay here, General, to keep Lilla happy.”

Perrin’s shoulders shook in a silent laugh. “They wouldn’t recognize me anyway. White hair, a little thicker—”

Peto smiled back. “Not exactly the same man they’d remember, no.”

Perrin sighed and went back to stroking Jaysie’s hair.



Young Pere was standing outside of the office with his fist raised in the air for the past several minutes. He’d been sent by his mother to give the men options for dinner, but he’d become too fascinated with the discussion inside to knock on the door.

Instead, his mind reeled with the words of his father. *Seeing you*

“I got to watch a falcon for quite a while.”

come back from the dead surely could strike fear . . .

Perrin Shin might not look like the Perrin Shin of thirty years ago.
But *Young* Perrin Shin certainly did.

Chapter 6--“We leave at dawn, by the way.”

It was the 57th Day of Weeding Season, the evening before the marking party was to leave.

It was also its annual flurry of activity with every visiting child, spouse, and grandchild staying at the two houses at the end of the lane, and the third down the road.

That also meant it was time for Jaytsy’s yearly, ‘We’ll never get everything ready in time,’ panic. It arrived on schedule, as she was setting out all the food on her long table to make sure nothing was forgotten for thirty men and boys. It was the constant interruptions that often had nothing to do with her task that triggered the panic.

“No, Briter—if your Uncle Cephas doesn’t want you sleeping with him tonight, I’m not about to force him. What’s wrong with sleeping at your house? Banu, why is the goat back in the house? No, she’s not lonely! Sewzi, get that kitten out of your niece’s mouth. Why it hasn’t clawed her yet, I’ll never understand. Yes, Young Shem, you get to eat this, but only on the trip. Get your hands off of it! Dinner’s at Muggah’s and Aunt Lilla’s tonight. Wait a minute, you’re not one of mine. Hogal, I do *not* need extra bodies around me right now. You’ll see what your meals will be when you get there. Now take your nephew and come back tomorrow morning. And take those sleeping packs with you! Salema and Jori are making the breads at Calla’s right? No, sweetie, I’m not talking to you. I’m just talking to myself again. Now who took the dried peaches? I know I had dried peaches. It was that goat, wasn’t it? DECKETT!”

“We leave at dawn, by the way.”

“Remember,” he said, whispering in her ear from behind and putting the bag of dried peaches in front of her, having taken it gently out of her hands, “five whole days with no men around. None at all. From the biggest to the smallest, we’ll all be in the mountains.”

Jaytsy sighed, as he wrapped his arms around her. “Thank you. I needed that reminder. Now, tell me again why I told Lilla I’d be in charge of getting the food ready this year.”

Deck laughed. “I really don’t know why you volunteered for this job! But it looks like you have enough to feed our army. Remember, we’ll be fishing along the way. No one will starve. Perrin still thinks we’re going to get in some hunting, too, but he also forgets how much Barnos and Bubba like to have hollering contests in the canyons.”

Jaytsy leaned against her husband. “And whenever our Cambo starts the grandsons with Trovato blood singing, that’s the end.”

“I think he does that just to watch Perrin cringe. Cambo told Cephas he learned some new songs that should really get Puggah groaning. One of them has to do with prancing, dancing deer.”

Jaytsy laughed. “Now I almost want to go!”

“Oh? Because if you *really* wanted to—”

“No, I don’t.” Jaytsy turned to face her husband. “The impulse died just as quickly as it rose when I thought about sleeping on the hard ground. I’ll be much happier in our soft bed. But thanks for the offer. I guess you’re going to miss me?” She wrapped her arms around his neck.

“Definitely,” he said. “I really hate cooking in the wilderness. Even your attempts are better than mine or Peto’s.”

Insulted, she smacked her husband gently on the arm.

Deck chuckled and gave her an apologetic kiss.

His grandson groaned. “Grandpa Deck, eww!” Briter Zenos rolled his eyes. “I’m going back to Grandma Calla’s.”

“Tell her dinner’s almost ready at Muggah’s, all right?” Jaytsy called after him as he pushed open the side door to get away from their mushiness.

“You really think you’re going to be all right?” Jaytsy fretted, watching their oldest grandson trot off. “You have so many little ones this year.”

“It won’t be that bad,” Deck said, trying to sound optimistic. “Besides, that’s part of the purpose: to see how the children—and their parents—can handle the paths. If a path’s too hard, we cut an easier one.”

Jaytsy was dubious. “You’ve got Lek and Salema’s two boys, Boskos’s almost three-year-old, Lori’s three-year-old, Jori’s two-and-a-half-year-old, and Relf’s toddler. He’s only a year-and-a-half. I still think that’s insane—”

“But Peto’s insisting. We should see what it’s like with one in changing cloths.”

“Then there’s also Cambo’s three-year-old,” Jaytsy continued. “Good thing Bubba had twin daughters or he’d be wanting to take them along this year, too. At least this way he can help with Lek and Salema’s boys. Makes our Young Shem seem old at seven.”

“Don’t worry. It will be great fun, I’m sure,” Deck said. “We have plenty of older boys who can help with the younger ones.”

Jaytsy shrugged. “Just make sure you and Peto assign each little one to be watched by a bigger one, all right?”

“We always do. It’s Perrin and Shem we need to keep an eye on. Sometimes they get so involved in talking, the next thing you know they’re half a mile ahead of us. Peto was thinking of assigning Young Pere to Perrin. He’s still a bit slow and might be able to keep your father’s pace manageable for the little ones.”

“You really think that will be a problem this year? I thought Father was slowing down himself,” Jaytsy confessed, worried. “When he brought Young Pere home, I thought he looked a little pale from the walk.”

Deck scoffed at that. “Have *you* picked up Young Pere lately? He’s as big as your father! I would’ve been looking a little pale myself. He’ll be fine, Jayts. He promised Mahrree he’d take that walking stick Shem’s father made him years ago. I think he plans to hit the slow pokes with it.”

“If you say so. It’s just that for some reason, I’m worried about this trip,” she admitted. It’d been nagging at her for the past few days. “Of course, I worry *every* time, I know. And I also know nothing *really* bad ever happens—”

“Only to Young Pere,” Deck said soberly, but a smirk was around his eyes. “But he promised he wouldn’t climb any trees this year or chase any porcupines. Or skunks. Or badgers.”

Jaytsy tried to smile and ignore her persistent apprehension. “And you have Shem with you. And Boskos promised Calla he’d bring the bigger doctor’s bag. It’s just . . . oh, I don’t know—”

Deck held his wife’s face. “It’ll be all right, Jayts. We’ll be careful, we’ll watch out for every little boy, and we’ll all return home

“We leave at dawn, by the way.”

again to see how all the women fared without the men for five glorious days. Women’s week? Greatest week of the year, I hear?”

Jaytsy chuckled. “Yes, we have plenty of projects to keep us busy. Since Hycy’s getting married soon, Mother should be doling out her wisdom on how to have a happy marriage.” Jaytsy raised her eyebrows in suggestion, and Deck blinked in surprise. “It’s always *great entertainment*, if you know what I mean. I love how she seems to forget about the many standoffs they had when Peto and I were young. Of course, I then remind everyone that once she was sure her husband was going to kill her, so in front of his officers and her children, she called him the nastiest name in the world, accusing him of being the son of a female pig.”

Deck laughed. “Oh, I certainly remember that night of his resignation, and I’m sure she appreciates you bringing that up!”

Jaytsy giggled. “That’s when she pulls out her well-practiced glare and reminds me we don’t talk about the world unless it’s on the anniversary.

“You know,” she added, suddenly remembering, “it wasn’t until I was older that it occurred to me they probably squabbled just to make up later. I know they *argued* upstairs, but I think they purposely picked fights with each other to do so.”

Deck frowned. “Are you sure?”

“Oh, yes. When they started shouting, Father would develop this glint in his eye that I didn’t fully understand until I married you.”

“A glint?” Deck asked, and more understanding came to him, enough to make him cringe. “Ugh, I didn’t need to hear *any* of this about your parents—”

Jaytsy laughed. “Lilla, Calla, and I will just have to make sure the younger girls are in bed before Mother gets *too* detailed. Poor Barnos’s bride went so red last year when Mother started on her, ‘How to keep your man *completely* satisfied’ lecture.”

Deck’s eyebrows went up. “Now I’ve heard a lot of Mahrree Shin lectures over the years, but I don’t think I’ve heard that one. Maybe I’ll stay behind and listen in. Could be enlightening.”

Jaytsy winced. “I know you dislike leaving the herd every year, but do you *really* want to hear your mother-in-law talking about *that*?”

Deck winced back. “You’re right. Never mind. Besides, I’ll be hearing Perrin’s, ‘Taking care of your wives’ speech on the trail at some point, anyway. With Hycy’s fiancé agreeing to go, Peto and I

better give him a warning about Perrin taking him into the woods for one of his private conversations. Although I'm pretty sure Lek or Con or Sam have said something to him already." Deck looked into his wife's eyes. "You're still worried, aren't you?"

She nodded miserably.

"We're in the Creator's hands. We pray for guidance every morning and night. Whatever happens will be His will. You can't stop His will, Jaytsy Briter. Everything is up to Him, right?"

"Yes," Jaytsy sighed.

Deck chuckled. "Well, that was a pitiful display of faith! *Yes*," he mimicked. "I'll keep an extra sharp eye out, all right?" he said pulling her in for a hug.

Jaytsy nodded.

The side door flew open. "So *this* is why you aren't over for dinner yet? Hugging in your eating room? We'll never leave on time in the morning at this rate!"

Jaytsy rolled her eyes at her father. "Everything will be ready, General. My goodness, can't a woman get in a goodbye hug?"

"Of course you can," and Perrin held out his arms.

Jaytsy and Deck laughed.

"I didn't mean *you!*" Jaytsy said. But she released her husband and went to hug her father instead. He pulled away after a moment, but Jaytsy kept her grip on him. "Make sure everyone comes home safely, all right Father?"

Perrin stepped back, held her shoulders, and looked at her critically. "When have I ever failed you?"

"Never," she admitted. "It's just that I feel nervous about this trip."

"You do this every year, you realize that? 'I'm worried about the little boys.' We've never lost one yet—not even Young Pere—and I'm not planning to lose one this year either. Satisfied?"

Jaytsy exhaled and hugged him again. "Of course."

"Good," Perrin said, "because I'm hungry and I want everyone over at our place in five minutes. We need to eat and discuss tomorrow's plans. Deck, blow the gathering horn. No time to waste!"

"Yes, sir!" Deck said, saluting sloppily, and headed out the side door.

Perrin scowled at the salute. "I'll get your brood over there, Jaytsy. Really, there's enough food here," he said, eyeing the table. "We've only got four pack horses after all. Come on!"

“We leave at dawn, by the way.”

Perrin walked through the house to the opposite door, bellowing down the hall and pounding on doors. “Dinner! Now! Move it, Briters! Hey, you’re a Shin. Why are you hiding over here? Your mother’s looking for you, Hogal. You didn’t do your chore. Dinner! Now! Move it!”

Jaytsy rubbed her forehead. “Five days . . . no men . . .”

She jumped when she heard the gathering horn blow loudly, calling for the three Zenos families down the road and any other Briter or Shin family members in the garden, orchard, barn, or fields to come in for dinner.

Jaytsy rubbed her temples some more to ease the throbbing worry.

Another loud pound on a door came from the end of the hall. “Dinner, Tabbit! Now! I hear you reading in there. Finish it later. Don’t giggle at me through the door, young lady. Move it! Jayts, are you *ever* coming?”

Jaytsy sighed. “Yes, Father!” she called. At the end of the bedroom wing, she heard him whistling his annoying ‘I’m still waiting on you,’ tune.

“Five days, no men . . .” she chuckled to herself. “Five days . . .”

Mahrree did a head count as Perrin stood in front of their family seated on blankets behind the Shin house. Dinner was finished and it was time for last minute instructions.

“Everyone’s back now, Perrin,” Mahrree told him.

“Finally?” he asked.

“Yes! Now do your talking, quick, before someone else needs to relieve themselves.”

One of Bubba’s twins squirmed and raised her hand.

“Please no, Raishel,” Perrin pleaded with the two-year-old. “Just hold it, all right?”

“Then talk fast, Puggah,” she said soberly.

The rest of the family cheered and a few cried out, “Hear, hear!”

Perrin clapped his hands loudly. “Everyone remember their assignments for the morning? Who’s hitching up the Zenos wagon?”

Lek’s and Zaddick’s hands went up.

Perrin nodded. “The Briter wagon?”

Viddrow’s and Cephas’s hands went up.

“The Shin wagon?” The hand of Sam Cadby, Lori’s husband, went up, along with Young Pere’s.

Perrin gave Young Pere a searching look, trying to see if he was up to it.

He sent a challenging look back.

Perrin moved on. “Who’s preparing the pack horses?”

Up went the hands of Holling and Bubba Briter, as well as Con Cadby, Jori’s husband, and Relf Shin.

“Loading the food?”

Jaytsy and Deck’s hands rose.

“Loading the bedrolls and supplies?”

Lilla and Peto’s hands went up.

“Keeping the smallest children out of the way while everyone works?”

Mahrree and Calla raised their hands.

“Hugging and kissing everyone too many times so we leave half an hour late again?”

The hands of every wife went up, to collective laughter.

“And who’s responsible for making sure our stop at the Trovatos’ house in Norden takes only 15 minutes?”

Shem’s hand went up. “I’ll do my best, Perrin.”

Perrin pointed at him. “Do better than that, Shem. We only need three grandsons to go with us to the trailhead, then they bring back our wagons to their barns. We don’t need to give an update about every person, and we *certainly* don’t need any tag-a-longs.”

Insulted, Lilla put her hands on her hips. “*Still* bitter about that, Papa Pere? It’s been what, twenty-four years?”

Perrin winked at her as the family laughed. “And Shem,” he said turning to him. “I’m taking only one hug from her. I know that she’s your mother-in-law, but one hug is enough. It’s amazing how strong she is for an old lady.”

Mahrree elbowed her husband. “Perrin, she’s seventy-three, only a year older than me.”

Perrin blinked at her in surprise. “Well . . . you’re not old. You’re *Mahrree*,” he finished lamely. “Now,” he said, addressing his laughing family. “Do all the visiting family members know where they’re sleeping tonight?”

Several heads of grandchildren, their spouses, and their children nodded.

“We leave at dawn, by the way.”

Lori sighed loudly to get her grandfather’s attention. “Yes, Pughah. I promise you will not find Ensio in your bed again.” She cuddled her three-year-old.

“Good,” said Perrin. “Because he felt a little *damp* last night when I picked him up to bring him to you.”

“He’d just been bathed, that’s all!”

“I’m sleeping with Grandpa Peto tonight,” Ensio announced.

“Whoa!” Peto said. “Who decided this?”

Lilla raised her hand.

“Sounds like a good plan, Ensio,” Perrin nodded at him. He then turned, folded his arms, and sent a stern look to Wes Hifadhi who was cuddling his fiancé, Hycy Shin.

Wes swallowed hard.

Perrin’s look communicated clearly that while Jothan may have been able to beat Perrin in nearly every wrestling match they had, Perrin still had a few moves left for Wes, who was built solidly as all Hifadhis were, but was merely a fraction of the size of his massive paternal great-grandfather.

It wasn’t that Perrin didn’t approve of Wes. Far from it. A year ago, at an outdoor music festival when Perrin first noticed Wes eyeing Hycy fondly, and Hycy smiling shyly back, he’d starting plotting ways to get them interested in each other, should they not be able to figure it out on their own. To have his family join with the Hifadhi family seemed like an overdue pleasure. Perrin had sidled over to Jothan faster than Hycy had bashfully made her way over to Wes, and elbowed the boy’s great-grandfather.

“What do you think?” he asked, and only later realized to his chagrin that their evaluations sounded more like horse studding. Wes was awkwardly shaking Hycy’s hand, as if having just introduced himself as a new apprentice, and Hycy was giggling ridiculously.

Jothan had chuckled in his low, sonorous way—too far away for them to hear him—as he and Perrin watched the two first-year college students try to start a conversation. “I think they’d produce a terrifying, massive son, or a terrifying, sharp-tongued daughter. In any case, I’d pay all the gold slips in the world to see that.”

The grandfathers laughed and spied on the pair as effectively as only two men practiced in spying could. In the end, or actually, quite near the beginning, their meddling assistance wasn’t needed, because Hycy and Wes certainly figured out courting all by themselves. The wedding would be at the beginning of Harvest Season.

Still, this was his granddaughter, and a grandfather needed to protect his girls. His focused glare communicated that quite effectively.

Peto gave Wes a nod. “We’ve got it figured out, Father.”

“Uh, yes, sir,” said Wes nervously, shifting his gaze between Peto and Perrin. “I’m staying at Guide Zenos’s home tonight.”

Perrin continued his glare.

Wes withered, his dark skin draining of color, and pulled his arm off from around Hycy. She pouted at her grandfather.

Sam Cadby leaned over to Wes and whispered something in his ear.

“And . . . I’m going *the moment* we’re done with family prayer? Sir?”

Perrin nodded his approval.

Wes wiped his forehead at passing the test, and Sam patted him on the back.

Perrin clapped his hands again. “Any other questions? We leave at dawn, by the way. Mahrree and Calla both have lists of those who are coming by each day to take care of the men’s chores while we’re gone. No questions? Well then, we need to end with a prayer. Since the Zenos family is joining us tonight, and considering the purpose of our trip this week, Guide Zenos, would you please offer the prayer?”

Shem nodded and began to stand up, but then paused awkwardly in mid rising.

“Knees bothering you again?” Perrin smirked.

Shem shook his head. “Perrin, you need to offer the prayer.”

“I did it just the other night.”

But the penetrating look Shem gave him told him that didn’t matter. “Perrin, how often do you have your *entire* family gathered together?”

“About four times a year.”

“Then don’t miss these rare opportunities.”

Perrin cocked his head at Shem, then shrugged. “All right, Guide. Whatever you say.”

Later, as Shem and Calla walked home along the dark road arm in arm watching their children and grandchildren running ahead of them to the house, and making sure Wes Hifadhi was still among them, Calla rested her head on Shem’s shoulder.

“Shem, what was that all about, having Perrin say the prayer?”

Shem thought about it again, as he had been for the last little

“We leave at dawn, by the way.”

while. Perrin gave a typical grandfatherly prayer—expressing gratitude for their life in Salem, for his posterity, for the success of their crops and herds, for the opportunities to serve the Creator, and how much he loved his family. Sincere, loving, heartfelt. But nothing unusual or special.

He glanced behind him to see the shadow of Perrin at the pasture, talking to Clark, probably giving him the bad news that he wouldn't be able to come on this year's marking route, again.

“I don't know, Calla. I just felt I couldn't get up. Something was holding me back, and I clearly saw Perrin giving the prayer instead. Maybe someone needed to hear him tonight instead of me. I must admit, I was struck by the image of him standing there. For a moment he seemed to me the same as when I first met him as a thirty-year-old captain. How could we ever have imagined such a future for us? Just remarkable. I never cease to be amazed by the miracle. He just needed to stand before all of them tonight.”

Perrin was, indeed, breaking the news to Clark, and softening the blow with treats from his pockets.

“I was surprised to find them, too,” he told his favorite horse as he fished out of his trousers' pockets the old apples. “A little shriveled, and from the bottom of the barrel in the cellar, but still good, right?”

Clark snuffed and curled his lips around the first wrinkled apple.

“About two more moons until the fresh ones are ready—not too much longer,” Perrin assured him as he rubbed his neck where white hairs were replacing the black ones. “We're both getting old,” he chuckled sadly. “And, my friend, you're too old to go with us this year. I'm leaving tomorrow for another marking party. This one is way up in Norden. You remember that trail, right? Did it at least half a dozen times together, didn't we?”

He offered Clark the next apple.

“But, my friend, you're thirty years old. It's been a few years since we've been out marking together, but that's all right. These younger horses need you around to keep them in line. Teach them what it means to be a true Clark Shin. By the way, do you still approve of Clark 314? He's shaping up well, I think. This trip will test his worth, that's for sure. At least he looks right—just like you at that

age. Shin horses have to be black. GrayClark 411 was sturdy enough, but I think 14 is just a bit brighter, a bit more like you. Ah, what am I saying? No one's like you."

He offered the third apple.

"So you'll be fine here while I'm gone. Kanthi and Tabbitt take better care of you than I ever did anyway. You, uh, you're all right with them braiding your mane, right? I mean, the effect was quite fetching the last time. Apparently they have a new braiding technique they want to try out on you while I'm gone. I swear those girls pamper you more than I ever did." He chuckled.

Then he went silent, stroking his horse. "Kind of hard leaving you behind again. Each year I keep thinking it'll get easier, but you and me—we blazed all those trails. Then you carried my grandsons on it. It's not the same without you there, you know. I was expecting—"

He paused to gruffly clear his throat.

"I *was* expecting that you'd be up to going with me on the Last Day. I know, I know—silly of me. It's probably still a lifetime away. We'll all be long gone before it comes," he said, not entirely believing that. "I just rather hoped it'd be like when we first came to Salem, with you carrying Mahrree and me. But look at your back bowing," he sighed sadly. "Wouldn't have been able to take both of us for the past ten years now, I'm sure. But," he leaned into Clark, who listened intently, "if the Last Day comes, and we're still both here, you're coming with me. No loads on your back, I promise. Just walk with me and Mahrree. Clark 14 can take our weight, but we're bringing you along. You deserve to be there, after all you've done, don't you, boy?"

He pressed his head against Clark, even though he knew Mahrree hated to smell horse on his face. He'd planned on bathing before he'd go to bed, anyway.

Clark nuzzled him affectionately, and Perrin smiled. Clark always understood.

"Take care, old friend. I'll see you in a few days."

Chapter 7--“Rector Shin, how look the trees?”

“I said, we leave at dawn! This is not dawn. This is clearly *later* than that!”

Perrin stood on the front porch, holding the almost-three-year-old son of Lek and Salema in his arms. Not an early riser, Fennic gripped his blankie and leaned his sleepy head against his Puggah’s shoulder.

“Now,” Perrin announced loudly, as if anyone was listening to him as the families swirled around the wagons, figuring out seating arrangements, and throwing in last-minute items. “Fennic and I are loading up and heading out. If anyone wants to join us, you best get in now!”

With that, Perrin strode off the porch and headed to the first wagon. He climbed up to the driver’s seat, balancing his great-grandson who clung to him, and stood on the bench looking at his family expectantly.

The family noticed, and mothers and wives began to give hugs, kisses, and a threat or two about behaving to their sons, husbands, and brothers who began to make their ways to their wagons. The younger sisters of the three families cheerfully pushed their brothers toward the wagons, then went back to the Shins’ front porch to wave goodbye.

Peto nodded to his father and started to climb into the Shin wagon, but he saw something that stopped him. Shaking his head in apology at Perrin, he got off the wagon and walked over to a stand of trees.

It was a good thing Guarder blood didn’t run too deeply in his daughter’s veins. Had Hycy been dressed in dark clothing like her fiancé, and if she had the deep brown skin like his that matched the shadows in which they were hiding, Peto might never have noticed.

He pulled his future son-in-law out of the firm clutches of his daughter, abruptly ending their goodbye kiss.

“It’s good for a young man to leave his beloved for a time before

his wedding,” Peto assured Wes as he dragged away the normally reticent twenty-year-old. “Ask the guide. He can tell you better than anyone.”

He steered Wes, still waving goodbye to his weepy fiancé, to the family’s wagon. Wes reluctantly climbed into the wagon between Young Pere and Barnos.

“Keep a hand on him, Barn,” his father told him. “And you have my permission to push Hycy off if she tries to sneak over here.”

Barnos grinned and wrapped a strong, brotherly arm around Wes as his own wife Ivy jumped up on the side of the wagon for one last kiss.

Lilla, standing near the front porch, caught Hycy by the arm before she had any ideas of copying her sister-in-law.

Peto hugged his nine-year-old Centia and eleven-year-old Sakal one last time, then climbed into the wagon with the rest of the Shin men and boys who were taking their seats.

Perrin shook his head good-naturedly at the farewells at his wagon and looked over at the Briters’. They had the most men and the most worried women. His eye caught Jaytsy’s, who was patting ten-year-old Atlee’s head since she couldn’t reach over to kiss him.

Perrin nodded at her as if to say, *Trust me, all right?*

Jaytsy nodded back, kissed her husband one last time, and got off the wagon, pulling her three daughters-in-law after her.

Bubba carefully dropped his little twin girls Raishel and Reikel off the side of the wagon and waved to them as they toddled over to their aunts on the front porch.

Holling’s wife Eraliz took their baby girl Jaysie from Banu and waved at him with her little fist.

Deck took one last hug from his eight-year-old daughter Yenali, did a quick head count of the bodies finally taking their seats in his wagon, and lazily saluted Perrin that his load was ready to leave.

Perrin next evaluated the Zenos wagon’s readiness.

Lek was supporting Salema’s large belly as she leaned awkwardly over the bench to kiss Briter. She looked up and waved at Perrin holding her second son, but Fennic didn’t notice. His eyes were closing as he snuggled into his great-grandfather who patted his back in the best Hifadhi beating tradition.

Calla, along with Boskos’s wife Noria, were saying goodbye to their husbands while Boskos’s little boy Utolian waved cheerfully to his baby sister Callia, cradled in Noria’s arms.

Perrin cleared his throat loudly, and Shem broke off his kiss with Calla, who then gently tugged Noria and little Callia away. They joined the rest of the women and girls already on the front porch.

Perrin nodded in satisfaction. “*Finally*. And now, gentlemen, we get to leave!” He turned around in the front bench and was about to sit down when he saw something that stopped him.

Mahrree stood in front of his team of horses with her hands on her waist. “I think you’re forgetting something, General,” she said as she tapped her foot.

Confused, Perrin glanced at Fennic in his arms, then looked at the wagons. “Head count?”

“All here!” came back the call.

He turned to his wife. “What, then?”

She threw her hands up in the air. “Me!”

Some of the granddaughters began to giggle.

“*You’re* not coming!” Perrin told her.

The grandsons chortled in agreement.

“Of course not, Perrin. I’m talking about *my* goodbye kiss.”

His family laughed as Perrin’s mouth twisted in embarrassment. “We may have to skip it this year. Fennic’s almost asleep, and I don’t want to disturb him.”

“Oh, *PERRIN!*” Shem called out in disappointment. “You can do better than that!” He turned in his seat to face the Shin descendants. “Let me tell all of you about a few times back in Edge when Perrin and I were about to leave for—”

“*All right*, Shem,” Perrin called to cut him off before he could relate any one of a variety of stories when a younger Mahrree and Perrin tormented Shem with their long goodbyes while he sat lonely on his horse.

Peto held out his arms for his grand-nephew. “Better go, Father. It’s *long* past dawn, after all.”

Perrin gave him a playful glare as he passed down Fennic, hopped off the wagon, and sauntered over to his wife.

“You always could stop all forward progress, couldn’t you?” he teased as he neared her. “You know,” he whispered, making sure no one on the porch could read his lips, “we *argued* this morning.”

“Oh, I remember,” she whispered back, blushing slightly. “But I still want a goodbye kiss. And you better make this good, Perrin. Everyone’s watching.”

“I always loved an audience.” He wrapped his arms around her.

“No, you don’t! And don’t try to dip me, or your back will seize.”

“You just never hush up, do you?” he said, and he kissed her.

Several of their grandchildren clapped and cheered.

Several others groaned loudly.

“All right already!”

“Enough!”

“I just ate breakfast, come *on*.”

“Puggah, it very, *very* late now.”

“That’s longer than Papa let me kiss Wes!”

Deck, over in his wagon, cleared his throat as the kiss continued.

“Shem, I seem to remember something you used to whistle back in Edge when they kept you waiting . . .”

Everyone laughed as Perrin and Mahrree released each other.

“Perrin, please be careful,” his wife whispered.

“I always am,” he said, a bit insulted.

“Of course you are. I’m going to be lonely, you know.”

“With all of those women all week?”

“Yes, *especially* with all the reminders of you around me.”

He grinned, gave her another quick hug, and said, “I’ll miss you too, my darling wife. Now everyone will blame me for being late.”

She chuckled and pushed him away. “Then you best be off, General.”

He winked at her, climbed back up into the wagon, took Fennic from Peto, and pointed ahead. “We’re off!”

The ride to Norden was pleasantly uneventful. Only Atlee Briter threw up, but that was expected. He did it every time he was in a wagon for longer than half an hour, and his brother Cephas held him over the side when his time came. After that, he could ride for hours with no more problems.

Nor did Young Pere fall off the wagon this year, which was usually a tradition. But in the past few days, Perrin had noticed that Young Pere seemed to be more sober, more distracted. Perhaps his dive off the schoolhouse *had* done him some good. Either that or falling off the wagon was anticlimactic in comparison.

Young Pere didn’t even participate in the wagon-jumping contest he started as an eight-year-old. As the wagons drove side by side on the wider roads, the boys would stand on the edge of one wagon and leap to a neighboring one. Perrin always pretended to not see what they were doing, and their fathers never told their mothers precisely how the boys became hurt. Usually, most of the injuries from the

marking trips were acquired well before they reached the routes. It was just another reason no women were ever allowed to come.

Perrin glanced back a few times at Young Pere, but his grandson didn't notice. He just stared off at the mountains with a faraway look, never realizing there was bruising occurring all around him, and for once, he wasn't involved.

Keeping to his schedules was always important to Perrin, but especially so on the Norden route. It was the furthest from their house and, because of its winding nature, nearly the longest one to traverse, taking a full five days of hiking to mark the entire route, up and back.

Each of the four main routes from Salem to the ancient temple site was different, because of the varying topography. Testing each route on alternating years was crucial to make sure no rock slides or avalanches had rendered any sections impassable, or that any marked trees had been felled.

None of the routes were especially difficult, except for the backup route labeled the Back Door. It was in the middle of the routes and started from the temple land expanse that remained untouched and undeveloped. Lately, people had been calling the miles' long pristine meadows of the temple The Quiet Lands. No one lived near the Back Door route, so no one was really expected to take it, except in an emergency. They checked on it only sporadically when time permitted.

The longest route was the southern Idumean Trail. It was nearly ten miles, rising up quickly on a steep climb from the valley, then traversing easily along the tops of the mountains until it reached the peaks that overlooked the ancient temple site. While a healthy adult could do the route in a day, as all of the routes could be done—and much faster by a horse and rider who knew the ways as intimately as the Shin, Briter, and Zenos families—hiking the routes usually took about two days, sometimes more, depending on those traveling.

One of the reasons for the slowness was that travelers had to decipher the markings, then forge their own ways through the forests, meadows, and rock. During the marking party trips, they removed felled trees that blocked too much of the route, but otherwise left it wild. While the deciphering process was a bit cumbersome, Perrin and Peto had tested it over and over with volunteers until they were confident that even the weakest and frailest Salemites would be able to reach safety in two days' time, with help and with few exceptions, and with adequate warning.

The warning system devised by Perrin years ago used a system of gray banners to alert Salemites when soldiers were spotted attempting to climb the boulder field above Edge. He'd been surprised to realize that Lieutenants Offra and Radan had made it into the canyon so many years ago, and now he wanted a notice if anyone should happen to *even look* at the boulders, in order to give all of Salem ample time to reach safety.

So far, none of those banners had ever seen the light of day, still folded tightly on a little-used bottom shelf of every tower, waiting for the day to send Salemites to the routes.

Even a route of only a few miles, such as the Lower Middle route which started near the Eztates behind Deck's pastures and led through the gentle hills before reaching the mountains, could take a full day or more for those unfamiliar with the terrain, or not in the best of health or ability.

In Weeding Season, some of the meadows grew grasses even taller than Perrin, which easily confused little children not paying attention. Other routes meandered through dense forests of leafy trees with undergrowth of logs and branches that required one to walk carefully, something difficult to do for the elderly who often only shuffled.

Pack horses didn't travel too well through those sections either, one of the reasons why Perrin, in his semi-annual lecture about the routes to the Salemites, emphasized that horses be taken only if absolutely necessary. There really wasn't room on the tops of the mountains for thousands of horses to be stabled anyway.

In fact, no horses could go to the ancient temple site; there was barely enough room for all the Salemites who would take refuge there. The horses that were necessary to ferry those in need to the top would be turned loose in the high mountain meadows to fend for themselves on the grasses and streams. That was one of the reasons Perrin prayed each year that Idumea wouldn't come in the Snowing Season; he wouldn't be able to bear watching the animals starve. But, he'd already privately decided, he'd make room and take feed for Clark.

Other sections of the routes near the top were just bare rock, requiring careful navigation that slowed many people down, especially those weary from their climb. That's why the Back Door route, while being the fastest and shortest at not quite three miles, was also not recommended for anyone to attempt, unless absolutely necessary.

The last two hundred paces was a steep rocky face with loose stone and no discernible trail. Perrin and Peto had done it the first year they were in Salem, when it was covered by several feet of snow. That was the slope where Perrin took his tumble and slid down all the way to the horses tethered below, before being stopped by the freezing river.

The route was Perrin’s least favorite, especially when they visited it a few years later to see the rock face the snow had covered. Although the boys loved climbing up it, and Young Pere had always wanted to try leaping off the edge and tumbling down the thick, impenetrable grasses on either side, Perrin had decided that route would be attended to only if they had time. Otherwise it was too risky, especially when four other routes, more accessible to Salemites anyway, existed.

Next year they would do his favorite route, the Upper Middle route, which held breath-taking views as it went over the peaks, affording clear views of the Norden route to the north and the Back Door route at the south.

But every Trail Marking week was a good week, Perrin decided years ago. Taking every male member of the Shin-Briter-Zenos families made the excursions adventurous and humorous, and camping for several days with the finest men he had even known reminded him just how perfect his life had become.

And it would be even *more* perfect if they stayed on schedule.

They reached Norden not quite as late as Perrin feared, and got back onto the road only half an hour later, after Mrs. Trovato hugged her two sons-in-law, grandsons, great-grandsons, and even all the other boys she wasn’t related to at least twice.

Perrin got hugged three times. Shem wasn’t even trying.

By the time they reached the trailhead to the west, they were an hour behind schedule, because a couple of families near the edge of Norden saw the guide and didn’t want to pass up the opportunity to speak with him for a few minutes, and Shem never turned anyone away.

But Perrin reminded himself that one year they were nearly *two* hours late, so this was a vast improvement. Never before did they have so many boys with them, so they were doing well. The more he reminded himself, the closer he came to believing it.

It was nearly time for midday meal when the noisy group of men and boys, ages one year and nine moons all the way up to seventy-two, and their four pack horses—Clark 14 included, so he could start

learning the routes—stood in front of the forest before embarking on the trail marked only by slashes on trees. The young men borrowed from the Trovatos were already driving the three teams back to Norden. They would come back in five days to return the horses and wagons.

Before anyone stepped into the forest, they watched as Peto stood between the two trees designating the trailhead, pulled out his sharp knife, and etched the slashes he had made four years earlier deeper into the bark of the white aspen trees. The black markings hadn't healed over, nor had the trees suffered for his cuts. They never found one yet that showed signs of not handling the slashing.

“Rector Shin, how look the trees?” Perrin called loudly.

Peto smiled and turned back to him. “Very well, General Shin! Guide Zenos, shall we continue?”

Shem grinned. “Of course! It's a beautiful day to do the Creator's work!”

None of the three men knew how this little ritual began. Probably the second year when they dragged a reluctant Deck along. But each year before they entered the forest, no matter which of the four routes, they went through their routine as the teens rolled their eyes, the older sons smiled at the custom, and the younger boys looked at their fathers in confusion. The last bit of the speech had to be uttered by Deck before they could continue.

They all now turned eagerly to him.

Deck groaned. “Please tell me there's not much more to this, because I'm already getting hungry. Let's get moving.”

“Let's get moving!” chorused everyone, and Perrin and Shem started up into the trees.

Deck and Peto glanced at each other to see who would bring up the end for the first leg of the hike as Perrin and Shem rapidly covered ground ahead, with boys trailing behind them. Deck raised his hand to volunteer and Peto nodded. Peto would position himself around the middle of the pack to watch their sons ahead and behind, while Deck herded the slowpokes at the rear.

The young fathers put their sons on their backs or shoulders, or held their little hands and followed after their grandfathers. The teenage boys came together in a few knots to likely begin planning pranks on each other, and the younger sons scattered themselves among everyone else, picking up pinecones or holding smaller boys' hands or trying to catch up to Perrin and Shem who set a fast pace.

Deck looked around to see if he could start walking, but his son Young Shem was sitting on a rock picking at something on his boot, and fifteen-year-old Nool Shin was distracted by an oddly shaped tree branch.

“Peto,” Deck called up ahead. “Tell Perrin I want Grandpa Boskos’s walking stick. I have a few boys to prod along here already.”

Peto, talking with his nephew Cephas, chuckled as he saw his father already far ahead of them in the trees, nearly out of hollering range.

“Sorry, Deck!” he called back.

“Uncle Deck, look at this tree branch,” Nool said. “It’s got this little split part and a curve—”

“—which looks perfect.” Deck yanked the branch off the tree and tried it out on his nephew.

“Ouch! Hey!”

“Now if you want to look at the branch you only need to lag behind. I have a poking stick, and you have motivation to get walking. Do so. Young Shem, your boots are *supposed* to get dirty. They’re going to look a lot worse when we come out of here in five days. Now up, or you’ll miss midday meal in two hours.”

Young Shem jumped off the rock and began to rush through the trees . . . in the wrong direction.

“Young Shem, stop!” Deck called, but it was already too late. His youngest son, the most directionless child he’d ever met, was already swallowed by the trees.

“Holling!” Deck shouted at his third son who was well up the slope, “Young Shem’s yours today, right?”

Holling, in the middle of a conversation with his cousins Barnos Shin and Zaddick Zenos, turned around. “What, *already*? Has he even started walking yet?”

Deck pointed in the direction Young Shem now stood, unable to see his brother or father because of the young pine trees that obscured his view. “Gotta stay in view of him, Holl.”

Rolling his eyes that his littlest brother could get lost barely five minutes into the hike, Holling, who stood much taller and could spy the seven-year-old’s head bouncing as he jumped while looking for a way out, strode into the thicket after him.

“And this is why,” Deck muttered to himself as he made sure no one else was straying from the non-existent path, “Jaytsy, my love, you don’t get to come. You’d want to tie all of them together in a line,

wouldn't you? Why I didn't bring my bullwhip this year, I'll never know . . .”

By the time Deck reached the sheltered plateau where they were to have midday meal, nearly everyone else was already finished. Only twice had the call come for “The Ropes!” That meant a large tree that had fallen needed to be dragged out of the way, usually by ropes tied to the ends and several men enlisted to pull it to the side.

Deck had heard the calls, but by the time he and a slow Young Shem had arrived, trailing after a hungry Holling who kept encouraging Young Shem to walk faster, the logs were already repositioned and the rest of the family was well on the way.

The other men and boys were now scattered around the area, finishing their sandwiches, picking up pinecones for the war later, or laying on the ground to rest for a few minutes. Perrin and Shem were threatening to pack up the food.

“Don't you dare!” Deck hollered as he marched over to them. “And I'm sitting down while I eat. No rushing me, either.”

“All right, Deck,” Perrin said holding up his hands in surrender. “Bit of a slow hike so far?”

Deck merely grunted as he helped himself to the sliced breads, cheeses, lettuces, and tomatoes laid out on a slab of stone. Perrin packed away the ham slices, knowing that Deck wouldn't want it. It was rare that he touched meat, and hadn't eaten beef for decades.

Young Shem sat down next to his father and began to whine. “But I don't *like* the barley bread. I wanted wheat!”

Deck twisted his neck that was tight with tension and said, with strained calmness, “Then you may go *get* the wheat bread. Look—Uncle Shem is holding it out to you, if you'd just *look up* once in a while and *see* something!”

Shem tried to hide his smile as he gave his namesake what he wanted. “So, Deck,” Shem ventured, “someone getting a little lost?”

Deck took a big bite. With a mouth full of sandwich, he garbled, “He never looks up. He just wanders off, never seeing where anyone else is going. I think we should put him on a pack horse for the afternoon.”

Perrin furrowed his eyebrows at his youngest grandson who munched his bread while trying to kick dirt off his boots. Young Shem much more preferred to sit in the house reading books with Mahrree, or try to learn the time's tables just for fun. He shunned the outside nearly as much as his grandmother used to.

“But he won’t learn to pay attention if he’s on a horse, Deck. This is one of the problems we need to anticipate—inattentive youngsters on the trail. How do we keep them watching the route?”

“Perrin, if there’s danger, I imagine the terrified children will be far more attentive,” Deck muttered, “clinging to their parents and not stopping to sit on rocks to scrape off the mud. Young Shem, enough already.”

Perrin and Deck both looked to Guide Zenos for a decision.

Shem shrugged. “I see merits to both your arguments. Young Shem, what do *you* want to do this afternoon—walk or ride on a horse?”

Young Shem swallowed down his bread. “We’re not done yet? There’s more?”

Shem smiled gently at the seven-year-old. “I’m afraid so. We walk the rest of today, all day tomorrow, then the next morning we’ll make it the temple ruin and explore it for a few hours. Then we turn around and *come back*.”

Young Shem looked at his father, disheartened.

“We’ve been talking about this for the past few weeks,” Deck nudged him. “Don’t you remember last year?”

“Well, yeah, kind of. We’re doing this *again*? Why?”

Deck groaned and took another bite. “Would one of you *please* explain this to him again? I’m not sure I’m in the best state of mind right now.” He much rather preferred to be at home tending to his cattle than trying to herd boys who were much more distractible.

Shem grinned. “Of course. Young Shem, you like stories, right?”

Young Shem nodded eagerly.

Perrin exhaled. “This is going to take some time, isn’t it? I better go check on Peto. I think he’s still at the shelter.”

“Take all the time you want,” Deck said as he took another bite and closed his eyes.

Perrin picked his way through the boys and men, patting little heads, playfully pushing larger bodies out of his way, and hiding his smirk when Wes took a big step away from him. He made his way to the edge of the trees by a large rock outcropping and walked a couple of paces around the rock, following the carefully placed ‘beaver-chewed’ logs that no beavers chewed on, but which pointed to the narrow opening.

“Still here, Peto?” he called in.

“Yes, Father. Should be only another minute,” called back the

slightly muffled voice in the small cave.

“Take your time,” Perrin said as he slipped into the crevice that led to the body of the cave. “Deck just arrived with Young Shem and he looks like he could use a few minutes of quiet.”

Peto chuckled. “One of these years, Deck just might enjoy the hike.”

“Only if we let him bring his entire herd.” Perrin squeezed himself into the cave, but to call it a cave was misleading. The rock formation was more reminiscent of the large boulder maze that served as a natural barrier between Edge and the mountains beyond it. Only Salemites knew how to find the path through the rock and knew the locations of the large caverns which served as a shelter for those coming from the world.

When Peto had discovered this rock outcropping sixteen years ago, he had the idea that emergency supplies could be stored for those on the path, just as supplies were stored at the First Resting Station and the hidden fort in the glacial valley.

During the following years, Peto and Perrin sought out other emergency reserves on their marking trips. Now each trail had two or three caverns supplied with food, bandages, and blankets, their locations marked by logs subtly pointing in the correct direction.

In the past few years they’d experimented with keeping a supply of dried fruits, jerky, nuts, and hard breads in the emergency shelters, packaged tightly in crates soaked with other scents to keep out hungry bears or other curious animals. That was what Peto was checking now.

“Still nothing disturbed,” he announced proudly to his father. “Doesn’t look like anything tried to touch the crates at all. Mrs. Appert’s idea for soaking the wood in that herbal mixture was excellent. Look, you can see mice have chewed into the crate holding the bandages, but nothing’s touched the food ones.”

Perrin nodded in approval. “I hope she’s ready to mix up another large batch.”

“We’ll get her some help. Mrs. Yordin needs a project, don’t you agree? I think we should convert all the crates in all the emergency storehouses to the herb-soaked ones.”

“All of them?” Perrin asked. “This Harvest Season?”

“Yes, no sense in putting it off.”

Perrin shrugged. “True, but that means the families coming up to replace the stock will have to bring more pack horses than usual.”

“Not a problem,” Peto said confidently. “We always have far more volunteering families than we can use. What if this year we allow everyone to go? Instead of ten families resupplying each trail, why not try thirty to forty? It will give more people practice in deciphering the slashes.”

Perrin scratched his chin thoughtfully. “That’s a lot of people and horses at one time. Could *really* leave a trail.”

“Is Idumea coming next year?”

“Not that I’ve heard,” Perrin said.

“Any damage to the terrain will be healed in the next couple of years,” Peto told him. “Or just look like an impatient herd of elk plowed through there.”

“Well, Rector Shin, sounds like you’ve already figured it all out.”

“I have, General. Just need your permission to bear-proof everywhere else like we bear-proofed this cavern.”

“Permission granted. But I think this particular cavern is too narrow for bears to get in.”

“*You* got in well enough.”

“Barely.” Perrin sucked in his gut.

Another head poking into the narrow cavern cut off most of their light. “Cephas said you wanted me, Papa?”

“Yes, Young Pere. On my list I want you to add that there’s enough room here for at least three more crates of food, and two more crates of emergency supplies. No sense in wasting this space.”

Young Pere nodded once. “Anything else?”

“Yes. Make sure everyone’s had enough to eat—especially Uncle Deck—then ask Viddrow and Zaddick to start packing up the food. We should be going again soon.”

“All right,” Young Pere said and ducked out without another word. They heard his footsteps leave around the rock.

Peto watched after him. “He’s been terribly good for the past few days,” he said quietly. “I expected at least *some* complaining from him. He always thought these emergency storehouses were a waste of time, even when we started sending volunteers to restock them every Harvest instead of us doing it. And don’t get him started on the futility of the emergency stores for the valley.”

Perrin wasn’t about to. More than ten years ago, Guide Hew Gleace had told Salem he’d been impressed upon by the Creator that they should have four years of supplies in reserves, “Just in case.” The valley had erupted in a flurry of activity to begin the project,

growing extra crops, making new storage buildings, and devising strategies to preserve various foods. It had taken years to stock enough for 150,000 people for four years, but last year Guide Zenos declared that Guide Gleace's admonition from the Creator was finally completed, and Salemites could be proud of their immense accomplishment. Now when the words from the Great Guide Hierum's prophecy were to come to pass, about famine after Mt. Deceit's "awakening," or if any other disaster hit Salem, the valley would be ready. The storehouses, built sturdy enough to last one hundred years or more, would be resupplied and rotated every year to make sure that Salem's ability to deal with any disaster, well into the next century, was secure.

Rector Shin had read that announcement from Guide Zenos in their congregational meeting, and while the congregation buzzed quietly and proudly, Young Pere, who was seated behind Perrin, had grumbled, "What, we'll have to *keep* doing this waste of time?" Perrin always cringed when he remembered it, because Young Pere was loud enough that half the congregation heard him, and Rector Shin, still addressing the congregation, locked eyes briefly with his son, who merely glared back at him.

Kindly, no one in the congregation had ever said a word to Peto about the incident, but for weeks afterward many sent him looks of commiseration.

"I also noticed Young Pere's been quieter," Perrin said. "Maybe he's slightly jealous of Cephias. He's been walking and talking with you, and seems quite interested in the routes."

"Cephias wants to study geography," Peto told him. "If ever I need an assistant, he'd be the man. He has a good eye for the ground. But I don't get the impression Young Pere cares that Cephias and I are talking."

"Well then, Peto, maybe, *just maybe*, Young Pere's starting to grow up a bit. Maybe he's finally looking past himself and what he wants and is considering everyone else's needs instead."

Peto sighed. "I hope so. I hope he's sincere and not creating a situation."

Perrin squinted. "What do you mean?"

Peto stared at the gap where his son used to be. "Setting us up. Acting the way we want him to, so he can get what he wants later."

"That'd be rather devious of him," Perrin decided. "But also typical. Do you know what he might want?"

“Hmm? What?”

Immediately that set off Perrin. “Don’t give me that, ‘Hmm?’ Peto, you heard me. I haven’t heard him talk about a profession yet. But he has an idea, doesn’t he? So tell me, what does Perrin Shin the Younger want to do with his life?”

“Nothing . . . yet.”

Perrin was dubious. “Really.”

Peto shrugged. “He had an idea a year or so ago, but I turned it down. I didn’t really know what I wanted to do at his age, either, if you remember.”

But Perrin knew when his son was evading an issue. “So what did he say a year ago?”

“Doesn’t matter, Father.”

“If it didn’t matter, you wouldn’t be dodging the question!” Perrin said impatiently. “So what did he want to do?”

Peto finally looked his father in the eyes. “What did you do when *you* were eighteen?”

“Went to Edge,” he said easily. “Why?” His face fell as he understood. “Ah, Peto—*NO!*”

“Don’t worry—that’s what I said. And no one can become a scout to the world without the permission and blessing of the family *and* the guide.”

“Does Shem know?”

“Young Pere went to him first, hoping he’d talk me into letting him go.”

Perrin rubbed his forehead. “That stupid, stupid boy.”

“But it was a year ago, remember? I think he gave up the idea when he saw how adamantly Shem was against it. What he’s up to now, I have no idea.”

Perrin groaned softly, still thinking about Young Pere in Edge. Province 8. Whatever.

“Perhaps . . .” Peto started slowly, waiting for his father to look at him, “perhaps you could walk with Young Pere this afternoon? Maybe slow down the pace a bit? Keep to the middle of the pack? I’ll be bringing up the rear this afternoon. I wanted to spend some time with Wes, have a little future-father-in-law chat with him. Deck could lead with Shem. Maybe you could tell Young Pere you’re feeling a little tired, wanted to walk with someone else who’s been a bit slow today as well—”

“But he hasn’t been slow. Neither have I.”

Flight of the Wounded Falcon

Peto raised his eyebrows at his father. “*You’re getting slower*, General. If he’s accompanying you for several hours, maybe he’ll confide in you what he’s up to.”

“Ah. Yes. Good plan. Maybe I *am* getting slow.” Perrin tapped his head. “You know, Peto, I still think you could’ve had a career in strategy planning.”

“That’s what you said when you made me an honorary lieutenant when I was seventeen, but then you never promoted me,” Peto reminded him, and folded his arms. “Why not?”

“Because when you were thirty-three you were promoted to rec-tor. I realized that in many ways, you outranked me already.”

Peto shrugged at that. “But in the years leading up to that?”

Perrin was examining a crate closely. “Hmm? What?”

His son chuckled.

Chapter 8--“What are you hiding, Puggah?”

Half an hour later on the trail, Young Pere watched his ‘wearying’ grandfather walking alongside him. He wasn’t even using his walking staff. Well, not in the way it was intended. He swatted bushes and tapped a few trees, and occasionally used the hooked end to try to catch the arm of one of his grandsons or nephews.

“I could become a shepherd when I get older, like the elder Boskos Zenos,” he mused out loud. “I see the appeal of wrangling wayward sheep. Oops, sorry about tripping you up there, Vid. Guess I need more practice. Again, Viddrow? If you’d just keep up a good pace . . . oops.”

But he certainly didn’t seem to be ‘wearying’ that he needed to match pace with an equally ‘weary’ Young Pere. Still, Young Pere wasn’t about to let this opportunity go to waste.

“So Puggah,” he started quietly once the pack began to spread out along the trail, leaving the two of them somewhat alone, “when do I hear the rest of the stories?”

“What stories, Young Pere?” Perrin swatted at another shrub, accidentally stripping it of a season’s growth of leaves.

“The ones Relf said he heard when he was planning to get married. The ones Barnos said only the ‘mature’ children are ready to hear. The ones Hycy will most likely be getting all the details about while we’re gone on this trip.”

“Do you have something to announce? I wasn’t aware that you were courting anyone—”

“No, Puggah. I’m not getting married. But I *am* almost eighteen.”

“Aren’t you getting a little old for *stories*?”

Young Pere ignored his tone. “What was Mrs. Yordin talking

about the other morning? About our family's slander?"

Perrin paused. "You've heard some of this before, Young Pere. Why do you want more?"

"Because I want to know the truth."

Perrin sighed. "Here's the truth: The world was a terrible place, it became worse since we left, so we were right in coming to Salem."

"What are you hiding, Puggah?" he said boldly. "What are you *embarrassed* about revealing?"

From the corner of his eye Young Pere saw Perrin's jaw shift. "I have nothing to hide, and I'm embarrassed about nothing."

"So why does Muggah gloss over those details when she teaches the World History class, and only says that 'some false stories were spread'? Why do you keep us out of the eating room when newcomers arrive? Why do they all look at Mahrree Shin as if they're surprised to see her still living with you—"

That drew a reaction.

Perrin turned swiftly to glare at him. "Why are you saying that?"

"Because I want to know," a prepared Young Pere said coolly. "I've seen it, Puggah. People from the world *look* at her."

Perrin stopped, gripped Young Pere by the arm, and dragged him into a cluster of trees.

"Listen to me, and listen to me carefully, Young Pere." His voice was low and bordered on threatening as he pushed his grandson deeper into the trees and out of earshot of the family. "Your grandmother is the most wonderful, honest, and *courageous* woman I've ever met. She's braver than most of the soldiers I knew. She said and did what was right, no matter what the rest of the world said. And they said *plenty!* People 'look' at her because they'd been taught the world destroyed her, but it didn't. It tried, though. The whole world was afraid of her, of one little inconsequential woman at the Edge of the World, of what she could see. She saw their lies and had no reservations about exposing them, even if it meant her death, which Nicko Mal had planned. But the world never stood a chance to destroy Mahrree Peto Shin! The only one who could stop her was me. She never backed down without being forced to by a sword! Do you understand that, boy?"

"Yes, sir!" Young Pere responded automatically. The ferocity of his grandfather's response startled him, and there were bits and pieces he didn't quite understand. But enough of what Puggah said verified what Young Pere had recently learned from Mrs. Yordin. Finally he

was getting to some truth.

“Look,” Perrin’s voice softened a bit, “the world never appreciated the kind of woman your grandmother is. Honestly, I didn’t for many years either. She was always just a small woman from a tiny village far away from Idumea. But years ago my great uncle Hogal told me she had the potential to be the most dangerous woman in the world. I told you some of this when you and Cephas turned thirteen, remember?”

He did, a little. But the story seemed *washed* back then. He wanted the grittier version. Young Pere tried to nod, but the branch of a pine he’d been shoved into scratched the back of his head.

“At the time I thought Uncle Hogal was mistaken,” Perrin continued, “but he was right. She’d figured out the world, Young Pere. There’s nothing more dangerous than someone discovering your secrets and threatening to expose you.” His grandfather sighed, as if he knew that personally. “So they created lies to discredit her. They had to convince the world they destroyed her, too, just to counter her influence. She truly became the most dangerous woman in the world.” His eyes sharpened with renewed energy as he glared at his grandson. “So yes, people ‘look’ at her—in awe, in fear, in amazement. And so should you!”

If Perrin thought the intensity with which he confronted his grandson would end the questions, he was wrong. Young Pere had been planning this conversation for the past few days, and braced himself for the responses, too.

He took another breath and looked his grandfather directly in the eyes. He was one of the few men who could do so, since hardly anyone else was as tall as him.

“So, General, why would Thorne be afraid of Perrin Shin?”

Perrin cringed. “This isn’t the time—”

“This is precisely the time!” Young Pere insisted. “We have all afternoon. Even longer if we stay standing here in the trees while everyone else goes on ahead.” He offered half a smile to his grandfather.

Perrin didn’t accept it. He groaned softly, turned Young Pere, and pushed him back to the trail.

The two men walked side by side for a few minutes in silence, allowing Hogal and Atlee to run past them up to the pack horses being led by Boskos, whose son Utolian, or Toli as everyone called him, was napping in the child carrier on one of the horses. The two men

paced themselves to not catch up to him, and Young Pere waited patiently for Perrin to speak.

“You know, your Aunt Calla wrote all about this in her book.”

Young Pere was already planning to read it when they returned. “I guess it always seemed too hard to read when I was younger. But it’s always better to hear the story from the source, right?”

Perrin growled quietly.

Eventually he said, “He . . . uh . . . *he* was my captain. In Edge. At the end.”

Young Pere nodded encouragingly.

His grandfather watched the ground as they walked. “His father Qayin and grandfather High General Cush sent him to watch me after I tried to kill an Administrator. I was a little irrational following the murder of my parents. Shem made sure I survived that day.”

Young Pere knew parts of that story, but didn’t know how many more details he dared to ask. Suddenly it all seemed very interesting.

“He was a young captain,” Perrin continued slowly. “Only twenty-two when he was promoted. Before that the youngest man to be made captain was barely twenty-four.”

“Who was that?” Young Pere asked.

“Me.”

Young Pere waited for more.

“Thorne was ambitious, intelligent, talented, and utterly devoid of any conscience. All that he did, he did for ambition’s sake. All he wanted to do was become High General, and he was hoping to do so through me. For a time he, uh, had his eyes set on Jaytsy.” Perrin’s voice developed an agitated quality. “Your Uncle Shem preserved her from future, uh, from . . .” He sighed heavily.

Young Pere could tell he was trying to dance around something, and because the general never danced, he was pretty clumsy at it.

“Anyway,” Perrin picked up again, as if he’d said the words he failed to, “Shem has saved this family so many times, I’ve lost track. After Jaytsy married Deckett, the captain tried another strategy—exposing your grandmother.”

“How would that help him?” Young Pere asked.

Perrin’s jaw shifted again. “I think he thought he was helping me. You see, I did something stupid.”

Young Pere waited for the explanation. They walked over a gentle ridge before Perrin continued.

“I saved his life. On the battlefield. He would have been sliced in

“What are you hiding, Puggah?”

two if I didn't take out his attackers. You should know, Young Pere, I've taken a . . . a *few* lives in my time—”

Young Pere knew that number, from Relf. Fifty-three, including Lieutenant Radan up by the glacial fort. If fifty-three was only “a few,” what would have constituted “a lot”?

“—and I've felt the loss of each one. None deserved to live, but their deaths have always weighed on me anyway.”

They silently passed a grazing deer before Perrin spoke again.

“As if that wasn't enough, I went back after the battle and made sure he received medical attention. I was going against the direct orders of his grandfather just by being out there. He thought he owed me for that, I suppose. He seemed to think he was doing me a favor by revealing that my wife was a traitor to the government. I think he was trying to free me from her somehow.”

Young Pere pondered how to phrase his next question, but decided on the direct approach. “Was she? A traitor?”

He expected to be shoved off the trail again, but instead his grandfather answered with a casual, “Yes. She was. So was I.”

That confused him. “But . . . I thought you were to be High General of Idumea? That's what we've always been told . . . and then you refused it because you didn't believe in what the Administrators were saying.”

“That's true. I didn't believe in them for many years. I had what *they* would consider traitorous thoughts for a long time. And I shared those thoughts with my wife. Our minds were always the same, and we wanted a very different life than what we had in the world. We didn't know how to do it, though.

“The problem is that those with power feel very threatened by anyone thinking differently than they do. The world isn't run like Salem, Young Pere. In Salem, people have the freedom to do what's best for their families. For some people, having fourteen children is best. For others, having one is best. Some choose to teach their families on their own, others prefer to have the community schools help. Some choose to leave our society to try a different way of life, but are still considered part of our families. Some people work in one profession their whole lives, others change their work every year. We have freedom to think, to challenge, to experiment, to choose.

“The world won't allow that. Most in the world don't even have a concept of what happiness is. They think it's acquiring the next new thing or having more of something than their neighbor. They know

nothing of satisfaction, nor have any of those poor, wretched citizens ever felt real joy.

“The only way leaders in the world can maintain their power is by limiting everyone else’s freedom to choose—family size, education, where to live, what to know, to do, to believe, even to worship. When we were there, any time someone even suggested a different way of doing something, that idea was immediately seen as treasonous to those in power. And the idea—or even the person—was quashed.

“Leaders in the world don’t care about those they lead, Young Pere. They care only for the power they have. I was a legitimate threat to that power, and so was my wife. Before we ever heard of Salem we knew we didn’t belong in the world, but we did the best we could while we were there. I couldn’t support the Administrators or do what they expected of me as High General, so I resigned the same day I was given the commission.”

“So you *were* High General? But your uniform—it was only a colonel’s.”

“Never had time to buy the new jacket, Young Pere. I didn’t let the title rest on me long enough to become it. I couldn’t let it.”

He sighed again and looked up the path in the distance. Young Pere could tell he was working on the next thing to say.

“You see,” Perrin began slowly. “There was a day when . . . how do I put this?” he murmured to himself. “The Remembrance Ceremony,” he said suddenly. “One year after the land tremor, almost a year after my parents passed, I was to stand before the village and read the names of all those who lost their lives in the tremor. I stood on that platform and . . . You have to understand, it’d been a very difficult year. Edge was on the brink of starvation when we returned from Idumea with twenty long wagons full of food.

“During that following year, word spread throughout the entire known world that I would risk everything to feed my village, and the world wanted a leader like that. By the time of the Remembrance Ceremony, I was finishing a bad year after dealing with the loss of my parents, and with my nightmares,” he added apologetically. “As I stood on that platform that morning the crowd took up a chant: ‘General Shin. General Shin.’”

“The idea of being general hit me with full force. In a flash I envisioned how things could change if I were High General. First on my list was to properly avenge my parents. Second was to properly

remove Chairman Mal. I was sure he was behind it all. And from there . . . Young Pere, I’m ashamed to say, I *did* picture myself as Mal’s replacement, just like Eltana Yordin said. I could see myself as general of the world . . . or as king.

“Another officer and friend of mine, Brillen Karna, was next to me on that platform. I think he was worried that I might have another episode with my father’s sword, because all I did was stand there listening to the chant and making all sorts of plans in my mind. He asked me if he could help. He only meant to take over the reading of the names, but he’d been my lieutenant at the beginning and was loyal to a fault. He’d help me with anything, and I realized I had a lot of loyal friends in the army. It could work. I *could* do it. I could take over *everything*.”

Perrin paused, as if reliving that moment.

Young Pere noticed his gait had slowed considerably and he reduced his to match it.

“I looked up at the crowd that was shouting my name louder and louder,” Perrin continued. “And as I surveyed the crowd, I suddenly noticed my wife. There stood Mahrree, at the very front, with immense worry in her eyes. Behind her were my daughter and son, concerned. And then . . . *then it hit me*. Quite literally, Young Pere. There have been a few rare times in my life when the Creator reached down and just *thumped* me upside the head!”

He made a large swatting motion with the walking stick, taking out an innocent shrub.

“I heard the words just as strongly as I felt them. He said, ‘This is not my will for you, Perrin Shin! Do not forget who you are!’”

Perrin smiled easily and held out a hand. “And just like that, I lost the desire for that title of High General. I knew my future lay somewhere else. Where, I didn’t know, but as I looked at my wife I knew I’d be taking her somewhere else, maybe even to Terry’s lands.

“That day I started planning a way to get the Administrators to open up exploration to the west, and that evening I decided I’d make copies of Terry’s map that I had hidden in my office to send out to the world. But right then on the platform, I winked at my wife, she smiled at me, and suddenly I knew everything would be right, as long as I never tried to take power the Creator didn’t intend for me to have. I wasn’t a strong enough man to handle it properly, no matter what Eltana Yordin wishes.”

“Puggah,” Young Pere said softly, “I can’t think of any other man

than you who could have handled the power.”

Perrin shook his head. “No man can handle that much power unless the Creator assigns him to it. There’s only one man alive right now who could’ve done it, Young Pere. And at midday meal he was changing the cloths of your nephew Grunick while Relf adjusted the pack horses.”

Young Pere stopped in his tracks.

Perrin glanced back at him.

“You mean . . . *Uncle Shem*?”

Perrin nodded and continued to walk slowly.

Young Pere caught up to him.

“For all intents and purposes, Shem Zenos is King of Salem,” Perrin told him as they walked together. “And tonight that king will undoubtedly help prepare dinner, then serve his sons and nephews, and clean up after them. Then he’ll sleep on the ground under the stars without a servant in sight. That’s the Creator’s idea of a king. The world’s idea? Well, I met King Oren many times, Young Pere. He couldn’t do anything for himself, insisted on sitting in the plushiest chairs made of cloth you don’t even know exists, and was the most self-interested and ineffectual leader the world ever saw, just like his ancestors before him.”

“But, Uncle Shem . . . he’s not *like a king*.” Young Pere struggled with the idea.

“Exactly. He’s more like Salem’s servant, isn’t he? I’ve never known him to say no to anyone wanting a moment of his time. He goes out of his way to comfort someone grieving or in distress. He cares nothing for himself, but only for those he serves. He acts just as the Creator would if He were here.”

Young Pere couldn’t process that. From what he remembered in history, kings don’t tear up when little children bring them half-eaten cakes as gifts.

They walked for a time, both lost in thought, before Young Pere remembered Puggah didn’t finish the story.

“So . . . you left Edge? Couldn’t you have reasoned with the Administrators, or gone off and done some other kind of work?”

Perrin scoffed. “The Administrators were shocked by my resignation and worried about what I might do next. They never would’ve just let me ‘go off’ and do something else. Mrs. Yordin told us they were convinced I was planning a takeover. To show you how reasonable they were, they illegally passed laws to punish us merely for

speaking out. We escaped before they could. Shem got us out, right past the captain.”

Young Pere noticed his grandfather avoided saying the name of Thorne.

“It was the captain’s biggest failure. We snuck past his soldiers posted at our house, which Jothan had knocked out with sedation, eluded several more groups in the forest, and got your aunt safely out even though she was within weeks of birthing Salema.”

Heaviness hovered in the air as they slowly walked among the trees, as if something unwelcomed was closing in, like storm clouds on the day of a wedding.

Young Pere waited to hear what his grandfather was avoiding.

“The last man I saw in Edge was him. The captain,” Perrin said, still sidestepping his name. “During the lightning storm that guaranteed our escape, I looked back and he saw me as well. And the look in his eyes . . .” Perrin continued walking in silence for a moment, his face contorting at memories he wasn’t expressing.

“Abandonment,” he said finally. “He seemed to think I was *abandoning* him. Here he was, trying to capture us to send us to trial, and he has *the nerve* to look at me like a frightened child watching his father run away!”

He stared into the trees, his jaw shifting angrily as if he’d spied the captain hiding ahead. “He reported that all of us were dead, that Shem was a traitor whom he killed himself. He actually had killed the last son of King Oren, Dormin—a wholly innocent and excellent scout for Salem—with my father’s sword. The captain knew full well that wasn’t Shem. Our capture would have been the greatest triumph of his very young career, and he failed it. When Mrs. Yordin said my return would scare him, she was right. But Shem’s return would be even worse for him. After you’ve bragged to the world that you killed the greatest traitor, the last thing you’d want would be for him to show up years later to tell everyone you *missed*.”

Young Pere smiled faintly at that. There was more to the story, he knew. But this was the most his grandfather had ever revealed, far more than when he was only thirteen. That version had been brief and neat, like a small puncture wound, and not nearly so full of avoided emotion as this telling. Young Pere felt as though he were gazing into an open wound, still festering after many years. It was all just as Mrs. Yordin had told him.

They walked again in silence, Perrin lost in his thoughts, and

Young Pere searching for the right words to express his. Finally he gave it a try.

“Puggah, what would happen to the world if Perrin Shin returned to it now?”

Perrin exhaled. “Don’t know. Not going to find out, either. I’m a bit old for that anyway. Actually, Young Pere, I do know,” he whispered. “Shem says it would be a failure. The world’s too far gone for us to save it. All we can do is save people *out* of it.”

“Puggah, I wasn’t talking about the seventy-two-year-old Perrin Shin,” he said carefully. “I was talking about the eighteen-year-old one. What if he returned to the world to clear your name, correct the history—”

Perrin groaned loudly. “No, no, no. Young Pere, you don’t know who you’d be dealing with! Thorne was a young, naïve menace then, but now? He’s a battle-hardened general. You have no experience with men like him. The world is not the place for you. We don’t care what the world thinks of us. Besides, you couldn’t handle it.”

Young Pere’s hand clenched into a fist. “I know I could, Grandfather. All I need is the opportunity to prove myself. All I need is a couple of seasons to—”

He should have expected *that* shove into the forest, but he was unprepared for it until he felt his head banging into the trunk of a tall evergreen. Perrin’s hand on his chest held him firmly in place.

“Young Perrin Shin, I said *NO!*” His tone made the hair on the back of Young Pere’s neck rise up. “You have no idea what the world is like! It’s far more complex and depraved now than you could *ever* imagine. The few things the guide has told me—”

“Shem knows nothing!” Young Pere interrupted hotly.

Perrin pushed him harder against the tree. “The *guide* knows everything! But he’s not going to burden us with that knowledge.”

Young Pere doubted that.

Perrin took a deep breath. “Look, if going back to the world would have been a failure for Shem and me, it will be a complete disaster for you. You don’t understand those people. They’re not even *looking* for someone to save them from the rule of the generals. The citizens of the world have *let* the generals take charge. They’re not interested in thought or exploration; they’re selfish creatures who just want to be fed and entertained. You can’t do anything with apathetic people. All those who wanted a better world left for Salem, or are too timid to do so, or died long ago.”

“What are you hiding, Puggah?”

Young Pere opened his mouth to speak, but Perrin grabbed him by the arm with one hand and pointed at him with the other.

“Say no more of this! Ever! If there’s anything you can try to understand today, it is this: I do not *ever* want you going to the world. You are too important to me to lose you. Please, Young Pere, believe me, just this once. I *do* know what I’m talking about.”

It was no use to argue with him, Young Pere knew. Not when he had that look in his eyes and Young Pere could feel sap starting to stick to the back of his head. He did his best to nod.

His grandfather released his grip and nodded back. Shaken, Young Pere started back to the trail, but Perrin grabbed his arm and yanked him back. He caught him in a tight embrace which startled Young Pere so much that tears welled up in his eyes.

“I love you, boy,” he whispered. “You have no idea how much. I would do anything to keep you safe. *Anything.*”

Young Pere found it difficult to answer, and not just because his grandfather held him so firmly. “I know, Puggah,” he choked out. “I know.”

His grandfather gave him a quick kiss on the cheek and stepped back to hold Young Pere’s face in his hands. “Your soul is more important to me than life itself. *Please*, Young Pere.”

A tear of frustration leaked out of his eye and landed on his grandfather’s hand, but Young Pere managed a whispered, “All right, Puggah.”

Perrin smiled and his eyes brightened. “That’s my boy!” He playfully slapped his grandson’s cheek then looked around the ground around him. “Dropped that stick around here somewhere . . . ah, there it is. Old men like me have a hard time getting around, you see.”

Young Pere couldn’t help but snort as his grandfather bent easily to get the walking staff he obviously didn’t need.

“Sure, Puggah,” Young Pere said as they got back on to the trail. He noticed his father not too far behind him, walking with Wes and little Cori.

Peto gave Young Pere a quizzical glance as the two of them emerged from the dense wood.

Young Pere ignored him and continued on. Undoubtedly Puggah would give him a meaningful look later to explain their continual disappearing and reappearing on the trail.

A moment later Puggah was again next to Young Pere. After some silence he said in a cheerful voice, “A few weeks ago I saw Mr.

and Mrs. Ison's daughter talking to you after Holy Day services. She seems to be a nice young lady. Your Muggah said she was quite a smart girl. Did very well in her world history class."

Young Pere tried not to sigh. There was that less-than-subtle hint again about courting someone. But why would he single out one girl when it was far more interesting working a whole flock? He had experiments to do, limits to push. For example, he'd already perfected getting a girl to go all starry-eyed in only two verbal exchanges or less. It now took only fifteen seconds before their breathing quickened, their eyes grew larger, and their cheeks flushed.

It wasn't so much what he said to them, but in the way he leaned in and towered over them, putting them slightly off balance. Then he moved in closer than custom allowed, turned one side of his mouth up into a sly smile, and narrowed his eyes slightly as he stared hard into hers. That's when they practically crumbled before him.

Girls were so easy. No challenge at all. He was considering trying next for a genuine swoon.

For that matter, elderly women were pretty easy, too, under the spell of his *ability*. Mrs. Yordin's revelation that his grandfather had a flock of females surprised him so much that he didn't confess he had one as well. He briefly wondered whose had more members.

He glanced sidelong at Puggah. That's what he'd look like in about fifty-five years. Not too bad, Young Pere considered. He wondered how long the flock would follow him. Young Pere had plenty of years to play shepherd.

"Yes, she seemed nice enough. Pretty too, I suppose," Young Pere offered. That vague description fit nearly every young woman in their congregation, which was useful because he had no idea which one she was.

Perrin smiled. "Best decision I ever made was marrying a wonderful woman. Don't put it off too long. There are some great benefits to coming home each day to a wife who you adore and who adores you back . . ."

Young Pere tried not to cringe. They still had quite a ways to go, and Puggah was about to give the "advantages of marriage" talk.

Instead, he let his mind wander as his grandfather rambled on about "someone to share your soul with" and "a companion equal in strength and ability to meet the challenges of life." His mind wandered over the mountains, down through valleys, and past the ruins of Terry's vast lands Young Pere visited when he was fifteen. There

“What are you hiding, Puggah?”

his mind took a sharp turn east and headed many miles to a place that used to be called Sands.

He wondered what a desert looked like, and how deep the sands went. He'd just have to find out for himself.

Mrs. Yordin was right. The old man next to him prattling on about “understanding the purpose of life” *had* become weak and fearful.

Young Pere would prove it to him.

Perrin knew his grandson wasn't listening. He'd seen that glassy-eyed look enough times because he used to have that same expression when he was that age.

They hadn't spoken for about a quarter of a mile and continued on in silence that late afternoon, nearing their designated campsite where everyone besides Peto, little Cori, and Wes, who were still behind them, should already be. Perrin wondered just where Young Pere was. His body was there, but his mind had been missing in action for quite some time.

There was only one person he thought would know where Young Pere was headed, and fortunately, at moments like this, he wasn't far away.

Uncle Hogal? Perrin sent out the thought. Hogal, he's not listening. I'm afraid I'm losing him. How did you reach me?

Ah, my boy, you were ready to listen. You were already in pain, but you refused to acknowledge it. You'd been on the wrong path for some time and had made some serious mistakes. You were ready for something better. Your heart was beginning to soften. But his, I'm afraid, is hardening.

And his arrogance is growing, isn't it?

It is. It's going to take a lot more than moving a few bales of hay like you did in Edge to reach this one.

Especially since he already moves hay. Hogal, I've told you before: whatever it takes, I'll do it. Nothing's more important than my boys and girls. I've never forgotten Tuma Hifadhi's message to me when I was a young father. He told me that sometimes it was only grandfathers who could say what their grandchildren needed to hear. He wasn't just making small talk; he was a guide seeing my future. He traveled all that way as an eighty-seven-year-old just to tell me that and to give our family a blessing. Now I need to act on that, and

Flight of the Wounded Falcon

I'm ready to do whatever it's going to take to get Young Pere on the right path.

We know, my boy. We worry about him, too. Remember, the Creator already has a plan, and He's pleased that you've volunteered.

Chapter 9--“That’s one nasty stick.”

The area near the top of the peak was a favorite camping spot. Not only did it afford an impressive view of the surrounding peaks and valleys, it was relatively flat, had soft, sandy patches that were ideal for sleeping on, and was surrounded by pine trees with the densest and most spherical pinecones in the area.

Perfect for war.

Perrin had forgotten about that as they approached the end of their hiking for the afternoon, too lost in thought to consider an ambush. But the first sharp cone that hit him in the shoulder immediately reminded him where he was and what he’d just walked into.

“*Attack!*”

Perrin barely had time to shield his face and dive behind a bush as the barrage of pinecones beat upon his body. Fortunately, he wasn’t the main target.

Most of the boys were aiming for Young Pere. They remembered how two years ago he’d run ahead on the Lower Middle trail, collected a bag full of pinecones, climbed up a tree, and pelted each one of them as they ran for cover underneath him.

The tree had gotten its revenge, however. That was the second time Young Pere slipped and impaled himself on a branch. The year before, on the Idumean trail, three lumberjacks had to cut down a tree to rescue Young Pere when a branch punctured his thigh and refused to let go.

The stick that stabbed Young Pere two years ago had only entered into his bicep, and Peto was confident they didn’t need to recruit assistance to cut his son free this time. Peto had climbed a nearby tree and hacked off the offending branch with his axe to free Young Pere, while Boskos Zenos waited below, his new doctor’s bag open and ready.

So today Perrin was suffering because of Young Pere's previous pinecone attack, but not nearly as much as his grandson. Perrin took cover under a wide, thick shrub and scabbled along the ground to a small opening in the foliage where a few stray pinecones fell. He pocketed those, then watched from the concealing safety of the branches and laughed quietly at the scene.

Young Pere frantically searched for shelter from the bombardment of more than twenty men and boys pelting him with pinecones, dodging this way and that, and always into a new assault.

It wasn't as if they could help it, Perrin decided long ago. Nearly every young man there had an ancestor who had been a soldier. Although Salem was a peaceful land, it was in the boys' blood to engage in warfare, at least occasionally. Plotting, fighting, shouting, pursuing—they just had to get it out of their systems sometimes.

Still flailing to defend himself from the attack, Young Pere ran over to his cousin Lek, snatched Fennic from his arms, and held him in front of him like a shield.

"Oh, unfair!" Lek cried. "Holding a child hostage? That's really low, Young Pere!"

"Drop them!" Young Pere yelled, displaying his young cousin who was clutching a pinecone. "Drop them all, or you have to take Fennic to use the tree!"

No one threw another cone, worried about hitting the little boy, but Fennic wasn't defenseless. With his pinecone in his chubby fist, he smacked Young Pere on the cheek and grinned when Young Pere cried, "Ow!"

"Good move, Fennic!" Perrin called from under the bush. "Attack your captor. Always fight back."

"All right, all right!" Shem walked through the crowd of men and boys holding pinecones they were itching to throw. A few took shots at Young Pere's unshielded legs.

"Enough now!" Shem said loudly, keeping his volume to just this side of a yell. "We're here on a mission of peace, not war. Remember? All cones, DOWN!"

A variety of groans and disappointed complaining accompanied the dropping of the weapons.

"This is not a fair fight," Shem said, walking among all of them, patting their shirt and trousers' pockets to find stowed cones that he pulled out and dropped on the ground.

"First we set up camp," he pointed at the three men designated to

“That’s one nasty stick.”

set up the shelters for the younger boys, “and get dinner ready,” he pointed at four more who were in charge of setting up the evening meal and fishing for trout, “and gather enough firewood for the night,” he pointed to several boys, “and *then* you may choose sides for teams and engage in a *fair* and *even tossing* of pinecones *gently* at each other. Understood?”

The boys offered up mischievously cautious smiles to the stern guide.

“Remember,” Shem said, “all of you promised your mothers you’d behave yourselves!”

The pinecone that smacked Shem squarely on the chest seemed to fly out of nowhere. A variety of snorts and guffaws accompanied it.

Shem looked around and glared. “All right! Who threw that?”

“My guess would be *someone*,” said Peto, who had just arrived with little Cori and Wes Hifadhi, “who didn’t promise *his* mother he’d behave himself.”

Deck held up his empty hands in innocence.

“PERRIN!” Shem bellowed.

Everyone began to laugh.

“Where are you?!”

Another pinecone sailed but narrowly missed its target only because Shem dodged out of the way.

“Still have some quick reflexes, Sergeant Major. Good to see.”

Shem peered at the thick shrub where the voice came from. “Remember, General, *I know where you’re sleeping tonight.*”

As their family laughed, Shem sauntered over to the shrubs. “Get out of there, Perrin, so we can do some fishing.”

Perrin chuckled. “Gladly. I might need some help, though. My back is, um, a little stiff.”

“Serves you right.” Shem rubbed his chest where the pinecone hit him.

Several of the younger children giggled and ran over to see where Puggah was hiding, and Cephas and Boskos came over to lend a hand.

“How’d you get in there, anyway?” Shem asked.

Perrin grunted as he started to back out. “I dove under here when the attack began. Then I realized that if I crawled forward a few paces I had a clear shot with the pinecones that fell in here. But then you went and called for a truce and ruined all the fun.”

Shem chuckled as Perrin’s boots began to emerge. “Just when I

thought you were finally ready to be a grown-up.”

“Puggah, want us to pull you out?” Cephas asked.

“Not yet. I’m caught on something. Hold on, let me just—Augh!” he cried out.

And then Perrin thought, *Oh. So this is how it will go . . .*

Young Pere put Fennic down when he heard his grandfather cry out, and smirked. About time someone else got hurt around here.

Cephas and Shem, by the bush, were laughing at it along with smaller boys who had run over there.

“Puggah’s stuck!” called a little voice.

Young Pere rubbed his hands in anticipation and ambled over.

“I can get the hatchet, Father,” Peto suggested with a grin as he came over to peer into the bush. “I sharpened it right before the trip, just in case.”

But Boskos narrowed his eyes. “All right, Uncle Perrin?”

“Actually, no,” came his voice, sounding strained. “Something’s stabbed me. In my thigh. I can’t get it out.”

Boskos squatted to look into the bush. “Is it puncturing your flesh?”

“Yes,” his voice came urgently. “I need help!”

The smiles fell from the men’s faces. General Shin wasn’t known to ever plead for assistance. Young Pere’s eyebrows rose, and Peto ran to get the hatchet from the pack horse.

“Puggah,” Cephas said, now down on his hands and knees. “I see the branch.”

“Where?” Boskos asked, leaning over. “Ah, I see it too. Papa, pull back the bush right in front of you.”

Shem yanked, and in his growing worry pulled half the bush out of the ground.

Perrin cried out in pain.

“Perrin, I’m sorry!” Shem said, panicked.

“No, no, no,” he mumbled from under the leaves. “You didn’t do it. I tried to pull my leg out and instead my arm got caught on some pokey thing.” He chuckled weakly. “I think I know how Young Pere feels some days.”

Young Pere scoffed at that. “Not enough bruising yet, Puggah. You’ll need to fall off a short cliff before you’ll know how I feel.”

“That’s one nasty stick.”

Shem evaluated the fragments of the bush he tore from the ground. “I don’t see any thorns or prickles on this.”

“Well there’s something tangled in here with something sharp growing on it!” Perrin insisted.

“Out of the way,” Peto called as he made his way through the crowd of men and boys now clustering around the bush. “Shem, where’s the best place to cut?”

Deck, analyzing the bush from the opposite side, indicated to a point near Shem. “If you cut that part off first, you’ll have a better view of the stick that’s impaling Young Pere. I mean, *Old Pere*. I mean, *Perrin*.” Over the scattered chuckling, Deck added, “Sorry, Perrin.”

“No, you’re not, Deckett,” said the bush feebly.

Peto went over next to Shem, saw his father’s face through the leaves, and waved to him. “We’ll get you out of here soon.”

Peto carefully hacked at the bush, and after three whacks the men could pull a large section of it free. Peto moved in closer and, with a few more carefully placed hits, another segment of the bush was removed, almost completely exposing Perrin.

The jagged stick imbedded in his leg appeared to be a branch of a coarse vine, an inch in diameter. His light colored trousers around the stick had turned red with blood, and the stain was growing.

Several of the boys stepped back quickly, “ewww”-ing when they saw the injury.

Cambo Briter and Lek Zenos herded the younger boys over to Bubba Briter, who had already taken Boskos’s son Toli way from the action to gather pinecones. Sam and Con Cadby quickly joined them with their sons Ensio and Cori, and a few more boys with weaker stomachs followed.

Peto squatted by his father. “Yep, that’s not the friendliest stick I’ve ever seen, but we’ll get you free of it.” He pulled out his knife and started to cut at the thick vine that was rooted to the ground.

“Stop, stop!” Young Pere cried out as Perrin flinched. “You’re wiggling the stick in his leg when you do that, Papa. Here,” he stepped over next to his father. “Let me hold the stick still so it doesn’t aggravate the wound, then start cutting.”

Perrin patted Young Pere’s hand gratefully as Young Pere wrapped his hands around the stick just above where it entered Perrin’s thigh.

Boskos smiled. “Good observation. Want to be my apprentice?”

Young Pere shook his head. “Not observation, just experience.” Perrin kept his hand over Young Pere’s as he tightened his grip on the stick.

“Cut right there, Papa.” Young Pere nodded to a point higher.

“Ready?” Peto asked.

Both Young Pere and Perrin nodded.

With quick cuts, Peto severed the stick several inches above Young Pere’s hand.

The remaining boys erupted in cheers.

Boskos snatched up his bag and pointed to a flat area. “Get him over to the sandy section. Atlee, find Puggah a blanket to sit on.”

Barnos Shin and Holling Briter reached down to help up Perrin.

“No, no, no. I can do it,” he said, trying to stand up. But he winced in pain, and his grandsons caught each of his arms to pull him up.

“Let them help you, Uncle Perrin,” Boskos said. “No need to put more pressure on the leg than necessary.”

Barnos and Holling brought a hobbling Perrin over to where Atlee Briter had laid out the blanket, and they gently put him down.

Perrin moaned as he lay. “I thought Shem assigned some people to start dinner and get camp established. I really don’t need an audience.”

“I’ll take care of it,” Deck said, not eager to watch what was about to come. He pointed to several of the boys and reissued orders. Soon most of Perrin’s audience was gone, but they still tried to peek over to see what was happening.

Only Peto, Shem, and Young Pere remained to watch Boskos work. As Boskos kneeled by his bag, Shem kneeled by Perrin’s head.

“It’s not that bad,” Perrin said, reaching for Shem’s arm. “You don’t need to ask for a blessing.”

Shem raised an eyebrow at him. “The Creator has plenty to give out. It’s not as if we’re *bothering* Him. This is what He’s waiting for. To bless us.”

Boskos looked expectantly at Perrin. “I work best when it’s not just me working. The Creator is the real healer. I just get to take the credit.”

Perrin nodded. “Fine, Shem. Keep it short. He’s a busy Being.”

Shem chuckled and closed his eyes. “Dear Creator, will You please help my son to help my brother to complete Your work? Amen.” Shem opened his eyes and looked to Perrin for approval.

Perrin nodded. “See? Doesn’t have to be long.”

“That’s one nasty stick.”

Boskos chuckled and pulled out supplies from his bag. Observing the remaining stick jutting out from Perrin’s thigh, he said, “Exactly how’d you do that, Uncle Perrin? You couldn’t have exerted a lot of force, yet that stick seems to be in rather deep.”

“I don’t know,” Perrin groaned resignedly. “I felt something pricking my leg, but I thought it’d give way if I just pushed past it.”

Boskos peered at it. “An impact like that suggests someone fell on it from a substantial height. Perhaps it’s very sharp—”

“Just get it out and you can stare it all you want, Bos,” Shem said nervously.

Young Pere glanced at Uncle Shem, who was chewing on a fingernail.

King of Salem.

Young Pere couldn’t see it.

“I will, Papa,” Boskos assured Shem. “I’m just waiting for Zaddick to bring me a jug of water. See, there he is. Uncle Perrin, I’ll need to cut the trousers to get to it.”

“Fine, Bos,” he said, flopping an arm over his eyes. “I’ve got extra in my pack.”

As Boskos trimmed the cloth away with a small pair of scissors, Young Pere folded his arms. “Kind of strange being on this side of the action. I’m usually on the ground, or just waking up in the middle of something, or a few hours later. I never get this view.”

Peto shot him a look.

“I’m glad I can entertain you, Young Pere,” said Perrin. “Isn’t there something else you should be doing?”

Young Pere shook his head. “Nope. Not on firewood or food or camp detail until tomorrow. I’m still ‘resting,’ if you recall *your* orders.”

Peto gave Young Pere another sharp look.

Young Pere held up his hands in apology.

Boskos eyed the exposed stick. “I think I can get it out without cutting any more flesh. Good thing I brought the large bottle of numbing agent.” He rummaged in his bag and pulled out a brown bottle.

“Love that stuff,” Young Pere nodded in approval.

“No!” Perrin said firmly. “I don’t want it. Just yank it, Bos.”

“Uncle Perrin, you’re being unreasonable,” Boskos said. “All it does is numb the area around the wound. I just dab it around, wait a few minutes, and—”

“Shem!” said Perrin forcefully, “Explain to your son I *do not want*

it.”

Shem sent a long-suffering look to his son.

Boskos exhaled in frustration. “Fine, Uncle Perrin. Papa, go get a plank and beat him—”

“Hey!” Perrin said, trying to sit up. “It’s not that bad!”

Boskos gave him a cutting glare. “Think not? We’ll see how you feel in a couple of minutes. This may not just ‘yank’ out, Uncle Perrin. There are a couple of barbs near the base. If there are more in your flesh, I may have to work it, and that will not be pleasant. Do you *really* want your great-grandsons hearing you in pain? Or are you going to think about *their needs* and allow me to give you enough local sedation to numb it just enough to allow you to deal effectively with the pain you will *still* feel? This isn’t the army, Uncle Perrin. This is a family outing with little boys who have long memories.”

Shem raised his eyebrows at his son’s audacity and sent him a smile of admiration. He shifted his gaze to Perrin.

Perrin sighed, nodded briefly to Boskos, and lay back down.

Shem grinned at his son. Not many men could force General Shin to see their way.

Boskos took the jug of water and poured some over the wound.

Perrin writhed in unexpected agony. “I thought you were going to numb it?!”

Young Pere sniggered while Boskos smiled slyly. “First I have to cleanse the area. Wasn’t pleasant, was it? But it’ll be much better in a few minutes,” he promised. He dabbed the brown substance on the flesh around the entry point of the stick.

“Can’t you give him some of the green stuff?” Peto asked, a permanent wince on his face.

“My *other* favorite bottle,” Young Pere commented. “Pain Tea.”

“Wouldn’t help much at this point,” Boskos told them. “The Pain Tea works mostly on internal injuries. I’ll give him some later, though, to help relax him.”

“Who came up with that name, anyway?” Young Pere asked. “Sounds like it *gives* you pain, not takes it away.”

Boskos chuckled. “We brew it when someone is *in* pain. I don’t know who named it one hundred years ago, but the name’s stuck.”

“Don’t want it anyway,” Perrin grumbled.

Young Pere squatted next to Boskos as he inspected the wound. “Think it will need stitching? Or will resin hold it?”

Boskos turned to his cousin. “What do you think?”

“That’s one nasty stick.”

Young Pere tipped his head in consideration. “If it’s a straight slice, the resin works fine. But if it’s jagged, or there’s too much hole to cover, you’re best doing stitches.”

Boskos smiled. “Sure you don’t want to study medicine?”

“Too much stuff to memorize. I’m not that good at remembering all the different ailments, herbs, formulas—”

“It’s hard for everyone, Young Pere. But there are ways to memorize it all. We work together to help each other succeed. Seriously, if you—”

Shem cleared his throat loudly. “Perhaps you could discuss this another time?”

Boskos looked up at his father. “I’m just waiting for the numbing agent to work, Papa.”

“Actually,” Young Pere said, “it works pretty fast. The more wounded flesh that’s exposed, the faster it absorbs into the exposed nerves. I never felt the need for waiting a full five minutes.”

“Really? Interesting,” Boskos said. “Uncle Perrin, how does it feel?”

“I’m trying not to think about it,” Perrin answered, his arm over his eyes again.

Boskos poked the flesh around the stick.

Perrin didn’t flinch.

Boskos nodded at Young Pere who smugly smiled in an *I told you so* manner.

“All right, Uncle Perrin. Some patients like me to tell them everything I’m doing. Others just want me to work without knowing what’s going on. What kind of patient are you?”

“Not a very *patient* one, Boskos. Just get it out and don’t waste time talking!”

“As you wish,” and he started to pull experimentally on the stick. The barbs did go beneath the flesh, and he silently pointed out that fact to Young Pere, who was watching closely, but also kept an eye on his father and uncle.

Peto had that frown on his face which always meant he was growing nauseated, and turned away for a moment to exchange a quick, shuddering look with Deck.

Perrin winced in discomfort at the tugging of Boskos, but the pain didn’t seem too bad.

Shem’s eyes darted anxiously from Perrin, to his son’s efforts, and back again.

Peto reached over and patted Shem on the shoulder, and he jumped in surprise.

“It’ll be all right,” Peto whispered. “Father’s in excellent hands.”

Shem smiled briefly at Peto’s assessment and went back to watching his son Boskos slowly twist and pull on the stick.

Young Pere noticed something. “Right there, Bos,” he said as he huddled next to his cousin. “Another barb, catching on that ragged edge.”

“Yes, very good. Perhaps a twist in this direction . . . yes, now another barb. Twist the opposite direction . . .”

“That’s it, Bos. You’ve got it. Now twist in the other direction again.”

“That’s one nasty stick.”

Perrin shifted uncomfortably, trying not to listen to them.

“One more twist, Bos.”

“I see it, I see it. Those have got to be the most unusual barbs I’ve ever seen. Go in easily, but refuse to come back out. I’m saving this stick to show Dr. Toon. Uncle Peto, ever see such a vine before in your studies?”

“I specialized in trees and terrain,” Peto said, his voice a touch shaky, “not pokey things.”

“I never realized thorns could be such a menace,” Boskos said, sliding the bloodied stick out a little more and twisting again.

Young Pere rocked back onto his heels, thinking about “thorns” and “menace.” Here it was, many years later and many miles from Edge, and Perrin Shin was still being tormented by thorns. The whole idea sat strangely on Young Pere, like a complex puzzle he wanted to solve, but was almost too frightened to approach. Almost.

Peto glanced over at him, trying to figure out why his son reacted so unusually.

Young Pere didn’t meet his gaze.

“And . . . it’s out!” Boskos announced, holding up the red-stained evidence. “Congratulations, Uncle Perrin. You’ve produced a bloody, thorny stick! The tip is just what I suspected: pointed and sharp. Perfectly angled to penetrate. Must have gone in about two inches. Well done, pushing right past *that*.”

Perrin sighed in relief. “I have to admit, Boskos, that ointment actually helped. Good job.”

Boskos smiled as Perrin moved his arm from his eyes. “I’m not finished yet, though. We need to close the wound. It’s split open in a

“That’s one nasty stick.”

jagged way. Young Pere was right—it’s going to need a few stitches.”

Perrin nodded and put his arm back over his eyes. “Just do it, Bos.”

Boskos studied the wound first.

“At least it’s not bleeding much,” Shem offered.

“I rather wished it did, Papa.” Boskos examined the stick he removed. “Uncle Perrin’s not the first to get caught on this. Right here—animal hairs on the barbs. And this speck of dirt here, see it? And right here, this looks like a little bit of moss.”

Shem crouched and peered at the dirty stick. “So this means . . .?”

“Bleeding would purge the wound of any of these objects still in his leg. If any of it is still in him and I stitch it closed . . .”

Peto held his hand over his mouth. His stamina for the situation was beginning to weaken. “What do you recommend?”

“I need to wash it out some more since it won’t bleed sufficiently. And then, Uncle Perrin, after I stitch it, I hate to say it—I’m going to have to *mold* you.”

“Oh, you can’t be serious!” Perrin scoffed.

Peto began to chuckle. “Father, I don’t know why you’re so opposed to that.”

Perrin tried to sit up again. “Because it’s so ridiculous!”

But Boskos was already at work, pouring more water over the open wound in an effort to dislodge any dirt that might have remained. “We’ve been bread molding people for over one hundred thirty years. Just because no one in the world you came from understands it . . . It really works, Uncle Perrin. Yes, it seems odd, but somehow it sucks out the infection.”

Young Pere smiled. “And if you get hungry, Puggah, you always know where you can get a bite to eat.”

“Don’t eat it!” Boskos said, alarmed, opening the bottle of numbing agent again. “It could kill you.”

Perrin shook his head in dismay. “See, that’s what I don’t understand. Tell me how a moldy piece of bread that can *kill* you if you *eat* it will *cure* you if you *strap* it to your wound?”

“I wish I could tell you, Uncle Perrin,” Boskos said, again dabbing the brown liquid around the jagged puncture. “But we’re not sure ourselves. It just often works, that’s all we know.”

Perrin lay back down. “It will take weeks to mold some bread. Your mother just baked it yesterday.”

Boskos smiled. “But we’ve been molding several pieces for a few

weeks in preparation for this trip.”

“You would,” Perrin chuckled weakly.

“I actually thought I’d be using it on Young Pere, not *Old Pere*,” said Boskos as he pulled out a needle and thread wrapped in clean, white cotton. “Noria was wondering why I wanted so much cultivated.”

“You must be the only man who’s happy when his wife’s cooking goes moldy,” Perrin murmured.

“She makes it moldy *for* me. She’s a skilled chemist.”

Shem watched as Boskos squeezed Perrin’s thigh, trying to get it to bleed. “Don’t understand it,” he said. “Perrin was always a great bleeder.”

“Thanks a lot, Shem,” Perrin mumbled.

“It’s the nature of the wound, Papa,” Boskos explained. “Splits like this often don’t gush.”

Peto was beginning to look clammy, and Young Pere was sure he’d be on the ground in a few minutes. Medical talk wasn’t his thing. It was always his mother who sat next to Young Pere holding his hand when the doctors stitched him up or set his broken bones. Mama had a much stronger constitution for these things than Papa, who usually sat outside of the room, waiting anxiously.

Young Pere still remembered when, four years ago, Boskos had come over excitedly to tell them all that he’d passed the entrance exams to study medicine. Peto had made the mistake of telling him that back in Edge he’d considered becoming a doctor . . . for about ten minutes.

Lilla had laughed and laughed about that, much to Peto’s chagrin. “Seriously? You considered being a doctor? When I gave birth to all of you,” Lilla announced to their family, as her husband hid behind his hand in consternation, “*your father* stayed in bed longer than I did, because *he* was so woozy from watching *me* deliver *his* children!”

Papa had never been able to live that one down.

Young Pere smirked at his father’s graying complexion, then turned to his uncle. “So tell me, Uncle Shem, what kind of a bleeder was Puggah?” With enough details, Peto would be vomiting in the shrubs behind him within minutes.

Shem smiled, oblivious to Young Pere’s plotting to see his father become sick. “There were many slices and nicks over the years. Some in practice, a few in action. Your Puggah was planked at least half a dozen times to stitch those up. Now, I wasn’t there yet to witness the

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gash the Guardians gave him on his back, but the jagged scar is still there. But I think the best incident was years ago when he was training the cook.”

Perrin groaned, but not because Boskos was dabbing more numbing agent on the edges of his gash.

Peto sat down on a log, looking dizzy. He held his head in his hands and asked, “The cook? I don’t know if I remember that.”

Shem chuckled. “He wasn’t the cook at the time, and you were only a few years old, Peto. He wanted to be a soldier but he was the clumsiest thing I’d ever seen.”

Boskos readied a needle and thick thread.

Young Pere pointed at something on Perrin’s leg and Boskos nodded.

“It wasn’t so much that he was clumsy,” Perrin winced briefly as Boskos began to tug on his skin, “but that he was weak. One of the skinniest things we ever had come in. He barely passed the physical. He didn’t have enough arm strength to steady the sword.”

“I tried, Perrin,” Shem said. “I worked him and fattened him up, but no muscle ever developed on his spindly little arms.”

“So what happened?” Young Pere asked, watching Peto sway slowly back and forth.

Perrin squeezed his eyes shut briefly as Boskos started another stitch.

“I decided to train him one-on-one with the sword,” Perrin said, slightly breathless. “Spent an hour with him every afternoon. After two weeks I thought he might be ready for a little practice in sparring.” He ended with a cringe as Boskos tugged.

“Good thing there were witnesses,” Shem said, frowning at the stitching, “or no one would have believed it was an accident. I saw it. Perrin couldn’t have been easier on him, but the poor boy tried to lunge, tripped on his own feet, and the weight of the sword literally tipped him over. Perrin tried to catch him and got tangled up with him as well. Next thing we know, Perrin’s flat on the ground with the soldier’s sword sticking out of his side! The poor boy was terrified and started crying. ‘I’ve killed Major Shin!’” Shem chuckled at the memory. “He never touched a sword again, if I recall correctly. Kept to the kitchens after that.”

“I think I remember that now,” Peto said, lifting his head. While his color was still off, Young Pere figured he was probably past being sick, since he wasn’t watching the stitching. Maybe next time.

“Weren’t you in bed for a long time, Father?” Peto asked.

“Yes,” Perrin winced again. “Sword went right into my liver.”

“That would cause a lot of bleeding,” Boskos agreed. He nodded to Young Pere in a conspiring manner, and presented him the needle.

Young Pere burst into a grin and knew exactly what to do. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Peto’s mouth drop open in alarm, and Young Pere slid the needle into the ragged flesh.

Perrin didn’t flinch as he mumbled, “Even the slash on my back wasn’t as bad as that sword to my side.”

“Yes, you’d taken a lot of hits over the years,” Shem said, not realizing who of the two young men hovering over Perrin’s thigh was actually working on it. “And you had plenty of stitches, too, but that one was the worst. I had to hide your undershirt so Mahrree wouldn’t see how much blood you’d lost. She was quite upset when she arrived at the fort and saw your condition.”

“How long were you down?” Boskos asked, nodding in approval to Young Pere and motioning for him to do the next stitch. It really was quite simple, nothing to it, just pulling torn flesh together.

“About a week,” Perrin said, oblivious, his eyes shut tightly. “Bos, your father stayed at our house to help take care of me. He even postponed his leave home just so he could stay and help Mahrree. He was about your age at the time. Maybe that’s where you get your doctoring talent.”

Boskos winked at his cousin who completed another stitch and chuckled quietly.

Shem noticed, and recoiled in dismay when he realized it was Young Pere expertly stitching Perrin, under Boskos’s guidance.

Peto was covering his face with both hands, unable to watch.

“I never had the inclination for doctoring, Perrin,” Shem said, wincing in worry. “I just knew there was no way Mahrree was going to tolerate you staying at the fort for a week, and there was also no way she’d be able to move you on her own. You were in agony for several days.”

“I remember. And I don’t know if I ever thanked you enough.”

“Trust me, you did. It was my pleasure to help. But it was hard to watch. You were so miserable. You don’t know how tempted I was to bring you some Pain Tea, but neither the scouts nor I could come up with a convincing story as to where we got it. We couldn’t even slip it into your food or water because it has such a distinctive taste.”

“That’s one nasty stick.”

“The one thing I *don’t* love about it,” Young Pere said as he knotted the stitch he completed.

Shem said, in a faraway tone, “I don’t know why I didn’t realize *he* would be in a lot of pain as well.”

“Who?” Perrin asked.

Shem scratched his chin. “Uh, I don’t know why I just thought of him, but *Lemuel*. After the offensive. Even though his internal organs weren’t hit, he *did* have thirty stitches.”

Boskos let out a low whistle. “A soldier? Where were the stitches?”

“Along the base of his ribs,” Shem gestured on himself.

“Ouch,” Boskos said, pointing to Young Pere where the last stitch should go.

Shem rubbed his chin guiltily. “I wasn’t exactly nice to him. He wasn’t a favorite of mine. He was leaning up against me after his procedure and I purposely let him fall to the ground.”

Boskos looked up at his father whom he had only ever known as a gentle, kind man. “Really? That’s so unlike you.”

Perrin, his eyes still squeezed shut, chuckled softly. “Two things you don’t understand, Boskos. First, your father was a great soldier and an effective leader. Coming to Salem made him lose the first attribute but intensified the second. The other thing you don’t understand is that Lemuel Thorne should have died in Moorland!”

Young Pere jerked at the name of Thorne.

His grandfather flinched at Young Pere’s clumsiness.

Boskos took over the needle and finished the stitch.

“I don’t know about *that*, Perrin,” Shem said quietly as Boskos clipped the thread.

“And if he’d been paying attention to his attacker instead of watching me take out the Guarder behind him, he wouldn’t have been injured either,” Perrin declared. “Thorne was foolish and reckless, and it was up to me to preserve him.”

Young Pere listened intently.

“True, but we had him under enough control, Perrin,” Shem said, not convincingly, though. “Occasionally I wonder if I had been better to him, befriended him—”

Perrin opened his eyes and tried again to sit up, but immediately thought twice about that. “Shem, I don’t know of any man who tried harder than you. He wasn’t interested in being *our friend*. He was interested in taking over our fort! He was manipulative and wholly

out of line, in many, *many* ways,” he said darkly. “I don’t know how much more of a ‘friend’ you could have been by not killing him when you had the right and opportunity to do it!”

Boskos, Young Pere, and Peto stared at Shem.

Lek, who was passing by, stopped in his tracks and turned to his father.

Shem grew uncomfortable under their stares. “Now’s not the time, Perrin,” he murmured. He nodded to his oldest son in a manner that meant, *Move along, and don’t ever ask about this*. Lek obediently walked off, likely because he knew his brother Boskos wouldn’t let the matter drop too easily.

“So,” Boskos said casually, rummaging around in his bag, “this sounds like an interesting bit of history we’ve never been privy to.” He pulled out some bandages and another wrapped package. “I think this is a *very* appropriate time, Papa. You could have killed a man, and didn’t? Sounds like it would be a great story for the congregations to hear about self-mastery and shunning the ways of the world.” He unwrapped part of the package and held up a piece of bread covered in various shades of green.

Young Pere, anxious to hear of Shem’s experience with Thorne, nevertheless sneered in appreciation at the moldy bread.

“Not everything in history is necessary to remember, son,” Shem said through clenched teeth.

But Peto was watching Shem earnestly. “Did it have something to do with Jaytsy?” he whispered.

Shem’s eyes flared in fury.

Boskos, placing the bread on the wound, paused and saw the unexpected look in his father’s eyes. Young Pere noticed that just as quickly as it rose, the anger faded. He couldn’t remember ever seeing Uncle Shem livid before.

“Yes,” he said with such finality that they knew Shem wasn’t going to say anything more about it.

Boskos and Young Pere exchanged intrigued looks before Boskos unwrapped a long bandage and worked the end under Perrin’s leg.

“Shem,” Perrin said, “even if you *had* made more progress with him, it’s not as if any of that would have mattered after we left.”

Peto nodded in agreement as Shem shrugged.

Boskos finished wrapping. “Uncle Perrin, how does it feel?”

“What, you’re done?”

Boskos grinned. “Completely! Stitched and molded. You’re

“That’s one nasty stick.”

ready for anything. *Except* for hiking and long walks. You need to stay off of the leg for a couple of days. Fortunately, I brought a sling that we can rig on two of the horses—”

“No, absolutely not.” Perrin pushed himself upright. “I am not going to be carried.”

Boskos, wiping his hands on a cloth, wasn’t about to back down. “Look, your grandson and I just put in seven stitches—”

Perrin’s eyebrows shot up. “You let Young Pere stitch me?”

“He’s a natural. Did an excellent job.”

Young Pere beamed smugly and wiped off his hands, too.

“And Uncle Perrin, if you go walking around on that, you’ll tear them all out and we’ll have to put in seven more. I might even let some of your other grandchildren have a stab at it.”

Perrin studied his nephew. “You would’ve been a good fort surgeon.”

“Flattery will get you nowhere, Uncle Perrin,” said Boskos dismissively. “You really need to rest that leg. I’m fairly confident the wound is clean, but there’s no sense in aggravating it. You could ride one of the horses if you prefer. Take turns holding the little boys. I know they love riding with you. You could tell them all kinds of stories instead of racing up the trail. Now, tonight we’ll move you to the fire and you will stay there, understood?” He put his hands on his waist. “If you need anything, we’ll bring it to you. Right?”

“Yes, Dr. Zenos.” But Perrin’s smile had undertones of rebellion.

“Tomorrow morning I’ll take a look at it. Maybe we can take the mold off then. In the meantime, don’t disturb it.”

“Whatever you say.”

Boskos stood up and announced to the family, “He’s stitched up. Now, nobody bother him or jump on his leg or trip over him or challenge him to a race, understand?”

A variety of yeses and laughs acknowledged his warning.

Relf Shin and Cephias Briter walked over to help Perrin up.

“We already prepared a spot by the fire, Puggah. You should be comfortable there for the night. How’s it feel?” Cephias asked.

“It stings, but I’ll survive,” he said as he sat down where some logs had been set up as a seat and support. “Thank you, boys. The real pain will come when we get home. I promised your Muggah I’d be careful. How am I going to explain *this* to her?”

Chapter 10--“Does it ever hit you, just what we have?”

“Young Pere, why are you telling me this?”

“I thought you’d want to know.”

Boskos and Lek glanced at each other before Boskos said, “But Young Pere, we already know this story.”

“What?!”

It was dark and no one was around them, but still they kept their voices low as they stood in the trees. The three of them had gone out in search of more firewood, but Young Pere had dragged his cousins over for a private meeting.

“Our family names have been slandered *for years* in the world,” Young Pere exclaimed, “And you knew about it?”

“Well, of course,” Lek told him in his mild manner. “They’ll tell you, too, once you become an adult and get married. They don’t want you to hear about it from anyone coming from the world.” He fidgeted, clearly uncomfortable. “It’s not like it’s a story I think often about, you know. My papa and your Muggah?” He frowned and shuddered.

“Besides,” Boskos said, “we don’t care what the world thinks.”

“Really? How can you say that?” Young Pere almost forgot to keep his voice down. “Doesn’t it bother you that the world thinks your father is the worst traitor who ever lived?”

“No, because I know in a way it’s true,” Lek said simply. “And he was right to do what he did.”

Young Pere groaned. “I’m not talking about his getting people out for all those years, I’m talking about the *other* reason he was a traitor.”

Boskos rubbed his cheeks. “Look, I hated that story when I first

heard it a few years ago from Papa and Mama, and I never wanted to hear about it again.”

“I agree,” Lek said. “It made me feel sick to my stomach just considering something that never happened.”

“That’s why we need to fix it!” Young Pere said. “We have to kill that story so it never hurts anyone ever again! Haven’t you ever wondered why the army refugees have such a hard time with Shem Zenos and Mahrree Shin? Shouldn’t that be fixed?”

“It *is* fixed, Young Pere,” Lek said. “After a few weeks, I don’t see any problems with anyone who’s come.”

“That’s what they say, but that’s not what they feel,” Young Pere insisted. “Mrs. Yordin told me there are a few from the world who she’s already met who still don’t fully trust your father or my grandmother. They’re just faking it.”

Boskos threw up his hands. “That’s what, maybe a dozen people? So what? *We* know what kind of people they really are, and so does the Creator. He’ll make everything right in the end. It’s not our place to worry about it.”

Lek eyed his cousin. “What do you think *you* could do to fix it, Young Pere?”

He looked askance as he said, “Not sure yet. But I’m working on it.”

Lek and Boskos exchanged glances.

“Young Pere, nothing *needs* to be done,” Lek told him. “We’re happy here, our parents and grandparents are happy—”

“Are you sure?” Young Pere stopped him. “How does Aunt Calla feel about all of this?”

Boskos and Lek looked at each other again.

“She knows,” Boskos said. “She helped tell me the story, and she didn’t seem to care. Mama and Aunt Mahrree have been the best of friends for as long as I can remember.”

“We don’t need to discuss this anymore, Young Pere,” Lek declared. “Nothing good can come from talking about an old lie.”

“So you don’t think I should tell the others tonight?” Young Pere asked.

“No!” both brothers said loudly.

The three of them looked around to see if anyone might have heard.

The rest of the family was sitting around the campfire singing one of Lilla’s songs about a lovelorn porcupine.

“Young Pere, all of the older grandchildren already know,” Lek said. “The younger ones will be burdened with these horrible images as they mature, too. Obviously our parents and grandparents think this is the best way to reveal to us things that never even happened, and I feel bad for them that the world makes them have to do this. It just reinforces for me how small and petty the world is, that it’ll make up stories just to feel better about themselves. They’re like children. Deplorable, snotty children.”

Boskos smiled at that evaluation. “I agree. This isn’t your place, Young Pere. Mrs. Yordin shouldn’t have said so much to you. Realize, she’s a bit unstable—”

Young Pere rolled his eyes dramatically.

Lek sighed. “The poor woman. She must’ve seen a lot of horrible things in the world. Of course she’d believe those stories.” He glanced over at Boskos. “You’ve helped Dr. Toon with some of those soldiers who have come from the world, with some of their diseases. So . . . do people really act like that in the world? Doing . . . *stuff* . . . without marriage?”

Young Pere almost smirked at his cousin’s obvious discomfort. Lek was such a gentle, quiet man who couldn’t imagine anyone doing anything remotely *out of bounds*. Maybe that’s why Young Pere could never connect with him.

“According to Mrs. Yordin,” Young Pere said, “apparently they do. A lot. There aren’t even marriage laws anymore, remember?”

Boskos sighed. “That’s true, and it’s a big problem. These former soldiers have ailments we don’t have in Salem. Dr. Toon is pretty sure the infections come from . . .” He hesitated, trying to find an appropriate way to put it so as to not shock his older brother. He finally came up with, “Multiple random matings.”

Lek and Young Pere stared for a moment before the light dawned.

“Seriously?!” Lek whispered, aghast. “But . . . *why*?”

Boskos shrugged. “Dr. Toon doesn’t ask too many questions about that, but we’ve talked about it in our class and we came up with some theories. It seems people in the world don’t see intimacy the way we do. It’s an animalistic instinct they think has to be acted upon.”

Lek sat back in disgust. “Like the cattle? Standing out in the field then feeling the need to—”

“Seems so. They’re trying to satisfy urges. Or they’re bored, and it’s casual entertainment. They don’t see intimacy as more than that.”

“Does it ever hit you, just what we have?”

Lek’s gentle demeanor dropped. “That’s not even *intimacy*, Bos! Intimacy is when you join your soul and heart and all that you are with the one person you have chosen to love! When the two of you combine your fears and hopes and bodies and thoughts and lives—”

His brother and cousin stared at him as he gestured wildly. No one would’ve suspected that Lek Zenos had a passionate side.

Except for maybe Salema.

“You . . . you . . . you share your vulnerabilities with each other! You trust each other to keep that vulnerability safe. You—”

“Lek, calm down,” Boskos whispered, taken aback to see such a display from Lek. “I know that as well as you do. There may be very few people in the world who know what I feel when I look at Noria, or when you look at Salema.” Boskos watched his agitated brother. “This is going to be a long week for you, isn’t it? Away from her?”

“These weeks always are, Bos,” Lek sighed and shook out his shoulders. “So, the people in the world with their random—” He chose not to finish the phrase. “What do they get out of it?”

“Not what they’re looking for,” Boskos said. “That’s part of the problem with those from the world. There’s great heaviness and sorrow in many of them that they refuse to confront. Dr. Toon thinks that by so many . . . *encounters* they hurt more than simply their bodies. They feel something is missing in their lives, an emptiness. They try to fill that with another body they don’t love and don’t commit to. But that fills them only for a moment, and then the emptiness is even greater. Then they think, ‘Maybe I did it wrong. Maybe I need to try someone else.’ So they do it again, gratify the urge and emptiness for a few minutes, then fall even deeper into darkness. No matter how many times they do it wrong, it’ll never feel right. The few women Dr. Toon has worked with suffer from depression and even self-loathing. But the men manifest anger and cynicism that’s unheard of in Salem. There’s little he can do medically for that.”

“So what *does* he do for them?” Lek asked.

“He says that it’s an illness of the soul, not the body. Some he recommends to talk to their rector,” Boskos said. “But for the most troubled men, he tells them there’s only one man in Salem who can help them find their way to the Creator to be healed.”

“Papa?” Lek guessed.

Boskos nodded.

“I’m beginning to see something, Young Pere,” Lek said. “I suspect that the men who still distrust Shem Zenos are the same ones

who Dr. Toon sends to him. It can't be easy to confess all that's causing darkness in your life. It's easier to think the man who *could* help you isn't capable of doing it, that's he's just as loathsome as you are."

Young Pere was unconvinced, of a great many things. "Maybe." He had to try one more time. "Just consider this—remember when they were talking about Thorne? The soldier your father could have killed? He's one of them behind the story! Puggah told me just this afternoon that he should have let Thorne die instead of saving him, and now we know your father could have done the same thing. He's in charge of the northern half of the world, now, but there's something that—"

"Should not worry us," Lek finished.

"But it was *because* of him they had to come to Salem!"

"For which I am very grateful!" Lek's rarely-seen passion flared again. "None of us would be here if they hadn't. If my father ever feels the need to bring General Thorne here, I'll be sure to thank him for chasing the Shins and Briters out so Salema would be raised here and could become my wife."

Young Pere sat back against a tree. "You just don't get it."

"I don't," Lek agreed.

"Neither do I," said Boskos. "Look, Young Pere, I'm not sure why this bothers you so much. Why don't you talk to our papa about it?"

Young Pere scoffed at that.

"Young Pere," Lek said gently, "What do you want from us?"

"Nothing," he said in frustration. "Nothing at all. We best get back before Fennic or Toli wake up."

Perrin, seated on a log with his leg elevated near the fire, watched his grandson and nephews return from the trees, each with additional logs. The song had mercifully ended and now a few boys were trying to decide which to sing next.

The three young men, seemingly without wanting to, glanced at Perrin, then their eyes rested on Shem for a moment. Something flickered across their faces as they looked away and put their wood on the pile.

Shem hadn't noticed them because he was talking with Deck. But their glances put Perrin to wondering.

“Does it ever hit you, just what we have?”

Lek and Boskos checked on their two sleeping sons, and Perrin watched as Young Pere took a spot behind Hogal to whisper something in his younger brother’s ear. A mischievous look grew on his face, and Perrin decided to keep an eye on whatever was developing.

He glanced at the rest of the young men and boys around the fire. Sam, Con, and Wes were in a quiet discussion which Lek joined.

Out of the corner of his eye he noticed all four of them glance over at him. Perrin hid his smirk, because he still needed to have his, “So, you’re marrying my granddaughter,” talk with Wes. He’d planned to do it on the last day, but maybe tomorrow, while he hobbled along, might be better.

Five-year-old Briter Zenos got up and walked dejectedly over to Perrin, kicking up dust as he went. He stood in front of his Puggah and moped.

“You look like a man with a problem, Briter,” Perrin said.

“I do.”

“And so you’ve come to me?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Why?”

“So you’ll fix it.”

Perrin smiled. “Briter, do you know anything about the chain of command?”

“No.”

“Well, Briter, it goes like this: when you have a problem, you go to the person right above you. That would be your papa. Did you talk to him yet?”

Briter shook his head. “He can’t fix it.”

“Ah. You’re sure? Well, then you go to the next in the chain of command. You have two grandfathers here. Did you try Grandpa Deck?”

Briter shook his head again. “No good.”

Deck looked over at his grandson. “No good?”

“Not with this, Grandpa Deck,” he said sadly.

Deck shrugged.

Now everyone around the fire had stopped talking and were watching the exchange between Briter and Puggah.

“So if Grandpa Deck can’t help you, what about Grandpa Shem?” Perrin suggested. “He’s in charge of all of Salem. If *he* can’t help you—”

Briter was already shaking his head at his Grandpa Shem. Shem

gave him a disappointed, pouty face back.

“Only you, Puggah,” Briter said with big eyes.

Perrin smiled. “Well, I’m flattered, Briter. But if you need help finding ‘the tree’ in the dark, that’s where you ask your papa—”

Briter shook his head. “I just use any tree.”

Several of the older boys grimaced and looked around for whatever tree may have been most convenient, hoping they weren’t leaning against it.

Perrin chuckled. “So Briter, I’m now *very* curious as to what it is that only I can help you with.”

Briter stepped carefully over Perrin’s injured leg and leaned against the knee of his good leg. He sighed loudly, as if ready to pour out his heart.

“It’s this: Cephass won’t let me steal his hotness.”

Perrin blinked. “Say that again?”

“Cephass won’t let me steal his hotness!”

Perrin scratched his head, a confused smile on his face. To Cephass across the fire, he said, “Care to interpret?”

“He wants to sleep with me, Puggah,” Cephass explained. “He thinks it’ll be cold tonight, so he wants to sleep with someone who will keep him warm.”

“Ah,” Perrin said, starting to chuckle. “Steal hotness?” To his great-grandson he said, “And why won’t your Uncle Cephass let you steal his hotness?”

“Kicky legs,” Briter moped.

Perrin raised an amused eyebrow in question to his grandson.

“He kicks all the time,” Cephass said. “I slept with him last year and got bruised.”

Perrin grinned in understanding and turned back to his great-grandson. “Muggah has kicky legs, too. But she thinks it’s me, not her. And so you want me to . . . do what?”

Briter stood tall, put his hands on his waist and puffed up his chest. “*Order him, General!*”

Briter’s determination and the one eyebrow that shot up was more than Perrin could stand. He threw back his head and laughed.

Briter’s face softened, because surely an order was imminent. He turned triumphantly and glared at his uncle Cephass.

Everyone burst out laughing at his resolute stance. Briter turned back to his Puggah, leaning carefully on Perrin’s good leg and regarded him with proud eyes.

“Does it ever hit you, just what we have?”

But something burned in Perrin’s heart. It caught him so much by surprise that he almost gasped. He stopped laughing and took Briter’s face in his hands. Something was so familiar about that moment, about that face. And it wasn’t just because every feature of Briter was either a copy of himself or Shem. He barely dared to glance up at the other smiling and chuckling faces around him.

Because he had seen this before. Because he’d *lived* this moment before—

Then it hit him.

Idumea.

The night he buried his parents. He dreamed.

Just before he felt his parents next to him, he was dreaming about a small child saying something amusing. There were many more people behind him, all familiar somehow . . . *would be* familiar. *Are* familiar.

He remembered in the dream that he tried to take control of it, to see if there was a large house behind him like in Mahrree’s dreams.

That was when it all shifted. He had been talking to Hogal Densal that night, then he spent time with his parents . . .

And then he had that dream so many more times that year. So often the Guardians had invaded his sleep, and only with the Creator’s help—and the memory of that little face which he now cradled in his large hands—could he force them away. For seasons he had searched for that face in Edge, the one that he remembered only hazily from his dreams, the face that had given him hope to carry on. He never found it, but he remembered it and clung to it.

It was a promise of something different.

And now, after so many years, that face suddenly came sharply into focus. Indeed, the entire dream that buoyed him so often was playing out in front of him. The little boy before him, the cheerful laughter beyond him, the mass of people who were all *his*—

The familiarity was so overwhelming he could hardly breathe.

Nor could he fight the tears that welled in his eyes. He smiled at that face. Despite his growing out of his baby-ness, Briter’s cheeks were still perfectly squishy.

It was all too much, but Perrin knew he had to say something to the patiently waiting child.

“I have an idea,” Perrin whispered as a tear leaked unnoticed down his cheek. “Go get your pillow and blanket, and come sit with me. I have some hotness to share.”

“Really?”

Perrin nodded and gruffly cleared his throat. Another feeling overwhelmed him and he wished the firelight wasn't so bright on his face. He couldn't hide the emotion that came with the knowledge that poured over his soul.

He had *made it*.

He had made it to where he was supposed to be, to where the Creator wanted him to be. That night so long ago in Idumea he was sure that he was to stay and investigate his parents' death. He was sure of so many things he only later learned he was completely wrong about.

But that night, long ago, he had listened. He'd been on the wrong path, and the Creator had granted him a glimpse of what his life was supposed to be.

And again, so many times that year, and even a few times later, Perrin recalled that image where he sat with people of all ages that were somehow his. He didn't realize it then but the dream was like a marking on a tree, assuring him he was on the right path, to keep going to the correct destination.

And tonight, after twenty-nine years, he realized this was his legacy. He'd done the Creator's will. And he didn't even have the strength to get up and find a quiet stand of trees to properly thank the Creator.

He wiped his face and watched with blurry vision as Briter gathered his blanket and pillow and rushed back to his side. Perrin grinned as the boy with such familiar features that Mahrree and Calla joked he should have been named “Sherrin” stood eagerly before him.

“I won't kicky your leg, I promise.”

“That's all right. I'm sure you'll do your best.”

“Because it hurts, doesn't it?”

“A little.”

Briter nodded. “That's why you're crying. That's all right. I cry too when I get hurt.”

Perrin smiled and wiped his eyes again. “I'm fine, I'm fine. Get Grandpa Shem to help us get my bed ready, then we can lay down.”

Young Pere watched as his cousin's son talked with Puggah. But he wasn't laughing at Briter's little soldier-man impersonation. He

“Does it ever hit you, just what we have?”

was watching his grandfather. Why he was wiping his eyes was a complete mystery. He glanced over at his father.

Peto watched Perrin with a bemused expression as well, but smiled at Perrin’s unexplained and unusual emotion.

Young Pere sighed.

General Perrin Shin *was* weak.

“Doing all right, Perrin?” Shem asked as he stared at the stars above them.

Perrin laid on his bedroll nearby. Their five-year-old descendant was sprawled between them, fast asleep, with Perrin’s injured leg on the opposite side of his kicky legs grandson, just to be safe. Briter’s left hand was on his Grandpa Shem’s chest, his right hand on his Pughah’s.

“I’ll be doing better when everyone finally settles down and we can get some sleep,” Perrin whispered back.

Shem chuckled softly. “It’s always hard the first night to get everyone down before midnight. Just too much excitement. By the last night they’ll be falling asleep in their dinners.”

“Like Ensio? Sam didn’t even notice for a few minutes.”

The two men laughed softly.

“No, Shem. I’m doing very well.”

“Good. Because I couldn’t help but notice tonight you’ve been a little . . .” Shem paused. It didn’t seem appropriate to use ‘emotional’ with Perrin, but no safer words presented themselves.

“I know,” Perrin said, preventing him from having to finish the sentence. “Shem, does it ever hit you, I mean *really hit you*, just what we have?”

“It does, Perrin. Often when I least expect it. Out of the sky it smacks me: joy.”

“That’s it exactly,” Perrin whispered. “Look at us—sleeping under the stars with our grandson between us. Would you ever have imagined this in Edge?” his voice trembled. “It’s just too much.”

Shem chuckled softly. “Remember when Mahrree said that? After you came back from Idumea and she saw for the first time her repaired house? Too many miracles.”

“And they kept coming, Shem.”

“Yes, they did,” Shem said, patting his grandson’s hand. He

glanced over and saw that Perrin was doing the same thing. Perrin chuckled when he realized they were copying each other.

“It’s been a fantastic life, Shem,” said Perrin as he looked deep into the dark and glittering cosmos. After a moment he said, “I’ve been thinking about the night of that first Guarder attack on Edge, when you were hurt. You don’t remember this, of course, but I had sent out soldiers looking for Mahrree. She had taken off to her mother’s. I was in such a panic, and furious that she didn’t obey my order to stay at home.

“When she finally was found and brought to me, I was so angry with her. But Hogal Densal was there. He made me kiss and hug her, in front of everyone. But I didn’t let him watch me kiss her. I always felt bad about that. Then he said something I couldn’t understand at that time. He said, ‘Now I can die a happy man.’ I wondered, when I was thirty-one, how someone could actually say they were ready to die happily. Shem, I now understand him.”

Shem was silent for a moment. “Are you planning to . . . *go somewhere?*”

Perrin chuckled. “No, Shem, I’m not. I have plans for the next fifteen years, then I’ll make some more for the next five after that. It’s only that I realized that there comes a time when you can look back on your life and feel a sense of fulfillment that you’ve done all that you were supposed to. That you know the Creator is satisfied with what you’ve accomplished.”

“If there’s anyone He’s satisfied with,” Shem said quietly, “it’s certainly you.”

“I could never have made it without you, you know. You’ve taught me so much. You always were my guide and the best brother a man could have.”

“Stop it, Perrin, or you’ll make me cry.”

“I just wanted to say . . . thanks.”

Shem sniffed. “I told you to stop it.”

“You’re so easy, you know that? The challenge is to make you *not* cry.”

The men chuckled.

“Hey,” they heard a weary voice. “Some of us are trying to s-l-e-e-p, here.”

Perrin looked over at Deck who was patting Cambo’s three-year-old son. Little Decker lifted his groggy head and dropped it again on his small pillow. He wanted to sleep with Grandpa Deck, but didn’t

“Does it ever hit you, just what we have?”

want to fall asleep and miss it.

“Sorry, Deck,” Perrin whispered. But he didn’t know why he bothered. Across the fire the teenage boys were huddled together sharing stories that made them laugh out loud. A little way beyond them were the young husbands with some of their sons sleeping between them at the covered shelter. They were also in deep discussion, but quietly.

Perrin loved watching them, grateful that none of them were soldiers but were instead farmers, stone cutters, shepherds, ranchers, and builders.

Perrin moved Briter’s hand to the ground and rolled clumsily to his side to better see the young men, and maybe work out what they were talking about.

Wes was sitting with them, wide-eyed. Lek held up his hand and made a violent action like a rough cutting motion.

Perrin’s face contorted as he fought back his laugh. He knew that movement. It was the same one that drew a terrified look from Jaysy’s would-be admirers at The Dinner in Idumea. The description also had a profound effect on his new grandson-in-law, too, after Salema married him. Lek had an excellent memory.

Wes’s eyes bulged while Sam and Con stifled nervous snickers.

Cambo, Bubba, and Holling Briter; Relf and Barnos Shin; and Boskos Zenos all stared at Lek, open-mouthed.

Lek whispered something else, and the young men turned at the same time to stare at Perrin.

He pretended to be asleep, but watched them through the slits of his eyelids.

“He really *said that* to you?” Perrin could read Cambo’s lips slowly moving. “He didn’t say anything like that to me before I got married.”

“You weren’t marrying *his granddaughter*, were you?” Con said quietly. “I was just glad Sam gave me a warning before I was called into the general’s office for our little pre-wedding ‘chat’!”

“No wonder why you didn’t dare talk to him,” Boskos whispered to Lek. “I couldn’t figure that out, why you were suddenly afraid of Uncle Perrin.”

Lek whispered something to Wes that Perrin couldn’t make out.

Sam and Con patted him encouragingly on the back, and Wes sat a little taller, as if he were a timid soldier taking courage before going off to his first battle at dawn.

Maybe he'd go easy on poor Wes, Perrin considered. After all, Wes had already heard the threat of what Perrin would do to him with a long knife if his granddaughter ever came home weeping because her husband mistreated her.

The young married men started to lie down for the night and Perrin slowly rolled to his back.

"Perrin!" Shem whispered harshly.

He winced. If he could see the young men, Shem likely could too.

"So *that's* what you said to *my son*?" Shem whispered, barely able to keep his voice under control. "My timid, tender-hearted boy—you threatened him with the *Guarder suicide ritual*? How could you do that to those boys?"

Perrin smiled apologetically. "Just making sure they know how much my girls mean to me," he whispered back.

He glanced over to Shem and saw him shaking his head in disgust. Perrin made a quiet noise in his throat. Shem looked over at him. Perrin gave him a complicated look. Shem smiled reluctantly, nodded, and waggled his eyebrow. Perrin was forgiven.

Loud laughter from across the fire startled them as the teenaged and younger boys roared again at whatever Young Pere had said.

Shem groaned and rolled over on to his belly to face the boys. "Young Pere!" he hissed across the fire. "It's late. Your grandfather needs to rest. Finish the story in the morning."

"Uncle Shem, I'm almost done."

Shem held up his finger in admonishment.

"All right . . . one more minute?" Young Pere asked.

Shem growled quietly.

"I promise."

Shem rolled on to his back and grunted softly at Perrin.

He looked over at him.

Shem didn't look back, but instead reached over Briter and put something in Perrin's hand. Two small, sharp pinecones.

Perrin grinned into the dark. Shem turned to him. Perrin twitched his nose. Shem twitched back the distance. Perrin smirked. Shem smirked back the trajectory. Perrin raised an eyebrow. Shem raised back the direction. Perrin winked. Shem winked back.

None of the boys saw where the pinecone came from, but they all saw it hit Young Pere on top of his head.

"Ow! Who did that?" demanded Young Pere, looking around. He didn't expect the next pinecone to come over the top of the fire in a

“Does it ever hit you, just what we have?”

high arc either, so he didn't know it was headed straight for him until he looked up at the right moment for the pinecone to hit him squarely on the forehead.

“Hey!”

Shem rolled over again. “Young Pere!” he said sternly, “Enough of your noise. Get to sleep now. *All of you!*”

Young Pere glared at him accusingly.

Shem held up his empty hands, then put a finger to his lips and tipped his head at Perrin to indicate that he was asleep.

Young Pere looked over at his father who was sitting on the far side of the fire with his nephew Cephas and sons Nool and Hogal, talking quietly. He clearly wasn't in a position to throw the pinecones, and Peto nodded a firm good night.

Frustrated, Young Pere went to his bedroll.

Shem rolled and turned back to Perrin, scrunching his mouth: Excellent shots.

Perrin wrinkled his nose: Of course. Excellent directions.

The two men shook in quiet laughter until they fell asleep.

Chapter II--“Those are the greatest soldiers we’ve ever produced.”

There was a stand-off of sorts in the morning. One man kept trying to *stand* up, and another kept forcing him *off* his feet.

“It feels fine. Just a little twinge, that’s all. I’ll walk it out.” Stand up.

“That twinge means it needs to heal. You’ll walk out all the stitches!” Push back down.

“I can make my own decisions, *Dr. Zenos!*” Stand up.

“And if I remember correctly, I can override the commander if I feel he is acting irrationally. Do you really want me to relieve you of duty, *General?*” Push down.

Camp was packed up, breakfast was put away, the horses were ready, the little boys had taken care of the weeds around the trees, and all that was left was for two men to decide how one of them was going to travel. Twenty-eight males watched two more arguing.

Guide Zenos stood nearby, waiting for his opinion to be asked. He wasn’t about to intervene yet, though, far too captivated with watching his son. He would never have had the guts to take on High General Shin when he was twenty-three years old.

“You’re not a full doctor yet, *Apprentice Zenos.*” Stand up.

“I’m as real a *doctor* as you are a *general.*” Push down.

“Is that a *shot* at what kind of general I am?” Stand up.

“I wouldn’t know. You’re the only general I’ve met. And right now you’re the moldy, stitched up kind.” Push back down.

“Yes, about that mold—just how much of that did you bring along? Your entire bag is turning green.” Stand up.

“Enough to keep you packed until we get back to Salem which, at this rate, will be today because I have half a mind to bring you

“Those are the greatest soldiers we’ve ever produced.”

home right now!”

“So you admit you have *at least* half a mind.”

Boskos took a deep breath in aggravation. “Papa!” he bellowed as the family laughed.

Perrin patted him on the shoulder. “Boskos, take a look at me—how many times did I stand up in the last minute? Obviously I can handle this.” He stepped closer and gave his irritated nephew a one-armed hug. “You’re a wonderful doctor, you know that? Thank you for trying so hard to take care of me. Whatever I do is my responsibility, not yours, right?”

Boskos sighed. “All right, Uncle Perrin. But if you do any more damage, promise you’ll tell Aunt Mahrree it’s not my fault.”

Perrin patted his cheek. “Of course. Now, where’s that stick your grandfather made me? I think I may need it this morning.”

Shem was relieved. “Now, Peto’s taking lead this morning. Perrin will walk in the middle of the pack with Deck, and I’ll bring up the rear until midday meal. Then we’ll re-evaluate Perrin’s leg,” he said with a meaningful look aimed at his son. Both of them were sure Perrin would be on a horse or in a sling by then.

“I’m walking with Puggah!” cried Briter. “I didn’t kicky his leg, so I get to walk with him.”

Lek looked to his uncle to see if that was all right, and Perrin nodded and smiled.

“I walking too!” called out Ensio. His cousin Cori ran after him to stand with Briter.

“I see I have my escorts ready,” Perrin said.

“So I better get my herding stick ready,” Deck decided.

Peto started off, handing his long knife to his son Kew at the first trees of the morning. “Your turn to mark. A little deeper. Whoa, not that deep—we’re not trying to cut down the tree. That’s better. You mark the next three trees, then hand off the knife to Atlee and Hogal.”

Perrin waited, leaning on the walking stick experimentally as he watched Peto coaching his son. He’d never noticed before that Peto marked only the first two trees of the routes. All of the other trees he let the boys mark. Perrin wondered how many years he’d been doing that. Since he was almost always at the head of the trail he never saw what was happening behind him.

Soon enough the rest of the boys and horses were on the way, and Perrin started along the bare forest floor with his three little charges. His leg twinged, but not unbearably, thanks to the pain tea. Besides,

he had enough distractions.

Briter was trying to tell him a story, but Ensio and Cori kept interrupting him to tell Puggah their own stories. For the next hour Perrin tried to let each boy get equal time while he hobbled along.

Cori's stories were the shortest but the hardest to understand. They consisted of him saying, "And then Mama gave me a sumpin sumpin and then I went 'ohh' and then I dropped it and then I laughed."

Perrin knew the best response. "Oh really? You don't say."

Then Cori would try to say it all again, until he was interrupted by a cousin.

By the second hour they were falling behind back to Shem. Deck kept to the middle and Cambo's son Decker joined Perrin and his escorts, as did Fennic Zenos and his uncle Young Shem Briter, who liked being among a group of boys where he, for once, was the oldest. He beamed with pride as he helped the smaller boys stay on the trail, and frequently nodded back to Uncle Shem that he had things under control.

Perhaps it was Perrin's slow gait, or the steepness of the climb, but by the third hour, even though he was very far behind, he wasn't alone.

Boskos, concerned about Perrin's leg, accompanied his son Toli who now also walked along with his cousins next to Puggah. Even Relf and little Grunick plodded along with them. They maintained a pace even the youngest boy at not yet two years could keep up with.

Shem remained behind all of them, gently nudging along children who were distracted by a fuzzy caterpillar or a fast snake, and encouraging them to see if they could run past their Puggah again.

Perrin had rarely been in the pack this far behind. Yesterday had been one of the few times he was among the last to arrive at the campsite. That made him uneasy. He always liked to be the first at each of their destinations to make sure all was secure and to direct everyone else in preparations. It didn't feel right to let someone else take the lead.

But then again, at the lead of their hike today was Peto, followed by Deck. He couldn't think of two better men for the job.

Perrin had learned years ago that the Creator always allows things to happen for a reason. He understood that morning why he was injured. Never before had he been in the company of so many funny little boys, and for the first time he didn't look at the trees or the trail,

“Those are the greatest soldiers we’ve ever produced.”

or imagine soldiers along the tree line, or call out for Bubba to haul away logs that clogged the paths.

Instead he listened intently to eight little boys who vied for his attention and frequently asked if his hurt was all better yet. Their concern for his efforts as he had to negotiate a large rock in their path was not only amusing but heartfelt. By the end of the third hour, his shirt pocket was filled with tiny blue flowers the boys picked because flowers helped their mamas feel better.

Boskos and Relf walked most of the time with Shem behind Perrin and the little ones, the three men enjoying watching Puggah try to talk to all of them at the same time. Only occasionally did someone step up to help Perrin over more difficult terrain.

As they approached the area where they’d have their midday meal, Perrin was almost sad that the morning, no matter how slow and painful, was nearly over, even though Young Shem announced they would all continue to help Puggah on the next leg of the hike. Perrin realized he had spent that morning walking with the greatest men he’d ever met.

By the time Perrin and his eight short escorts reached the hidden mountain lake, the teenage boys had already fished out their meal and were roasting several large trout.

Peto stood from the fire he was tending and analyzed his father. “How are you doing?”

“Good, good,” he said, a little out of breath. “Much better now that I smell my favorite meal cooking.”

“Sorry we didn’t wait for you to get here. I thought you might want us to keep to the schedule—”

“Absolutely,” Perrin agreed.

“Over here, Perrin,” Deck gestured to some logs they had set up for him to rest on.

Perrin limped over and sat down in relief.

Young Pere walked over, clapped his hands like his grandfather often did, and announced, “About time you arrived! We’re ready to eat and get moving again. Are you?”

Perrin cringed. That was his speech to Young Pere the year he was impaled by a tree in his leg. Perrin hadn’t been the most understanding that day, and now he was reaping the rewards of that.

He nodded at Young Pere. “You’re right. I shouldn’t hold up everyone else. Back on my feet,” and he made a motion to get up.

“No, no, no,” Young Pere chuckled and pushed him back down.

“I was just teasing you, Puggah. Fish won’t be ready for at least . . . two or three more minutes. You have that long to rest.”

Perrin sighed with a chastened smile. “Thanks.”

Boskos came over with his bag. “Time to flip your moldy bread, Uncle Perrin.”

“You sound like a horrible cook,” he said, grunting as he lifted his leg on to the log Deck had provided.

Boskos pulled up his trousers’ leg, unwrapped the wound, and gently peeled off the bread. He frowned as he looked at the stitching.

“Oozing, swollen, and red. Unsurprising. Does it feel tender?” he asked as he gingerly poked around it.

“Yes!” Perrin gasped.

Boskos nodded in disappointment. “That’s because you’ve been *walking on it*.” He turned over the bread and rewrapped the wound with the bandage. “So, are you ready to play big, tough soldier man?”

Perrin leered at him. “And what do you mean by that?”

“Don’t big, tough soldiers ride on *horses*?”

Perrin sighed. “Sometimes. They certainly don’t ride in slings.”

“And doesn’t the commanding officer always ride on a horse so he can have the best view of everything?”

“All right, Dr. Zenos,” said Perrin with resignation. “You win. Rig up Clark 14 to carry me for the afternoon.”

Boskos smiled. “Besides, some of the little ones will be ready for a nap, so they won’t be able to ‘help’ you as much. Maybe one can share your ride with you.”

Perrin nodded and closed his eyes to rest, and he felt someone else sit down next to him.

“You look pale, Perrin,” Shem said quietly. “Please tell me you’re riding this afternoon.”

“I am,” he said, without opening his eyes.

“Not that I didn’t thoroughly enjoy this morning,” Shem said. “Even though we’re way off schedule, I have to tell you, watching you with your little army . . . Well, I’ve seen you lead a lot of men in my time, but those are the greatest soldiers we’ve ever produced, aren’t they?”

Perrin smiled with his eyes still closed. “Yes, they are, Shem. How could we have wanted anything else? They are our best legacy.”

Shem was quiet.

“You’re not crying again are you?”

Sniff.

“Those are the greatest soldiers we’ve ever produced.”

Perrin opened one eye. “Maybe you better lead this afternoon. Watching all eight boys take a nap on me might put you over the edge.”

Shem chuckled and patted his good leg. “I’ll go get your fish,” he said, wiping his face.

Perrin spied Young Pere out of the corner of his eye. He’d been watching his grandfather and uncle, and by the expression on his face he seemed to think he saw something very unpleasant.

Perrin didn’t eat alone. Soon his little division was seated on the ground in front of him eating fish, bread, and dried peaches. Their fathers sat with them listening to them recount the morning’s excitement on the trail.

“And then Cori fell over the root Ensio told him not to,” Briter announced. “I told him little boys are like that. They just don’t listen.”

Lek smirked as he heard echoes of his own lectures.

Young Shem nodded knowingly at Briter. “But I thought the best part was when Puggah messed up the words to that song Aunt Lilla always sings—”

“I wasn’t singing,” Perrin interrupted quietly.

Every set of eyes turned to him.

“I wasn’t,” and he took a bite of trout.

“Uh-huh!” Ensio said loudly, pointing at him. “You were too! You kept mixing up the buzzing bees and the bouncing butterflies! You kept singing the butterflies were buzzing.”

Fennic shook his head. “Butterflies don’t buzz, Puggah,” he said solemnly.

Perrin shifted uncomfortably, pretending it was his leg that was bothering him and not the snorts of suppressed laughter of the boys’ fathers. “I don’t *sing*.”

“That’s true,” Young Shem said, feeling very grown-up. “Not very well.”

Perrin fidgeted as the fathers didn’t even try to hide their laughter.

Relf pointed at him. “I *thought* I heard something ahead on the trail.”

“Uncle Puggah sing wiff us,” Toli tattled with a smile.

Ensio, Cori, and Grunick nodded in agreement.

“Like thunder,” Fennic said.

“Thunder?” Lek asked his son. “What do you mean?”

Fennic looked at his father. “Puggah’s singing sound like thunder. Far away.”

Briter nodded. “Yeah, that’s it!”

Perrin turned slightly red under the smiles of his grandsons. “I may *rumble* from time to time,” he confessed, “but I do not *sing*.”

“Of course, Puggah,” Sam patted him on the back as he stood up. “And I’m sure none of us will tell Lilla that you *mis-rumbled* the words of her song.” He took a cautionary step out of the swinging range of Perrin.

Perrin snatched up his stick threateningly and Sam took another step backward.

“You’re lucky I can’t move fast, boy!” Perrin growled with a twinkle in his eye.

“That’s why I’m over here,” Sam teased. “I know what you’re capable of, General, even with a bad leg.”

Immediately Perrin’s expression shifted and he tipped his head contritely. Sam hadn’t talked to him for almost an entire season after he married Lori, too terrified to get near him.

Sam’s face softened as he understood Perrin’s unspoken apology and he nodded back.

“Rumble all you want, Puggah,” Relf said as he got up. “We’ll make you an honorary Trovato yet.”

When the meal was over, Deck reconfigured the loads on the horses so that Perrin could ride along with the child carrier. The little boys were already discussing the order in which they would get to ride with Puggah.

Perrin stood up to mount Clark 14, and immediately was grateful he didn’t have to walk any further. An unexpected pain shot through his leg and he nearly collapsed.

Bubba and Cambo Briter caught him before he fell.

“Father! What’s wrong?” Peto came over quickly.

“Nothing, nothing,” Perrin said in a strained voice. “Just stiffened up while I was sitting, that’s all. Boys, can you help me up on the horse?”

“Of course, Puggah,” Cambo said, leading him slowly over to Clark 14 while Bubba moved a few logs to fashion steps up to the saddle.

“But Puggah,” Bubba said as he supported the other side of his

“Those are the greatest soldiers we’ve ever produced.”

grandfather, “remember—I get to ride with you first. I could use a nap.”

“No, Uncle Bubba!” squealed Cambo’s son Decker. “Papa, tell him—I first!”

Cambo chuckled as he eased Perrin up. “He’s right, Bubba.”

Perrin nodded solemnly from atop Clark 14, evaluating his burliest grandson. “Our combined weight would cripple this poor horse. Sorry, Bubba.”

Bubba shrugged. “Worth a try,” he said with feigned sadness. “Last time I rode with you I was maybe nine years old.”

“And about two hundred pounds lighter.” Perrin held out his arms for Decker and, with a grunt, placed him in the child carrier in front of him.

Decker grinned excitedly and bounced in his seat.

They made much better time to their campsite that night with Perrin on the horse and the little boys taking turns with him. Even Young Shem pretended to nap while he leaned against his grandfather for his thirty minutes on the horse.

Perrin didn’t have the heart to tell any of the boys, but supporting their weight as they leaned against him became more difficult throughout the afternoon. Just getting them in and out of the carrier was surprisingly tiring, but he kept a smile on his face as the boys’ fathers hoisted them up and down.

Cori was the last to go in, and Con eyed Perrin with concern as he lifted him up.

“Puggah, are you sure you’re up to this? You look pale. You could just rest for a while.”

Perrin shook his head as he slipped his great-grandson into the carrier. “And disappoint Cori? Besides, I’m still trying to work out what ‘sumpin sumpin’ is. He keeps telling me about it. Maybe if he’s sitting closer to me, I can decipher it. It’s become my goal for the day.”

Con smiled appreciatively. “If you figure it out, would you let me know? Jori and I don’t know what he’s talking about either.”

“Sure thing,” Perrin promised. He caught Con’s arm before he left. “I should tell you that . . . I’m sorry if, uh, maybe I *intimidated* you before you married Jori. I shouldn’t have done that. To any of you boys.”

Con’s eyes looked damp. “Don’t be sorry. You love your girls. You should. I’m planning to threaten the same thing to all of my sons-

in-law.” He grinned and patted Perrin’s good leg. “Does this mean Wes doesn’t get to take a *walk* with you?”

Perrin chuckled. “Maybe when we get home I’ll sit him down in my office for a few minutes.”

Con rubbed his stubbly cheek thoughtfully. “But that doesn’t have the same effect as, say, *the barn*. Hold a pitchfork, too. He’s kind of expecting it, the rite of passage to becoming your grandson-in-law. His Great-Grandpa Jothan has already told him so many stories about you. Hate to disappoint him now.”

Perrin laughed. “I’ll see what I can do. Con, I haven’t told you before, but you’re a good husband to my Jori. Thank you. All of you boys are wonderful men. I’ve been watching you over the years. I’m very pleased with all of you.”

Con, taken aback by that unexpected compliment, bobbed his head in awkward acknowledgement. “Thanks, Puggah.”

He smiled at his little boy before joining the others ahead on the trail. Once he caught up to Wes, he put an arm around him, said something in his ear, and Wes turned back to look at Perrin.

Perrin smiled and nodded kindly, but Wes still regarded him with fear.

Con winked mischievously at Perrin and jogged up the path to his brother Sam.

“Con, Con, what did you say to him?” Perrin muttered as he clucked Clark 14 to start walking again.

“Papa says silly stuff,” Cori told him.

“Like you? Like you?” Perrin said, tickling his great-grandson who giggled. “So tell me, Cori, what’s ‘sumpin sumpin’?”

“Just sumpin.”

Perrin sighed. He never was good at juvenile interrogations.

By the time they reached their camp site for the night, Perrin couldn’t hide his exhaustion anymore. He allowed Barnos and Peto catch him as he slipped off the horse, and willingly let them, along with Viddrow and Holling Briter, carry him to his bed roll. He didn’t even look around to see if the camp was set up properly. It likely was.

Shem and Boskos came over to check on him. Without a word Boskos unwrapped the wound, and sighed when he saw it.

“Well?” Perrin whispered.

“Those are the greatest soldiers we’ve ever produced.”

“It’s redder than earlier. Uncle Perrin, as much as you hate the idea, we need to keep your leg elevated. That means riding in the sling tomorrow.”

“All right, Bos,” he said weakly, his eyes already closed.

Alarmed at his uncle’s lack of argument, Boskos looked anxiously up at Peto and Shem.

Deck walked over to them. “Did he just say, ‘All right?’” he whispered. “Didn’t even put up a fight about the sling?”

The three of them shook their heads and stared at Perrin.

Deck squatted next to him. “Got some more fish for tonight, Perrin. Barnos found some of those herbs Lilla uses and is trying to make it like she does. Do you want that, or the jerky Jaytsy packed? Personally, I’d go for the fish if I were you. Smells pretty good already. I might even try some tonight.”

“Fish is fine,” he whispered. “Wake me when it’s ready.”

“Should only be a few minutes, Perrin.” He looked worriedly at Boskos who didn’t shift his gaze, but continued to stare at his ailing patient. Having no other way to help, Deck jogged over to the fires where dinner was cooking.

Boskos stood up and silently motioned for Peto to follow him. They walked away several paces while Shem kneeled down by Perrin again, and they watched from a distance as Shem asked another blessing for him.

“Uncle Peto, I think we need to get him home,” Boskos whispered. “He’s far more frail than he should be. I don’t like it. Dr. Toon has different molds he’s been experimenting with and probably has something more effective than what I brought.”

“I agree,” Peto said. “But let’s not tell him until morning. He’ll be upset about not getting to the temple ruin this year. It will be the first time he’s missed it.”

“I’ll help take him down,” Boskos said. “I just need another person for the other pack horse.”

“Actually, Bos, I think you should stay. What if something happens to someone here? Young Pere has yet to get into trouble, but it’s coming, I know it. He’s been far too quiet and good. You could write a detailed note for Dr. Toon telling him what you’ve been doing, then a few of us can hurry my father down. We should be able to get there by afternoon if we leave early in the morning.”

Boskos tipped his head. “Sounds like you’re planning to take him.”

“He’s my father, after all,” Peto said. “None of the young fathers should help me, though. They need to watch their boys. Maybe Cephas or Viddrow or—”

“Young Pere? If he’s with you, you won’t worry so much about him. Besides, he could do his own stitches now,” Boskos almost smiled. “You might have some time to talk with him. I think he’d be a great doctor. He could start taking the anatomy courses when classes resume and be ready for the entrance exams by Planting Season.”

Peto patted him on the back. “Not bad ideas. But I’m worried about not leaving you with enough horses.”

“Well, you need one to send a rider ahead to retrieve the wagon from Grandma Trovato’s in Norden,” Boskos thought out loud, “Then you still need two horses to carry Uncle Perrin in the sling down the mountain—”

“That leaves you with only one horse for the food and supplies and children,” Peto said. “I don’t like that, Bos.”

He waved it off. “Now that I think about it, I’m sure we can handle it. It’ll be downhill all the way back. Besides, it’ll be a good experience, remember? Not everyone will do this trip with pack horses. If needs be, we can leave the supplies here and retrieve them later. No, Uncle Peto, one horse will be all we need.”

“Let’s keep thinking about this until tomorrow morning, Bos, then we’ll make final decisions. I have a feeling the Creator will tell us by then what we should do. Let’s keep open minds so that He can.”



Perrin felt the land tremor, and the snow coming through the roof and landing on him. He was in Edge and Idumea at the same time, and the ground wouldn’t stop shaking. No matter what he did he couldn’t hold it still. The snow fell on his face in big white clumps, chilling him all over.

But what bothered him the most was that he couldn’t find Mahr-ree anywhere.

When he opened his eyes, the sky was dark. In the dim firelight he recognized Shem on one side, Peto on the other, and Deck above him. Someone was working on his leg, and it felt like it was on fire. He recoiled in pain, but didn’t have any strength to move it, even if firm hands weren’t holding it in place.

Deck laid something cool and wet on his head.

“Those are the greatest soldiers we’ve ever produced.”

“No. Too cold,” Perrin whispered. “No more snow.”

“Father, you have a high fever,” Peto told him. “We need to cool you down.”

“Stoke the fire. Too cold.”

The three men looked briefly at each other. The fire was lit for light, not for warmth on that balmy Weeding Season night. “We can’t do that, Father. The heat might make you worse.”

“Peto, I can’t find your mother.”

Peto took his trembling hand and held it firmly. “I know, I know. We’re taking you home to her. We’ve already sent Barnos on Clark 14 to the Trovatos. The wagon will meet us at the bottom of the mountain.”

“Just find her, son.”

“Perrin, I’m not sure you understand what’s happening,” Shem said, leaning closer to him. “We’re in the mountains now, on a marking trip, but your leg was injured, and now it’s looking much worse. We need to get you to Dr. Toon to try something different. As soon as Boskos has your leg rewrapped, you’re heading down the mountain.”

“After the land tremor.”

The three men looked at each other again.

“Land tremor, Perrin?” Deck asked.

“Shaking.”

“Perrin,” Shem laid a firm hand on his shoulder in a futile attempt to still him. “Can you feel me? The only thing shaking is you. That’s what woke Briter up. Your shaking means you’re suffering from an infection. The only way to treat you is to get you home and to Dr. Toon. Do you understand me?”

“I think so,” he mumbled and shivered.

“He’s ready,” Boskos said, placing a light blanket over Perrin.

“Can I go with Puggah?” asked a little voice.

Everyone turned to look at Briter.

“I won’t kick him.”

Shem pulled his grandson close. “Puggah’s very sick. He’s going home to get better.”

“I don’t want to leave Puggah. We should go with him,” Briter decided. “But I don’t need his hotness. He has too much now.”

Shem sighed. “Briter, the sun won’t be up for hours still. Go lie down with your brother and get some more sleep—”

“No!” Briter started to wail. “Puggah needs me!”

Peto noticed Young Shem approaching. "Uncle Peto, can I go with you? I heard Young Pere saying you were going to help Puggah go home. I can help."

"Don't you want to stay with your papa and help finish marking the trail?" Peto said. "You get to see the temple ruin today."

Now Young Shem tried not to blubber as he turned to Deck. "Puggah needs me, Papa."

Deck exhaled. "Son, it's not like you can ride with Puggah." He glanced up as Young Pere and Cambo led two pack horses over to them.

Lek was testing a long, thick tree trunk they had just chopped down, intended to hold the sling as it straddled between the two horses.

"I hope it's strong enough," he said quietly to Young Pere. "Relf and Sam are looking for another piece that you can take along with you, in case this one cracks."

Shem stood up and felt the diameter of the wood. "Looks adequate. Let's pray it's enough."

Suddenly Atlee, Hogal, Kew, and Nool stood nearby. "We've decided," Nool said, "We all want to go home, too."

On the ground Perrin shivered again.

Shem knelt down gripped his shoulders to try to calm him. "Boys, now's not the time. We need to move quickly and *soon*."

Boskos nodded in agreement.

Lek, Peto, and Deck hefted Perrin into the net sling already spread out on the ground next to him, and Shem slipped the ends on to the tree trunk.

Zaddick came trotting out of the dark woods with another long trunk. "Relf and Sam said to couple this one with it. Should be more than strong enough now."

It took three men to heft Perrin and his sling, then attach the sling to the pack horses that shifted unsteadily under the awkward load.

Deck frowned. "I don't like the looks of this. Those Clarks aren't trained like the horses used on the routes from Edge. And what if something goes wrong? They're already looking skittish. Peto and Young Pere can't lift Perrin and steady the horses by themselves."

Shem closed his eyes.

Everyone watched him, holding their breath.

When he opened his eyes a few moments later, he looked around at the faces illuminated by the dying fire.

“Those are the greatest soldiers we’ve ever produced.”

“Wake everyone who’s not up yet,” the guide ordered. “Pack only the necessities. We’ll retrieve the rest later. We’re all going home, but we need to leave in the next half hour.”

Several of the boys cheered, taking care of the first item Guide Zenos mentioned.

“What about marking the path and clearing the downed trees?” Peto asked, no longer really concerned about it, but feeling he should mention it.

“We can finish later in the season,” Shem told him. “Idumea’s not coming this year.”

Mahrree found herself lying awake in her bed and wondered what had disturbed her. She listened carefully to the sounds of the house. Not having any men around always made her a little jumpy, although Salem was the safest place she could imagine. Even with visiting granddaughters and great-granddaughters filling most of the rooms that the boys left, the house seemed a little empty. She was still exhausted, having sat up with the teenage girls and married women until late in the night, talking and laughing.

Jaytsy and Lilla were sure they knew all there was to being a good wife, and Mahrree kept setting them straight again and again. Calla sat back and listened, rocking her latest granddaughter and offering the sagest advice of all, but only when asked. The good-natured arguments certainly kept Hycy’s rapt attention as she learned more about men than she ever had before.

Mahrree tried rolling over to get back to sleep but found her eyes opening again. She sat up and looked around. The sun wouldn’t be rising for perhaps another hour.

But then a feeling of intense worry filled her, as if she was watching something terrible happen, but she couldn’t see what it was. It was followed oddly by great warmth and peace, gently wiping away the concern.

She listened carefully, then heard again what had awakened her.

Mahrree, there’s been an accident. But it’s the Creator’s will.

Oh Father, who is it?

Perrin. He’s starting on his way home.

Chapter 12--“And it’s the Creator’s will.”

Mahrree was dressed and sitting on the front porch watching the tower between the Shin and Zenos homes when the banners changed. The sun had come over the mountain peaks a few minutes ago, and the tower watchman waved down to her instead of hitting his chimes to get her attention.

Mahrree waved back half-heartedly, already knowing what would be rising.

Quickly the flags were hoisted. First was the banner for Perrin—dark and light blue stripes, meaning that the message was for or about him. He and Shem had their own banners, designated to send signals to either of the men throughout Salem and the surrounding communities.

Next was a set of smaller flags, each with different shapes and colors for different letters, spelling out a brief message. *Home*.

Then another banner, white with red stripes, went up. *Emergency*.

Mahrree swallowed and tried to fight back the tears. She heard the door at the Briter home fly open and Jaytsy stood there, staring up at the tower.

“Mother!” she cried and rushed over to the Shin house. “Mother! Do you see it?”

Mahrree nodded and patted the spot next to her. “I know,” she said. “The Creator sent me His own message about an hour ago.”

Jaytsy was too worried to sit. “What happened? Do we know who it is?”

“Your father,” Mahrree whispered and nodded at the tower. “Someone up north must have alerted the tower outside Norden. Who knows how long they’ve been traveling back. Couldn’t send the message until they had enough morning light.”

Jaytsy sank next to her mother and put her arms around her. “I

knew something bad would happen this trip. I knew it, I knew it, I knew it—”

The front door of the Shin house opened and eleven-year-old Sakal was surprised to find her aunt and grandmother sitting on the steps.

“What’s wrong?” she asked urgently.

“Sakal, go get your mother,” Jaytsy said, and she ran back into the house.

A moment later Lilla rushed out and stared at the tower.

“No!” she yelled, and spun around to look at Jaytsy and Mahrree, both trying to fight back tears.

Lilla was never one for that. She let her tears fall freely.

“What do you think happened? Why am I asking that!” she said, sitting down hard on the steps as she cried. “How can any of us know what happened, but it happened to Papa Pere, right? Isn’t that what the tower means? Here I thought it’d be one of the little ones, or Young Pere getting in trouble—”

“Lilla,” Mahrree tried to slow her down.

“—I’ve been feeling uneasy about this trip for weeks, but there was no reason, I kept telling myself. Why should this trip be different? After all, they have the guide!”

“Lilla—”

“They have a doctor! They have the general! But no!” She stood up. “I’ll get a horse and go find them—try to see what’s happening!”

Before Mahrree and Jaytsy could stop her, they heard someone running from the Zenos road. Calla was holding up her skirt and making quick time across the field. She pointed up at the tower as she came to the front porch.

“Do we know what happened?” she asked as she kneeled down, breathless, in front of Mahrree.

Mahrree shook her head. “Not yet. But it’s Perrin. That much I know. And it’s the Creator’s will.”

“What’s *that* supposed to mean?” Lilla wailed.

“I don’t know,” Mahrree murmured. “But it’s what I was told, early this morning, by my father.”

That hushed even Lilla, and in silence the women fretted.

Calla gripped Mahrree’s hands and smiled bravely. “Then whatever happens, happens, and all will be well.”

Mahrree smiled dismally at Calla’s calming optimism. Her youngest sister needed some of it.

Lilla started off the porch, intent on going to the barn when Calla called after her. “No, Lilla. Stay here. News will reach us soon enough.”

Lilla spun back around. “But I just can’t sit here and wait!”

“That’s right, you won’t,” Calla said in a firm but gentle tone. “We’ll get an early start this morning on the blankets we planned to tie today. This evening we’ll be busy taking care of whatever we need to do for Perrin and those who come with him, so this is our only opportunity to tackle the rest of the projects, right?”

Lilla’s shoulders sagged. “Right,” she reluctantly agreed. “Jayts, I guess we best start breakfast. Weren’t we planning to do something together this morning?”

Jaytsy tried to smile. “That’s right, we were. We were going to let the younger girls help us—” Her voice trailed off as she wiped away a frustrated tear.

“Let’s go,” Lilla said, full of new determination to do something, anything. “Mahrree, would you wake everyone here?”

Mahrree glanced up at the tower again and slowly stood up.

“I’ll help,” Calla said brightly.

“I really don’t think I need help waking the girls, Calla,” Mahrree said to her best friend.

Calla put a bracing arm around her. “That’s not what I’m going to help with, Mahrree.”

Breakfast was usually a noisy affair on regular days, but when it was women’s week, it was almost deafening. All of the Shin, Briter, and Zenos wives, sisters, and daughters crowded together in one house to eat together and plan the day’s projects.

But this morning was unsettlingly somber. Only the toddlers and babies still babbled, taking advantage of the silence. A couple of girls sat on the Briters’ front porch eating, watching for any tower message changes. Breakfast was finished rather sooner than usual, and the girls and women walked over to the Shins to start working on the blankets set up for tying.

Several male Zenos relatives, over to help take care of the cattle and the men’s chores, read the banner message and offered to head north to see if they could lend a hand once the chores were finished.

Seeing the volunteers going about their tasks in the barn and fields

made Mahrree all the more lonely for her own men. She wished that somehow all of them could come home today. It no longer seemed right for them to be gone.

She was making her way over to the Shins with Jaytsy when they noticed a cloud of dust fast approaching. They rushed to the road and the rider soon became clear.

Within moments, Barnos Shin stopped Clark 14 in front of them and slid off the frothing horse. He went straight to Mahrree as women piled out of the Shins’ house to greet him.

“Muggah,” he said taking her gently by the arms, “I see the tower messages reached here. Puggah has an infection in his leg. He’d been impaled on a barbed stick, and Boskos got it out and stitched it up, but early this morning he was feverish and the wound looked pretty bad. At least, that’s what Bos said. I wasn’t about to look myself, though. Papa and Young Pere are going to bring him down out of the mountain. Grandma Trovato was sending a wagon to meet them. Bos thinks Dr. Toon has a better way to treat him. I’m on my way now to go get him. I was thinking Dr. Toon could ride up and meet them on their way home. They should be here by this afternoon, if all has gone well.”

Mahrree hugged her exhausted grandson. “Thank you, Barnos. I can’t imagine how tired you are.”

“It’s all right, Muggah. I’m actually not that tired. Riding down the mountain in the dark was rather invigorating, and I haven’t quite gotten over that yet. I have a note from Boskos to get to Dr. Toon.”

“Then come right back for breakfast,” Jaytsy said, patting her nephew’s arm.

“Can’t. I should get Dr. Toon to them as quickly as possible.”

“But you’ll need a fresh horse, Barn!” Lilla rushed over. “Come back, eat, and we’ll have another one saddled.”

“No, Mama. Can’t spare the time. I’ll borrow Clarkess 85 from down the road. I saw them saddling her up for some errands.” Barnos noticed his wife Ivy trotting over to greet him, but he only waved to her, then mounted on the tired horse and spurred it back to the center of Salem.

Ivy stopped in her tracks as Barnos raced away.

Calla produced a smile as she joined Mahrree. “There, see? Just an infection! Dr. Toon’s the best physician we’ve had in Salem. He’ll have Perrin up and dancing again in no time, if Perrin danced.”

Mahrree wasn’t convinced.

Calla put her arm around Mahrree and started to walk her back to the house.

But Ivy continued to watch as the dust cloud faded away.

“He didn’t even stop for a kiss,” she said quietly to her sister-in-law Lori who stood next to her. “Barn going anywhere without a goodbye kiss?” She glanced over at her husband’s grandmother who heard her.

“Don’t you ever,” Mahrree told her, “*ever* let him do that again.”



Peto was surprised with the speed in which they made it down the mountain, even though each hour seemed to go by insufferably slowly.

Without stopping to mark the backs of the trees, and focusing only on getting to the bottom as quickly as possible, Peto, Young Pere, Cephas, Viddrow, and Holling brought Perrin to the waiting wagon driven by a Trovato grandson only a couple hours after sunrise. Traveling light and having men jogging next to the pack horses to keep them steady sped up their pace, and Peto assumed that the rest of their party was only a few hours behind them.

Gingerly they loaded Perrin into the wagon, keeping him in the sling and hanging it suspended from two posts on either end. They sent the Trovato grandson back with the pack horses to retrieve the other wagons in anticipation of the rest of the families.

Peto sat next to his father in the back of the wagon with the other young men while Holling Briter took the reins and started the horses in a steady gallop south.

Perrin was quiet now, his eyes closed and his breathing shallow.

Peto put a hand on his arm and discovered that his father had plenty of ‘hotness.’ He wondered how long this bout of calm would last. Perrin had been alternating between stillness and thrashing, between silence and muttering. Peto didn’t need to be a doctor to know the situation was serious.

He felt a hand on his arm, belonging to Cephas. His nephew smiled faintly. “He’s in the Creator’s hands, Uncle Peto. I’m sure of it. We do all we can, then He makes up the difference.”

“I know,” Peto said. “But I also appreciate the reminder.”

Peto noticed Young Pere staring at the distant farmlands. Young

“And it’s the Creator’s will.”

Pere glanced at him, at Cephas’s hand on Peto’s arm, then he turned back to the scenery with mild disdain. He’d been uncharacteristically silent on the fast run down the mountain, and said only a few necessary words since they left early this morning.

But Peto had little energy left to worry about his son. All he could focus on was his father, and what his mother would say when she saw him.

Mahrree felt the wagon approaching before she heard it. It was a light uneasiness in her belly that made her get up from the blanket she was stitching to calmly walk outside without causing any of the girls or women around her to wonder why. It was only a little after midday meal and certainly too soon for anyone to be coming.

But they were.

She recognized the wagon as it rushed down their lane. By the time it reached the house, half of the girls and women were joining Mahrree in the front garden, waiting in silence.

She thought she was ready for anything, but seeing Perrin so still in the net litter, instead of sitting next to Holling on the front seat waving to her sheepishly about being injured, was not something she was expecting.

He would *never* be voluntarily in a sling. Not unless . . .

She ran to the wagon, Jaytsy close on her heels, before it could properly stop. Dr. Toon, riding in the bed next to Perrin, immediately starting issuing orders.

“Mrs. Shin, we need to get him flat and comfortable. Boys, lift him gently. Ladies, out of the way!”

“This way!” Lilla called unnecessarily. The grandsons, hefting the net litter off the posts, knew where Puggah’s bedroom was, but Lilla needed to do something as she jogged to the house and the open door.

Peto hopped off the wagon and went directly to his mother and sister. His light gray eyes were dark and muddled.

Mahrree bit her lip. “Tell me honestly, Peto—how is he?”

“Not good, Mother.” He put an arm around his mother and sister and he walked them to the house.

The grandsons were carrying Perrin through the main door and

down to his section of the house, the rest of the girls and women having moved out of their way.

“He was fine yesterday morning,” Peto told them. “I just don’t understand it. Boskos did an excellent job on him. Even Dr. Toon thought so. He and Barnos met us north of Salem. He’s put on a different poultice but wanted to redo it once we got home.”

As they arrived at Perrin and Mahrree’s bedroom, the grandsons were lifting a very still Perrin into his bed. His flesh was nearly as pale as his hair.

Jaytsy whimpered when she saw him, and Mahrree covered her mouth. He looked worse than she imagined, and she thought she’d imagined pretty bad.

“He’s so quiet,” Jaytsy sobbed softly.

“He wasn’t earlier,” Peto assured her. “Mother, go to him. Let him hear you. He’s been worried about you all morning. He seems to think he’s back in Edge during the land tremor, and he can’t find you anywhere.”

Mahrree weaved through her grandsons who stood watching Dr. Toon hastily unwrapping Perrin’s leg, and went to the other side of the bed. She sat down next to her husband and took up his hot, limp hand.

“Perrin. Perrin? You’re home! Can you hear me? You’re home now.” This wasn’t the first time she sat next to an ill man trying to reach him, but she still couldn’t think of what to say that didn’t sound odd not given a response.

Slowly he opened his eyes. It took him a moment to focus on her, but when he did he began to breathe more rapidly. “Where did you go?” he whispered slowly. “We’ve been looking all over for you!”

“I know, I know,” she smiled, relieved to hear his voice, no matter how feeble. “But we’re together again, so everything’s fine.”

“Mahrree, I think I got hurt again. I’m sorry about that. But at least I’ll be home for a while.”

Mahrree kissed his hand. “Yes, you will. And I’ll enjoy that.”

He sighed and closed his eyes as Dr. Toon rewrapped his leg.

Behind Mahrree, Peto reached down to check his father’s temperature. “Still very warm.”

“Plenty of hotness to share,” Cephas said quietly.

The young men smiled sadly.

“Fever can be a good sign,” Dr. Toon said, pulling a thin blanket over Perrin as he began to shiver. “It shows his body is fighting the

infection. The concern is if he’s too hot for too long.”

“That’s true,” Mahrree said, noticing Jaytsy, Lilla, and Calla standing in the doorway, looking far too worried. The bedroom was crowded with bodies, and many of the women and girls packed the small gathering room behind them, waiting for news about Puggah. Mahrree had to alleviate some of their fears, along with her own.

“No, fevers aren’t always bad,” she said optimistically. “Jaytsy, you and Peto remember when I was sick with the pox, don’t you? After Grandmother Peto passed?”

Jaytsy sent her brother a faint smile. “Oh, yes I do. Peto wanted to take some ink and connect the pocks on your face. He was sure they would reveal some secret message.”

Peto scoffed lightly as his sons and nephews snickered. “I would *never* suggest doing such a thing.”

Young Pere, who’d been very quiet, Mahrree noticed, didn’t even crack a smile.

Mahrree touched some of the faded scars on her face. “I was feverish for over three days, or so I was told. Apparently at one point the fort surgeon told Perrin that I wouldn’t make it to morning. But I did. I recovered.” She patted her husband’s still hand. “And so can he.”

Jaytsy smiled more broadly. “That was probably the night Father was so worried that he didn’t want to leave your side. Because he didn’t come down for dinner, we brought it up to him as he sat next to you. It had gone cold, but once again Peto had an idea. He put a piece of bread on your arm to see if you could warm it up. And it was working, until Father realized what Peto was doing.”

Now the boys began to laugh.

Even Dr. Toon smiled and shook his head.

Young Pere’s face didn’t move.

But Peto was aghast. “Why Jaytsy, I would *never* consider using my ill and beloved mother as a stovetop.” But his eyes thanked her for the memory.

Lilla put her hands on her hips. “No wonder you’re so reluctant to share stories about your past with me. You were awful!”

“I like to think I’ve improved over the years,” Peto told her.

“You have,” Mahrree said, reaching back to pat him. “And Perrin’s going to be just fine,” she declared.

Dr. Toon gave her an encouraging smile. “If anyone can fight it off, it’s the general. I’ll be back in two hours to check on him. Keep

by his side and monitor his breathing and heart rate. Send a messenger to my office if anything should change dramatically. When Boskos arrives, he can replace the poultice. I'm leaving an additional one."

"But they won't be back for days," Mahrree said.

"No, Mother," Peto said. "Everyone's on their way home. They should be here by dinner time."

Calla's eyes grew large. "*Everyone?* But I'm not prepared! Tonight's my night for dinner and . . . oh my." She looked at her sister. "I may need some help."

Jaytsy put a hand on Calla. "Remember, they'll be bringing home all the food I packed. Just let them eat what they should have tonight."

Peto winced at his sister, and Holling put a bracing arm around his mother. "Jayts, I'm sorry to say it, but in order to get everyone down quickly, we kind of . . . *left everything* up on the mountain. We left them with only one pack horse, so everyone took only what they needed for a quick midday meal. The Trovatos said they'll retrieve everything else tonight and bring it down tomorrow."

Jaytsy sighed at Lilla. "Next year, you're in charge of food again. It seems all I did was pack meals for the bears."

The family's chuckling almost drowned out Perrin's mumbling. "Why is Jaytsy feeding the bears, Mahrree?" he whispered. "Don't we have enough children?"

Mahrree laughed and smoothed back some of his white, sweaty hair. "I think everyone should go now and let him sleep. I have a feeling we have some hungry boys here."

"Definitely!" Young Pere said, speaking for the first time. He pushed his way through the bodies to head to the kitchen.

In the gathering room, Barnos was weaving through the women when he felt a hand grab him and pull him into his grandfather's office.

"Ivy! I was just coming to look for you. I'm sorry I didn't—"

She stopped him with a kiss.

After a minute she pulled away. "Your grandmother's orders. You are never again to leave without kissing me goodbye."



Perrin opened his eyes and was completely bewildered.

The candle nearby dimly illuminated a familiar room. He was in

his bed, he was sure of it, but he didn’t know *why*. He heard someone breathing softly next to him and recognized the rhythm as Mahrree’s. His eyes scanned the ceiling, trying to remember exactly what was going on.

They were in the mountains, right? So why was he now—

He tried to move his leg but a shooting pain caused him to gasp. He remembered everything up until . . . until getting off a horse? Fish?

“Oh, Perrin, you’re awake!”

He felt his wife kiss him and put a hand on his forehead. She was unnaturally cold, and a mild panic rose up in his chest as he fumbled to take her wrist or her throat or anywhere else he could to feel for a pulse.

But she was moving, so she wasn’t dead. So why was she so cold? Nothing was making sense. Everything felt off.

“Mahrree, what’s going on? When did I get home?”

“Earlier this afternoon. It’s now about midnight. You’ve been very feverish, but I think you’re cooling down a little. Dr. Toon is trying something different on your leg.”

He tried to sit up but felt unusually weak. “I don’t understand . . . How did I get home? What about everyone else—”

“Perrin, everything’s fine. Everyone came home. They arrived a few hours ago.”

“What? How?”

Mahrree kissed him again. “I’ll let Shem explain it. He’s resting on the armchairs, hoping you would wake tonight. I’ll send him in and then get you something to eat.”

Perrin started to raise a finger, a variety of questions and thoughts in his mind, but he couldn’t sort out any of them, so he slumped again into the feather pillows.

For the first time all day, Mahrree breathed easier. He was talking! He was coherent! Already he was shaking it off.

She got off the bed, still fully dressed, and went into the gathering room.

“Shem, he’s up and very confused. I’m going to get him some dinner. Do you want to tell him what’s been going on?”

Shem sighed in relief as immense as hers, and he rubbed the ex-

haustion out of his eyes. “Absolutely!” He made his way to their bedroom as Mahrree started down the dark hall, where she crashed into a tall body.

“Young Pere? What are you doing up at this hour?”

“Muggah,” Young Pere said, surprised. “I didn’t realize you would be . . . How’s Puggah?”

“He’s awake, finally. Confused, but at least he’s making sense, now. I knew he could beat this,” she added confidently. “Did you need something?”

“Oh, well, I was . . . coming down to check on you.”

Mahrree squeezed his arm. “You still can! Go say hi to your grandfather, help Shem explain what’s happened. I’m sure he’d be happy to see you.”

“Sure, Muggah.”

Young Pere waited until his grandmother was well on her way to the kitchen before he continued on to her small gathering room. He paused and listened to the deep, quiet voices in the bedroom. Someone chuckled hoarsely, and it took him a moment to realize the frail sound came from Puggah.

Young Pere didn’t join them—he hadn’t expected anyone to be up at this late hour—but instead stepped noiselessly over to General Shin’s office and slowly opened the door. He crept into the dark room over to the large bookshelf. He’d seen it there many times before, but never bothered with it. Within a few moments of up-close searching in the pale moons’ light filtering through the windows, he located what he was looking for.

Burned carefully into the leather cover were the precise letters: *The Army of Idumea: The Shin-Zenos Years*, by Calla Trovato Zenos.

One should always fully research one’s first career before embarking upon it.

“Papa!” Tabbitt was breathless the next morning as she reached her father, out in the pasture checking on a calf.

Deck looked up, surprised to see his fourteen-year-old so distraught. “What’s wrong?” His only thought was, *Please, not Perrin.*

“And it’s the Creator’s will.”

Please, not Perrin—

“It’s Clark,” she panted, her eyes red. “He won’t eat.”

Deck was already walking quickly back with her to the horses’ pasture. He realized he should have been thinking, *Please, not Perrin or Clark*. “What do you mean ‘won’t eat’?” although he already had an idea.

“Kanthi and I can’t get him to take anything. Not oats, not the old apples—nothing. He just turns away. He didn’t eat much yesterday, either, but we didn’t think too much of it. Well, now we do! What do we do?”

Deck sighed, because he’d seen this before. He put an arm around his worried daughter. “Right now, we just hope and pray.”

Tabbit’s chin trembled. “That’s what Kanthi said you’d say. It’s because of Puggah, isn’t it? Clark knows.”

Without thinking, Deck said, “Did you tell Clark what happened?”

But his daughter didn’t think it foolish that their animals understood them. Just because they didn’t answer back didn’t mean they weren’t listening. “No, we thought we shouldn’t. We didn’t want to worry him.”

They were at the pasture now, Kanthi holding a shriveled apple up to Clark’s lips, but he wouldn’t take it. Deck caught the look in Clark’s eyes and . . . there was no look. Where there was normally a bright spark—even at his age—it was dimming, rapidly. Clark turned away, and slowly walked to a corner of the pasture where he drooped his head and stared at nothing.

Deck noticed none of the other horses were nearby. Usually they hovered around him, at an adoring distance, as if knowing he was king of all horses in Salem. Today, they grazed as far away as possible.

Kanthi looked to her uncle, distraught. “He knows about Puggah, doesn’t he, Uncle Deck?”

Deck sighed, realizing that this wasn’t a good sign, for Clark or for Perrin.

“Yes,” he decided. “Clark knows.”

The next two days were as if they were taken out of time. No one was quite sure what to do or how to do it. The women still had many

projects to complete—blankets and clothes to sew and new recipes to try—but the presence of the men complicated everything.

And the men didn't quite know what to do, either. They should've been in the mountains instead of at home. But none of the visiting families felt like leaving yet, either. No one wanted to do anything until they were sure their Puggah was going to be fine.

His condition changed hour by hour. The morning after they returned, Perrin was sitting up in bed and talking easily with Dr. Toon and a steady stream of visitors who saw the tower messages and came by to express their concern.

Mahrree wasn't at all surprised when Yudit, Shem's oldest sister showed up.

"I heard my 'twin brother' is now a layabout?" she said with her hands on her hips and her eyes twinkling. In many ways, she and Perrin were like siblings, only a day's difference in their ages, and both of them feeling they needed to take care of Shem; Yudit raised him ever since their mother died when Shem was only two, and Perrin took over the duties when Shem went into the world. Yudit was a frequent visitor, a well-matched tease, and as dear a friend as any real sister could be.

Mahrree laughed as she let Yudit in. She was still as big and broad as Shem, and with snowy-white hair that matched Perrin's. "Maybe you can get him up and kicking again."

Yudit struck a pose. "Of course I can," she sniffed haughtily. "Lead me to Mr. Lazybones."

She followed Mahrree back to their bedroom, and Mahrree announced, "Yudit's here!"

Perrin groaned and said, "Oh, great. *Now* I'm going to get it."

"That's right, you are! What kind of example are you setting for the children?" Yudit exclaimed as she marched into the room where she stopped unexpectedly. She stared silently at Perrin, her face blanching almost as pale as his, and Mahrree understood her abrupt silence and change in demeanor. Noch.

Her husband had fallen ill last year, and was also very pale, just before he passed away. Surely Perrin's condition, lying propped up by pillows in bed, reminded Yudit of those terrible, terrible weeks, and Perrin seemed to remember, too.

He forced himself to sit up more properly, as if to prove to Yudit that he wasn't ailing as Noch had, and she did her best to rally.

“Well, it’s not often we find Perrin down.” But her teasing demeanor was gone, replaced with a subdued tone as she sat down next to him on his bed and tenderly took his arm. “Still so warm. Oh, Perrin. Can I get you some ice? The ice houses are still quite full—”

He patted her hand that was clutching him with her ever-too-tight grasp. “I’m already feeling too chilled, but thank you for the offer.”

They spoke for a few minutes about nothing important, but Mahrree didn’t hear any of it. She was staring too hard at Yudit, trying to suppress her annoyance that Yudit was being so . . . *nice*. Not that it wasn’t in her nature. She had seven children, and hordes of grandchildren and great-grandchildren who she loved immensely, but there was always a slight edge to her, a sharpness in her affection that Mahrree had imagined must have come from her and Perrin’s ancestor, Lorixania Shin, who had been a massive woman with an affinity for knives and battle.

While Yudit would never take up a blade, she certainly would never coddle someone either. Not like she was now coddling Perrin, worriedly dabbing his sweaty forehead with a damp cloth.

“You look so tired, I really should let you sleep,” Yudit was saying when Mahrree focused on their conversation again. “Don’t try to get up too soon. Rest, Perrin, all right?”

He smiled feebly at her, a little surprised at her earnestness. “Of course. Whatever you say. I know better than to pick an argument with you.”

She grinned at him. “Finally you catch on!” But Mahrree could see that her eyes were swimming as she hastily turned and left for the gathering room. Mahrree followed, if only to assure Yudit—and herself—that this was *not* like Noch.

But before Mahrree could get the words out in some gentle, kind way, Yudit surprised her with a massive embrace, holding Mahrree so tightly she almost couldn’t breathe.

Only after a long moment did she pull away, and Yudit’s face was wet with tears.

“It’s not like Noch,” Mahrree blurted, knowing that wasn’t the most tactful thing to say, but desperate to clarify that to Yudit.

Yudit tilted her head sadly and gave Mahrree that look she hated, the condescending one she was so good at delivering herself, but resented to receive. The, *You don’t really know what you’re talking about, dear*, look.

“I’m sure it’s not,” Yudit said generously, but her eyes betrayed

her. Salemmites were such terrible liars.

For the first time ever, Mahrree was glad to see Yudit leave.

By the late afternoon, Perrin was exhausted and slept through dinner. He didn't awake until after dark, and Mahrree refused to let him exert himself in any way.

By the morning of the second day he was hotter than ever, but after sleeping past midday meal he looked almost like his regular self again. Boskos checked the wound hourly, and Dr. Toon was by six times a day.

On the afternoon of the second day, Boskos took Dr. Toon aside to look at the stick he'd wrapped carefully in white cotton.

"I thought you'd be interested in seeing it," Boskos said as Dr. Toon pulled out his warped glass to examine it more closely.

"Yes," Dr. Toon said slowly. "Very unusual. Peto said he'd never seen anything like it. From your description, you removed it correctly, but I see something right here."

He handed the glass to Boskos and pointed at a section. "You'll notice there's a pattern to the barbs, an even spacing between them. But what do you notice right here, near the sharp tip of the stick?"

Boskos moaned softly. "There's a barb missing! That thorn is probably still in Uncle Perrin's thigh."

"That's what I'm worried about," Dr. Toon sighed. "It's tiny, but it's enough to infect."

"But Dr. Toon, I cleaned it as thoroughly as I could," Boskos gestured in frustration. "I examined the wound and didn't see anything."

"I'm sure you did the best you could," Dr. Toon said, examining the stick. "It was probably in the deepest part of the wound, a good two inches into the muscle. I doubt I would've done anything differently. I'm not sure even bleeding it would have dislodged the thorn."

Boskos sat down hard and held his head in his hands. "So what do we do now?"

"Nothing more than we are," Dr. Toon assured him. "The body *can* fight the infection, and even purge the thorn in time. We just keep molding and poulticing him and forcing him to rest. Remember Boskos, who's the real healer?"

Boskos looked up with a sad smile. It was drilled into the medical students from the first day of classes, and they recited it every day to remember.

"The Creator is the real healer. It's ultimately up to Him. We merely take the credit when the patient gets better, and put the blame

“And it’s the Creator’s will.”

on Him when things go wrong.”

Dr. Toon nodded. “You did do an excellent job on your uncle. Now we just wait and see what the Creator has in mind for him.”

That evening Perrin, feeling restless, wanted to see all of the family. He’d never felt so distant from them before, even though it’d been only a couple of days since he’d spoken to most of them. It felt wrong not to be counting all of their heads as they came home from the marking trip, and he’d missed the last two nightly family prayers. That was his duty—securing Salem, securing his family, and he’d felt he’d been neglecting all of that as he laid in bed, useless. He needed to see all of them, from the smallest to the largest, just to make sure they were all right.

But at Mahrree’s insistence, he could see them only for a few minutes, and only one family at a time. So, upon his wife’s orders, although he wasn’t sure just when and how she promoted herself over him, he lay in his bed and smiled as little boys and girls brought him more flowers, and teenagers and the young married couples gave him reports on their trip back home. Silently he counted them, just to make sure someone hadn’t been forgotten on the mountain.

In the back of his mind it occurred to him that if someone were missing, they would have discovered it by now, but that wasn’t the point.

Barnos and Ivy came in together to share with him their secret that he was going to become a great-grandfather again in the Snowing Season, and even Wes was able to give him a smile.

But it faded when Perrin asked Hycy to leave them alone for a few minutes. Hycy bit her lip in worry, but Wes nodded bravely to her and shut the door behind her as she stepped out.

“Sit down, Wes. Right there,” Perrin motioned weakly to one of the chairs next to his bed.

“Yes, sir,” Wes said obediently. He wasn’t sure what to do with his hands as he sat down. He tried folding them, clenching them, putting them under his legs, then finally folded his arms and tried to look nonchalant.

Perrin watched him intently the entire time, causing Wes to become the most anxiously relaxed man in Salem.

“You’re marrying one of my granddaughters in a few weeks,” Perrin began. “I like to have a *little chat* with the boys who plan to take my girls away. They mean a great deal to me, and I want to make sure they are always treated as the daughters of the Creator that they are.”

“Yes, sir,” Wes swallowed hard. “I understand.”

Perrin studied him in silence until a bead of sweat began to form on the poor boy’s forehead. He couldn’t hide his smile anymore, but apparently Wes saw it as more of a sneer because he began to shift uncomfortably.

“You will take good care of my Hycymum?” Perrin finally asked.

“Yes, sir,” Wes said, sticking to the practiced answer.

Perrin nodded. “Good. I’m sure you will. You’re a Hifadhi, after all. That name carries immense weight with me. So, welcome to the family.”

Wes’s eyebrows furrowed. “Wait. That’s it?”

“Well, yes.”

“Um,” Wes said, looking around in dismay. “I thought you’re supposed to . . .”

“Yes?”

Wes repositioned himself on the chair. “I thought there would be an *explanation*—”

Perrin blinked. “Explanation about what, son?”

“Well, you see, Lek, Sam and Con were telling me that, uh—”

“Were they telling you stories?” Perrin shook his head. “Ah, Wes, I’m sorry. There’s something you need to know about this family and those who marry into it: we’re a bunch of teasers. I’m afraid your future brothers-in-law may have been having a bit of fun with you. We have a problem with that. Whatever they may have said was just to make you nervous, especially if it was about me. Everyone gets the wrong impression about me, Wes. Just because I was in the army for many years, everyone thinks I’m something scary. But I’m not, Wes. I’m a big old softy. Just ask Lilla.”

While Wes regarded him with a drop of disappointment, he also seemed drenched with relief. “So they just *made up* that stuff—”

Perrin gave him his best innocent look. “About what, son?”

Wes scoffed. “You would *never* believe it, General Shin! Oh, I can’t believe they did that to me . . . and I fell for it!”

Perrin smiled. “I supposed that’s their little ‘Welcome to the family’ prank,” he said weakly. “We’re not very Salem-like sometimes.

We need to keep working on that.” He leaned forward slightly. “*But not tonight,*” he winked. “I’ll tell you what,” he began, and used the last of his strength that evening to push himself up into a semi-sitting position. “When you leave this room, rush out holding your mouth as if you’re trying not to be sick. Make sure you run past all of them, acting horror-stricken, on your way out the side door.”

Wes laughed out loud.

“And then,” Perrin said with a mischievous twinkle, “come back in, tell them you could never, *ever* marry into such a family with a grandfather like me, and announce that you’re calling off the wedding.”

“Oh General, that’s terrible!” But Wes’s eyes danced as if already seeing the reactions of the family.

“Don’t worry, we’ll let Hycy in on it so she can play up the part. Maybe you can pretend to whisper something in her ear and she can get her own horrified look as well.”

Wes burst into a grin. “You’re right, General—people do get the wrong impression about you!”

“Now, before you bring Hycy back in, promise me one more thing.”

“Anything, sir!”

“Call me Perrin or Puggah or Papa Pere—just not General or sir. That was my father.”

“All right . . . Puggah.”

Perrin predicted the level of fury and timing of his son’s appearance perfectly. He was waiting patiently for Peto when, a few minutes later, he stormed into his bedroom.

“What did you *SAY* to that boy?!” Peto yelled. “Father, he’s positively sick! He wants to call off the wedding, and so does Hycy! How *could* you?”

Close on his heels were the young husbands who, just a couple of nights ago, had so carefully prepared poor Wes. Or at least they *thought* they had. They now looked at their grandfather and uncle with mixtures of shock, anger, and genuine fear.

Perrin merely smiled at all of them.

Suddenly shouts of laughter came from the large gathering room.

Peto’s shoulders sagged as he heard his wife, mother, and the rest of the women laughing. His mouth slowly opened as he turned to look at the confused young men standing with him.

Hycy marched into the bedroom with a huge smile. “Ha! That’s

what you all get for trying to scare my Wes! It was great, Puggah. I wish you could've seen their faces!"

"I see them right now," Perrin said with a weak laugh. "Don't worry, Peto. The wedding's still on. I just needed to teach a few young men about frightening someone unnecessarily."

Con pointed a finger at Perrin and started to stammer, "You . . . you . . . *you* thought *we* needed a lesson?!"

Perrin held up a hand. "Boys, boys, I'm really quite tired now. I need to get some sleep. We'll talk later, all right?"

Boskos shook his head at Perrin. "I think he's feeling better. I'm not sure if I'm happy about that now."

As the young men filed out of the room, chuckling ruefully and shaking their heads, Lek was the last one, and the look on his face was one of complete confusion.

"Lek, wait a minute," Perrin said before he could leave.

Shem's oldest son nodded warily at him. "Uncle Perrin?"

"I'm sorry, Lek. For all of that. I never should've tried to intimidate you in the first place when you were marrying Salema. A boy like you didn't need to hear such stories."

Lek shifted uncertainly. "So, Uncle Perrin, I've always wondered, was there *ever* a . . . a . . ."

"Guarder suicide ritual?"

Lek nodded. "Or . . . did you just make that up to scare me?"

"Oh, it's real all right. I saw it happen on two occasions. Gruesome. You see, first the man—"

Lek held up his hands. "All right, all right already. Once was enough," he smiled nervously. "I'm glad you're feeling better, Uncle Perrin. Someday I'll figure you out. Obviously today is *not* that day," he mumbled as he started for the door.

"Lek . . . please wait."

He turned around.

"They named you all wrong," Perrin said quietly. "My great-great-great-grandfather was a brash and aggressive man, from the little I know about him, one of the first generals King Querul the First ever appointed. But you have never been anything but gentle and kind, and I should've recognized that marriage wouldn't change that about you. I should've known you'd do nothing but treat my granddaughter like the Creator's daughter. I am sorry that I sat you down that day before your wedding."

Lek blushed and looked down at his feet. "No need to be sorry,

“And it’s the Creator’s will.”

Uncle Perrin. Always been a great story. And I’ve always wanted to be bold like you. Maybe one of my boys will be, instead.”

“And I hope *not*. The world doesn’t need more brash men like me, Lek. We need more men like you.”

Lek went purple with bashfulness. “I’ll let you rest now,” he said with a hesitant smile, then headed out the door.

Only once he was alone again did Perrin sigh in exhaustion and slump on his bed. “All right,” he whispered to himself. “What else? What else do I need to fix? What else?” Hastily he made a list in his head, because he was sure he didn’t have the strength to pick up a sharpened piece of charcoal.

Mahrree came in a minute later and carefully laid down next to him. “I think everyone’s come through now. You’re still warm, but not so hot anymore.”

“When do you think they can stop molding me?”

“Dr. Toon says it’s still festering. Not until it stops can they remove the poultices.”

Perrin exhaled. “I’m so tired, Mahrree. I’ve never been so weak in my entire life. I’ll be honest—I’m a little concerned.”

Mahrree tried to cuddle with him without hurting him. “I am too, Perrin. They may have to take the leg if it doesn’t stop.”

“I’m not worried about that,” he said offhandedly. “I’m concerned that maybe . . . *maybe* I don’t have enough to overcome this.”

Mahrree sat up abruptly. “Not enough to overcome a little *thorn*? You’ve done it before, Perrin Shin!”

He smiled at her and closed his eyes. “This one’s a little different, my darling wife. And I’m a little older now.”

“What are you saying?” she demanded.

“Nothing, Mahrree, calm down.” He opened his dark eyes. “It’s just that we should consider—”

“I’m considering nothing, Perrin!” she said fiercely. “Shem has asked all of Salem to fast for you tomorrow, to ask the Creator to heal you. There’s nothing more to *consider*.”

He laid his hand gently on her arm. “We should consider if the Creator says ‘No’. I’ve had more than my fair share of miracles, Mahrree.”

“And we can always ask for one more!”

He patted her clumsily. “Of course we can.”



Young Pere was up late in his room, reading by the candle light. Earlier that morning he had been impressed to read how Captain Shin dragged a reluctant Lieutenant Karna—the officer he mentioned a few days ago who was his friend—through the forbidden forest in pursuit of Guarders. Together they killed their first man and first witnessed the Guarder suicide ritual.

But tonight's chapter was even more astonishing. The young captain defied all rules of the army by dressing as a man in white and entering the forests again, despite the warnings from Chairman Mal. Young Pere marveled that Captain Shin killed eleven Guarders in the snowy night, one after sustaining the injury on his back that still remained as a faded scar. He blinked in surprise to realize it was a younger Jothan Hifadhi, his sister's future great-grandfather-in-law, who had finished off one of the Guarders who was choking Captain Shin. He knew there was a history between the Hifadhis and the Shins, but he hadn't realized how far back it went. And then old Guide Tuma Hifadhi—even further on the family line—made the trip to Edge to bless the Shins with protection, and Shem Zenos signed on officially to be Perrin Shin's watcher and keeper.

Young Pere set down the book and wondered how it was that the frail man lying in bed, and his 'brother' who wept so easily, could have been the same two men who battled Guarders in Edge, tracked and spied on them in the forests, and trained the strongest, most disciplined men in the army.

Maybe Aunt Calla got it wrong. She was, after all, in love with one of the heroes of the story.

Chapter 13--“I’ve had enough surprises in my life.”

The next day was the day before Holy Day, when the visiting families were scheduled to leave for their homes. But no one wanted to go.

Perrin didn’t wake up easily that morning. His breathing was quick and shallow when Boskos arrived.

“He slept all right,” Mahrree told him fretfully as she watched Boskos taking his pulse. “A little bit of thrashing, but that’s just the way he always sleeps.”

“His pulse is getting faster,” Boskos said with a sigh. He looked up as his father came into the bedroom.

“How is he, Bos?”

Boskos looked at Mahrree then back to Shem, as if unable to face her with the news. “I think he’s getting worse.”

Mahrree sat down limply on the bed next to her husband. “No, no, no . . .”

Shem knelt in front of her. “Mahrree, all of Salem is fasting today. He’s in the Creator’s hands.”

“I know, Shem. And so does he. We talked last night. But I’m just not ready . . .”

Shem took her hands and kissed them. “Keep faith, Mahrree. I still need my big brother as well. I keep telling the Creator that.”

It was a very long day. Mahrree rarely left his side, waiting for him to wake up and notice her, to give her some hope. But whenever his eyes opened, it was to look vaguely around before closing again.

At dinner time he finally awoke, just as all of Salem was offering their final prayers for him before eating their first meal that day.

He looked at Mahrree and smiled. “Sorry I haven’t been around

too much today.”

“That’s all right,” she said, kissing his cheek. “You’re here now, and you’re going to get better.”

He took her hand and slowly lifted it to his lips. “Of course, my darling wife.” He kissed her hand.

That evening a visitor came to the house, and while Mahrree had been sending all of them away, this one she let into their bedroom, because Perrin had sent for him.

He opened his eyes slowly and tried to smile at his guest.

“Now *this* is when I should challenge you to a wrestling match!” Jothan Hifadhi announced. “I could beat you with one arm tied behind me.”

Perrin could barely chuckle at the man who, while a couple years older than him, was still just as strapping as he’d always been. The only thing that had changed on Jothan was that his curly black hair had gone gray. Perrin was frequently amazed how much he now resembled his grandfather Guide Tuma Hifadhi.

“You always could’ve beaten me with only one arm,” Perrin said. He nodded to Mahrree to close the door, and she nodded back as she left. She didn’t ask why, but Perrin had told her he needed to speak to Jothan alone.

Gingerly he sat down on the bed next to Perrin and touched his forehead. “What’s going on with you? Trying to heat up the house? It’s already a hot Weeding Day outside. Time to stop this nonsense.”

But Perrin could see through Jothan’s attempt to be jovial. He wasn’t normally so chatty about nothing.

“How’s Asrar?” Perrin asked.

“She’s ill, too, or she would’ve come. She’s afraid you’d catch her cough on top of whatever’s ailing you.”

“Very conscientious,” Perrin whispered.

Jothan startled him by grabbing his hand. “Fight it, Perrin. Please, fight it,” he whispered earnestly.

“Trying to,” he told him. “It’s tough.”

“Yes, you are. Always were.” Jothan’s brown eyes flooded with tears. “We’re going to start having shared descendants in a year or so. I’m eager to see how that great-grandson of ours will shape up.”

“So am I,” Perrin murmured. “You train him well—”

“*We’ll* train him well,” Jothan said, tears dribbling down his face. “Come on, Perrin. You can beat *this*. This is nothing compared to what you’ve faced before!”

“I’ve had enough surprises in my life.”

“Trying to,” he repeated. “Until then, Jothan, do something for me?”

“Of course.”

Perrin shifted his thumb to be on top of the faint scar on Jothan’s hand, a thin pale line that still remained on his dark skin from when Perrin tried to stab a Guarder behind him, but instead stabbed Jothan who had come to his rescue.

“A few years ago I spoke with you and Guide Gleace about *some impressions* I had,” Perrin began vaguely.

“You mean a very vivid dream you had,” Jothan said. “Seven years ago, shortly before Shem became the next guide. I remember it, every last detail.”

“Do you also remember,” Perrin said, “Shem’s response to my dream about him?”

Jothan smiled sadly. “I do. He didn’t want to think about it, at all.”

“I shared it not only with him, but with you and Guide Gleace, because I knew that someday one of us would need to press him to do his duty.”

“And *we* will.”

Perrin fingered his scar apologetically. “No, my dear friend: *you* will. You’ll be the only one left—”

Jothan’s chin bobbed. “Stop talking like that. Stop—”

“I saw you there, Jothan. In that dream, I saw *you* there. He’s going to need you that day, whenever that is. I don’t know if it’s the Last Day, or a day long before it, but he’ll hesitate. He’s going to need reminding, and *you* will say the words that’ll get him remembering his duty.”

“Because you’ll be busy with some other important task,” Jothan said easily. “Because I’ll be sitting around, doing nothing of consequence, and will have all the time in the world. So to speak.”

Perrin winked pitifully at him, and Jothan squeezed his hand back so tightly that Perrin was sure that something cracked.

“Promise me you’ll watch out for Shem,” Perrin asked.

“You know I will. I’ve been watching out for him even before you were. But only for about a week or so,” Jothan decided. “Only until you’re back on your feet again.”

But Dr. Toon had a different diagnosis when he came by that night to check the wound again. He sent Mahrree to go get some dinner while he examined Perrin alone. His eyes said it all.

“Just let me know, Doctor,” Perrin said quietly when he saw his reaction. “What’s it doing?”

“It’s not healing, General. The discoloration, the striations,” his voice faded. “Honestly I don’t think you’re strong enough to handle an amputation at this point—”

“That’s all I needed to know, Doctor. I’ve known for a while,” Perrin said calmly. “And I’m all right with that. How long do you think I have?”

Dr. Toon sighed heavily. “It could still heal, General. It could surprise us and—”

“I’ve had enough surprises in my life. It’s *all right*,” he repeated. “How long?”

The doctor shook his head. “I really don’t know. Hours. Weeks. Days. I’m sorry I can’t give you a better idea. Perrin, I’m so sorry,” he said, his eyes growing wet.

“Thank you for being honest.” Perrin offered a small smile. “You’ve done a wonderful job, with Boskos too. Do me a favor, please? Send Mahrree in for me to tell her, but will you let everyone else know? Call the Zenoses over as well. If they are all together it may be easier for them to deal with it. I’ll take care of my wife.”

Dr. Toon smiled sadly at him. “You really are one of the bravest men who ever lived, aren’t you?”



The Shin-Briter-Zenos families assembled worriedly about ten minutes later in the Shins’ large gathering room.

A few minutes after that, they collapsed together into a wet huddle of tears and they stayed like that for the next hour, except for one teenage boy who bolted from the room.

Young Pere didn’t need to be around a bunch of weeping weaklings. When Dr. Toon told them the news that General Shin would likely not recover, he ran to his bedroom, took the book from under his bed, and darted out to the barn. He climbed into the loft, sat down in the straw, and skimmed in the growing dark the pages he finished reading last night.

The rescue of Edge. The attack on the caravan. Colonel Shin’s defeat of sixteen Guarders, without receiving more than a few nicks himself. The death of Colonel Shin’s parents. His furious ride back

“I’ve had enough surprises in my life.”

to get revenge. His probation. The memorial service for the victims of the land tremor. The thousands of people chanting “General Shin.” Perrin Shin rejecting the idea . . .

He slammed the book shut in disgust and threw it into the straw.

Perrin Shin was giving up. Just when he could triumphantly return to the world, he was quitting.

No wonder he and Shem would have failed.

The barn was the only place Deck could think of bringing her. She was too distraught to remain around the children, but needed to weep and wail and beat on his chest before she could return home to comfort their family.

Besides, in the darkening barn she wouldn’t see his tears.

“Deck, he can’t go!” Jaytsy sobbed as she pounded on his chest again. She was beginning to lose strength. Maybe the bruising wouldn’t be so bad.

“We’ve fasted for him! I still need him—there are still newborns to nap in his arms, to know their Puggah! Deck, no . . .” She finally collapsed on to the ground, weeping, cradled in her husband’s arms.

“I know, Jayts, I know. He’s become my father, too. I never expected to mourn a father twice in my life.”

Young Pere, still in the loft of the barn, looked down at his aunt and uncle crying together in the straw.

“Look what you’re doing to them, General Shin,” he whispered angrily. “If you were just a little stronger, a little braver . . .”

In Guide Zenos’s office, the door remained shut long past midnight. On the small sofa, Shem sat with his arms around his wife, quietly telling her all the stories she’d already heard about Shem and his big brother.

If he kept talking, maybe Perrin would keep living.

Peto sat on the edge of his bed again late at night, staring dully at his wardrobe, as if his eyes could penetrate the wood and read the thick parchment folded in the envelope under his sweaters.

His mother had sent him to bed, promising she would send for him if she needed him.

His wife sat behind him, waiting for him to move.

He didn't.

Not even when the four youngest children crowded into bed with Lilla to be comforted.

He stared at the wardrobe all night long.

In Perrin and Mahrree's bedroom, their pillows became wet from their combined tears as they held each other as tightly as they could.

Sometime during the night, before he drifted into an exhausted sleep, Perrin kissed his wife.

"But maybe this is the way it's supposed to be, Mahrree. The last two generals named Shin died in bed while lying next to their wives. Pere by a heart attack, Relf by a Guarder attack, perhaps me by a thorn attack. Who am I to break the tradition?"

The next morning was Holy Day.

Everyone woke with bleary eyes. None of the children in any of the families slept well that night, and many spent the night in the beds of their parents.

If there was competition for who looked worst, Peto would've won. He went to check on his father early in the morning, decided he wouldn't leave his side, and sent Nool to one of his counselors asking that he conduct the congregational services that day.

Then he stood at his father's bedroom door.

“I’ve had enough surprises in my life.”

“I refuse to have this conversation with you,” he said, folding his arms.

“Peto,” Perrin’s voice came weakly, but with undeniable firmness, “I don’t have time for—”

“You have plenty of time—”

“No, son, I do not. Now get in here and sit down. Show some respect!”

Peto sighed and sat down reluctantly by his father’s side. “I always respect you.”

“I know you do,” Perrin said dismissively. “Now, you know where all of my papers are in the desk.”

Peto closed his eyes, trying to hold back the tears. “You’re not leaving me. Not leaving us. I refuse to let you go. We don’t need to have this conversation—”

“Peto,” Perrin whispered so earnestly that his son had to open his eyes, “I don’t mind going. I’m not afraid, I’m not worried, and I’m not even concerned about Mahrree. I know all of you will take excellent care of her. It’s all right for me to go; I know exactly where I’m headed.”

Peto sniffed and nodded, blinking back tears as he watched the Greatest General the world never saw.

Never *would* see. The prophecy was dying.

“I know, too, where you’re going.”

“So no more tears,” the general insisted. “At least, not for me. I’m heading off on an amazing adventure.”

Peto chuckled sadly. “I can’t help it,” he said, wiping his nose. “I just never thought that—”

“Well, we should!” Perrin declared with as much energy as he could muster. “We plan for babies coming into the world, we should plan for our exit out of it as well. I don’t know why we avoid talking about the inevitable.”

“Because baby births are joyful events,” Peto pointed out. “But dying—”

“Oh, there’s always *someone* happy when someone else has died,” Perrin waved feebly, his eyes twinkling. “But truly, son, there *will* be great joy. There are a few people I’ve missed over the years who I’m rather eager to see again. I suspect they may be happy to see me again, too. Death isn’t an end. You know that. It’s just . . . a *promotion*. Graduating from this life, moving on to the next one. If any-

thing, you should be feeling rather envious of me. Think of everything I'll soon see, know, remember, and learn! Any question I've ever had, I'm going to know the answer to, very soon. Really, son, can't you see how exciting all of this is?"

Peto chuckled with new tears. "*This* is what I'll miss. You and Mother have always seen things from odd angles, and I need those reminders that things aren't always as they seem." His voice cracked, and he paused to try to compose himself. "I just can't get over how much I'm going to miss everything about you," he choked out. "And I do believe I'm allowed to be sorrowful about missing your companionship. It's not a sin to be sad, you know!"

Perrin smiled faintly, then let it fade. "There's only one thing I don't know, son. Get *The Writings*," he nodded to the book on the bed table. "Hew Gleace's prophecy. You know the one."

Peto pulled the book off the nearby table and opened it to the prophecy a much younger version of him witnessed the guide receiving, along with his father and Shem.

"The Last Day, at the ancient temple site?" Peto guessed.

"Yes. I said it then, and I'll say it again: Gleace said Idumea would come with about 75,000 soldiers, and one third would be lost to fear."

Peto nodded as he read the words silently to himself, although he didn't need to; the entire morning when Gleace saw in vision how the Last Day would play out was so clearly impressed on Peto's mind that he remembered every detail of it.

"Peto, I still don't know how to scare them away," General Shin confided, his voice tinged with desperation. "You and I have done everything else—secured the paths, created emergency shelters, increased the valleys' storage and resources—but I never figured out how to scare 25,000 men desperate for land and food. I kind of thought I wouldn't go until I *did* figure out that mystery, but . . ."

His voice gave out on him, and he cleared his throat gruffly.

"Anyway, son, I'm sorry to leave that burden on your shoulders. It's been wonderful to have you by my side in all of this. I never could've imagined a better life for either of us. Thank you for being with me every step of the way."

Peto sniffed loudly and wiped his nose on his sleeve like a toddler. Soon he'd be blubbering like one, too. "You just can't go, Father," he begged in a whisper. "I can't do this without you. You're the general!"

“I’ve had enough surprises in my life.”

Perrin scoffed lightly. “Just a title, Peto. It meant nothing. We still would have done the work without the title.”

“It’s more than just a title, Father,” Peto said earnestly. “It’s your destiny, your—” He stopped. It was useless, and he knew it. Even if he pulled out the words written by Relf Shin so many years ago declaring that his son would become the greatest general the world ever saw, Perrin wouldn’t believe it.

Because he was dying. Peto could smell it in the air.

As a rector, he’d frequently encountered that unique scent which seemed to slip into the house of the dying as a gentle warning that there was nothing left to be done, but to say goodbye.

He’d never expected to encounter it in his own house. Then again, neither did many of those he served as rector.

Perrin smiled weakly at him. “It’s all right, son. My life has been better than I hoped it would be. And this is a very proper and excellent end.”

Peto could only squeeze his hand and said, “Get some rest, Father.”

While no one went to the congregational meeting, the day still had a sacred feel to it. None of the visiting families went home that day, either, but stayed at the Eztates to be near Puggah who drifted in and out of sleep, and back and forth between consciousness and hallucination.

Mahrree never left his side. Except for once, when Calla insisted she get some fresh air, and Lilla took her turn to sit next to Perrin.

He opened his eyes and he looked around.

Lilla saw her father-in-law awake and jumped slightly. “You’re up!”

“In a manner of speaking,” he said slowly. “Where’s Mahrree?”

“She’s been here all morning, but Calla just took her outside for a little walk,” she said apologetically.

Perrin nodded. “Good. I know she’s been here. Fresh air sounds like a good idea.” He sighed and closed his eyes.

“Do you need anything?” Lilla asked gently.

“No, just your company.”

Lilla sagged. “I’m not sure how entertaining I can be.”

“Oh, you’ve always been entertaining,” Perrin whispered. “From the first day.”

“Perrin, can I tell you something?”

He opened his eyes to see that she looked very concerned. “Well,

I'm not going anywhere."

"Perrin, I need to tell you that, well, from the very first day . . . how do I put this?" She paused, then blurted, "You've always terrified me!"

"Me?"

"Oh, yes! When you came to Norden and I saw Peto . . . Well, I'd seen him at Shem and Calla's wedding, but he was so odd, just sitting in the grasses, staring at me. I immediately decided he was far too serious for me. Can you imagine? But then when you and Shem and Peto came to our place before that first marking trip of yours . . . I saw him and I knew . . . You know how it is, when you see someone and you just know? Like you did with Mahrree, you just knew? Anyway," she rushed on not waiting for his response, but taking his smile as his answer. "When I saw Peto, oh! I just had to be near him! It was as if he came all that way just to find me. But he was *your* son. Yes, even though I called you the captain or something like that, I always knew you were the general. How could I not? Remember, I grew up listening to Calla's stories every night. Most girls hear tales about handsome young farmers, but Calla told me the tales of the Army of Idumea. But I had to go with you on that trip, I knew it. So," she paused to take a breath before continuing to plow on.

Perrin couldn't have stopped her even if he wasn't ill.

"When I saw that bear, on the trail that second day, I knew I had to make an impression on you. I couldn't fall in love with Peto and fear you. So I thought, I am going to impress him and scare off that bear. So I did. Oh, I was terrified, but I was more frightened of you. I mean, what if you didn't like me? What if you wanted someone more delicate, or prettier, or not so 'healthy' for your only son?" Lilla looked at him with pained eyes. "Yes, I know what you mean by 'healthy'."

Perrin slowly raised his hand and beckoned for her to take it.

She did so cautiously.

"Lilla, now I have something to tell you. *You* have always terrified *me*."

Lilla pulled back surprised, but Perrin didn't release her hand. Instead, he did his best to grin. "Truly, who breaks out into song in the middle of the forest, singing about buzzing butterflies and whatever it was?"

Lilla began to blush, then grin.

Perrin continued, "I couldn't help but think, 'I'm lost in the woods

“I’ve had enough surprises in my life.”

with a crazy young woman, and my son is falling for her.’ What father wouldn’t be worried? And then,” Perrin tried to sit up but decided against it. “Then, you *hugged* Shem, after you scared off that bear. At first I thought it was an excuse to get to hug Peto next.”

Lilla nodded guiltily.

“But then you hugged me as well. Now, that’s just not normal. You hug everybody. All the time. Terrifying,” he added again with feigned solemnity.

“It’s normal where I come from!” Lilla laughed softly.

“No,” he whispered. “I’ve been to Norden, and it is *not*.” He squeezed her hand with the little strength he had.

Lilla squeezed it back.

“And now,” Perrin said softly, “I do want something from you.”

“Anything, Perrin.”

“My darling daughter, because I do think of you that way, why are you suddenly calling me ‘Perrin’? ‘Papa Pere’ kind of grew on me.”

Lilla’s eyes glistened. “You have always been my Papa Pere, and you always will be.”

That afternoon Perrin asked to be brought to the back porch. He wanted to see all of the family together while he still felt strong enough.

Solemnly they assembled, and Peto, remembering years ago his injured grandfather in Idumea, had two of his sons drag the biggest sofa out to the porch. Then four young men carried Perrin outside and laid him on it. He tried to sit, but didn’t have the strength.

Mahrree assured him everyone could still hear if he lay down. She sat on the porch next to the sofa and held his hand as he looked over the collective Shin, Briter, and Zenos families.

His voice was faint as he said, “It’s hard to believe that just one week ago I stood on this porch bellowing at all of you about your assignments in the morning. I know not all of you were listening to me then, but you are now. I see now that the way to get your attention is to speak softly.” He smiled. “I guess it’s never too late to learn something new. And I’ve never seen all of you so quiet! Another miracle.”

The family chuckled sadly, trying to match his smile.

“I’ve had some time to do some thinking recently, when I didn’t think I was in a snowstorm in Idumea. And since none of you went to the congregational meeting this morning, I decided it’s my turn to

deliver the day's sermon. If that's all right with our rector and the guide."

Peto and Shem nodded at him with forced smiles.

"There's much on my mind, but I can't seem to organize it well. Forgive me if my words seem confused. And on that, I hope you all can forgive a great many things. I've been thinking about answers. About listening. I didn't always listen well, especially when I was young. I had my own ideas, my own plans. What I needed to know was to recognize when the Creator told me no. As important as it is to know when He tells us 'yes,' I think it's more important to know when He's trying to tell us 'no.' I often ignored Him when I didn't get the answer I wanted. But when I listened to Him, everything worked out so much better."

He tried to focus on Young Pere, but his grandson wasn't focusing on him.

"I've also been thinking about . . . hidden help." His words were slowing and labored; but, ploddingly, he got out each one. "No, I'm not hallucinating. Shem knows what I'm talking about. I know it's not the anniversary of our coming to Salem, but I want to tell you a bit about the Moorland offensive. I spent days working on a plan to root out the Guarders. I had every detail planned out perfectly. And Shem knew everything I was going to do. It was a fantastic success. I was praised on every front. But a few years later I learned it wasn't all my doing. In the forest just beyond my sight were masses of Salemites, and they were the ones who made the attack a success. They intercepted a traitor named Beneff on his way to the Guarders, and they made sure that the vast majority of Guarders who ran into the forest never ran back out.

"Some of your relatives were there. Ivy, your great uncle was one of them. So was a cousin of Sam and Con's mother. And Wes, well, there's nothing more I can say about your great-grandfather Jothan that I haven't already said a dozen times before. He did as much for us as Shem. Here I thought it was all my success. But it wasn't. The Creator sent others to help me, and I never knew they were there.

"But that wasn't the only time He's done that. He does it all the time, every day. We are always surrounded by help that we can't see and don't realize are there. But they are. I promise you that.

"I have felt them, your ancestors, many times. Paradise isn't some far off place. Paradise is here. Dying doesn't mean leaving your family. It just means moving to the other side of the forest, to fight the

“I’ve had enough surprises in my life.”

battles, unseen, from over there. Dying isn’t the end. It’s just a promotion. I’m not afraid to go. After doing this for so long, I’m eager to see what my new rank will be,” he said with a smile as faint as his voice.

The family members who weren’t quietly sobbing tried to give him brave smiles back. Very few were successful.

“I see it’s useless to tell you to not be sad. I suppose it’s all right to be a little sad about someone leaving. But it’s only for a short time. Our lives are only a temporary condition. The Writings tell us we existed long before this Test, and we will continue to exist for long after it. This separation will be but for a brief moment. And we can handle anything temporarily, right?”

Only a few nodded.

He tried to smile again but felt his energy sapping away. His voice would give out soon, but there was one more thing he wanted to say. “You are the greatest army I could’ve ever imagined. I am proud of each and every one of you, and I love you more than I could ever express. I’ve often wondered what my legacy would be. Now I know. Thank you for being my legacy.”

It was probably good that was all he *could* say, because Jaytsy broke ranks and rushed up to him, sobbing. She kneeled down in front of him and laid her head lightly on his chest. She wasn’t alone; several of her family followed her, waiting for their turns. She kissed her father gently on the lips.

“Just don’t say goodbye, Jayts,” Perrin whispered to her.

She nodded, then reluctantly moved back to let Salema smooth his white hair and kiss his forehead. She would have stayed next to him, except Lilla was waiting.

For the next half hour, the descendants of Perrin Shin each took their turns with him, but no one said goodbye, per his request. Instead they told him they loved him, then halfheartedly moved away to let the next person squeeze his hand, or kiss his cheek, or ruffle up his hair.

Mahrree sat next to him, silently weeping as she watched each of their children and grandchildren have the opportunity to not say goodbye.

It was another tender mercy from the Creator, Mahrree decided.

She considered how many times he could've abruptly been taken from them over the decades. But he was granted the opportunity to touch them all one last time.

When Deck, the last one to make it to Perrin, bent down to kiss his forehead and thank him for being his second father, Perrin was visibly weakened, not only from his fever but from the outpouring that overwhelmed him.

Mahrree leaned over to him. "Let's get you inside. Boskos suggested that the afternoon heat might make you feel worse."

"No," Perrin whispered. "It's a perfect day. Let's enjoy it on the bench by the orchard. We can sit in the shade and watch our grandchildren catch grasshoppers."

"That sounds like a perfect afternoon to me."

A few minutes later four of Perrin's grandsons carried him over to the bench, padded by several thick blankets provided by his granddaughters, and gently laid him down.

"Let me go get your pillow," Mahrree said.

"Your lap will be the best pillow I could ask for," he mumbled. Mahrree sat down at the end of the bench and let her husband rest his head. "See? Perfect again."

She smiled and ran her fingers through his thick hair. "Have I told you today that you are the most wonderful man in the world, and that I love and adore you more than words can say?"

Perrin closed his eyes. "Actually, I can't think of a day when you didn't," he said slowly. "But that's because you were always the most perfect woman in the world. Thank you for marrying me."

"Thank you for asking." But then she realized, "Actually, now that I think about it, you never really did ask me to *marry you*. You said something like, 'Can we continue our debates forever,' but you didn't actually *ask* me to marry you."

Wearily, he opened his eyes. "I'm not going to debate that right now, woman," he whispered.

"Then just tell me you love me."

"I love you. I always have."

"I love you, too. I always will."

Perrin smiled as he closed his eyes.

Mahrree sat on the bench with her husband's head on her lap for the balance of the afternoon. The little ones brought them flowering weeds and laid them on the ground below Perrin. He smiled once as he heard some of his granddaughters offer to bring Mahrree a pillow

“I’ve had enough surprises in my life.”

which she declined.

She sat soaking in the warmth of the day, deliberately not thinking about tomorrow, or any days after that, as she slowly ran her fingers through Perrin’s shaggy white hair, damp with sweat, and kept her other hand on his broad chest to feel his heart continue to beat, albeit erratically. This was the only day in their lives that mattered.

At one point he opened his eyes.

“Ready to go inside?” she asked.

“That’s not where I want to be,” he whispered.

“Have to go in again some time.”

“Not planning on it.”

“What do you mean, Perrin?”

“I refuse to die in our bed,” he said quietly. “I won’t let you go back to that every night, knowing that’s where I was when I went.”

Tears filled her eyes again. She didn’t know she had any more. “But . . . what about the General Shin tradition?”

Slowly he whispered, “Since when am I one to foolishly follow the traditions of my ancestors? We should be like Hogal and Tabbitt instead. Outside, resting on your lap. Just need a bonfire.”

Mahrree wiped away her tears that had splashed on her husband’s face. “Oh Perrin, what will I do without you?”

“Who says you’ll be without me—”

Suddenly his face contorted, his breathing quickened, and his body tensed and shuddered.

Mahrree put her hand on his chest again and felt his heart racing.

“You’re right, Perrin, as always. I won’t be alone,” she said hurriedly, frantically, unable to bear seeing him suffer. “You can go. Remember, I’ll always love you.” She bent over and kissed his lips.

He stopped thrashing. His body went still. A quiet gasp slipped through his lips.

Mahrree patted his chest for his heartbeat.

But Perrin was gone.

Chapter 14--“Show me the miracle now!”

Shem had mounted his horse and was just leaving a rectory on the south side of Salem when he heard it.

He'd been reluctant to leave the Shins that afternoon, but felt a great sense of peace as he observed Mahrree and Perrin resting quietly on the bench by the orchard. His most pressing duties that day would take only a couple of hours—his assistants had offered to take care of the majority of his visits—then Shem would be back.

Calla promised she wouldn't leave the Shins' house, staying close by with Boskos should Mahrree need her.

But as Shem slowly rode Silver through the neighborhood to the main road of Salem, he knew what he'd find when he returned home. He marveled that no one else could hear it, and he half-heartedly waved back to Salemites who seemed oblivious. He fought back his tears as the noise grew louder every moment.

He made note of the date. The 63rd Day of Weeding Season.

For some reason that day sounded familiar. Then he remembered—it was the day Perrin stood again in front of Edge, as a thirty-one-year-old Major Shin, and assured them in a debate that nothing really had changed in Edge.

Then the Guarders attacked. Shem's skull received the dent along his hairline which he could still feel, and the next day Hogal and Tabbit Densal died. Forty-one years ago.

The sound was now so loud it was almost deafening.

Voices.

Dozens of them. No, many, *many* more than that. Thousands of them. And they were all crying out in joy. Cheering. Shouting.

“Show me the miracle now!”

One voice, distinctive and familiar, filled Shem’s ears and produced goose bumps on his arm.

It was General Relf Shin. “He’s coming! Joriana, I see him! Our boy is coming home!”

It was so late that night when Peto went to bed that it was actually morning. But time had lost all meaning. He lay in bed knowing that sleep wouldn’t come, despite his fatigue and heaviness, and wondered why he even bothered.

He couldn’t get out of his mind the expression on his mother’s face when she looked up at him as he came out of the house. He was the first to reach her, Jaytsy right behind him.

All that afternoon he, Lilla, Jaytsy, Deck, Calla, and Boskos had watched his parents from the eating room. They sat at the table quietly talking while observing through the open side door as Mahrree stroked Perrin’s head, patted his chest, or ran her fingers through his hair. No one wanted to bother their quiet afternoon, but no one wanted to leave them alone, either.

They all saw Perrin suddenly writhe, and the women gasped in unison as Boskos lunged for his medical bag.

Peto ran out the door straight for the orchard.

By the time he reached her, Mahrree was trying to smile but her chin was trembling so violently that she couldn’t hold it. Peto knew immediately what happened as he kneeled in front of his lifeless father. He hadn’t expected him to go so quickly. He thought maybe in a week, not in a few hours.

Mahrree didn’t want to get up. She wanted to stay there, with his still head in her lap, for as long as she could. And while the family slowly filed past their Puggah again, she remained there, silently weeping and stroking his head or twisting a lock of his hair around her finger.

It wasn’t until Shem arrived that she finally agreed to get up. She didn’t go far, just into the arms of Jaytsy as they sat on the ground next to him and wept together. Peto wanted to sit and sob with them as well, but he felt a weight on his shoulders that didn’t let him do so just yet.

He was now the head of the Shin family.

That meant comforting the many children who kept coming to

him for hugs, caressing his wife as she sobbed loudly, and exchanging encouraging glances with his brother-in-law who seemed to feel an equal weight on his shoulders as well as he held his children. Now the entire Briter family saw Deck as their head.

Yudit had arrived a short time later with a bundle of white burial clothing. She said she “just had a feeling.” It was her duty in their rectory to bring the clothing to mourning families, and Peto had never known her to not “have a feeling” when the time came. He wondered just how long she’d had the shirt and trousers, waiting. Yudit rushed to Mahrree and held her as the women wept together.

Nothing seemed real as Peto helped Shem and Deck with the dressing custom. Soon after a death in Salem, the sons and brothers of a man, or the daughters and sisters of a woman, dressed the deceased in pure white clothing to signify their passage to Paradise.

Peto had assisted and advised in the dressing of many men in his rectory, but never had he experienced the astonishing depth of sorrow of dressing someone in his own family. It was a good thing so many were there to help; at some point either he, or Deck, or Shem was so overcome that a grandson had to step in to help fasten a button or straighten a trouser leg for his father.

Several minutes later, General Perrin Shin was laid out peacefully on the bench in the orchard, his body growing cold.

Mahrree sat surrounded by the rest of the family on the ground, her chin quivering to see her husband in radiant white clothing that matched his hair.

At dinner time, which came and went unnoticed as the families sat in weeping clumps in the orchard, Peto made his way to the message tower. It was time to let Salem know.

One of the messengers came quickly down the ladder, followed by his companion. “Rector Shin, I couldn’t help but notice some activity in your back garden.”

Peto could only say, “The general is no longer in pain.”

The tower men sagged in disbelief.

“Please send up a message,” Peto said. “For all of Salem. Fly the general’s banner, then the white one.”

“Rector, I’m so sorry,” one of them whispered, and his younger companion sniffled.

“Thank you,” Peto mumbled. “I’ll be back later tonight with burial details. I have a feeling we’ll need to do something at the arena

tomorrow. There may be a few people who want to say their good-byes.”

The men nodded somberly and headed back up the tower.

Peto slowly walked back to the house. He heard the chimes as he reached the front porch and half-heartedly looked up at the tower to read the message he never thought he'd see.

First up was the red flag, meaning the message was for all of Salem, then the blue striped general's banner, then the long, slim white banner signifying death.

A crowd would soon come.

Perhaps Perrin Shin had planned to pass away on that bench. It really was the best place to let people see him. Plenty of room, places for people to congregate and talk in the orchard. And it was a beautiful day.

He always had a plan, even up to the end.

Less than half an hour later somber Salemites started to arrive, with food that they placed quietly around the family they knew would forget about eating, and they kept coming, for hours.

Peto also considered that maybe Perrin passed away on one of the longest days of the year, just to give people more daylight. They were all a blur in his grieving mind as they hugged him and the family on their way to touching General Shin's cold hand.

Except one face was hard to forget, and Peto couldn't get her words out of her mind now as he laid in his bed and looked at the dark ceiling.

“A place of miracles! That's what you said. Show me the miracle now!” Eltana Yordin had marched, furious, to Shem and Peto before she went to see Perrin.

Shem took her arms but she pushed him away.

“Is this what you brought me here for? To give him back to me, then present me with *another* dead general?” she shrieked to the astonishment of the reverent crowd in the orchard. “How many more do I need? What did you do wrong, Guide?” she sneered. “Your people starved themselves for a day, prayed for him, and still he died. Just what kind of Creator do you follow anyway?”

“Mrs. Yordin,” Peto said calmly, aware that the majority of Salemites were watching them, aghast. “We follow a Creator who has a plan for each of us. No matter how faithful we are, we cannot change His plans. It was His will that Perrin Shin return to him today.”

But Mrs. Yordin wasn't accepting that. "No truly benevolent Creator would allow such a thing to happen, would allow the world to crumble this way! Where is He? Sitting on some distant planet watching us, thinking, 'Oh look how peaceful that little world is. How lovely.' If He really knew what was happening here, He'd stop it!"

Shem took her arm again and turned her gently to him. When he spoke his voice was powerful yet kind.

"Eltana, He knows what's happening. More intimately than you could imagine. And He feels sorrow for the world, more powerfully than you can feel it. But this is the Test, and He will not stop it. But He will reward us when it is over. You can't stop the pain a child feels when he's suffering, but you can comfort and assure him the pain will eventually pass. Eltana, choose to be comforted. Trust that in the end, the pain will stop. Choose to have faith and believe. Then you'll see miracles. Then you'll feel joy."

Peto would never forget the look on her face. How she could deny the power and warmth of Shem's words was beyond his comprehension, but she did.

Enraged, as if all of this had happened merely to spite her, she said, "The only miracle I want to see is a dead Lemuel Thorne! He's the last general who needs to die—so do it! *You* know how to use a sword, Sergeant Major, so use it!"

Those words turned nearly every head in the vicinity to stare at their gentle guide.

Shem recoiled, but stood his ground. "That's not my calling, Eltana."

"Then whose is it?" Her attention was caught by something just past Shem.

Peto turned to see who she gazed at, and his heart plummeted to his feet.

Young Pere stood several feet behind Shem, watching Mrs. Yordin intently. His arms were folded and he looked remarkably like his grandfather. If he were wearing a blue uniform the resemblance would have been jolting.

Peto turned to Mrs. Yordin. She must have had the same thought, because the ferocity in her eyes turned to calculated determination. She shifted her gaze back to Shem.

"Until I see a dead General Thorne, I cannot believe in miracles."

The two elderly women she lived hurriedly came to her side. "Come, Eltana, let's go say farewell to the general. The line's shorter

“Show me the miracle now!”

now,” one of them said, guiding her away.

The white-haired woman who stayed behind put a hand on each of the men’s arms.

“I’m so sorry about her,” she said to Shem and Peto. “She’s been going on and on about Colonel Shin ever since she arrived. But I think his passing may actually help. She hasn’t wept about what she’s left behind, but this might get her dealing with her losses. The Creator’s timing is always perfect, isn’t it, gentlemen? Don’t fret about her. We’ll take care of everything.” She patted the men’s arms and went to stand with her sister and Mrs. Yordin, who refused to look back at Peto or Shem.

Peto turned to Shem, but Shem was watching Young Pere behind him. Something passed between them, a look that only the original Perrin Shin might’ve been able to decipher.

“She’s right,” Young Pere said in a low voice. “We starved ourselves for him for nothing.”

“Not for nothing, Young Pere,” Shem said. “Now we know the Creator’s answer is ‘No.’ Now we know we did all we could, and we can live peaceably with that knowledge.”

Young Pere arched one eyebrow, sending a shiver down Peto’s back.

“Who feels like living peaceably?” Young Pere spun on his heel and marched to the barn.

Peto started after him, but Shem caught his arm. He should have caught his daughter-in-law’s arm instead.

“I’ve HAD it with him!” Salema announced as she appeared seemingly out of nowhere and, with shocking speed and gumption, broke into a waddling run after her cousin.

Peto and Shem were too stunned to react.

She reached the barn doors just as Young Pere did, and followed him in, shouting, “How dare you!”

“Oh no,” both Shem and Peto murmured. Unsure of how to proceed, they looked around for someone else intent on intervening, maybe someone else who’d have insight as to what to say to keep Salema and Young Pere from starting an all-out fight. But Jaytsy was holding three of her weeping children, Deck was engaged in a conversation, and Lek—who both of the men were hoping to locate—was nowhere to be seen.

Shem and Peto looked at each other with dread as they heard the snatches of muffled arguing from the barn. Fortunately, it was well

built and tight, or thousands of Salemites would have heard General Shin's grandchildren shouting at each other.

"—don't need another lecture, Salema! I'm not your husband or your brother, so—"

Shem and Peto both cringed. A few others standing nearby in the orchard turned as they heard the angry noises come from the barn, and gave the guide and rector pained looks of sympathy before respectfully turning their backs.

"—you WILL listen to someone, before you cause—"

"Another war?" Peto whispered to the guide.

"I'll see what I can do," Shem assured him, patting Peto's shoulder, but already it was too late. They saw Young Pere run out of the barn, at full speed, and head up to Deck's pasture lands.

Peto lunged to follow him, but Shem gripped his shoulder tighter.

"No, Peto," he whispered. "He's not ready to listen. This is how he'll grieve. Young Pere will return when he's ready."

Peto watched him rapidly become smaller on the hillside, and his chest tightened. He couldn't bear to lose two Perrin Shins in one day.

Salema came out of the barn a moment later, her eyes red and puffy from weeping.

Lek appeared next to his father.

"What'd she just do?" he asked in a low tone as his wife penitently made her way back to them.

"I'm guessing a lecture," Shem said quietly back. "And it didn't go well."

Lek sighed and turned to Peto. "I'm sorry, Uncle Peto. All of this has been . . . well, hard on her. On all of us. I don't think any of us are reacting properly."

"It's all right, Lek," Peto assured him as Salema neared. Her eyes reflected devastation. "I don't think there *is* a proper way to react."

"I am *so* sorry, Uncle Peto," Salema whimpered. "I just was so angry . . . I shouldn't have yelled at him, then . . ." She slumped into her husband's arms, overcome with sorrow, regret, and probably some severely strained belly muscles from her jog.

Lek hugged her tenderly and said, "There are times for lectures, and there are times for love." Then, demonstrating that he recognized the difference himself, said nothing more as he held her.

Peto had stayed up late that night waiting for Young Pere to return. He kept looking out the windows long after the last visitors left,

“Show me the miracle now!”

and after the tower messages went up announcing the memorial service for Perrin the next afternoon.

He kept glancing at the hills as he picked up his father’s body, with Deck and Shem, and brought it to rest in the general’s office for the night.

There was something he noticed out in the dark evening, but was too wrapped up in grief and despair was he to do anything about it: Clark was down in the pasture.

He knew. Somehow, Clark knew.

Peto peeked out the windows again as they moved the sofa into the office so Mahrree and Calla could sit together by Perrin all night. Many of his other children came to him, and he and Lilla spent time with each of them in their bedrooms wiping their tears, kissing them good night, and assuring them that Puggah was fine and happy where he was, and that he knew how much they would miss him.

Peto finally assumed Young Pere might be asleep somewhere, probably in the barn.

Before he went to bed, Peto checked on his mother and Calla for the fifth time, and found them leaning against each other in a shallow sleep. Peto crept into the room so as to not disturb them.

He touched his father’s cold face, brushed aside some of his hair, and sighed as he looked at him.

It was over so fast.

Peto leaned over and kissed his father, probably for the first time since he was a toddler. “I still need you, you know,” he whispered. “Please don’t go too far. Let me hear you from the woods every now and then, all right?”

He didn’t know if he expected an answer or not, but he sighed again and quietly slipped out and up to his bedroom.

That’s where he had been for the last hour, staring into the dark. It was useless. Dawn would be here in a few hours anyway.

He slid out of bed so as not to disturb Lilla and Morah, who was snuggled up against her mother, and walked over to the wardrobe. He opened it, felt for the old envelope he knew was still there, pulled it out, and went down to the kitchen where he lit a candle, then dropped the fading envelope on the small table.

General Perrin Shin was gone.

Peto stared at the envelope, wanting to read it again, yet also wanting to destroy it. He had treasured it and carried it for years, and now it felt as dead as his father.

He sat down heavily in a chair and, dropping his head in his hands, finally let the tears fall that he'd been fighting all evening. Now that the house was quiet he could finally grieve.

A warm hand gently touched his neck. "Oh, Peto," Lilla said softly, and she wrapped her arms around his head and cradled him as he sobbed.

Eventually his weeping slowed, and she pulled out a chair next to him. "The Papa Pere Prophecy," she sighed as she pulled the envelope to her.

Peto couldn't help but scoff a chuckle through his tears. "You really should stop calling it that. Not very respectful."

"He said he wanted me to remember him that way, as my Papa Pere," she began to choke again. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry," she said quickly. "It's your turn. I've been so worried about you. What can I do for you?"

He shrugged and rubbed his eyes.

Lilla fingered the envelope. "So . . . what are you going to do with this?"

"I don't know. He's gone now, but it doesn't feel like it was fulfilled. My grandfather Relf was so sure, Lilla, so sure. He wasn't the kind of man do to anything lightly. 'The greatest general the world ever saw.' He was adamant about that."

"Maybe he was hoping his son would be the general he wasn't?" Lilla suggested. "Or maybe Perrin Shin's legacy is the one he's left for his descendants. All that he did to get them here, what he sacrificed for his family to grow, to know the truth? I know all of them think he was the greatest general in the world."

Peto sat, despondent. "I thought about pulling it out yesterday, reading it to him, maybe guiltting him into getting better so he could still fulfill it. Telling him his old wolf father would have been able to beat it, *and* live to tell me about a dream! But I couldn't. I just felt it wasn't the right time. And now there's no time left at all. Only you and I know what he could have been. He *was* a great man, he did so much, but . . ." Peto nudged the envelope helplessly. "Lilla, he's *gone!*"

He buried his face in his hands again, his shoulders shaking.

She leaned against his arm, tears streaking down her face as he sobbed.

"I just don't get it. I just don't get it," he whispered. "My grandchildren are supposed to remember this document, but when? I've

asked the Creator what this all means. All I get back is, *Wait*.” His hands came down to reveal his face blotchy with grief. “I really don’t appreciate that answer: Wait. You know how many times He’s given me that answer?”

Stunned to see him so low, she gripped his arm. “And how many times did He fulfill that promise, Peto? You’ve waited and you’ve seen the miracle?”

“Every time, Lilla,” he admitted. “But I just don’t see how this one will get answered. It just can’t be. There’s no final General Shin in the world to lead us into a great battle. Even he saw the pointlessness of being called General of Salem.”

“Rector Shin!” Lilla said in a shocked whisper. “Since when do *you* lack faith?”

“When my heart’s dead, Lilla.” Even he was stunned by his despair. There was nothing left. Nothing. They’d tried so hard to save him, and the Creator took him anyway.

She shook his arm frantically, as if that would shake hope back into him. “That’s when you need your faith the most, Peto! You need to believe that you simply don’t understand all that the Creator has planned for us. You of all people know miracles happen in ways we can’t understand. Your mother got her house and her dozens of children around her, didn’t she? What could’ve been more amazing than that? The Creator already knows the end of everything, so until we can too, you just have to *trust* Him, and stop trying to second guess Him!”

Peto couldn’t move, but stared at the old envelope.

Gently Lilla took it up, carefully removed the old document and laid it on the table, smoothing it flat. The high-quality ink was still as dark as it was the day the teenage Peto wrote down his grandfather’s words in Idumea. Lilla lightly fingered the signature of Relf Shin.

Peto touched it too.

“Keep it, Peto. Keep it safe. The time’s not right yet,” Lilla decided. “You *will* live to see the day. See, you wrote that right there. Terrible handwriting, by the way. Looks more like ‘Petu wil leve to sea tha daiu.’”

Peto’s shoulders started to shake, this time in weary laughter. “So maybe we just got it wrong so many years ago,” he chuckled, but immediately the tears fell again. “Ah, Lilla, do you really think so?”

“We have at least . . . thirty more years, I think. So much can happen in thirty years, you know.”

He picked up the parchment again. "It was just three years after this that we came to Salem. Jaytsy was married and expecting Salema. Father had resigned, we were going to be tried in Idumea, Mother would have been executed . . ." Peto shook his head at the memory of it. "So much happened in such a short time, I never would have guessed then."

"Your grandfather said this was for *you*," Lilla reminded him. "Perhaps you've held on to this for this very day, for this exact moment. It's a message from Paradise, telling you that it's not all over yet. You need to . . . wait."

Peto analyzed his grandfather's writing and the note he made in the margin. Where Peto had written "general in Idumea," Relf had drawn a line to it and wrote instead in his more careful hand, "the world." Peto felt a warmth he'd felt before and knew it was comfort from the Creator.

But then the feeling changed.

The warmth heated intensely until it burned throughout his entire body. Energy so overpowered Peto that he felt he could have leapt to his feet and run twenty miles in an instant. A smile came across his face that he couldn't have fought even if he wanted to. New tears filled his eyes, but not of sorrow.

Joy. Pure joy.

He felt a presence in the chair next to him, remarkably like his father. He could even smell him, earthy sweet. The presence overtook him and his eyes closed, now feeling weakened by the sensation.

Lilla gripped his arm and gasped. She felt it too.

WAIT.

The word came from inside both Peto and Lilla, surrounded them in the kitchen, then settled on the parchment before them.

As if a great bear wrapped his arms around them, the presence hugged them powerfully from the outside, taking away their breath. Then it seeped into their souls, settling in their hearts.

And it faded peacefully away, except for a small burning that promised to linger.

"Papa Pere!" Lilla whispered.

"Yes, Father," Peto whispered. "Message received. We'll wait."

With his vision so blurry that he could barely see what he was doing, he tenderly picked up the parchment, kissed it, folded it again, slid it in the envelope, and held it to his heart where the flame continued to burn.

“Show me the miracle now!”

Young Pere was awakened by the sound of metal hitting stone, over and over again, tapping rhythmically. He stretched and tried to focus on where he was. And why.

The barn. And because he didn't want to sleep in *that* house last night.

He sat up and brushed straw off of his shirt. The tapping continued. Fully irritated, he got up, climbed down the loft ladder, and walked outside.

The sun had not yet risen over the mountain, and out of the corner of his eye Young Pere noticed that Clark was lying in the pasture. It wasn't his normal state, but the old horse was getting old.

There was also enough light to make out Relf standing at the enormous boulder that straddled the dividing line between the Briter and Shin gardens. For years it had been the spot for gathering the family, for mothers to climb up to search the area for missing children, for children to climb and look for the mothers looking for them, and in the Snowing Season it was the base of icy slides and snowy forts.

But this morning Relf was chiseling it with his hammer. As much as he wasn't in the mood to talk to anyone, Young Pere was so aggravated that he needed to know why Relf was making such a racket. He strode over to the stone where he was startled to see two letters already there.

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“Do you realize how early it is?” Young Pere demanded.

“Do you realize how worried Papa was about you last night?” Tap, tap, tap.

Young Pere shrugged. “I was just in the barn.”

“He didn't know that though.” Tap, tap. “Don't you think he's got enough on his mind right now without you taking off in a huff?” Tap, tap, tap, tap. “Papa needs us now. He doesn't need to be up half the night fretting.”

Young Pere rolled his eyes. “What are you doing to the boulder?”

“It's no longer just a boulder,” Relf told him. “It's Puggah's headstone.” Tap, tap. “We're burying him here, between the two gardens.”

Young Pere groaned. “I thought it was going to be up on the hillside.”

“Muggah changed her mind.”

“But it’s so rocky here. This will be much harder to dig.”

Relf spun around to face his brother, a lock of his blond hair sticking to the sweat already on his forehead. “Who cares? If we have to dig a little harder, then we dig a little harder! If Muggah wants Puggah nearby, then we will bury him nearby! It’s not about what’s easier or more convenient for *you*, Young Pere—it’s about doing what is needed for the most good for the family!”

Young Pere was unmoved. “Digging in this isn’t going to do *me* the most good,” he mumbled.

Relf threw up his hands, nearly tossing his chisel and hammer. “There’s that word again—‘me’. Why should you care so much about yourself?”

“Because my grandfather *died* yesterday,” Young Pere snapped. “Or maybe you didn’t notice?”

“My grandfather died yesterday too, Young Pere,” Relf said gently. “None of us expected that. None of us are going to get over it soon. We all need to find our own ways to honor him and work through this. I know what you’re feeling—”

“No, you don’t!” Young Pere said sharply. “You just don’t know all there is to *know*.”

Relf took a step toward his brother.

Young Pere took two steps back.

“It’s all right to feel angry, sad, shocked,” Relf assured him. “It’s what you’re supposed to feel. Just let us feel *with* you. We can all help each other through this—”

“I don’t need anyone’s help, Relf!” Young Pere said with barely controlled rage. “I don’t need to sit and cry like a baby in the grass with anyone.”

“Well you need to do something, Young Pere,” Relf sighed. “Don’t you dare go into the house with that attitude. Papa and Mama and especially Muggah need our support, not our aggravation. You know what you need?”

“Yes, but you’re going to tell me what *you think* anyway, aren’t you?”

Relf smiled faintly. “You, my *little* brother—” he said to his sibling who stood several inches taller than him, “—need to go get a shovel and work out some of that anger. I’m carving now so I can get a start on his name. But I’m also out here so early because I have my own store of anger to take out on this rock. It’s helping, Young Pere. Just look how deep those letters are. When I’m in a good mood, I can

“Show me the miracle now!”

never chisel that deep. I should be depressed more often when I work.” He wanted to give his brother a genuine smile but couldn’t find one yet.

Young Pere sighed and looked down at the ground below the boulder. “You’re dropping bits of rock on where we need to dig. That’s going to make it even more rocky.” But he nodded at his brother and went to retrieve a shovel that stood in the ground next to Aunt Jaytsy’s first row of potatoes.

Without another word Young Pere began to dig a few feet behind Relf.

The ground *was* hard. That’s why Aunt Jaytsy’s garden ended several paces before the boulder. Young Pere didn’t get too far before he had to stop to pull out a large stone and toss it by the boulder.

Relf stopped his tapping, smiled dimly at it, then put the large stone in a crevice of the boulder.

He had plans for that one.

“Peto, he’s back!” Lilla was looking out the eating room window toward the Briters.

Peto joined her by the window and sighed in relief as they watched their middle son digging the grave.

“What are you going to say to him?” Lilla asked. “Today’s really not a day for confrontations—”

“I agree. Just looks like he could use a little help.”

By the time Peto pulled on his boots, retrieved the pick axe and headed to the boulder where Young Pere was digging, Deck was already there with his sons Viddrow, Cephas, and Atlee.

Boskos and Zaddick Zenos arrived moments later, shovels in hand, and Hogal and Kew Shin followed their father. A lot of sons had a lot of grief to work out.

Peto put a hand on Young Pere’s shoulder and squeezed it. Young Pere looked up, nodded once, then went back to work loosening the dirt around another large rock.

None of the men and boys spoke as they worked. The only sounds were those of moving dirt, clashing rock, and Relf’s constant tapping on the boulder. The older boys and men dug while the younger boys retrieved the large rocks and stacked them near the boulder.

Finally, Peto put a hand on Relf’s shoulder. “You’ll need to step

aside for a while, son. We need to dig at the base of the boulder.”

“That’s all right,” Relf said. “I have something else I can do in the meantime.” He took the first stone Young Pere had removed from off the boulder and sat down with it, tapping again.

After an hour the grave was ready, and a large stack of stones sat by the boulder.

As the men cleared out the last of the rocks, Peto walked over to Relf, wiping sweat off his brow. “We’re finished, Relf. What are you doing?”

Relf looked up from his work. “It occurred to me that wasn’t the first grave there. There’s another, on the side, but we never properly marked it. I thought I should take care of that. I think Puggah would appreciate it. I remember they were inseparable when I was younger.”

Peto squatted by his son and inspected the stone. The surface was already etched, to be chiseled deeper later. Peto smiled as he ran his fingers across the indentations.

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“I forgot his favorite pet was buried there. My father did it himself. Nice touch, Relf.”

“Thanks. And speaking of touch,” he nodded toward Young Pere who was walking back to the barn with Peto’s pickaxe. “I don’t recommend touching *him*. He’s not taking this well at all.”

“I know,” Peto said. “I think I’ll give him a moment. Maybe after he’s put away that pickaxe.”

Peto was waiting for Young Pere when he came out of the barn. “Sleep all right last night, son?” he asked as casually as he could.

“Sure,” Young Pere answered shortly and brushed past his father on his way to the house.

Peto jogged to catch up. “I don’t think you’ve heard all of the arrangements for today. We’re bringing Puggah to the arena just before noon. That will give people time to see him again and it’s also where we’ll have the memorial service. Then only the family will bring him back here for burial. Your grandmother was hoping each of the boys would help move him.”

“Move him how?” he mumbled.

“Army tradition in Idumea. All of the soldiers help carry the fallen to their graves . . .” Peto couldn’t keep up the conversational tone, because the words coming out of his mouth sounded so wrong.

He was planning a burial? They shouldn’t have to do this; *they*

“Show me the miracle now!”

shouldn't have to do this—

He cleared the lump that choked his throat. “All of you were his army, you see, so it’s fitting that we each take turns carrying him.”

“Sure, Papa,” Young Pere curtly responded as he strode through the kitchen door.

Peto didn’t follow him.

He had wanted to grab his son and embrace him, but Young Pere put off a distinct air of not wanting to be touched.

“Father?” Peto whispered. “This was always the time that I’d look at you, and you’d follow him and get him to talk. What do I do now?”

JUST SHOW HIM YOU LOVE HIM, PETO.

Peto smiled at the words that formed so clearly in his mind. He hoped he guessed correctly about who planted that in his conscience.

“How, Father?”

Only silence greeted him.

He strained to listen harder, not entirely sure what that entailed, but doing his best to clear his mind.

“You need to talk louder, Father. You’re too far into the woods.” In his mind’s eye, Perrin was a distant blur at the edges of the trees.

I’M NOT ABOUT TO GIVE YOU ALL THE ANSWERS, SON. WHERE’S THE GROWTH AND LEARNING IN THAT?

Despite his misery, Peto smiled. That was definitely a Perrin Shin response.

“Thanks a lot. At least I know you haven’t gone too far.”

It was most likely his imagination, but Peto thought he heard chuckling, and a cat purring, in the distance.

“He’s going to know,” Kanthi Shin accused her cousin, but Tabbt Briter couldn’t control her tears. They were brushing Clark again, after coaxing him to take a little water from the bucket they brought him. He was flat on his side, ignoring them.

“He already knows,” Tabbt sniffled. “He’s mourning, just like us.”

Kanthi wiped her nose and looked up to see her brothers and cousins heading back to their houses after digging the grave. Each of them stopped to look at Clark, whose eyes were blank and unseeing.

Cephas sighed at his sister and cousin. “It’s not much longer

now,” he tried to warn them.

“Don’t say that,” Kanthi said, trying to fight her tears.

Fifteen-year-old Nool Shin shook his head at his twin sister. “Cephas is right. This doesn’t look good—”

“You don’t know that,” his fourteen-year-old brother Kew insisted. “He could just be . . . depressed or something. Even Uncle Deck wasn’t sure—”

Their older brother Barnos paused on his way back to his house and put his arms around his brothers. To his cousin and sister practically draped over Clark, he said, “That’s true. None of us know. You’re doing all you can for Clark. He knows it, and Puggah knows it.” His words stumbled on that last part. “Come on, everyone. Time to get cleaned up. Long day ahead of us.”

Chapter 15--“We can do this for him, and for you.”

Mahrree had never known time to move so strangely, or for her thoughts to be so unfocused. She couldn't get a grip, couldn't fully comprehend anything around her.

While Calla slept next to her, Mahrree spent most of the early morning hours staring at Perrin lying stiffly on the board across his desk.

It couldn't be real. It shouldn't be real. Nothing was real.

There were grandchildren who came in and talked to her, and she knew she responded, but she didn't know who it was or what she said.

She wanted to hold on to the next little while, when nothing was different. Everything was *mostly* still the same. He was still in his office, still in their beloved home, her dream home. She could still see him, and touch him. Just for now everything was still fine, and she clung to that.

But he was so still.

She didn't notice when the men came to the office, or when people shifted around her. She kept staring at him, wondering when his hair turned so white, wondering if the two of them ever did get to argue about who ate the last piece of pie. They were supposed to be like Hogal and Tabbitt—

But they didn't even make it to fifty years of marriage. It was only forty-four years, just a few weeks ago. Such short weeks.

Such short years.

They were supposed to be like Hogal and Tabbitt. He even said it himself, yesterday. It was almost a promise.

Just like Hogal and Tabbitt—

“Mahrree?” Someone kneeled in front of her and took her face in his hands.

Shem.

“Mahrree, I’m sorry to say it, but it’s time.”

“No.”

Tears flowed down Shem’s face as he slowly nodded. “He’s coming back, remember?”

“But he’s not coming back *here*,” she whispered. “I’m not ready for this. I can’t let him go. I can never be ready for this.”

“I understand,” he said gently. “How could you ever be prepared?”

She felt two more people sit down next to her. Calla was on one side, Jaytsy on the other. Lilla stood behind Shem, her handkerchief drenched and clenched in her fist.

She knew it didn’t matter that she wasn’t ready. Since when did life—or death—ever care about its victims’ readiness?

The office was filling with family, all of them watching her with the most miserable expressions. They were going to take him, if she wanted them to or not.

Mahrree exhaled, stood up, and stepped over to her motionless husband. Not caring what anyone thought, she kissed him on the lips again.

It was very different than yesterday’s kiss. He wasn’t there.

THAT’S WHAT I’VE BEEN TRYING TO TELL YOU, MAHRREE. LET THAT GO. I’M STILL HERE.

Mahrree smiled dimly at the words that filled her, head to toe.

I’M RATHER CURIOUS TO SEE IF THERE’S AS MANY AT THIS SERVICE AS THERE WERE IN IDUMEA WHEN I WAS “LOST” TO THE FOREST. THERE AREN’T MANY MEN WHO CAN SAY THEY HAD TWO MEMORIAL SERVICES, TWENTY-FIVE YEARS APART.

Mahrree almost laughed. She certainly smiled.

Peto watched her, worriedly. *Everyone* watched her closely, perplexed at her swinging emotions.

“I’m guessing he’ll be watching to see who shows up today,” she told them softly. “He missed his service in Idumea twenty-five years ago, after all.”

“Caraka’s coming,” Shem told her. “He saw the people going to his service at the biggest stadium when he left the Administrative offices in Idumea back then. Maybe he can give us a comparison.”

Mahrree nodded and sighed, then patted Perrin’s cold hand.

STOP IT, MAHRREE. THAT’S CREEPY.

You be quiet, she thought back with a smirk.

GO AHEAD AND MAKE ME. I DARE YOU.

“We can do this for him, and for you.”

Mahrree snorted a laugh, which startled her. It certainly startled everyone in the room who stared at her uncertainly.

She covered her mouth. “I’m sorry. I’m not sure I know why I did that,” she said, still smirking.

LIAR.

Deck nodded to her, with a meaningful look in his eyes. “I think I know why you did.”

Shem tenderly took her arm and whispered in her ear. “He’s been doing it to me, too. He keeps telling me that he knows things now that I don’t. Death doesn’t change our personalities, does it? He’s still such a tease.” Shem was smiling, despite his tears, which made Mahrree start to weep yet again.

“He doesn’t like that, you know,” Shem said, wiping her face.

“Well, it’s his fault!”

“He knows that, too.”

He was there, in the room. More than just his body. She could feel him, and even smell him, earthy sweet. Whenever she buried her face into his neck at night and inhaled deeply, that was the singular scent of his comfort, of his strength, of his love, of *him*.

With every thought she could generate she sent him the message, Come back to me, Perrin. Like Hogal and Tabbitt. You said that, remember? Like Hogal and Tabbitt—

Nothing happened, but her family continuing to stare at her in pity.

Unable to bear their sympathetic gazes any longer, and knowing she had to face the inevitable, Mahrree turned to Peto and Deck, dressed in their lightest colored clothing. That was the tradition in Salem. The deceased wore all white, and everyone else wore a light color as well. Paradise was a place of light, not darkness.

She stepped over and patted each of them. “You look wonderful.” Seeing their sons behind them, trailing out to the gathering room, she called, “All of you. Thank you. It’s a long way. Are you sure you don’t want to use the wagon and horses?”

Peto shook his head. “No, Mother; we’ll all take turns carrying him. It’s only a few miles. We can do this for him, and for you.”

“Thank you,” Mahrree whispered.

Reverently, Deck and Cambo went to the front of Perrin, while Peto and Relf went to the back. Together they squatted, then hefted the board carrying his body up onto their shoulders, then slowly carried Perrin out of the office.

For the very last time.

Mahrree blubbered.

In the gathering room stood the rest of the Shin, Briter, and Zenos men and teenage boys in a profound silence. They followed Perrin, ready for their turns to carry him to the arena in the heart of Salem.

Shem signaled for Mahrree to follow, but she couldn't. Suddenly her heart was so heavy again, her muscles didn't have the strength to move it. She'd felt Perrin follow his body out, most likely to whisper warnings to the boys about not tripping.

Only because Jaytsy and Lilla took either side of her did Mahrree find her feet moving, and they led her out to follow her husband.



Shem was sure that at any moment he'd lose it. Already during the night he'd wept to sheer exhaustion twice alone in his bedroom, because his wife was sitting next to her best friend in this office. He'd thought about joining them but first he needed to find his own strength to share, which he found in short supply.

He only had to hold it all together until the end of the service. Then, he could collapse into his wife's arms and sob like a little boy who'd lost his best friend and big brother.

He should stay near Mahrree, he decided, to help her in case Lilla and Jaytsy no longer could. Shem was just about to follow her when Calla caught his arm and nodded for him to wait. They watched as the boys in the gathering room stepped aside to let Mahrree and her escorts follow behind Perrin. The grandsons shuffled in line to follow.

"Calla," Shem whispered to her as the room rapidly emptied, "I need to be with them—"

"I know," she whispered, "We'll catch up to them. But first there's something I need to know. Wait for just a moment."

They watched as the rest of the families silently fell in behind the boys and Mahrree, and peered out the window to see them making their way somberly down the dirt road. Lek drove a wagon behind them, in case anyone needed a ride.

Growing anxious, Shem raised his eyebrows in questioning to his wife, but her gaze had shifted inexplicably to the empty sofa where she'd sat all night long.

She nodded once to it and smiled before turning to Shem. "Tell

“We can do this for him, and for you.”

me about Tabbitt and Hogal Densal.”

Shem blinked at her. “The Densals?” he asked as they made their way out of the house to bring up the end of the procession. “Perrin’s great aunt and uncle? Why?”

“Because Tabbitt Densal sat with Mahrree and me last night for quite some time,” Calla explained.

Shem was hardly surprised. Paradise frequently dropped by and communicated with Calla as if she were an old friend.

“Was she . . . on the sofa?” Shem asked. “As we left?”

“Yes,” Calla said easily. “She said you could explain a few things better than she could. During the night Tabbitt told me that Mahrree doesn’t understand, that she’s going to need some help later. Apparently Mahrree was expecting something to happen before now, as it happened with Tabbitt and Hogal, but I couldn’t quite understand it all. I suppose my own grief kept getting in the way of my ability to listen. So tell me about the day the Densals passed to Paradise.”

“All I know is from what Mahrree told me, but . . . oh. Oh, now I see,” Shem said as they left the front garden and walked behind Lek’s wagon. “In fact, today is their anniversary, of sorts. You see, Tabbitt Densal was Perrin’s great aunt, but the Densals were more like his grandparents. She and Hogal were very close . . .”

Young Pere sat almost at the rear of the arena, leaning forward with his head down on the back of the bench in front of him. The rest of the family were in chairs and benches set up near Puggah’s body at the large center stage, talking quietly with those who came to say goodbye. The great-grandchildren wandered around the empty stage, not quite sure what was going on, but feeling the heaviness of the day and behaving surprisingly well.

Young Pere glanced up occasionally and sighed. The line to see his grandfather wove all the way to the back and out the doors. The memorial service would never start on time at this rate, and the arena was filling with those who already passed his body. People had lined the road as their procession made its way into the heart of Salem, then all of them fell in line behind the family so that thousands arrived at the arena together. This could take all afternoon.

He put his head back down, exhausted. Maybe he didn’t sleep so

well last night. Maybe Boskos was right—he wasn't completely recovered from his fall off the school. Digging this morning didn't help, either. Whatever it was, Young Pere felt a dark brooding that made him want to lie down on the floor and go back to sleep. In an attempt to stay awake, he listened to the conversations that drifted past him.

"I can't believe he's gone."

"It was so fast."

"Mrs. Shin certainly seems to be struggling, doesn't she? Poor woman. She's smiling one moment, then weeping the next."

"What are we going to do for a general now?"

"I don't know. I heard some suggesting that Rector Shin should be given the position."

A couple of bodies sat down in a vacant bench a few rows behind Young Pere.

"Certainly he should have the position. Peto Shin has done as much to secure Salem as his father has, but what about the title?" The voice sounded as if it came from a younger man.

"I don't know that he needs the title of general," said a man who sounded older. "I think Gleace gave Perrin the rank of general just because that's what he was used to. True, he was also in charge of the militia, but I think Guide Zenos should probably take that position now. Not as if he needs to do much more than retrain the trainers every year."

The younger man sighed. "I just don't understand something . . . what about Pax's prophecy?"

Young Pere held his breath, hoping to hear the response. He'd been wondering that himself.

"Ah," the older man said. "I thought about that too. I pulled out The Writings last night and . . . Wait, here's someone who undoubtedly can help. Assistant Holl, do you have a moment?"

Young Pere heard a third man, who was walking past his bench, stop behind where his hunched form remained.

"Gentlemen," said Assistant Holl, one of Shem's chosen twelve men, "I always have a moment. Quite a day, isn't it? So unexpected. What can I do for you?"

"Pax's prophecy," the younger man said, "what he saw in vision when he first saw the valley that would become Salem. I thought, that is, I'd always been told that . . . General Shin might have been the Deliverer."

Young Pere heard the assistant sigh. "Many people have read

“We can do this for him, and for you.”

more into that than they should. Look, I’ve got it right here.”

Young Pere rolled his eyes. *Of course* the assistant would have The Writings and the verses at hand. He could almost see the dark script as Holl reverently read the words Guide Pax had recorded when he first laid eyes upon the empty valley.

“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 will He call one to mark the path of escape for the valiant.

“The Deliverer will ensure the safety of the Creator’s people, until the coming Destruction. Look, there’s a distinct separation.” Holl must have been pointing to the text. “The lines about one from the highest ranks stands alone. Pax would have reviewed the text before it was printed, making sure the lines stood where they should.”

The older man said, “That’s what I noticed last night. It’s *another* sentence that talks about the Deliverer before the Destruction. We connect all of them in our minds, but I don’t think we should.”

“I agree,” said Assistant Holl. “No one ever said Shin was the Deliverer. Hifadhi knew he was the one from the ranks of the enemy that Pax spoke of; that’s why Gleace made sure he came here. But neither guide ever said that Shin was the Deliverer, nor have I ever heard Guide Zenos claim such a thing. But Shin certainly did mark the paths, didn’t he?”

“Indeed,” agreed the men. “Excellent job.”

“I saw them a couple of years ago coming out of the mountains after one of their trips,” the older man said. “Perrin was in the lead, looking as strong and healthy as a twenty-year-old. He had one of the smaller children on his shoulders. The boy was sound asleep, flopped awkwardly over Perrin’s head. Sweetest thing I ever saw. Not that I was about to tell General Shin that he looked *sweet*.”

The three men chuckled softly.

“I saw him less than two weeks ago,” the younger man said. “He was helping to carry home that unconscious *grandson* of theirs—”

Young Pere bristled at the tone of his voice, and clenched a fist when he heard the other two men scoff quietly.

“—and I thought he probably could have carried that troublesome boy all by himself. That’s why I can’t believe he went so quickly,” the man’s voice became quieter. “He was so strong.”

“But he *was* seventy-two,” Assistant Holl reminded.

“I thought he could have lasted another ten, or even twenty years. I really was hoping to see him lead our people to the temple ruin. I used to imagine it when I was a boy,” the younger man said, sounding wistful. “I used to think it must be getting closer to the day, the older he became. I was expecting the last day to be within the next few years, but now? I know what you mean, Assistant Holl, that we misread The Writings to mean what we hope they mean. It’s just that, well I can’t help but wonder, why have we been preparing so much for so many years? Nothing has happened. I’m wondering if anything ever *will* happen.”

Young Pere was tempted to stand up and shout his agreement. What was the point of all of this!?! They’d been preparing for famines and disasters and invasions since before he was born, and now it *killed* his Puggah—

The assistant’s voice cut into his thoughts. “A few things to consider. How much more do we know about the mountains, about our ability to move people? I know of many families who take trips along the routes and come back with a greater sense of understanding about the Creator and His will for us. Their faith is increased, and any effort that increases faith is never wasted.”

“True, true,” the younger man conceded. “We took a trip like that when I was young. I loved looking at the marks on the trees, deciphering them, knowing why they were there and who put them there.”

Something in Young Pere’s chest burned. He did his best to extinguish it.

The assistant spoke again. “What we do and learn along the way to our destinations is just as important as the destination itself. Now consider this: does it matter *when* the Last Day is?”

“What do you mean?” asked the young man.

The older man spoke up. “No, it doesn’t, Assistant. The Last Day for Perrin Shin was yesterday. The Last Day for me may be tomorrow. None of us know when our Last Day is.”

Young Pere squeezed his eyes shut.

“That’s right,” Assistant Holl said. “You mentioned you expected to see the Last Day,” he addressed the younger man. “And you will.”

“Are you sure?” the younger man said eagerly. “What do you know of Gleace’s prophecy at the temple site, after the Shins first arrived? I remember hearing that he said something to Zenos and Rector Shin at the time, something about them being there. So it *will* be coming, right?”

“We can do this for him, and for you.”

“Not too soon, I hope,” the older man said with a soft chuckle. “I think I’d rather not be here when it happens. I hope I’m on the other side. I imagine the view over there will be much better.”

Assistant Holl chuckled as well. “Yes, it’ll be coming, and I’ve heard Guide Zenos discuss that prophecy. He *did* say that Guide Gleace told him and Peto that they would see the day, but honestly, it still may be a hundred years away. They may be watching it from the other side with us.”

“So we keep preparing,” the older man told his younger companion. “It doesn’t matter if I ever head up those trails before the army, or if I personally benefit from our family’s restocking the emergency caves, or if I never draw from the long-term reserves I help fill. What I do, I do for others, for some future residents of Salem. I don’t need to eat those rations or use those blankets. I’m satisfied knowing that I’ve done my part.”

“We’re blessed for obeying,” Assistant Holl said, “and that’s the real test: are we obedient even when we can’t see why we should be?”

Young Pere wished he knew how to slip out without drawing attention to himself. He’d sat near the back thinking no one would be there, but the entire arena would fill up, and he was stuck listening to the conversations around him. More praises of General Shin. More memories about him. More sympathy for the family. And he couldn’t get away from any of it.

He was trapped, like a wounded falcon, in an immense barn.

When Guide Zenos stood up before the congregation filling the enormous arena, he smiled in awe. This *must* have been better than the memorial in Idumea, he thought.

The many conversations, which had been quiet and reverent, fell to silence as the audience saw their guide.

Shem had dreaded this moment. He knew the program would be moving, as all memorial services in Salem were. He was looking forward to the young grandchildren and great grandchildren singing the “buzzing butterflies” song, complete with Perrin’s modifications, and the older grandchildren singing one of the family’s favorite hymns, led by Lilla.

But Mahrree had asked Shem to give the tribute, and he couldn’t

imagine anything more difficult, or more important to him. He never really expected to do this. He always thought that the Last Day would come first . . .

“Just a few days ago my best friend and brother said that getting me *not* to cry was the real challenge,” Shem began in a loud voice as he addressed the tens of thousands of people in attendance.

The crowd smiled. Guide Zenos’s weepy tendencies were legendary. Children throughout Salem looked forward to his annual visits to their congregations. It was their hobby to guess how long it would take before he’d began to cry, and which word would get him going. Shem didn’t mind—he knew at least that way the youth of Salem were paying attention.

“Then he said a few things to me, and I demonstrated why one of his nicknames for me was Sergeant Sniffles.”

The audience grinned.

YOU’RE LOSING IT ALREADY, SHEM. YOU HAVEN’T EVEN SAID MY NAME, AND ALREADY YOU’RE ABOUT TO WEEP. I CAN SEE IT IN YOUR EYES. YOU’RE JUST SO . . . SWEET.

Shem began to chuckle. “But I supposed I earned that. Forty years ago, when he was nearing his thirty-second birthday, and I was a spry twenty-two-year-old, I gave him the nickname of Grandpy.”

The audience chuckled softly.

OH THAT’S NOT FAIR, SHEM!

Shem grinned. “Obviously it didn’t stick once we came to Salem. Here he earned the much more respectable nickname of . . . Puggah.”

Now everyone in the congregation was laughing.

It is too fair, Perrin, Shem thought. You forced me to do this. I have no doubt that if our positions were reversed, you’d be telling everyone about my first kiss coming from Sareen on our first Strongest Soldier Race.

Shem heard a familiar chuckle.

“But the name I loved best for him was brother. And the names he loved were husband, son, father, uncle, Papa Pere, General of Salem, and of course, Puggah. Colonel was somewhere down next to Grandpy. High General of Idumea didn’t even make the list. Perrin Shin was the best friend a man could ever have. Even when he was yelling in my face when I was only twenty-two, demanding to know if I was a spy, and trying to extract a confession. He didn’t know for years how close to the truth he was. He was my best friend even when I chased him down on a mad ride to Idumea when he was slightly

“We can do this for him, and for you.”

crazed, and he thanked me by pulling a sword on me. So I beat him up.”

The congregation wasn't shocked. Most of them had been through Mahrree's History of the World class, or had a relative who did. Everyone knew the story of when Shem chased down Perrin to keep him from killing the administrators after his parents' murders.

Shem paused and smiled. “I've always been a little vainly proud about that, I must confess. It was the only time I bested him.”

The congregation chuckled in understanding.

I WAS A BIT AT A DISADVANTAGE AT THE TIME, BEING OVERCOME WITH GRIEF. BUT I NOTICE YOU'RE NOT MENTIONING THAT.

My tribute, my version of the story, Shem thought to the voice in his head. You can clarify the details when we all get to your side of the woods.

“I always loved him. Especially when he saw how homesick I was as a young soldier, and took me into his home and let me call him Perrin. But not in front of the other soldiers. Especially when he stayed at my home here in Salem for days sustaining me and taking care of my family and duties when my father died and my second son was born just hours after his burial. Especially when he sat up with me half the night after I was called to be guide seven years ago. He listened to me describe all the reasons why I was unfit for the responsibility, then reminded me that the Creator qualifies whom He chooses. It was times like those that make me believe that Perrin Shin's favorite name was Son of the Creator. He knew his Creator and His will. He didn't always, though. Not until he was eighteen did he begin to understand what the Creator expected from him. He became one of the greatest men ever to have lived in the world, or to live in Salem.”

Shem felt something change. He looked down at Mahrree in the front row and noticed Perrin in white and sitting next to her, his arm around her. He nodded and winked. Shem fought the urge to wink back. Mahrree might get the wrong impression.

“Perrin Shin was born in the village of Pools, on the 51st Day of Harvest, 291, the only child of Relf and Joriana Shin. He was named a version of his grandfather's name, Pere Shin . . .”

Shem was rather impressed with himself. He didn't start sniffing until the third story, but it wasn't the story that got to him. It happened when he looked down again at Mahrree and saw Perrin whispering in her ear, trying to comfort her as she alternated between laughing and

crying. He wasn't there alone. The rows of the family were far more crowded than anyone else could see. Shem stumbled a bit on his words as he realized that every worthy Shin, Peto, and Briter ancestor was sitting next to his or her namesake.

Except for Young Pere. As Shem continued to address the crowd he couldn't see him anywhere with the family.

Shem glanced down again at Mahrree, or rather, at the spot next to her that was filled by more than just Peto.

Perrin nodded in understanding that someone was missing, gave Shem a complicated look, then vanished.

Shem's voice trembled again as he started the next story. Perrin was going to be busier than ever.



As the last song was being sung—mercifully without him; Young Pere wasn't much for singing, unlike his mother—Young Pere finally stood up at the back of the arena, startling the dozen or so people around him who hadn't realized the hunched-over body among them was a Shin. Without looking at anyone, he made his way to the side aisle and tried to subtly walk up it, in order to be in position by the end of the prayer. Soon he was in place with the other grandsons at the stage waiting his turn to carry his grandfather back home.

As the prayer ended, they all regarded him with the same expression: Where have you been?!

He merely looked past them, and noticed Uncle Shem smiling oddly at him, as if welcoming him back. Young Pere looked away without acknowledging him, and followed his brother and cousins over to the plank.

Young Pere took his position at Perrin's head, opposite of his brother Nool, while Bubba and Holling Briter took the other end. As the audience rose, together the four young men hoisted their grandfather to their shoulders and slowly left the stage, taking the wide front stairs cautiously, guided by Peto and Deck on either side. They walked down the center aisle of the arena toward the back doors, and, for the first time, Young Pere looked to see who had come.

Everyone. From all over Salem. But what caught his attention were the number of blue uniforms scattered in the congregation. They stood out in contrast to the light-colored clothing everyone else wore. There must have been more than fifty men in the army jackets, each

“We can do this for him, and for you.”

standing at attention, saluting the fallen general as he passed.

Young Pere found his vision blurring and was grateful for it. He could no longer see their faces, but still he could make out their dark shapes and their salutes. His jaw trembled as he tried to focus on the doors, not on the people lining the aisle.

A woman’s whisper, however, surprised him. “Chin up, Lieutenant. That’s better.”

He glanced over and saw Mrs. Yordin standing proudly. She didn’t look up at General Shin, but kept her eyes on Young Pere. He nodded briefly to her and cleared his throat.

Just a little further to go and it’d be all over.

Mahrree had never felt so weak as she made her way out of the arena, following her husband. Although the pace was slow, she stumbled over her feet, even with Jaytsy and Lilla holding her up on either side. When they reached the warm sunshine outside, she knew she couldn’t walk the rest of the way home.

Calla came over to her. “Mahrree, come ride in the wagon.” Lek was already there to help her up on to the seat. Calla sat next to her and nodded to Jaytsy and Lilla that she would take care of their mother so they could walk with their children. Shem, following the men, smiled encouragingly at his wife.

Calla put her arm around Mahrree and she leaned heavily against her best friend. “How are you holding up?” she asked as the wagon started.

“I’m not, Calla. To be honest, I really didn’t expect to be here.”

“What *did* you expect?”

“That he would find a way to . . . to . . .”

“To come get you?”

“Yes!” Mahrree sobbed. “I sat on the sofa waiting for him, but he never came except to tell me he loved me, to tease me as they took his body, but he was supposed to . . .”

“Like Hogal came for Tabbitt after he passed?”

Startled, Mahrree sat up and looked at her. “How do you know about that?”

Calla smiled sympathetically. “Tabbitt Densal told me last night. She tried to reach you, but understandably you were a little out of reach. Mahrree, she wants you to know that you still have more to do

here. Tabbitt didn't. The Creator still needs you *here*, but He needed Tabbitt *there*. The Creator has provided you with a large family that will care for you. Tabbitt left very little family."

Mahrree slumped in discouragement. "What more can I do here? What good am I? I teach world history at the university, but anyone can do that. Just read out of my book. And I help teach the little ones at home, but their mothers can do that just as well. I help around the houses with chores, but there's always another child who needs to learn the work. I just take up space, Calla, that someone else could use better than me. If I were gone, Hycy and Wes could have our section as their new home. My purpose was to take care of him," she gestured feebly to her husband far ahead. "Now that he's gone, why am I still here?"

No one in Salem had more experience with widows than the guide's wife. Calla undoubtedly had heard this all before. "Mahrree, Mahrree—no one else can be Muggah. Look at how devastated this family is to lose Perrin. I promise you they'd feel the same way about you. As much as he was their rock, you're their soft pillow. They can't bear to lose you both at the same time."

"But he *did* something for them, Calla," Mahrree tried to explain. "For the entire community! They miss him because he gave them so much. They won't miss me. I don't do much more than help a little here and there. I could leave now, be with Perrin, and everyone would continue fine without me. Calla," she whispered, her voice lowering in despair, "I don't *want* to be here anymore. Why didn't he come for me? What have I done wrong? Why doesn't the Creator want me?" She collapsed against Calla, who patted her shoulder.

"Mahrree, you've done nothing wrong. The Creator is pleased with you, I'm sure of it. He still needs you here. This family needs you. You can't see things clearly right now, but someday you will. You're more than *just* Perrin's wife, more than *just* someone's mother and grandmother and great-grandmother. You are Mahrree Peto Shin, a daughter of the Creator, and you still have something to accomplish before you can go. Tabbitt told me you still have a great work to do, and someday you'll understand."

Mahrree sighed. "Well, Auntie Tabbitt, wherever you are, I *don't* understand! I don't know if I want to. I can't bear to keep living and feeling this pain, Calla."

"I know you can't believe it right now, but this pain *will* become bearable." Calla wrapped both arms around Mahrree to help hold her

“We can do this for him, and for you.”

up. “Remember how your mother was? After your father passed? In time she learned how to work with his loss. She carved a new life for herself. If I remember the stories correctly, she took to decorating, and later wanted to decorate the fort? She did your bedroom years later, in something called plaid. You know, Shem still has the occasional nightmare about her supervising his building efforts.”

Mahrree snorted softly at the memory of her red and blue plaid bedroom. How *did* her mother move past the pain? Mahrree was only a teenager when Cephias died. She was too lost in her own grief to look at her mother’s.

Why was it only many years later that she seemed to understand her own mother?

If only Hycymum had written down how she felt, what she did. Mahrree did remember the entire house being redecorated, but that really wasn’t something that was done in Salem. There were no trends or fashions to dictate what color the curtains should be this year. Mahrree didn’t know how to grieve Salem-style—

She wept, for a long time.

Mahrree sighed as she felt her father come back to her again, as he still occasionally did.

She looked at you each day, and wondered how she could help you through the grief. You became her reason for going on. Helping you move on was what helped her move on. How can you imagine no one needs you? You have children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren who desperately need you to help them through this. What could be a greater calling than providing comfort to the grieving? Isn’t that part of the Creator’s work?

Mahrree watched the procession in front of her as it stopped to switch carriers. Young Pere seemed pale as he held the board for Con Cadby to take his place. His eyes met hers, and the darkness in them surprised her. He let the procession carry on without him and watched Mahrree’s wagon slowly go past.

She beckoned for Young Pere to hop on to the wagon. He began to shake his head, then climbed on to the back and lay down in the bed, his arm covering his eyes.

You have plenty of work to still do, Mahrree.

I see that. Thank you, Father. Somewhere in my heart I know you’re right. But I’m going to need some time to find that spot.

Of course you will. You have time. All of you do, for now. By the way, it’s been wonderful getting to know my son-in-law. I always knew that I would like him.



The sun was baking them by the time they reached the Eztates. But large thick clouds building over the eastern mountains threatened rain by the evening. While thousands of people had lined the road again, they respected the family's wishes and no one was left at the gravesite except for the Shins, Briters, and Zenoses. The family stood or sat around the open grave while Perrin's body changed hands one last time. The last to move Perrin were Deck, Peto, and Shem. The three of them carried him to the coffin that was waiting, gently placed him in, and watched tearfully as Mahrree gave him one last kiss.

Without a word they closed up the coffin. Then all of the men took hold of the ropes to lower the box into the grave. Every last flower from the gardens of the three large houses in the area, as well as from the gardens of the smaller houses of the married grandchildren, had been picked clean, and the granddaughters tossed the flowers in after the coffin.

Sitting on a chair, and supported on either side by her daughter and daughter-in-law, Mahrree watched as the men filled up the hole. So recently her life was absolutely, wonderfully perfect. Now it was a black pit, deeper than the grave that was filling up.

The shovels were set aside after the last bit of dirt was placed, and Peto kneeled at the base of the grave. Everyone bowed their heads.

"Dear Creator, today we bury our beloved Perrin Shin. We ask that You will watch over this site, keep it safe and sacred, until the Last Day. We also ask that You will help all of us who remain to understand Your will, to feel of Your comfort, and to live as well as this, Your son, lived."

Chapter 16--“Discover anything thought-provoking?”

The large table in the eating room of the Briter house had been filled to capacity while the Briters were away at the memorial service. Yudit had organized the rest of the Zenoses, neighbors, and the rectory to bring enough food to keep all three extended families fed for a few days. That’s where the families began to slowly make their way after Peto’s dedication of the grave. Eating had kind of been forgotten since dinner was missed yesterday. Breakfast was an afterthought that morning, and midday meal had been skipped.

But now, after the little ones tossed the last of their flowers, and their parents quietly walked them to the Briters to feed them, the crowd around Perrin’s grave began to dwindle. After half an hour all that were left were Mahrree, Peto, Jaytsy, and Shem.

Relf stood to the side, his tools in hand, hoping to get in a few more hours of work before sunset. Tomorrow he’d return to his regular job carving stone for a new rectory in the southwest of Salem, so the time he could spend on the boulder would be limited to just the evenings. But it didn’t seem right to continue working on the stone until Muggah was ready to leave.

Mahrree noticed him standing nearby. “It looks wonderful already, Relf. You should have his name finished by this evening, I imagine.”

“But there’s much more to put on it, Muggah. Plenty of stone. I hope you’ll be happy with it.”

“How could I not be?” But she stared at the pile of dirt.

“Mother,” Jaytsy said gently, “you really should eat something. Lilla said you missed breakfast. You look rather peaked.”

Mahrree was tempted to say, “What does it matter?” But she had

already promised her father she would at least try. Instead, she nodded. “I will. I just need a few more minutes. Why don’t you three go ahead? I promise I’ll come to the house in a bit. I’d like a little time alone.”

Peto and Jaytsy looked at Shem who nodded to them. They reluctantly stood up, but Shem kneeled down in front of Mahrree. He took her hands into his and kissed them. “All of this will make sense someday. I promise. Oh, Mahrree, I just can’t bear to see you so sad.”

Mahrree tried to smile, but wasn’t sure what twist of muscles appeared on her face. “What would I do without you, Shem?” Then her smile became genuine as she remembered something. “Do you realize we never did tell him about the sedation we gave him during his trauma when he couldn’t sleep in Edge? I actually planned to tell him about that one day.”

Shem managed a grin. “I think I just heard someone in the woods groaning in frustration and rubbing his forehead. He knows *now!*”

Mahrree looked up. “We had to, Perrin! We needed to sleep!” She patted Shem’s cheek. “Go, get something to eat. And thank you, for everything. You did a wonderful job today, as usual.”

Shem nodded, touched her cheek, then stood up. He put his arms around Peto and Jaytsy and walked them back to the house.

And so Mahrree sat, regarding with contempt the dirt which was slowly beginning to settle. Relf had wandered over to the barn to give her privacy, but now that she was alone she didn’t know what to do. He really *wasn’t* there.

She had planned to say some kind of goodbye but it didn’t seem appropriate to do so now, and she couldn’t understand why.

Suddenly her thoughts filled with Young Pere. He had stood next to the grave, put in a few shovelfuls of dirt, but then after the prayer he’d bounded off to the end of the garden where some of the married grandchildren’s homes were. Something was in his hands, but Mahrree hadn’t thought at the time to look at what it was. Now she felt an urgent need to see what he was up to.

She stood up from the chair and Cephas came jogging over from his house.

“Ready to get something to eat, Muggah? I can help you.”

She could always count on Cephas Briter to look after her. She often thought it was no accident he was named for her father. He was taller than the original, but had the same gentle gray eyes that now watched her with great concern.

“Discover anything thought-provoking?”

“Actually, no. Cephas, did you see where your cousin went? Young Pere?”

He exhaled. “Muggah, he’s not doing well at all. I saw him walk off. I know he went past Relf’s house, but I lost sight of him after that. I can go find him—”

She squeezed his arm. “I think I’ll take a little walk and see if I can find him myself.”

“But you’re supposed to go in and eat something.”

“I will. I’m not hungry yet. I’ll just go down to the end of your garden and back. You go to the house and finish eating.”

He stepped uncertainly. “Sure I can’t go with you?”

Mahrree shook her head.

Young Pere sat between the thick pine trees that created a little forest thicket. The younger children loved to play in there, but none of them would be bothering him today. He opened the book and skimmed the last few chapters again.

The probation imposed on Colonel Shin for trying to kill Gadiman and taking the food to feed Edge. The meeting of the northern commanders worried about the build-up of Guarders in Moorland. The research into people missing from the world. The planning of the offensive at Moorland. The two hundred Salemite men that no one knew were in the trees waiting for the escaping Guarders. Colonel Shin breaking his probation after the explosions that burned Moorland. His saving of Captain Thorne, Major Yordin, and more than a dozen other soldiers. Their injuries. The pox outbreak. The land grab. The copy of Terryp’s map, made and sent out secretly by Colonel Shin. The excursion sent to Terryp’s land. The Administrators’ presentation calling it poisonous and claiming that the Creator was nothing more than an ordinary man. High General Shin. Mahrree Shin protesting the findings in public and trying to tell the village it was all a lie—

“There you are! For some reason I had a feeling I’d find you here, Young Pere.”

He slammed the book shut and stared up through the branches to see his grandmother. She seemed so small and frail today. Hardly the fierce and determined woman he was just reading about who tried to proclaim to the world that the Administrators were liars. He couldn’t

picture her as that woman, either. Maybe Calla had those details wrong as well.

“Muggah. What are . . . what do you want?”

“I want to know how you are,” she said kindly. “This has been such a strange few days. We haven’t spoken for so long.” She tried to push her way into the tight stand of trees but thought twice about it. Instead she knelt, a little stiffly, on the ground. “So?” she asked him through the branches.

“I’m fine,” he said shortly.

Mahrree sighed. “How can you be, Young Pere? I’m a complete mess. I know you must feel that way, too. You and me, we *always* feel the same ways.”

“All right, I’m not fine,” he admitted. “But I will be,” he added in gentle defiance.

Mahrree nodded slowly. “I suppose we all be, in time. What are you reading?”

“Uh, oh, um . . . I just was—” He realized it was useless to put it off, and he held up Calla’s book.

Mahrree smiled. “I was wondering when you might be interested in that. Discover anything thought-provoking?”

Young Pere scoffed. “Yeah, you could say that.”

Mahrree narrowed her eyes at him. “Such as?”

“He did a lot more than I realized.”

“He wasn’t always just an old man, was he?” Mahrree said. “That was just a recent development, you know. He was one of the greatest men who ever served in the army. He could have been anything, done anything. But instead he chose to do the right things.”

Young Pere couldn’t help but groan as he said, “Sure, Muggah.”

“What do you mean by that tone, ‘Sure, Muggah’? That seems to be all I hear you say lately. Young Pere, where are you going?”

His head snapped up. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, you seem so distant,” Mahrree said. “You hardly give me more than a couple words of an answer, but we used to chat for hours about your plans. So . . . what do you have planned next? I really could use a diversion right now, you know. Something else to keep my mind off of . . . everything else.”

Young Pere offered a half-hearted smile. “Not entirely sure of my next plans right now.”

“Still want to fly?”

“Oh, most definitely.”

“Discover anything thought-provoking?”

“Working on new wing dimensions?”

“You could say that.”

“Young Pere, will you promise me you’ll come tell me before your next attempt? I know I’m not nearly as strong as your grandfather, so I won’t be carrying you home, but I do want to watch you try.”

Young Pere sighed. “Of course. I’ll tell you before my next flight.”

Mahrree nodded. “What else are you planning? About your future, your first career? Not long until you’re eighteen you know.”

“Yes, I know. I’m not sure yet.”

Mahrree waited for something else from him.

He watched for her response.

An uneasy silence hung between them. That never happened before.

“Anything else, Muggah?” Young Pere finally said.

“Come get something to eat with me?”

“I will later.”

“Promise me?”

“Yes. I’ll be home in a little bit.”

Mahrree smiled dimly. “I can still hide pie for you, you know. Most of the pieces I hid I never intended to give to Perrin—” Something caught in her throat, and if it were possible, she appeared to be even more fragile.

She was right about them always feeling the same ways. The idea that she’d never again hide *his* pie for Young Pere stabbed him with unexpected grief.

It was her tears that startled him. Although she was staring down at her hands, as if to compose herself, there were too many tears to ignore. She was too much to ignore.

Young Pere leapt to his feet, forced himself through the thicket of trees, and knelt to wrap his arms around her. She gasped in surprise, then collapsed like a wilted flower against him.

“I’m so sorry, Muggah,” Young Pere whispered, trying to keep his own tears in check, but knowing he was failing. “I don’t think I’ve told you that yet. You’ve been through so much. It’s just not fair. I’m so sorry.”

Mahrree gripped his arm and kissed it. “Thank you, Young Pere.”

“I want to fix it all, Muggah. Somehow.”

“Young Pere, there’s nothing that needs to be fixed, but healed.

We're starting that, right now."

He kissed the top of her head and sat down next to her, keeping a supporting arm around her, but not meeting her eyes. He couldn't focus on anything just yet. "I can do much more than that, Muggah."

"What do you mean?" she asked and sniffled.

Young Pere sighed. "I don't know yet. But I promise, when I figure it out, I'll tell you."

"Young Pere, all I need you to do is hug me and talk to me. This, right now, is all that we need."

She didn't understand. She didn't dare even try. But maybe it was because she was simply too sad right now to think of anything bigger.

"Sure, Muggah."

"There's *that* answer again." She chanced to look up into his eyes, and he glanced over at her, sure that his eyes were as red and puffy as hers.

He shrugged. "It's an easy answer."

"Remember, there are no easy answers. Only lazy ones."

Young Pere rolled his eyes. "You just never quit, do you? Are you going to ask me the color of the sky now?"

Mahrree glanced up. "Looks to be rather unsettled, don't you think? Sunny here, cloudy over there. A storm may be approaching. We should get in, get something to eat," she hinted.

Young Pere glanced down at the book he dropped on the ground when he wriggled his way out of the trees to his grandmother. He was nearly finished with it, but . . .

"You're right, Muggah. Let's go eat."



Everyone looked immensely relieved when Mahrree and Young Pere came into the house.

Peto and Jaytsy exchanged looks that Mahrree couldn't interpret, and Cephas picked up a plate of food he must have set down moments before, probably on his way out to look for them.

Peto came over and put an arm around Young Pere. "Mrs. Ost brought over that spicy dish you like so much. I set aside part of it in the kitchen for you."

"Thanks, Papa," Young Pere nodded to his father and walked into Jaytsy's kitchen.

Peto beamed at Mahrree as she sat down and took a plate of food

Sewzi brought her. “How’d you do it, Mother? How’d you get him in?”

“I’m not really sure, Peto. I think I just got the timing right. I also think his stomach was more persuasive than anything I said. I’m sure I heard it growling.”

Peto smiled sadly. “We still have a way to go with him, don’t we?”

Mahrree nodded and noticed the potatoes on her plate. For some reason, at every burial this shredded potato dish showed up. If it was some odd Salem tradition or not, she wasn’t sure, but they always tasted like death to her. Especially this batch: someone made them with onions. Perrin hated onions in potatoes.

And then it hit her again. She didn’t have to warn him about them. Didn’t need to steer him to get a large spoonful from another dish.

She watched her family as they finished eating, as the little ones laughed and played, forgetting what happened that day, as the teenagers talked quietly with each other and occasionally chuckled, as her son and daughter spoke with and smiled at their spouses.

She ate the potatoes that tasted like ash.



Jaytsy couldn’t bear to watch her mother anymore, looking so frail, pale, and picking helplessly at her plate of food. It was almost as if Mahrree was trying to die, too, and Jaytsy understood her desire. So what she should say to her, she wasn’t sure.

Her attention was drawn to two-year-old Fennic Zenos, who was sitting on the floor and picking berries out of his pie. Jaytsy winced. He’d be wiping his sticky fingers on his tunic at any moment, and Salema would be waddling over with a damp cloth just a moment too late—

Fennic’s head popped up, as if he’d heard something, and Jaytsy strained to listen for what caught his attention. Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed Mahrree watching him, too, having given up on her meal.

Jaytsy had already started for Fennic, intent on cleaning his fingers before Salema noticed his mess, when Fennic jumped to his feet. This time, Jaytsy heard it too. Thunder.

“Puggah!” Fennic cried and ran for the front door.

Jaytsy’s heart sank, and several people around Fennic stared at

him, Mahrree included. Jaytsy would try to fix that later, but in the meantime she ran after her grandson who had headed out the door to the front porch.

“Puggah! I hear you!” he cried to the approaching storm clouds.

“No, no Fennic. Oh sweety—it’s not Puggah.” Jaytsy scooped him up and held him close. Tears fell as she looked at his happy little face. “Sweety, it’s just a storm. It’s not . . . he can’t . . .”

But Fennic was watching the clouds rolling in, with great anticipation.

JAYTS, HE THOUGHT MY SINGING—YES, I CONFESS, I DID SING WITH THEM—HE THOUGHT MY SINGING SOUNDED LIKE THUNDER.

Jaytsy gasped as the words filled her.

Another rumble reached them, and Fennic waved happily.

IF HE NEEDS TO HEAR ME IN THE THUNDER, THEN I CAN BE IN THE THUNDER. WHEREVER HE NEEDS ME TO BE, JUST LET ME BE.

Then can I have you anywhere as well? Jaytsy thought back.

OF COURSE. BUT I THINK YOU’D RATHER I BE RIGHT HERE.

The feeling was unmistakable. She’d experienced it many times before: her father’s arms wrapped around her from behind in a great big hug. She could even smell him, earthy sweet, as if the coming rain carried his scent with the wind.

“Puggah,” Fennic whispered to his grandmother.

Jaytsy nodded. “I feel him too, sweety.” She sighed in the feeling of comfort that nearly overwhelmed her.

Joy, pure joy.

“Can everyone feel you, Father?” she whispered.

I’M TRYING TO REACH EVERYONE. SOME DON’T BELIEVE IT’S ME THEY FEEL. THEY’RE NOT EXPECTING IT. IT TOOK ME A WHILE TO REACH DECK THIS MORNING. HE COULDN’T UNDERSTAND WHY HE KEPT THINKING ABOUT ME WHILE HE WAS PUSHING ON THE RUMP OF THAT BIG BULL TO GET HIM OUT TO PASTURE. I KEPT TELLING HIM TO GET HIS HANDS OFF MY STEAK. SUDDENLY HE HEARD ME. I’D NEVER SEEN HIM JUMP SO QUICK. THAT GOT THE BULL OUT, THOUGH.

Jaytsy couldn’t help it—she laughed. The thunder laughed back.

“I miss you. I miss you so much, I don’t know how it’ll ever stop hurting,” Jaytsy murmured as her face became wet with tears and now raindrops.

IT WILL, MY DARLING DAUGHTER. REMEMBER—THIS IS ONLY TEMPORARY.

“Take care of yourself.”

“Discover anything thought-provoking?”

I DON'T NEED TO. I'M PERFECTLY FINE. MY CALLING NOW IS TO TAKE CARE OF ALL OF YOU.

Mahrree fell asleep that night on the sofa in her small gathering room. For some reason that was where his scent, slowly fading, was still the strongest.

Young Pere stayed up late reading the last few pages of the book. The confrontation at the Shins' house. The resignation. Uncle Shem's spying on General Qayin Thorne in Idumea. Idumea's decision to try the Shins as traitors. Their escape with the help of the Hifadhis. Captain Thorne's failed pursuit, and murder of Dormin. Their arrival in Salem.

The End.

He didn't like the end. It seemed almost *cowardly* somehow. Exactly who was the coward, he wasn't sure, nor did he want to decide that.

But there were a few things he *was* sure about. In the past, whenever Perrin Shin saw a problem, he confronted it. He defied those in authority, again and again. He made plans without consulting those above him. He escaped the artificial and illogical boundaries they imposed, and he was wildly successful. He changed their world.

If one Perrin Shin could do it, so could another. *That* would be the legacy.

NO, NO, NO YOUNG PERE! YOU'RE READING IT ALL WRONG! YOUNG PERE, ARE YOU LISTENING? YOUNG PERE!

No one was surprised when, the next morning after the burial, Clark didn't move at all.

He hadn't been up in two days. Kanthi, Tabbie, and Deck had tried half-heartedly a few times to tempt him with something, but his eyes had gone glassy, and he wouldn't acknowledge them, even as they gently splashed water on his lips.

Kanthe and Tabbitt and many other grandchildren patted his still form one last time, sobbing as they said goodbye to the horse who had always been an extension of their Puggah. One more painful loss.

Mahrree came to the fence and sighed as she looked at the massive, lifeless animal.

“Of course *he’d* get to go on,” was all she said after a while. As much as she hated horses, she’d tolerated Clark.

Everyone who had gathered around the pasture was surprised next to see her dip under the fence, walk over to his body, and pat him on his bowed back.

“Take care of Perrin, all right?” she said. “You and The Cat and Barker the barkless dog? Interesting how all of you were dark, shadowy animals. He always loved black creatures. I suppose you can follow him anywhere, and no one will notice. Thank you for bringing me to Salem, and for the many rides to the temple ruins and back. You, Clark, were *a decent horse* that I really didn’t mind riding.”

The butchers were considerate enough to heft Clark on to a wagon with their pulley system and haul him away before they did their work, so that none of the families would have to witness the old horse becoming food for the sheep dogs.

Peto and Deck were the last to leave the road as the wagon trundled down it. Neither of the men said a word, but watched with tears slipping down their faces.

Eventually they walked back to their houses, arm-in-arm.

There were chores to do.



It was three days later, after midday meal, when Sam and Con Cadby stepped out of their houses to walk together to the weaving barn. Since the two Cadby families returned from the Eztatates on the far west side of Salem, they’d been trying to get back into a normal routine.

Con had gathered the young husbands together the night of the burial and told them of his conversation with Perrin on the trail, his apology, and his praise of all of them. Lek also told them about his last conversation with Perrin, and his apology for his threats. The result was teary-eyed young men, and a Wes who was more confused than ever before.

Sam and Con had comforted their weeping wives during the

eight-mile wagon ride home. Lori and Jori didn't want to leave their parents and grandmother the day after the burial, but Muggah insisted it was time for them get back to their sheep, and their little ones needed their own beds. There was nothing more to do, except visit when they could.

The two fathers made their way through the garden where cousins Ensio and Cori were playing with their toddler sisters Gersh and Annly. They patted their children's heads as they usually did, but paused outside the garden gate, because something seemed odd about their play.

Lori came from the henhouse with a basket of eggs and saw her husband and brother-in-law watching the children. Sam waved his wife over.

“Listen to them,” he whispered.

She stopped at the low fence by the men and watched the four little children. What they were doing wasn't so unusual. They had dug a little trench and filled it with pebbles. Then Ensio took a mug of water and poured it down the trench while Cori and the girls tossed sticks in it to watch them float away.

Lori looked up at the men. “They do this all the time,” she whispered back.

“No, *listen.*”

“Over here, Captain! The storm's coming!” Ensio called.

“All right, Colonel!” answered Cori.

Lori's mouth dropped open in surprise.

Her sister, seeing them from her window, came out to them. “What is it?” Jori asked as she reached them.

The three of them gestured to the children.

Two-year-old Gersh dropped bits of moss on to the rocks. “That help, Cor-nal?”

Jori looked in alarm at her sister. “Colonel?” she mouthed.

Lori nodded.

Ensio filled the mug again with water from a nearby bucket. “Deluge is coming, men! Prepare the dikes!”

The three younger children stopped and stared at him.

Ensio seemed confused himself.

Con cleared his throat. “Uh, Perrin?” he ventured. “They don't know what ‘deluge’ means.”

Ensio's face brightened. “Lots of water coming, men! Walls might break. Here it comes!” And Ensio poured the mug of water

down the trench.

The children squealed and laughed as the bits of moss washed away.

“Again! Again!” Annly cried.

“Whatever you say, ‘Tenant!’” Ensio said cheerfully. “Puggah says we need more rocks! The trench should be longer so the sticks and moss float farther.”

“More rocks!” Gersh cried and went to pick up pebbles.

Jori, her hand in front of her mouth, murmured, “Ensio said ‘Puggah,’ didn’t he?”

“Remember when we played Flood with him?” Lori whispered. “He’d even get out the pickaxe and dig a proper trench. We’d use buckets of water.”

“And Salema would lecture us on getting dirty,” Jori replied, “but Cambo would throw rocks to splash her on purpose. He knew to throw the rocks when Puggah yelled—”

“Deluge coming, men!” Ensio called again, pouring more water that splashed Cori unexpectedly.

“Hey!” Cori cried out. “Mama, did you see that? Puggah didn’t wait for me to move.”

Jori sniffled. “I did, Cori. That’s just the way . . . *he* plays.” She looked at her sister for confirmation.

Lori nodded at her nephew.

Cori scowled, then ran to get more bits of moss.

Sniffing in miserable happiness, Jori said, “I got promoted all the way to lieutenant colonel before I decided I was getting too old to play that. I think I was eleven.”

Lori smiled faintly. “I only made it to major before I started listening to Salema. Puggah always called her the Administrator when she left to tell on us for getting dirty.”

Jori snorted at the memory and Lori laughed softly.

Lori cleared her throat. “Puggah?” she said quietly, “will you let us know if anyone gets in trouble?”

ARE DIRTY CLOTHES CONSIDERED ‘GETTING IN TROUBLE’?

The sisters stared at each other, trying to read on each other’s face to see if the other had heard the words as well.

Jori said, “Uh, no Puggah. That’s only at Salema’s house. Her boys are the ones who can’t get dirty.”

THAT WILL CHANGE. THIS NEXT SON THAT’S COMING, HE’S ONE MESSY BOY.

“Discover anything thought-provoking?”

Lori grinned at Jori. “Next son?”

Jori grinned back. “Messy boy!”

Their husbands chuckled.

“Poor Lek,” said Sam.

POOR CALLA. SHE SO MUCH WANTS ANOTHER GRANDDAUGHTER. BUT THAT ONE’S COMING AS WELL. GO BACK TO WORK—I’VE GOT THINGS UNDER CONTROL HERE. AND BY THE WAY, ‘SUMPIN’ IS WHAT CORI SAYS WHEN HE DOESN’T KNOW THE NAME OF SOMETHING. ‘SUMPIN’ THEN CAN MEAN ANYTHING AND EVERYTHING. THAT DOESN’T HELP A WHOLE LOT, DOES IT?

“Thank you, Puggah,” Jori said, looking around, not sure where to direct her words.

Lori, Con, and Sam nodded.

“Longer, men! Make the trench longer!”

I THINK YOU MEAN FOR THAT TO BE A C, NOT AN O. YOU BEST STOP CHISELING.

Relf stopped and looked at the stone in the twilight. “Oh yes. You’re right. I think I’m getting a little tired.”

GO HOME FOR THE EVENING. GIVE THAT WIFE OF YOURS A FEW MOMENTS OF QUIET. GRUNICK’S BEEN A BIT DIFFICULT TODAY. THIS BOULDER’S NOT GOING ANYWHERE.

“I suppose that’s true. Thanks . . . Puggah.”

DID YOU CHECK UP ON THE HILLSIDE?

The hillside? Twelve-year-old Banu Briter thought to herself.

Her eight-year-old sister Yenali sighed and looked around. “She’s not here anywhere, Banu. She’s gone!”

“No, she’s not. I know she’s somewhere. She never goes this far.”

GO CHECK ON THE HILLSIDE.

“Maybe we should check the hillside,” Yenali suggested.

“Why are you saying that?” Banu snapped, and immediately felt guilty for it.

“Because it seems like . . . the right place to check,” Yenali insisted.

SHE’S RIGHT, BANU. GO CHECK THE HILLSIDE. IT’S GETTING DARK AND YOUR MOTHER WILL START TO GET WORRIED.

Banu sighed. “All right . . .” She hesitated to say the name.

“Puggah told you to check the hillside, didn’t he?” Yenali smiled.

Banu didn’t respond, but rushed up the hillside behind the herd, her sister in tow. There they saw the goat, chewing on the rope she bit through to escape in the first place.

“You are the dumbest goat in the world!” Banu yelled in relief as she walked up to it and took it by the collar.

NOW, NOW, BANU. WHO’S THE ONE WHO TIED HER UP AND FORGOT ABOUT HER FOR THE ENTIRE DAY? BY THE WAY, YOU’RE WELCOME.

I KNOW YOUR COUSIN JUMPED OFF THE SCHOOLHOUSE, BUT WHY DOES THAT MEAN YOU SHOULD JUMP OFF THE SHED ROOF?

Atlee Briter, holding the blanket he hoped would catch the wind and ease him slowly to the ground, looked around. He was alone, but felt the words distinctly.

YOU’RE ONLY TEN. I THOUGHT YOU WANTED TO SEE ELEVEN. DO YOU HAVE ANY IDEA WHAT A BROKEN LEG FEELS LIKE? REMEMBER HOW MUCH PAIN YOUNG PERE WAS IN LAST YEAR WHEN HE BROKE HIS ARM? AGAIN? THAT’S WHAT YOU’LL BE FEELING THE MOMENT YOU HIT THE GROUND. BUT IT WILL BE YOUR LEG. DON’T DO THIS, ATLEE. JUST TURN AROUND AND GO BACK DOWN THAT LADDER. RIGHT NOW. I’M WATCHING YOU. NOW, ATLEE. THAT’S RIGHT. STEP BACK. WATCH YOUR FOOTING THERE. DON’T KICK THE LADDER! BOY, THAT WAS CLOSE. PUT THE BLANKET DOWN FIRST. NO, NO, NO, NOT ON TOP OF THE SHED. THROW IT ON THE GROUND. THAT’S RIGHT. NOW CLIMB DOWN THE LADDER. AND PUT IT AWAY WHEN YOU’RE DONE. DON’T WANT YOUNG SHEM FOLLOWING YOU—ATLEE! I SAID TO PUT AWAY THE LADDER! ATLEE! GET BACK HERE!

SALEMA, YOU’RE TOO FAR ALONG TO BE DOING THAT. ISN’T THAT WHY YOUR SISTER-IN-LAW IS HERE?

Salema, kneeling in the middle of her garden, sat up on her knees. The humidity of the Weeding Day steamed over her, making her feel hotter than she already was. She pushed away a sweaty lock of dark curly hair and glanced at Lek’s youngest sister Huldah.

The fourteen-year-old weeding next to her was watching her.

“Discover anything thought-provoking?”

YOU HATE KNEELING IN THE DIRT AND YOU KNOW IT.

Huldah’s eyes grew big. “You hate kneeling in the dirt.”

“I never understood why my mother enjoyed this,” Salema admitted quietly.

YOU MIGHT WANT TO CHECK THE BREAD. YOU’VE LOST TRACK OF TIME. HULDAH KNOWS WHAT TO DO HERE.

Salema stood up. “I should check on the bread. Do you mind?”

Huldah shook her head. “I know what to do. Don’t pull the carrots!”

Salema and Huldah scanned the area as if expecting someone else to be there before Salema started for the house.

BY THE WAY, SALEMA, PREPARE FOR ANOTHER SON. THE THIRD ONE’S USUALLY THE HARDEST I’VE BEEN TOLD, BUT IF ANYONE CAN HANDLE HIM, YOU CAN.

She stopped in her tracks as she reached the back door. “What did you say?” she whispered.

YOU BETTER CHECK THE BREAD BEFORE IT OVERBAKES.

Slowly Salema opened the door and walked into the kitchen. “That’s not what I meant . . . Puggah?”

YES. AND I KNOW WHAT YOU MEANT. I’M RIGHT ABOUT THE BREAD, AREN’T I?

Salema pulled out the loaves just in time, her eyes growing moist. “Another boy? Oh, Puggah . . . I just . . . *Another* boy? I had five younger brothers before I finally got a little sister. I really was hoping for . . .” She sat down hard on a chair and stroked her large belly.

HE’S ADORABLE, SALEMA. HE’LL MELT YOUR HEART, EVEN AS HE DIRTIES YOUR FLOORS. YOU REALLY WANT TO TELL THIS LITTLE BOY THAT YOU’D RATHER HE NOT COME?

“No!” She said loudly and gripped her belly tighter. “No, of course not!”

THAT’S WHAT I THOUGHT. I ALSO THOUGHT YOU’D APPRECIATE A LITTLE WARNING.

Salema began to cry.

NO, NO, NO. SALEMA, DON’T DO THAT. I KNOW YOU’RE EXPECTING AND EVERYTHING, BUT—

“That’s why I get to do this, Puggah!” she laughed in her sobs. “And you’re right—I do appreciate the warning. I never told you this, but I’m sorry about the name: Puggah. If only I could have said my ‘r’s better when I was a toddler—”

NOT AT ALL. BEST NAME IN THE WORLD.

GRAB THAT PIECE OF PAPER.

Zaddick had gone into Shem's office to retrieve a file his father had forgotten to take to the council meeting, but he found himself staring at the desk.

THE ONE AT THE END. IT'S UPSIDE DOWN, THAT'S WHY SHEM DIDN'T RECOGNIZE IT. NOW GET IT TO YOUR MOTHER. SHE WAS GOING TO BRING HIM DINNER AT THE MAIN STOREHOUSE BEFORE THE MEETING. ONE OF THE ASSISTANTS WILL NEED THAT SOONER THAN SHEM REALIZES. HE CAN'T WAIT UNTIL TOMORROW LIKE HE THINKS HE CAN.

Zaddick picked up the file, looked around the office, nodded once in gratitude to it, and slipped out the door.

LILLA, SMELLS WONDERFUL AS USUAL. BE READY FOR PETO TONIGHT. SHEM AND THE COUNCIL ARE GOING TO GIVE HIM MY POSITION, BUT HE DOESN'T FEEL READY FOR IT. I CAN'T IMAGINE ANYONE WHO COULD DO A BETTER JOB. YOU'RE GOING TO HAVE TO HELP HIM REALIZE THAT. HE PRACTICALLY DID MY JOB FOR ME.

BY THE WAY, YOUR FATHER AND I HAVE HAD SOME WONDERFUL CONVERSATIONS. HE'S STILL WATCHING YOU.

MAHRREE, I'VE REACHED ALMOST ALL OF THEM.

It was late at night and Mahrree was sitting up in bed, reading. She used to do it all the time when she was single, but quit after she and Perrin were married because he didn't like the candle light when he tried to sleep. When she picked up her old habit again, a few days after he passed, she felt guilty about it. But then she remembered what Calla told her: "It's all right to start living how you need to live."

Mahrree set down the book. "I know," she whispered. "I've been receiving reports the last few weeks. It's been wonderful to hear how you've gotten around. I went to Salema's house today and found her and Calla crying at the kitchen table. You want to know what they told me?"

“Discover anything thought-provoking?”

Mahrree thought she heard a chuckle.

“You were there earlier, and Salema’s going to have another son. She thinks they should name him Perrin. Perrin Zenos.”

HOW MANY PERRINS DO THERE NEED TO BE IN SALEM?

Mahrree grinned. “So far there are four new baby boys named Perrin. Calla told me yesterday that one of Shem’s assistants has started making a list to see how often you’re honored. And wait until you hear this—there’s even a baby girl that was named Perrinia.”

OH THAT’S JUST TRAGIC. WHAT WERE HER PARENTS THINKING?

Mahrree laughed softly.

I THOUGHT PETO AND LILLA NAMING THEIR FIRST DAUGHTER LO-RIXANIA WAS CRUEL, BUT AT LEAST THEY COULD SHORTEN IT TO LORI.

“I suppose the family could call their daughter Perri.”

PERHAPS. I’M NOT EVEN THERE TO APOLOGIZE TO THE POOR GIRL WHEN SHE’S OLDER. WILL YOU DO IT, IF YOU EVER RUN INTO HER?

“Of course. You said you’ve reached almost everyone?”

EXCEPT ONE. WANT TO GUESS WHO?

“I know, Perrin. He promised he’d tell me what he’s up to, but he hasn’t said more than half a dozen words to me since we spoke after the burial.”

IT’S NOT GOOD, MAHRREE. I FOLLOW HIM AROUND ALL DAY WHEN HE’S HAYING, BUT HE’S NOT LISTENING, NOT ONE BIT. I CAN’T FORCE HIM TO HEAR ME. IT HAS TO BE HIS CHOICE. BUT HE’S NEARLY PAST FEELING. HE’S TOO BUSY PLANNING.

“What is he planning to do?”

I CAN’T BEAR TO TELL YOU.

“He wants to go to Edge, or somewhere else in the world, doesn’t he? Just to get away for a time.”

HOW DID YOU KNOW?

“He’s you at that age.”

I KNOW. THAT’S MY BIGGEST WORRY.

Chapter 17--“How long has this been in here, Father?”

Near the end of Weeding Season Peto approached his parents' wing of the house and stopped at the door, because he wasn't sure what he'd say when he opened it. Lilla had prodded him down this far, but left him on his own. He was about to grasp the door handle when it suddenly opened.

“And how long have you been standing there?” Mahrree asked.

“Uh, not too long.”

“Don't you think you should come in? You have lots of work to do, after all.” In her hands was a stack of files which she held out to him. “I got a start for you. These were from the bedroom, on his side table. But I'm not sure where you want everything.”

Peto sighed as he walked into their small gathering room. “I feel terrible about this, Mother. I—”

“Why should you feel terrible?” she cut him off. “Peto, there's no one else I'd rather have becoming the next general. Or whatever it is they're calling you.”

“I don't have a title picked out yet. I told Shem there was no way ever I'd accept an army title, especially since I took up a sword willingly only once in my life, and that was to use it against my father.”

Mahrree gave him a hug. “You'll do wonderfully. Your father said you practically did his job for him. Did you want to take over his office, or . . .”

Peto shook his head. “I don't want to change anything. I'll just bring some of the plans and maps to my office and reorganize my things to make room.”

“It's a waste to leave his desk unused and the room untouched,” Mahrree told him. “That's not the Salem way.”

“How long has this been in here, Father??”

“But it *is* the Salem way to honor those who have gone before by leaving memorials. Maybe someday we’ll do something with the office, but not today. We still have to finish Wes and Hycy’s new house before their wedding, and I don’t feel like starting another major project anyway. No one needs the space right now, and no one is in need of a desk. I already checked.”

“But you should go through his desk, see what you may need.”

“Of course,” Peto said, finally taking the stack she offered him.

“And I found this,” she said, pulling a small note from her skirt pocket. “I discovered it on the floor under the bed shortly after he passed, but I wasn’t up to doing anything with it then. I realize now it’s your responsibility, so thank you in advance for dealing with it.”

Peto took the note, the handwriting unsteady as if it were a great struggle to form the words. Although Perrin’s hand was normally neat and tidy, the shapes of the letters were definitely his, likely written when he was ailing.

“He was always one for making lists. Never wanted to forget anything important. *Item number one,*” Peto read out loud. “*Jothan about Shem.*” He looked up at his mother. “Jothan came over to talk to him, right?”

“Just before he went.”

“*About Shem? Meaning?*”

“I don’t know what that means,” she admitted. “Although I think Perrin was likely asking Jothan to watch out for him. Take over as big brother, perhaps.”

Peto nodded at that. “*Item number two: Drag Jon Offra home. We haven’t had any news about him for a couple of moons now.*”

“Eltana hadn’t heard about him since last year. No one has. Nothing recent about our colonel-at-large,” Mahrree said.

“I’ll talk to Woodson about organizing another search party for him. If I explain it was one of Father’s last concerns, they may dare to be more aggressive with him when they track him down again.”

“They could use sedation,” Mahrree suggested.

Peto let out a low whistle. “He’d hate that. And when he came to, he just might run again back to the world to *do his duty.*”

“Then we’ll have to find some other way to convince him his duty is over,” Mahrree said, unconvinced they’d be successful.

“*Item number three,*” Peto read. “*Poe Hili? Father wanted to find Poe?*”

Mahrree shrugged. “It’s been quite a while. The last time scouts

heard about him, he was all the way south with Karna.”

“But that was ten years ago now. Surely he still wouldn’t be down there, would he?” Peto asked.

Mahrree pondered that. “Well, once Sargon took over the southern forts, there was a movement of defecting soldiers to the north. Many decided Thorne or Yordin *had* to be better than Sargon. I can’t imagine Poe would want to serve the commander who betrayed Karna and Fadh. But maybe . . . *maybe* he’s one of Sargon’s men now?” Dread tinged her voice.

“I don’t think so,” Peto assured her. “I’m sure he’d find the north more appealing. He may have left the army after Sargon took over, for all we know.”

“No scouts or recent refugees have had any updates,” Mahrree recalled. “So maybe he *did* quit the army. Citizens are much harder to track than soldiers.”

“But maybe,” Peto began hesitantly, “*maybe* Poe has died. Ten years since any news?” and he shrugged apologetically for having brought up the idea.

“Hmm,” Mahrree mused sadly. “Then we likely may never know. I forgot to ask Eltana when she first arrived if she knew of him, but frankly, I don’t feel like talking to her right now.”

“Nor would she want to talk to you, either,” Peto said. “She’s still bitter. I’ve asked another rector to take over counseling her for a while. She doesn’t seem to want to deal with any Shins right now.” He looked again at the note. There were a few more stray lines, but no other items. “I wonder if he finished this,” Peto murmured, the thought of leaving any business undone as troubling to him as it would have been to his father.

“You’ll finish it for him, Rector-General Shin,” Mahrree said, kissing him on the cheek. “I’ll let you get to work, and if I find anything else, I’ll bring it to you.”

Reluctantly he walked into his father’s office. It was virtually untouched since he passed away three weeks ago, and Peto felt as if he were treading in sacred territory. Even though he’d been there nearly every day for decades, today it felt like a completely different room.

“Sorry, Father. I’m just coming to find some things,” he whispered as he sat down behind the large desk. “I hope you don’t mind. I’ve been given your position. I never expected you wouldn’t finish it. I don’t feel ready or worthy, but Lilla told me I’d say that. Apparently you and she have been talking?”

“How long has this been in here, Father??”

Peto pulled out the top drawer and smiled at the precisely placed quills and parchments. “I was never that neat. Maybe the army was good for something, huh? Taught you to keep things in good order. Shouldn’t be hard to find what I’m looking for.”

He pulled out one of the deep side drawers and easily located the file of what each emergency storehouse along the four trails contained. He opened it and saw a note on top. *No emergency storehouses are established on the Back Door route. One should be made.*

Peto smiled and nodded. “I considered that as well. Every now and then I remember that route, and I remember your sliding down it in the middle of Snowing Season! I’ll add it to the list. We’ll find a spot for supplies and make sure it’s stocked this Harvest.”

THERE’S MORE.

Peto’s hand was on the drawer to close it, but he stopped.

THERE’S MORE. IN THE BACK.

He pulled the drawer open wider and looked toward the back. There was an envelope, with his name on it.

“How long has this been in here, Father?” He pulled out the envelope and a glint of metal beneath it caught his eye. He reached in and pulled out something he thought had been left in Edge years ago.

The long knife.

Peto chuckled in dismay. “You snuck this out of Edge, didn’t you! We were supposed to leave unarmed, but you couldn’t do it, could you?” He grinned as he turned the sharp blade over in his hands. “What did you expect, an attack in your office?”

Peto’s grin fell as he remembered the end of General Yordin, stabbed to death by his own traitorous soldiers.

“But not in Salem, General. Not in Salem.”

He laid the long knife on the desk and opened the envelope addressed to him. Looking at the words on the parchment was like a gift: one last, unexpected conversation with his father.

Peto, if you’re reading this it means I’m no longer there as general. I’m leaving you this letter with some instructions. Don’t worry—there shouldn’t be anything as potentially scandalous here as there was in the letter I left for Shem in my desk at the fort at Edge years ago.

Honestly, I hope you never find this. I hope the Last Day

Flight of the Wounded Falcon

comes and finds us standing side by side at the ancient temple site, watching the forces of Idumea march in and comparing guesses as to how the Creator is going to end it all. I guess that since you're reading this it means I'll be watching from the other side. And that's all right as well. The view should still be pretty good. I always wanted to see an attack from a falcon's point of view anyway.

You should be the next one in command for the securing of Salem. You've done an excellent job as my assistant, and you should consider finding someone to assist you as well. Perhaps one of your sons or nephews would be interested in taking your former position.

There's an attached list detailing where each file is. Don't feel the need to preserve anything in the office to remember me by. How could you possibly forget me? You know what I mean. Take whatever you need. Use this office, use the desk, move everything—I'm not going to care. Do whatever you need to in order to complete this work, to continue to secure Salem, to continue to mark the trails.

I'm proud of you, son. You've become something far greater than the next High General of Idumea. You know who you are, and you're raising a wonderful family. I'm grateful you listen to the Creator and that you never ran off to Idumea to play kick-ball. I'm still amazed that you've given me twelve grandchildren, and that Lilla is willing to give us one more—

Peto smiled. Eight years ago. He wrote this eight years ago, just before Morah was born.

Please know that I love you, that I'm proud of you, and that I know you can do anything, because you listen to the Creator who helps us accomplish everything. Never forget why you are

“How long has this been in here, Father??”

here—to pass His Test.

Love,

Your Father

Peto wiped at the wetness around his eyes and ran his hand over the parchment. Then he noticed a note at the bottom.

By the way, I know about the sedation. Karna was right—the stuff was a miracle. I found the bottle in your mother’s drawer back in Edge when I was trying to find her a change of clothes when she was ill with the pox. I’ve just been waiting all these years for her to confess she used it on me.

Peto threw back his head and laughed.

Mahrree came into the office, alarmed. “Everything all right?”

Still laughing, Peto waved the letter at her and held up the long knife.

Her mouth dropped open as she came over to the desk and gingerly took the knife.

“I had a feeling he wouldn’t leave that behind. But I never knew where he hid it! I think I’ll put it on the table next to the bed. Remind me of better days in Edge.”

Peto wiped his eyes but kept chuckling. “That sounded strange, Mother—better days in Edge meant a knife by the bed?” He still held out the letter.

Mahrree shrugged in agreement. “So what’s so funny?” She took the letter and began to read. “Oh Peto, this is addressed to you. I shouldn’t—”

“It’s all right, Mother. He wrote it eight years ago. Just read the note at the bottom, then.”

Her eyes grew large and she clapped a hand over her mouth. “Oh no!” She laughed behind her hand. “And he never said anything?”

Peto was delighted to hear her laugh again. It’d been far too many weeks. “He was waiting for you to confess, obviously! I wonder if he knew Shem was involved with it, too.”

“We told him at the burial, remember? Maybe that’s why Shem thought he heard him groaning. He didn’t know Shem knew about the

sedation as well. Oh, Perrin!” She laughed again as she sat down in a chair and handed the letter back to Peto. “What else did he say?”

“That I should do his work. That he didn’t expect for me to ever find this. Leaving letters in drawers he thinks no one will read . . . that’s typical. Ah, well,” Peto sighed, looking up at the walls. “I’ll need the maps, Mother. But the rest of the books and things? Well, they can stay. For now.”

Mahrree nodded.

Shem was trying to go home, but when people recognized his GrayClark Silver, or him, they’d sidle up and ask if they could have “just a moment.” Those moments frequently turned to hours, but he’d never turn anyone away. The Creator never would, so neither would he, despite the lateness of the hour or the hunger in his belly.

This evening, the sun was setting before he finally made his way to the stables behind the council building to head for home, but someone was waiting in the shadows. He suppressed his sigh so as to not seem inconvenienced, and said, “Who’s there? Can I help you?”

“No,” said a deep voice. “I’m hoping to help you, Guide.”

“Jothan, you don’t have to hide in shadows anymore.”

“It’s where I’m the most comfortable,” he replied, and stepped over to shake Shem’s hand.

“So what did you need again?” Shem asked. It’d been a long day, and sometimes he found it difficult to keep up.

Jothan put his arm around him. “You got that backward. I want to know how *you’re* doing.”

“I’m fine,” he said automatically.

“Good. Now tell me how you’re *really* doing.”

Shem sighed, deflated. “I miss him. What else can I say?”

In the privacy of the dark stable, Jothan wrapped his arms around Shem. “So do I. He asked me to watch out for you, you know.”

Shem sniffed. “Of course he would.”

“And I happily agreed. I’ll be checking on you, Guide Zenos. Every man needs a big brother, no matter how old he is. I can never replace Perrin, but—”

“But a man can have more than one brother,” Shem said, and let himself weep for a few minutes with the only man he knew stronger than Perrin Shin.

“How long has this been in here, Father??”

It was the first day of school again, and Mahrree had too many mixed feelings to catalogue. It was good to get back into a routine again, and she'd always loved the first week of Harvest Season, because teaching at Salem's university was a sheer delight.

First, the students actually *wanted* to be there, unlike in Edge where she was always having to keep an eye on the door, or the window, for escaping students. In Salem, a university education, like everything else, was free. Everyone completed at least the first year of schooling offered. There wasn't any law requiring them to do so; it was just what everyone *wanted* to do when they were seventeen and eighteen: learn more about the world around them—experiment, create, go on excursions, and develop new ideas, all in conjunction with the brightest minds in Salem.

And also, Mahrree was quite sure, to meet members of the opposite sex from other parts of the massive valley. By the end of the first semester, there were always many romances, and by the end of that first year, a lot of weddings she was invited to.

Students who lived far away from the center of Salem were housed not in dorms like in the world, but with extended family members, or with those who eagerly opened their doors to any students needing a home to live in.

After that first year, about a third of the students went off to learn a trade or become an apprentice. But about two-thirds of the students continued at the university for up to three more years, depending on the difficulty of their first chosen careers.

Mahrree's department, history, had some two- and three-year programs, and those who completed them knew far more than anyone in the world to the south of them. There were courses in Salem history, history of the guides and their teachings, writing family histories, and, of course, Mahrree's world history. In her department was also speculative history, where the archaeology division taught all they knew about writings and buildings and peoples no one had ever met.

And, at the head of it all, was Professor Mahrree Shin. As she walked up to the large stone building early that morning, she expected—as she did every year—to finally see the president of the university standing in front, tapping her foot in annoyance, and announcing, “*Mrs.* Shin—we're on to you.”

Mahrree could never understand why they made her the director of the department, why they considered her one of the brightest minds, why they put her over twenty other professors, and put her on the board of directors. She felt like a fraud among a city of purely brilliant, kind people. One day, they'd figure it out.

But not today, and she was grateful for the ability to leave home where everyone doted far too much on her and every corner of her house reminded her of who was no longer in it.

She walked through the quiet corridors—in a couple of hours to be full and noisy with students returning to school—and headed to her office, which she hadn't been to since school let out two moons ago.

"Hello, Professor Shin!" called out a cheerful voice.

Mahrree grinned. "Hello, Roggie. How goes the sweeping?"

Roggie was a master sweeper. He swept the university buildings in the mornings, never missing a speck, then the temple at night. It was perfect work for him, because, unlike in the world, Salem had several people like him: the special ones.

The first time she met a special one, she was startled by the thick tongue, the drooping eyes, the slow manner of speaking. No one in the world was quite like that.

Mrs. Braxhicks, Jaytsy's midwife for her earlier deliveries, explained to Mahrree that special ones did exist in the world. "But not for long," she added bitterly.

"Why?" Mahrree asked.

"Because they're killed shortly after birth," Mrs. Braxhicks said, to Mahrree's horror. "Yet another practice instituted under the first King Querul. Any babies not seemingly 'perfect' were to be 'humanely smothered' by the midwife."

"Except not by Salem midwives, right?" Mahrree asked hurriedly.

"Of course not!" Mrs. Braxhicks said, slightly offended. "That was one of the many reasons we started sending midwives into the world—to help rescue the special ones. With some, their mothers didn't want them, so we brought them back to Salem for other families to raise. But a few of the refugee families had a special newborn, and readily came to Salem when given the option. The world won't tolerate them, but we love them. They love us back, far too much. And everyone can be useful and have a fulfilling life. Salem demonstrates that."

“How long has this been in here, Father??”

So did Roggie. Mahrree braced herself as Roggie came to her with his big arms outstretched. He was a large man, in build and in belly, and with the most painfully wonderful hugs in all of Salem. He always cracked Mahrree’s back when he hugged her, unintentionally. She’d never consider not indulging him. Hugs were mandatory. Roggie and Lilla got along great.

“I’m sorry, Professor Shin,” Roggie said in his deliberate, yet careful way as he crushed her with his affection. “About the general. I liked him. That’s sad he’s gone.”

“Yes, Roggie. It is sad he’s gone. Thank you.” She hugged him back, waiting for him to finally release her, but she heard a quiet sob instead, which, naturally, got her tears flowing again.

“So sad,” Roggie repeated. “So sad.”

Eventually he released her, and hurriedly wiped his face of tears. Immediately his grin was back. “Thought you might not come back to school. Good to see you!”

“I need to be here. It’s good to be here,” she decided.

“It is,” he agreed. When he saw she was heading to her office, he jumped ahead. “Lemme get the door for you, Professor Shin.”

He turned the handle and pushed, but oddly it seemed stuck.

Mahrree blinked. If Roggie couldn’t get the door open, there was little chance she could.

“Lemme push a little more . . . Oh, looks like papers are stuck behind it.”

Mahrree bent down, slipped her hand in the gap Roggie had made, and pulled out a few folded parchments. She could tell they were part of a much larger pile. “Hold on a minute, Roggie. Let’s see what’s happening here.”

She stood up and opened the first parchment.

“What’s it say?” Roggie asked. While in his thirties, Roggie had never managed to learn to read, despite the efforts of many patient tutors. His mind just couldn’t grasp the complexity of the task. But he knew a lot, because he’d sat in many university classes, absorbing what he could. And however often he wanted to sit in a class, he was welcome to. He’d been through Mahrree’s History of the World at least half a dozen times. When she asked for written essays, he’d put a smiley face on a scrap piece of paper and handed that in. She always wrote a smiley face back for his grade.

Mahrree read out loud the neat handwriting on the note. “*Professor Shin, I’m so sorry about your husband. I wish I could help take*

away your pain—” already her voice was trembling, “—but I know he’s gone to Paradise and the Creator, and is watching over you.”

“Oh, that’s nice,” Roggie said. “Read another one!” He pointed excitedly to one with a sketch of flowers on the front. “That one’s pretty. Read it!”

Mahrree had to chuckle at his enthusiasm. “*Dear Professor Shin, I’ve been thinking about you ever since we got the news about the general. I wanted to tell you about a time when he—*”

“Oh, I get it!” Roggie nearly exploded. “I get it! They’re doing what happened when the general’s parents died in Idumea because of those bad guys who stabbed them in bed. Sending messages to him? Yeah, that! But for you!”

Mahrree smiled weakly, feeling once again overwhelmed. She peered around the jammed door and saw a stack nearly to her knees. People must have been slipping them under her door for weeks now.

“I can get them all out,” Roggie said confidently, slipping his broom handle into the gap and nudging the notes aside. “See? They’ll all be out in a minute.”

“Thank you, Roggie,” she whispered, and clutched the notes to her chest. There’d be a lot of reading to get through in the next few days . . . maybe weeks, she amended as she saw the pile growing at her feet. For as lonely as she felt, Salem would refuse to let her feel alone. People in the world had done this for Perrin, writing him letters, and he answered them back, generating more letters—

Wait. Was she going to have to answer all of these?

Well, years ago she and Jaytsy and even Peto had helped respond to his letters. She had plenty of grandchildren who could help her with this lovely pile.

By the time she headed to teach her first class, the pile of messages had been stacked into a large crate Roggie had found, that he promised to bring to her home. Finally, she could get back to work and forget, for a few hours at least, the misery of the past few weeks. Weaving through the students walking swiftly to find their rooms, she counted down in her head when the bells would clang.

She always timed her entrance into the first class of the semester precisely, walking in just as the bells rang, sort of an announcement of her arrival. She liked to make an entrance to establish her authority, something she learned back in her debating years when she felt her small stature needing some bolstering.

She swept through the door of her first class just at the moment

“How long has this been in here, Father??”

the bells sounded, to find each of the thirty desks with a student at or near it. Audibly, the students gasped.

That’s a first, Mahrree thought as they stared at her. She wondered if maybe she’d forgotten to put on a vital piece of clothing that morning. Not as if Roggie would have noticed . . .

She smiled and motioned for the few students still on their feet to take a desk. “Good morning. You all seem surprised about something?” Then she thought, *Please let there not be something horrendously wrong with my hair—*

Her students, a new batch of first years whom she hadn’t met before, looked at each other as if daring someone to speak up.

A girl raised her hand. “Ma’am? We’re just surprised that you’re teaching. The rumor was that . . . you weren’t coming back.”

Mahrree scoffed a laugh. “A rumor? In Salem? What is this, the world?”

Her students glanced nervously again at each other.

“Trust me,” she said slyly, “in a few weeks that’s going to be funny. Now, why would I not be here? I’m not infirm, I’m not dying—”

There it was again, that soft, shocked gasp of surprise.

“Ah, that. Yes, my husband died nearly four weeks ago—” and she was proud of how easily that slipped out, “—but I can’t sit in that house anymore feeling sorry for myself. Not when there are students to teach and gossip to share about the world. Now, your semester is going to be even more interesting than what’s been taught in the past, because over the Wedding Season break, a new refugee came to Salem. Her husband was one of the battling generals until recently, and she came back with a lot of fascinating details, many of which I haven’t been able to put in the textbook yet, so you better be taking notes. And that’s a hint—*start taking notes!*”

Frantically they scrambled in their bags for paper and sharpened charcoal.

“We’re going to begin a bit backward today, starting with the most recent history first. Here’s a name for you to know,” and she picked up the chalk and walked to the blackboard. “General Gari Roarin’ Yordin,” she said as she wrote the name. “Most of you should have heard about him before, but you’re going to hear a lot more. His widow, Eltana Yordin, arrived in Salem just a few weeks ago.”

Now the gasps were startled and excited.

“Professor Shin?” a young man asked.

Mahrree turned around. “Yes?”

“Will she be coming to speak to us?”

Mahrree’s mouth scrunched. Word had gotten around that her class was one of the most entertaining, because she did only half of the teaching. As often as possible, she brought in the history makers themselves to teach her five groups of students each semester about the history they lived, and even affected.

Jothan Hifadhi came at least twice: the first time to tell them about his grandfather Guide Tuma Hifadhi; the second time, with Asrar to provide details about their adventures as scouts in the forests above Edge. Everyone always wanted to see the faint scar on his hand, given to him accidentally by Perrin when they were both fighting a Guarder on a snowy night.

Mahrree also brought in as many refugees as she could, giving them the hour to tell the students about their villages and the world they left, and why. She’d also bring in scouts and midwives and rec-tors who served in the world, and Perrin always . . .

Oh, this was going to be a long, difficult semester.

Because Perrin usually came three times; when the discussion was about the kings, who he had met; about Chairman Mal and the Administrators, who he also knew; and the Army of Idumea which, for one full day, he was wholly in charge of.

Then there was the Perrin-and-Shem Show—Mahrree’s unofficial title for it. All of her classes combined in the largest lecture hall in the early evening, with many former students and other professors returning for the lecture when both of the former soldiers came to tell them all about their experiences in the Army of Idumea.

To the first-year students, they must have been an impressive sight, Perrin and Shem walking together on to the stage of the thousand-seat lecture hall, wearing their old uniform jackets casually over their shirts without buttoning them (it’d be too hard to breathe for the two hours if they did), appearing dignified, mature, and wise.

But the reason the hall was always packed to standing-room only was because those who had seen this before knew that within minutes the two revered, older gentlemen would start explaining how it *really* was, which meant sharing stories, revising each other’s stories, getting in a few good digs at each other as they went into too much detail about the Strongest Soldier Races, and eventually getting into a good-natured argument—or shouting match—which shocked the newest students but made everyone else laugh and cheer.

“How long has this been in here, Father??”

And it hit Mahrree again, right then as she stared out at these thirty, fresh-faced older teenagers, what else in her life she'd need to revise now that Perrin was gone. Oh, that these students would never experience the Perrin-and-Shem Show! Her chest tightened at the thought of it. She'd still host the evening, and invite Guide Zenos to come again, accompanied by his wife who knew just as much about that army as anyone who served. But while Shem would still tell engaging stories, it wouldn't be the same without Perrin's interruptions. Calla would never argue with Shem on stage, but would probably make clarifications in her polite, kind way. It just wouldn't be the same without the threat of men possibly coming to blows in front of the audience.

Quickly she regained herself, realizing that she'd been staring at the boy who'd asked the question just a little too long, and then she had to remember what the question was.

Would Eltana Yordin be coming to speak to the class?

“No,” Mahrree said decisively.

The young man looked disappointed. “But, Professor, why not?”

How could she explain that Mrs. Yordin was furious that instead of marching down into the world to avenge her husband's murder, Perrin Shin had, instead, up and died from a mere infection? That she had taken over the Armchair Generals meeting and told every man who had recently attended what a disservice Shem and Perrin had done to Salem and the world by not organizing a standing army. That they had become weak, and complacent, and lazy living in Salem.

But somehow, in some gentle, Salemitish way, Mahrree was going to have to tell these innocent students that Mrs. Yordin was a bit *disappointed* in everything they were freely and openly giving her.

Mahrree exhaled. This was going to be a long semester.

That afternoon she caught a ride with Roggie, who was heading home to where he lived with his sister and her family. Theirs was one of the first homes off The Quiet Lands which bordered the temple, and Mahrree needed to visit there.

Roggie dropped her off at the end of the long drive, and she took her bag and walked into one of two small houses to the side of it, nestled obscurely in the trees along the river which formed the southern border to the Quiet Lands. One house was for men, the other for women to change from their work day clothing. She put on her white dress, then headed for the wide, stone steps of the temple.

It never ceased to amaze her that such a solid, imposing stone

edifice could exude so much warmth and light, as if the Creator Himself was in the building, filling it with joy. The tall columns, reaching up two stories, were patterned after the ancient temple ruins to the west of the Ezzates. Jagged rubble from its construction remained along the sides of the temple and portico, and bordered the stairs as smaller reminders of the boulders that created the natural border between them and the world to the south. The wide portico ran the width of the building, and held a few rocking chairs and benches, painted in white, for Salemites to sit and ponder as they looked across the miles of untouched land. Today, the meadows were filled with the last of the season's wildflowers. Spindly yellow sunflowers dominated the landscape this time of year, as if drops of sunshine were growing among the thick grasses.

Mahrree paused for a moment and just listened.

Silence. Sweet, golden silence.

In the distance, she could hear the river gently humming through the trees, and further a horse softly whinnied, probably in the stables a quarter mile away. But otherwise? Paradise.

Indeed, the temple was as close to Paradise as anyone could be, as if sitting in the massive open room, filled with soft rugs, comfortable sofas, and real evergreens was like going home to visit the Creator in His gathering room. Wholly peaceful, wholly quiet, wholly meant for adults to take a moment out of their lives and pour out their worries and troubles in meditation and prayer.

Mahrree nodded to the three attendants at the front desk who helped open the massive oak doors for her, and they nodded back a welcome. It'd been a few weeks since she'd been there, because of, well, *everything*.

But Yudit had told her she needed to go back, now.

"It's where you can feel Perrin again," Yudit told her last night during her visit. She had presented Mahrree with an unexpected and slightly strange gift: a lock of Perrin's hair. Sometime when he was laid out in the orchard, Yudit had subtly trimmed a lock of his beautiful white hair and wrapped it in a handkerchief. When she presented it to Mahrree, she confided, "I still have a lock of Noch's hair. I stroke it sometimes, just to feel something of him again. It sounds odd to those who have never lost a spouse, but—"

Mahrree was already tenderly fingering the white hair, noting that there were two black strands remaining in it, and her chin trembled.

“How long has this been in here, Father??”

Yudit cleared her throat of her own emotion and said, “I see that you already understand. Calla says you haven’t been to the temple lately, but you really must go. It’s where I go when I need to feel Noch nearby, to tell him about the family, to feel his arms around me again, to feel comfort. It’s a portal to Paradise, Mahrree. *Go.*”

Mahrree had known that already, yet she had hesitated, afraid that entering the temple might make her feel angrier that she couldn’t be with Perrin on the other side right now, rather than feeling comfort that she was supposed to stay.

Every day she looked for clues and reasons as to why she was still stuck in her body, not running through the cosmos with her husband. Each day she thought, Maybe I’ve done the bit I needed to, and I’ll die peacefully in my sleep and wake up next to him.

But every morning she woke up, alone in their massive bed, still in her body. And she’d sigh, and decide that maybe *today* would be the day . . .

It’d been four weeks now, and she realized she needed to take Yudit’s advice.

She also needed to remember the agreement she and Perrin had made, many years ago. It was another glorious surprise of Salem—the knowledge that the Creator didn’t intend marriages to be only for this life, but forever. It was a notion people occasionally mentioned in the world: “We’ll be together *forever.*” But it was intended to be more than just a sweet sentiment; it was meant to be a reality.

After they’d been in Salem for a year, Guide Gleace had explained to them the option of making their marriage lasting—of making a three-way agreement with the Creator that if Mahrree and Perrin both lived faithfully, and both desired to be together in Paradise, the Creator would grant that desire. Only in the temple, their link to Paradise, could Mahrree and Perrin make that agreement, with Guide Gleace guiding them through the vows to seal it. To Mahrree, it felt as if she and Perrin had been married all over again, and by the Creator. Nothing had ever felt so solid or lasting to her as that moment.

Next, they learned another marvelous detail: it wasn’t fair that the world didn’t have a temple, or knowledge of such forever marriages, and the Creator—supremely fair and loving—had provided a way to compensate for that. Guide Gleace told the Shins that they could stand in for their parents, grandparents, and aunts and uncles to make those agreements for them. Then, in Paradise, their relatives could decide if they wanted to seal the agreement on their end. No

matter where or when someone lived, the Creator would see to it that all of His children had access to all of His blessings, if they wanted them. If not during their lives, then after. Choices, always; not only in Salem, but in Paradise as well.

Immediately Perrin and Mahrree told Gleace they wanted to stand in for their parents and aunt and uncle, and with Gleace again guiding them through the vows, Perrin and Mahrree stood in for Relf and Joriana Shin, and Cephas and Hycymum Peto, and Hogal and Tabbitt Densal. Later Mahrree brought the names of the rest of their ancestors which they knew, and she and Perrin, with Gleace, gave all of their ancestors the choice of being together forever.

She tried to pull those forever and eternal feelings out of the air as she strolled into the body of the temple, but she struggled to hold on to them. She knew it was because of her own frustration and grief that she vacillated. Right now she felt so shallow and temporal, so fragile and forgetful. She glanced up at the ceiling, vast and high, letting in chunks of light through the slanted windows in the roof, and wished she could float up and away through them. The tall, purposely wavy windows on every wall allowed even more light to pour in, while distorting the distractions of the world she no longer wished to live in.

Mahrree knew exactly where to go: Perrin's favorite seat. It was one of many large cushioned chairs in deep blue, set up against a window on the left, next to the long curtains of blood red. Still next to the chair was Perrin's favorite evergreen—a fat pine with such a deep and sharp aroma that whenever Mahrree encountered its species outside, she was immediately transported back to that lovely room. This tree, like the many others, were planted in massive pots that sat on coasters, and could be slid around on the stone floor between the rugs to create small rooms or privacy barriers.

Mahrree didn't know if they'd left Perrin's tree and chair that way on purpose, or if no one had felt the need to shift them. But to see them in their same positions put a smile on Mahrree's face.

She sat down in the chair, breathed in the tree, and closed her eyes to pray—

And he was right there, his earthy-sweet scent even more distinct than the pine. He was still hers, forever.

Mahrree grinned. "I didn't feel you at all today at the university," she whispered.

YOU DIDN'T NEED ME TODAY.

“How long has this been in here, Father??”

“I always need you. Always!”

NO, MAHRREE, YOU DON'T. YOU MAY WANT ME, WHICH IS A FLATTERING THOUGHT, BUT YOU DON'T NEED ME.

She sighed. “So is that how it’s going to be? Slowly weaned from you?”

She heard a cosmic chuckle. *WELL, I SUPPOSE YOU COULD PUT IT THAT WAY, BUT MAHRREE, OUR FAMILY IS MY CALLING. AND THERE'S A LOT OF THEM. YOU, MY DARLING WIFE, ARE CAPABLE AND SMART AND CAN COPE WITHOUT ME, FAR BETTER THAN YOU WANT TO BELIEVE. WHEN YOU NEED ME, I'LL BE THERE. BUT THE FACT IS, YOU WON'T NEED ME AS MUCH AS YOU THINK YOU DO.*

“I’m not believing any of that,” she whispered resolutely.

YOU HAVE TO. YOU'RE IN THE TEMPLE.

She couldn’t help but snicker softly, and thought she heard him chuckling, too.

“All right then, I don’t *want* to believe it.”

IT'S ONLY TEMPORARY, REMEMBER?

“You being gone? For how long? Years? *That's* temporary?!”

WHEN WE'RE SPENDING THE NEXT EONS AND EPOCHS TOGETHER, YES, THIS SEPARATION WILL SEEM TEMPORARY. A MERE SNEEZE OF TIME.

She smiled at that, but exhaled in frustration. “Is it sooner than years?” she asked, full of hope.

IT'S NOT UP TO ME TO GIVE YOU THOSE KINDS OF ANSWERS, MAHRREE. JUST HAVE FAITH THAT YOU'LL JOIN ME WHEN THE TIME IS RIGHT, NOT EARLIER, AND CERTAINLY NOT LATER. IT'LL ALL MAKE SENSE IN THE END. WHAT WAS IT THAT YOUR FATHER USED TO TELL YOU?

She felt like a pouting nine-year-old as she murmured, “Every story has a happy ending, if we just wait long enough.”

HE WAS RIGHT, YOU KNOW.

“I hate waiting,” she grumbled. “But as long as I’ve got access to you . . .”

Something in the air changed, and her heart sank in dread.

“I *won't*, will I. Always have access to you?”

If the cosmos could shrug, it did.

“But you just said I could have you when I need you!” And then she remembered, “But I won’t need you as much as I think I do.”

I WILL ALWAYS KNOW WHAT YOU'RE THINKING, WHAT YOU'RE FEELING. AND I'LL ALWAYS TRY TO HELP YOU FEEL ME. BUT WHEN ATLEE'S CLIMBING ON THE SHED ROOF—

“He’s what?!” She almost forgot to keep her voice quiet.

Flight of the Wounded Falcon

HE'S DOWN, HE'S DOWN. THAT WAS A FEW DAYS AGO, ANYWAY. I TALKED SOME SENSE INTO HIM, ALTHOUGH I DOUBT HE REALIZED IT WAS ME. YOU CERTAINLY WANT ME STILL CHASING OUR GRANDCHILDREN, DON'T YOU?

“Yes, yes, of course,” she whispered. “You’re probably in the best position to do so.”

KNEW YOU'D SEE THINGS MY WAY. YOU ALWAYS DO, EVENTUALLY.

She snorted so loudly that several people, sitting scattered in other sofas and chairs, glanced up from their quiet meditations and tried to send her generous smiles to cover their annoyance.

That only made Mahrree want to snort again, and she covered her face and turned to the window, nearly ready to burst into giggles.

YES, THE GENERAL'S WIDOW IS SITTING ALONE SNORTING AND GIGGLING AT THE CURTAINS . . . BE READY. SOMEONE'S GOING TO REPORT TO SHEM THAT YOU'RE GOING GRAINY ALREADY.

She thought her coughs to cover her chortling were quite believable.

“You stop that,” she said to the red curtains as she wiped the tears of laughter and misery from her eyes.

ALL RIGHT, I'LL LEAVE THEN—

“Please don’t!” she whispered earnestly. “Please . . . stay with me.”

FOR NOW, I CAN.

Mahrree sat back in the blue chair and sighed, reveling in the sensation that both of them occupied the same space.

She didn’t leave for two hours, wondering how it was that she could ever go on without his whispering in her ear.

Chapter 18--“The world’s not so simple.”

The good thing about a large family, Mahrree decided later that week, is that there’s always something going on to keep the mind occupied.

The entire family, all of the Hifadhis—of which there was a medium-sized army—and nearly every person in the rectory came together for Hycy and Wes’s wedding. It was wonderful to have everyone together again for a happy event.

Before Hycy and Wes left that evening for their new home, a half a mile beyond Deck’s grazing lands, the immediate family gathered around the boulder that Relf recently finished but covered with a sheet.

Peto did the honors of removing the cloth and the family gasped in amazement at the precise carvings on the boulder.

PERRIN SHIN
291-363
BELOVED SON
HUSBAND
FATHER
GRANDFATHER
GREAT-GRANDFATHER
BROTHER
UNCLE
FRIEND
PUGGAH
SON OF THE CREATOR

“It’s marvelous, Relf,” Mahrree breathed. “Truly beautiful!”

Relf blushed proudly, then gestured to the smaller rock next to the boulder. “Did you see that, too?”

Mahrree leaned over to see the marker for The Cat and grinned. “Perfect, Relf!”

“And one more,” he said, lifting another rock that he had just finished. It read:

IN MEMORY OF CLARK, A DECENT HORSE

Mahrree chuckled at it.

“These gave us an idea, Muggah,” Relf’s wife Mattilin said. “Tonight might be a good time for it, since everyone’s here. My father gave me these pigments,” she said, reaching behind the boulder and pulling out a bucket. “He loves to paint as a hobby and these paints are weather-proof.” She looked at Relf to continue.

“Muggah, we thought maybe everyone could put their names on a rock,” Relf explained. “As you can see, we still have quite a pile near the boulder. Then we can place the rocks around the boulder and . . . always be with Puggah.”

Mahrree already was teary-eyed. “*Then* it will be perfect.”

Half an hour later every child, grandchild, great-grandchild—with help—and spouse had painted their names on rocks and placed them around the boulder. Some went on top, others in crevices, and many others underneath in the shadow of the enormous stone.

The sun was just setting as the last stone, with a toddler footprint next to the name of Jaysie, was placed in a crack next to her father Holling’s and her mother Eraliz’s rocks.

Jaytsy stepped back and smiled. “It seemed so lonely before, but not anymore.”

The boulder was now surrounded by rocks roughly the size of kickballs, with different styles of handwriting, and some with small handprints and footprints. Some names were painted carefully, some more artfully, others sloppily, but each distinctly.

The entire family, forever together.

“Mahrree,” Lilla said, “you told me once about rock gardens in the world. I can’t imagine any looked as warm as this one!”

Mahrree put her arm around Mattilin. “Please let your father know I’d like him to come by and see this, so I can thank him personally. It must have taken him a long time to create all that pigment for us.”

“Not really, Muggah,” Mattilin assured her. “Besides, his uncle was one who went to the world as a scout but didn’t return when he should have. Years later he came home, right past Edge. My father

“The world’s not so simple.”

always wanted to thank Colonel Shin somehow for making it possible to restore their family.”

Only two days after the wedding, Cephas celebrated his eighteenth birthday, and three days after that, on the 10th Day of Harvest, it was Young Pere’s birthday. Mahrree made Grandmother Peto’s cake recipe twice that week for each boy, now officially a man. Soon they would make their announcements about their futures.

Mahrree already had a pretty good idea what Cephas wanted to do. When the university started up again, he signed up for geography and botany classes. He spent many afternoons in his grandfather’s office reading old files, and Mahrree often joined him to talk about Perrin’s past plans and concerns before Cephas went to spend time with Peto helping him calculate how much wood and supplies would be needed to replace all of the crates in each of the nine emergency storehouses.

As much as she was pleased with Cephas’s desire to be his Uncle Peto’s assistant, she worried about Young Pere. He signed up for anatomy and herb use classes, but when Mahrree asked him how the first week of university went, he merely said, “Fine, Muggah.” He vanished for hours after his classes only to turn up at dinner time, then sequester himself in his bedroom. The only explanation he gave for his absences was, “I just need to think.”

It was what he was thinking about that worried Mahrree so much, because he wasn’t sharing any of his thoughts with her.

“Now,” Eltana called through the closed door, “open it and walk in here like a proper officer.”

The door opened, and Young Pere strode in confidently just as Mrs. Yordin had instructed him: chest out, shoulders back, gaze fixed. It was easy. He always walked like that.

“Good, good,” she said as he circled the room. “Now, the salute. Come to attention and . . . well done. You should—*what in the world did you just do?*”

“Added a roguish wink,” he smiled. “You know, to project self-assurance?”

Eltana tapped her foot and put her hands on her hips. “A roguish wink. In the army. And just what *exactly* do you think that’s going to

get you?”

“Um,” he faltered, surprised she didn’t think it was charming.

“Yes, that’s what I thought,” she snapped. “I’ll tell you what it’ll get you—one of three possibilities. First, a smack across the face from your commanding officer. Two, beat up by your commanding officer. Or three, taken behind the barn by other soldiers for activities you really don’t want to know about. There are no women in the army, but they make do.”

He narrowed his eyes, confused.

Eltana shook her head sadly. “You really are so naïve, aren’t you?” To the wall she murmured, “I don’t think he’s going to be ready. How can he know the ways of the world? Slagging idiot—”

“Mrs. Yordin,” he interrupted her foray into muttering to herself, as she frequently did. “I’m sorry, but isn’t this why we’re having these lessons each day? To teach me what’s appropriate and what isn’t in the world?”

She eyed him. “Do you know what slag is?”

Surprised at her change in topic, he said, “It’s what’s left over after smelting iron—”

“It’s the most derisive term in the world!” she hissed. “You haven’t done your homework, have you? Yesterday I gave you a list of terms and phrases, and you *should* have recoiled to hear an ‘esteemed woman’ such as myself using such language as slagging! Back in your grandmother’s day, women pretended they didn’t know what the term meant, and if any woman called someone a ‘slagging son of a sow,’ it was grotesque indeed! Nowadays, though, it’s no big deal. Everyone under forty curses like a soldier, and everyone older than forty does so under their breath. Do you even know what a son of a sow is?”

He hesitated. “Well, a sow is a pig, so her son—”

“Is the most repugnant and vile creature in the world!” she barked. “And should anyone call *you* that, you best be prepared!”

“Prepared . . . how?”

“To be appropriately stunned, to offer an apology if necessary, or to throw a punch if called for. And to not wink roguishly!”

“Sorry, that time was an involuntary eye twitch—”

“Study, Lieutenant Shin!”

“I am,” he insisted. “I’m not only taking your lessons, but I’ve got four courses at the university. Boskos coerced me into taking anatomy, and there are a lot more body parts than head, arms, legs,

“The world’s not so simple.”

and gooey bits on the inside.”

She stared at him for a full fifteen seconds before saying, “You think that was funny, don’t you. You think you’re clever.”

He sighed. “Well . . . yes?”

She threw her hands up in the air.

“Look, look,” he said genially, catching her gently by the shoulder and smiling in that way his grandfather always did.

It nearly worked on her.

“I was just trying to get you to smile. I am learning a lot, and I will be ready in two moons when the next scouting party goes down to Sands. I’ve seen the list my father has of what the scouts learn before they head into the world, and we’re covering all of it, I assure you. In fact, I think you’re a better teacher than Woodson, because you’ve lived for the past fifty years—”

“Sixty-seven,” she interrupted, slightly flattered that he made her so much younger.

“Well, you’ve been in the world, and you really know the army. Trust me, Mrs. Yordin. I can do this. You’ll be very impressed, I’ll get all the studying done, and I’ll even come up with a viable story to allow the scouts to let me go with them, without Uncle Shem’s knowledge.” He gripped both of her shoulders. “It’ll be amazing for all of us, I promise you.”

She stared deep into his dark eyes and said, “You’re so full of yourself, aren’t you? So cock-eyed sure you can handle anything thrown your way?”

“Yes, I am,” and that time, he meant the roguish wink.

“Oh, Perrin,” she sighed, part in hopelessness, part in pleasure. “Sometimes I’m not sure *what* to think about you.”

“You think,” he said in a manner which bordered on being coy, “that you’re going to give me the list of officers you knew, with their descriptions, and what I should say to them. I’ll study it, I promise.”

Again Mrs. Yordin rolled her eyes. “You really think the world’s going to roll over for you like a submissive dog.”

“Why shouldn’t it? I’m Perrin Shin’s grandson.”

“The world’s not so simple, Young Perrin,” she sighed. “You told me once that Salem is dull. And you’re right—it is. Delightfully dull. After such a life in the world, I’m more than happy to be bored here. But while you think Salem is a 1 and the world is a 10, it’s actually a 78. You’re wildly underestimating the world, and while you study and walk and salute, I have grave doubts that you’ll be able to pull

this off.”

Then she said the words which wiped the smirk right off his face.

“Maybe Sergeant Major Zenos is right: you shouldn’t go into the world.”

Young Pere released her shoulders and took a deep, angry breath. That’s what they all always said—he couldn’t do it, he wasn’t ready, he *shouldn’t* do it.

And now Eltana Yordin was saying it, too.

It was *enough*.

Doing his best to still be respectful, the words slid out dangerously between his clenched teeth. “I *can* do it. I can go into the world and snatch it away from Thorne. The plan *will* work. I will ‘transfer’ into Sands as a new lieutenant, I will gain their confidence, then I will pull your contacts in. We’ll gather enough men and we *will* go meet General Thorne on some pretext, then I will reveal my true identity and I *will* use my own blade to cut him down—”

Admirably, she held his hard gaze and interrupted with, “We didn’t discuss *you* using a blade. You’re too inexperienced—”

“—I *will* cut him down with my own blade, Eltana Yordin,” Young Pere seethed, feeling unexpected rage channel into every blood vessel and organ he’d memorized so far and even the ones he wasn’t sure of, filling him with power he’d never before felt. It was hot and fierce and fantastic. “I will do it, mark my words. And I’ll return within six moons victorious and with the northern army ready to follow to take over the southern.”

Mrs. Yordin’s expression had changed during the course of his little speech, and now she fairly glowed with anticipation. “Ah, now there’s my Perrin Shin! Keep that. The anger you feel right now, the rage you want to express—hold on to that. Keep it stretched tight. Then you *will* succeed. Now, salute. *Yes!* Much better. The fire in your eyes will get you much further than any silly wink. And yes,” she said, pulling out a folded paper from a hidden pocket, “I do have names for you . . .”

Two weeks later, Mahrree was skimming the first set of essays her students had turned in when she was surprised to hear a knock on her gathering room door.

“The world’s not so simple.”

It was Young Pere. “Muggah, do you have a few minutes to talk?”
“I have hours if you want them! Come in, please.” She gave him a hug which he only half-heartedly returned. “Take Perrin’s chair.”

He hesitated before he decided to sit down. Mahrree sat across from him, eager that he finally wanted to talk as they always had.

She suspected that when Perrin was young, he was as clever and mischievous as his grandson, and occasionally Mahrree had imagined she was actually dealing with the teenage incarnation of her husband: slightly rebellious, and certainly imaginative.

But tonight, something was different about Young Pere. The usual glimmer in his eye and his saucy grin were missing. Instead, there was something darker and heavier, trying to stretch him too tight. It put her on guard.

“I wanted to talk to you about my first career,” he got right to the point. “I want to be a scout in the world.”

“Well,” she tried not to sound as surprised as she was. “So how long have you been thinking about this?”

“Since last year,” he told her, and leaned back in the chair, supporting his head with two fingers as Perrin frequently did. It was a confident, even arrogant pose.

She rarely liked it when Perrin sat that way.

“I see,” she said, frantically trying to think of stalling tactics. If only Perrin were here to whisper in her ear. She definitely needed him right then. “You realize becoming a scout takes a great deal of training—three weeks in Woodson’s class just to become an accompanying scout who never opens his mouth in the world. Then after a year of that, you can go on for further training to be a full retrieval scout, which is another year of education. But the biggest obstacle is getting approval from Guide Zenos.” She raised her eyebrows in a *He’d never agree and you know it* manner.

“And also the approval of the family,” Young Pere said, and nodded to her. “That’s why I’ve come to you first.”

“So you’re asking *my* permission to be a scout in the world?”

“I’m asking for your blessing.”

“You need the guide’s permission to go.”

“He’ll give it if *you* agree to let me go.”

“What about your parents?”

“Who would deny the wishes of the *great* Mahrree Shin?” His sarcasm was only thinly veiled.

Mahrree bristled. So that's how he was playing this. "You're using me now? You've manipulated my words enough times, now you think you can manipulate *me* to get what you want? Why? Why do you want to go into the world—the same world which chased us away?"

"To right some wrongs," he said and tilted his head.

Something definitely had changed in him. Until she could figure out what, she decided to play along.

"To right wrongs," she repeated tonelessly. "We don't care about what the world thinks of us, Young Pere. You know that. When have I ever expressed a desire for any of my grandchildren to right those wrongs?"

"I wouldn't be doing it just for you," he scoffed lightly, as if her presumption were inappropriate.

Suddenly Mahrree understood. "Eltana Yordin! Have you been talking to her?" Her hand balled into an angry fist, but she did her best to keep her voice calm.

"I have," he said curtly.

It took all of Mahrree's strength to not fly off the chair in rage. She massaged her hands instead.

"It's a little *unusual* for an eighteen-year-old to spend his free time with an older woman. Mrs. Yordin is not well, Young Pere."

"She looks healthy enough to me."

"And so now you're an expert in the health of women in their sixties? Just how long have you been taking medical classes anyway?"

Young Pere leaned forward, his dark eyes strangely cold as he fixed them on her, and Mahrree suddenly wished he wasn't sitting in Perrin's chair. He was nothing like his grandfather now, so unreadable.

"I want to go to the world, Muggah. I know Uncle Shem doesn't want me to—"

"And one of many reasons why is that you look far too much like your grandfather!"

He shrugged that off. "The only people who would remember what he looked like at my age are either already here in Salem, or dead, like him."

Mahrree recoiled, first in fury, then in understanding. Young Pere was deep in grieving, and this ridiculous idea was his way of coping.

"But if I want to explore the world," he continued, "then let me.

“The world’s not so simple.”

If I make mistakes, so be it. We’re expected to make mistakes, right? The Creator allows for repentance, so I’ll just fix the mistakes as I make them. I’ve been injured before. Bones mend, cuts heal—”

“Infections kill,” Mahrree interrupted just as coldly. “And the world is full of infections.”

“They kill only the old and weak,” he said, glaring. “I’m neither. I *will* succeed, Grandmother.”

Mahrree raised an eyebrow, or at least attempted to, at his suddenly formal name for her.

“I thought no one in this family was more open-minded than you,” he continued nonchalantly, and it occurred to Mahrree he’d been practicing this. “More willing to see possibilities others missed. More understanding about the need to break one’s confines and see what else there is. More willing to go against what everyone was telling her, and discover the truth for herself.”

Mahrree sat back. “Calla’s book. You finished it, didn’t you? Read about my anger with the Administrators. Young Pere—”

“You can drop the *Young*,” he said. “I’m the only Perrin around now.”

“*That’s not true!*” Mahrree whispered severely. “He’s still here! You just refuse to listen to him, just like you won’t listen to me. My situation in the world was different. The Administrators were selfish men trying to hold us back from exploring, trying to keep us from learning, from worshipping, from becoming what we really could become—”

“Just like you’re doing to me,” he cut her off. “Like all of you are.”

“You can explore the *entire planet*, Young Pere!” She pointed an angry finger at him before he said anything else about being the only Perrin again. “You’ve already seen more than anyone in the world has seen! Salem holds nothing back. We’re trying to protect you, not limit you. It’s like fire, Young Pere. Do you know how many times you touched the hot coals before you finally believed they would be hot *every single time*? I do! I bandaged you up, six times, Young Pere. And you were probably ten years old the last time you did it. And it still hurt, right?”

Young Pere only stared at her with a look that made her genuinely nervous. He wasn’t rolling his eyes or sighing dramatically as he normally did when they bickered. Tonight, his glare was calculated. He was prepared.

And this was not a typical, good-natured argument.

She had to try something different. Leaning forward to match his pose, she tried to soften her expression. “My sweet boy, what do you hope to find in that world that you can’t find anywhere else?”

“Justice,” he said shortly. “Redemption for our family name. For Mrs. Yordin. For you. For Uncle Shem.”

Mahrree’s stomach twisted when he said, “Uncle Shem.” He knew it *all*. Everything, already.

Calla had left parts of the ‘official story’ out of her book. Young Pere must have heard the more gripping details of how Mahrree and Shem supposedly had an affair from Eltana, whose take on it would’ve been very worldly indeed. That was precisely what she had hoped to avoid by telling her grandchildren the story herself, when *she* deemed them mature enough to hear it.

Oh, that Eltana!

“Redemption? Very noble, Young Pere,” she said as calmly as possible. “So why doesn’t it sound like the entire truth?”

He raised one eyebrow successfully, menacingly. “Muggah, remember when we were young, and we played ‘Good Men, Bad Men?’”

“I seem to remember you always being the Bad Man.”

Young Pere finally rolled his eyes. “That’s because no one else was creative enough to come up with a truly interesting plan!”

“Truly *devious*, you mean. Cephas was always one of the Good Men, asking me what he should do to rein you in.”

His hard eyes met hers. “Maybe it was because I took so much after you and my grandfather. I remember overhearing you once saying that I had a good measure of *your* mischief.”

“I didn’t mean it as a compliment, Young Pere!”

“You were smiling at the time!”

“Learn to recognize a smirk when you see one!”

Young Pere sighed loudly. “The *point is*, Muggah, that in the world, the bad men have won—”

“Only temporarily,” Mahrree interrupted. “But the game isn’t over yet. The end of the story hasn’t come—”

“They’ve BEEN succeeding for more than TWENTY-FIVE YEARS!” he roared.

Mahrree was impressed with herself that she showed no more emotion other than raising her eyebrows at his outburst. “I don’t care,” she told him. “And neither should you. But you think someone

should stop them?”

He didn’t answer her.

Mahrree had a thought. “Young Pere, what would your grandfather say about your desire to go to the world?”

His eyes narrowed even more. “He’d be fine with it. In fact, I mentioned it to him. He’d admire my bravery, my determination—”

“Now you’re lying. That’s not what he said to you, is it?”

“I never told him I wanted to be a scout,” he said cagily.

Mahrree hadn’t seen such dancing around the truth since Edge. Her former students were very sure-footed, and she learned to recognize the moves from them. That was the reason why Woodson and Shem tested their scout hopefuls against her in ‘lying sessions.’ Only after they could be perfectly dishonest in front of Mahrree did they get to graduate to the world.

Young Pere was failing at every level.

“You may not have said a scout *specifically*, but I know what his answer would be. *No!*”

Young Pere was unmoved. “He would’ve said no because he was afraid. He’d grown soft. Yes, I did finish Aunt Calla’s book. The colonel I read about would’ve terrified him. The colonel was brave enough to take a stand, to grab his sword, to do what needed to be done.”

Now Mahrree rolled her eyes. “You think that’s bravery? Grabbing a sword with the intent to do harm? That’s a very narrow definition, Young Pere. Bravery is much more than that. It’s knowing when to fight, but also when to step away from a conflict. It can be much more frightening to put down the weapon and let the world do what it wants with you and your memory.”

“That’s not bravery,” he said unemotionally. “That’s cowardice.”

Mahrree struggled to control her rage. “Are you *suggesting*,” she seethed, “that your grandfather was a *coward*?”

“I don’t know what he was, Grandmother. The man I knew certainly wasn’t the man in the book.”

Mahrree slammed her fist on the armrest. “He was *greater* than the man in the book! He gave up all that he knew, all that the world wanted him to become, to live a life he knew nothing about! He set off not knowing where he’d end up, but he did so because the Creator told him to. *That’s* bravery, Young Pere! Following the will of the Creator and having no idea where it will lead you? Acting on faith is greater than any act of bravery.”

“Sure, Muggah.”

“Don’t give me that *Sure, Muggah!* You think he should’ve done Mrs. Yordin’s bidding, don’t you? That he should’ve marched back into that filthy and disgusting world just to get his honor back—”

“To get EVERYTHING back, Muggah!” Young Pere shouted. “Get our family what we deserve!”

“There’s *nothing* in the world that this family *deserves!* You think it’s better somehow, don’t you? What the world has to offer is more than what Salem offers?”

“Salem offers death, Muggah,” Young Pere answered darkly. “My grandfather died a meaningless death for Salem. Marking those stupid paths every year, filling those absurd caves every Harvest, and sitting at his desk waiting for something great to happen that never happened. There was no point in him going on if this was all that he had.”

“If this was all he had?!” Mahrree nearly flew off the chair. “He had everything, Young Pere! He wanted children! Grandchildren! He built his office so that he had a view from his desk to watch all of you running by! Do you know how often I found him in there with a sleeping infant in one arm while he worked? *This* was his dream. Not to be a high general or a king, but to sit at a large table eating a meal with a dozen children tossing rolls at each other. Nothing made him happier. That’s what he’s doing now. He’s not sitting on some cloud strumming a tuneless harp pretending to sing. He’s still with this family, still talking to them, preserving them, improving their aim when they throw those hard little biscuits your aunt Jaytsy makes. Death isn’t the end, Young Pere. As much as some people fear it is, and as much as other people hope it is, it isn’t. You’ve been taught that, I know you have. *I taught you!* Death’s just the next step in our progression.”

His eyes didn’t glaze over this time. Stone can’t glaze over. “I haven’t heard him.”

“Because you won’t listen! You’re past feeling, Young Pere. You won’t hear him, or me, or the Creator. Have you prayed about this decision?”

“I get no answers,” he shrugged. “No answer means I get to make my own choice.”

Mahrree rubbed her forehead. “If you’re not going to listen to Him, He has to reach you through other means. The Creator is trying to reach you through me! Remember what your grandfather said, the

day he died? It’s more important to know when the Creator is telling you ‘No.’”

“All I hear is what *you* want, Grandmother,” he said coolly. “You don’t want me to go. If I do, then I’ll be beyond your control—”

“My control?” Mahrree scoffed. “Have you ever been under *anyone*’s control? Young Pere, I love you! Why would I spend so much effort on you if I didn’t? Why won’t you believe me about the world? That we don’t care about what it says? Why is this so important to you? I want to understand, I really do. Please, help me understand what’s going on in your mind.”

Young Pere regarded her as he might a musty old book: outdated and unfit. “It’s gotten to you, too. I thought you might still be different, but you’re not. Salem’s made you weak, and the dullness of this place has made you complacent. You’re afraid of the world. You, who defied it, sent letters to it in protest, stood before five thousand people ready to proclaim everything was a lie? You’re now scared, too. Well, Grandmother, I’m not afraid. You ran away from certain death. I’m not afraid to confront it.”

“Oh, please!” She knew her eye rolling was dramatic, but for some speeches there’s just no other way to demonstrate one’s disbelief. “*You* just don’t get it, do you? Young Pere, you talk as if death is something to be afraid of. But there’s something more frightening: not living up to The Test! Failing to do the Creator’s will. It was His will we left Edge. And why are you now talking about confronting death? You’re not making any sense. You want to be a scout to get justice—which is not the point of being a scout!—but you also want to die to do so?”

Young Pere blew out in exasperation. “It’s *you* who doesn’t get it, Muggah! I’m not planning to die, but I’m not afraid of it if it comes. I’m not afraid of anything. I just want to . . . oh, never mind!”

“No, say it. Articulate *exactly* what you intend to do in the world. You know, scouts are supposed to *help* rescue people out of the world, not try to undermine the entire thing. Salem’s lost a number of scouts over the years because they didn’t go down with the right frame of mind.”

Young Pere stared off at a corner, his broad shoulders twitching. Clearly, he wasn’t in the right frame of mind, either.

“You want to go for all the wrong reasons,” Mahrree told him. “You’re running on pure emotion. Raw, selfish, angry emotion—”

“I’m not selfish!” he snapped.

“Well then raw and angry, which is still a volatile combination. But you *are* selfish, because no one, aside for maybe Eltana, wants you to do this. Therefore, you’re doing this for yourself. Selfishness is at the bottom of every stupid act, of every criminal deed. Selfishness is not Salem’s way—”

“Then maybe I don’t belong in Salem!” he shouted at the wall.

“Where’s the logic behind that?” Mahrree shouted back. “And look at me when I’m yelling at you! Where’s your thinking? Give me one good, solid, *logical* reason why you should become a scout, and . . .” She knew it was the only way to appease him, “I’ll *consider* helping you get the permission you need.”

Young Pere finally shifted his gaze to her. “Seriously?”

Mahrree sighed. “Yes. But it has to be a good reason.”

“How about, you love me enough to let me go?”

Mahrree stared at him before saying, slowly, “If I love you *enough*, I will allow you to do something that I believe is potentially damaging to your soul?”

“Yes.”

“Young Pere, you were more logical when you were eight! What kind of nonsense is that? *If you love me enough*. I love you enough! I love you so much that I’ll refuse to let you do such a thing without a better reason, even if you throw a fit and declare you’ll never speak to me again! That’s how much I love you, you ridiculous boy.”

She gave him a mischievous smile to try to lighten the mood.

But he sat with the weight of the world on him.

“Now, try again,” she said, as cheerfully as she could. Never before had an argument between them generated such hostility. It was swirling around the room like a tornado. There had been times Perrin had barged in on them, glaring at them both, when he thought they’d gone too far in their arguments.

Oh, if only he’d barge in right now!

“Give me a truly logical reason, my sweet boy. No more emotional arguments.”

Young Pere looked off again into a distant corner.

“Would you like some time to think about it?” she prodded. “To formulate a good reason for letting you go into the world in your present state of mind?”

He turned back to her. “Justice isn’t a good enough reason?”

“It’s not the job of a scout to try to exact justice. It’s no one’s job but the Creator’s. Scouts rescue those who want to leave; they don’t

“The world’s not so simple.”

interfere in the workings of the world. Try again.”

Young Pere sighed. “What’s wrong with doing something just because *I feel* like it? Doesn’t the Creator reveal Himself through our emotions as well?”

“He does, but you can also easily misinterpret your own desires as His influence.”

“But what if I’m not? Muggah, I have a very hard time believing you *never* did anything based solely on emotions. I’m sure there were times you acted just because you felt like it, without logically analyzing it.”

Mahrree’s mouth twitched. “Yes, I have,” she admitted. “And there were times I made foolish mistakes because of my impulsiveness, and I said and did things that I wished I hadn’t. Mistakes aren’t always easy to fix, Young Pere. True, wounds heal, but they often leave scars. Your grandfather had many scars left by the world. Some wounds cripple, some take a lifetime to recover from, and some will claim your life. So why run that risk, Young Pere? Why not ask the Creator instead to have these irrational desires taken away?”

Young Pere stared at the corner again.

Mahrree felt she had little time left with him. He was growing used to avoiding her and her words. Her opinions were becoming irrelevant.

“Young Pere, please . . . I realize this is important to you. I know Woodson’s scouting course begins in just over a week, so that gives us both some time to think about this, and *pray* about this,” she added when she saw him ready to launch into another debate. “Let’s both ask the Creator to help you make the correct decision, then let’s talk again in three days, compare our answers, and work from there. I promise you that if I feel the prompting that you should go, I will help convince your parents and Shem to let you.”

“So you promise you’ll help me?” For the first time his eyes softened and he was the same young man who, Mahrree would admit only to herself, was her favorite grandchild.

“If it’s the right thing to do, yes,” she said, already praying earnestly that it wasn’t. “I love you more than you can imagine. I’d do anything to keep you safe. Anything, Young Pere. Please? Give us three days?”

Young Pere pondered that, then slowly nodded.

Mahrree smiled. She stood up, held out her arms to her grandson, and he stood up reluctantly and accepted her embrace.

“I love you, Young Pere. Always remember that,” she said into his ribs. “No matter what you do, my sweet boy, I will still always love you.”

“I know, Muggah. Love you too,” he mumbled. He released her and gave her a fake smile that so resembled Perrin’s Dinner smile that Mahrree was momentarily startled. Then he turned and left.

She exhaled only once the door shut behind him.

WELL DONE, MAHRREE!

“And where have you been?!” she whispered harshly. “I could have used you here!”

YOU DIDN’T REALLY NEED ME. BUT CENTIA SAID THEY NEEDED A HORSE TO PLAY HOUSE WITH, BUT MORAH THOUGHT THEY NEEDED A DOG, YOU SEE, AND YENALI—

“So what are we going to do about Young Pere?”

YOUNG PERE’S GOING TO MAKE HIS OWN CHOICES.

“He can’t go down, Perrin. I feel that in every inch of me. It’d be a disaster—the Creator’s already whispering that in my ear!”

SO WAS I.

“But he won’t believe me. It’s as if the only thing he can feel is anger right now. I’m going to say something, only once, because I have to: had you not died, Perrin, he wouldn’t be making such foolish decisions in his grief.”

He didn’t respond as she expected.

HE WAS GOING TO GO DOWN, NO MATTER WHAT, MAHRREE. HIS RECKLESSNESS AND RESTLESSNESS WERE GOING TO GET HIM INTO THE WORLD ONE WAY OR ANOTHER.

“So I can’t blame all of this on you.”

NOPE.

“Worth a shot,” she sighed miserably. “But had you not died, you could have at least helped me with him. And your whispering in my ear is not helping, by the way!”

SORRY. IT’S ONLY BECAUSE I LOVE YOU.

“Then you should’ve taken me with you!”

YOU GOT THE MESSAGE THAT WASN’T POSSIBLE YET, RIGHT?

“I got it,” she whimpered, tears building in her eyes. “It’s too much, Perrin. Too hard. I’m losing him—I can feel it. First I lost you, then him?”

HE’S NOT LOST YET, MAHRREE. NEITHER AM I.



“Well, Perrin?” Mrs. Yordin asked as Young Pere sat down on her sofa in frustration.

“Went as well as we expected,” he sighed. “She’s a little unstable. She thinks *he*’s still around, talking to people.”

“I had that problem at first as well. I thought I heard my Gari everywhere. It’ll fade in time. The more I told myself he’s gone, the more I began to believe it. He stopped haunting my thoughts not too long ago. So what did she say?”

“She’s given me three days to come up with logical reasons for going, because she thinks I’ll be signing up for Woodson’s training course that starts in a week. She also wants us both to pray about it,” he added with a slight sneer.

“Her and her logic,” Mrs. Yordin exhaled. “And her praying! Sorry, I know you’ve been raised with the belief that something bigger and older out there wants to help you, but I’ve never seen any evidence. I appreciate that your people don’t care if I don’t believe, but *you* don’t have to believe, either.”

He bobbed his head noncommittally. “Sometimes I believe, sometimes I’m not sure.”

“Well,” she patted him on the knee, “I’ve got something to lift your spirits. I didn’t think I’d get it done so soon, but—” She stood, retrieved a bag she’d hidden behind a cushioned chair, opened it, and lifted out a blue jacket.

“It was Gari’s first uniform. I couldn’t bear to leave it behind, so I wore it under my clothes when I traveled here. Fortunately the faded blue of it now matches the current blue of the armies, so no one will know the difference. Try it on, Perrin!” she said excitedly as she handed it to Young Pere.

He grinned, stood up, and slipped the uniform over his tunic. “I didn’t realize the general was as large as me.”

“He wasn’t. Only in the shoulders. I was able to let out the sleeves and lengthen the coat. I covered the faded hemlines with those narrow yellow bands, also in style right now, quite conveniently. Maybe it’s a sign from your Creator that neither of us are too sure about? Stand up straight. Let me look at you.”

Young Pere stood at attention, nailing the stance perfectly.

Mrs. Yordin sighed. “You’re a natural. Ah, Perrin, you take my breath away! Or I should say, *Lieutenant*.”

Young Pere looked down at the emblems, patches, and markings. Mrs. Yordin had already removed the one from the Administrators, who were long gone.

“I thought a name label is supposed to go about here,” he pointed to over his heart.

“Those weren’t invented yet when Gari was first commissioned. I’m working on stitching a label right now. That’s going to take me a while, though. I’m not that precise a seamstress. All you need to do is choose the name. I still think Briter might be best. There were many Briter families in Sands. If you use a familiar name, you’ll be able to spit it out more naturally.”

He smiled mischievously at her. “What’s wrong with Shin? I could probably remove my grandfather’s label from his old colonel’s jacket when my grandmother is out.”

“No, not yet,” she exclaimed. “We’ve discussed this—it’s too obvious. We need to establish you first under an assumed identity, *then* spring the trap. No, we’ll stick to something more common.”

She brushed him down with her hands, removing dust that wasn’t there. Her hand lingered at the shiny silver buttons.

“I always wondered if I’d have a grandson to wear this. My son never chose to marry. He had plenty of women though, after the marriage laws were dissolved, so who knows? Maybe I *am* a grandmother. I like to think my grandson would be as impressive and handsome as you, Perrin.”

Young Pere caught her hand as she tried to unnecessarily polish a button, and she looked up into his face.

“Thank you for believing in me, Mrs. Yordin. You’ve been a great help these past few weeks. I won’t let you down.”

Mrs. Yordin’s eyes grew damp. “I should thank you. You’ve given me more hope than I’ve had in years. Your grandmother doesn’t know what a treasure she has in you. With so many grandsons, she certainly can’t pay enough attention to each of you.”

“That’s why I have you,” he said, and gave her a quick kiss on the cheek. “May I take this home with me? To keep me focused?”

“I still need to put on the name label . . . oh, but you *do* look so grand in it, don’t you! Yes, yes—take it home, but keep it well hidden for now.” She wet her lips, almost nervously. “Young Pere, I have to admit—maybe . . . maybe Mahrree’s got a point. Maybe you should enroll in Woodson’s course—”

“But that would ruin our timeline completely!” he exclaimed in

dismay.

“*When* you get down there really doesn’t matter,” she said. “But making sure you’re fully prepared—that’s what’s important. We’ll still sneak you down as we planned, but sometime later, after Woodson’s had time to train you—”

He took a hard step back. “You don’t think I can do this either, do you?”

“No, that not what I meant—”

“It is!” he exclaimed, noticing that she wouldn’t look him in the eyes. “I . . . I thought you were *different!*” he whispered harshly so that the two elderly sisters she lived with wouldn’t hear him yelling. “I thought you could see the potential—”

“Oh, I do!” she exclaimed back, just as angrily, just as softly. “Why would I be tutoring you for so many weeks if I didn’t? But Perrin, I’m trying to put you through three years of officer training in two moons’ time, plus teach you all the details of the world? I’ve overestimated how hard this would be—”

“Because I’m not smart enough?” he snarled.

“Oh, you’re smart enough. And very clever. But also over-confident—”

“I don’t believe this!” he waved wildly and stomped around the room.

“I’m not saying you’re *not* doing this, but that we need to do this *right*. Perrin, *I’m* not smart enough—I’ve realized that now. You don’t even know the history of the world—”

He spun and stared at her. “Have you even *met* my grandmother?”

“I meant, the version they’re teaching this year. Perrin, it changes every year! If you saunter into a fort with the wrong understanding, you’ll expose yourself. They change the histories frequently, as kind of a code. Only the insiders know what that year’s story is, and if you casually say something wrong, they’ll know you’re an infiltrator. Since Gari died, Thorne certainly would have changed the history at the fort at Sands. He’d have it reflect what he needed the soldiers to believe. I don’t even know what that story is, now! But Woodson might, because your Honri was in Sands for many moons. He’s a clever man, too, and he may have found out the current story—”

Defeated and deflated, Young Pere collapsed on her sofa. “Uncle Honri won’t be back until the first snows fly. That is, *if* he decides to come back for Snowing Season. He didn’t last year. And *if* he does, that’ll postpone our plans for what, another four or five moons? Even

more? No! I want to go now!”

He wrenched off the jacket, but, calmer than he felt, folded it respectfully, smoothing the blue wool with his hand. “I’m sorry,” he whispered. “I can see so clearly what needs to be done, but then so many people throw nails in my path.”

“I’m not trying to throw nails,” Mrs. Yordin assured him. “I’m just trying to ensure your success. Do you realize, Perrin, that nowadays men make their own rankings? They don’t necessarily need a superior officer to promote them. Lemuel Thorne certainly didn’t. He deposed of Administrator Genev one day, then the next put away his captain’s jacket and replaced it with a major’s. And not long after that, he suddenly was a general, and no one’s ever questioned it. Do you realize the potential, Perrin Shin? You do all of this *right*, you can march back into Salem as General Perrin Shin. I want to see that, Perrin. I want that to happen for you. And if you think I’m holding you back now, it’s only because I want to make sure no one in your future ever will.”

Breathless, he stared at her. No, he didn’t realize Thorne had made himself a general. And yes, he could see the potential.

“Think about it, Perrin,” Mrs. Yordin said, placing a hand on his arm. “Think about everything you and I could accomplish, *when* you’re ready.”

He tucked the jacket into his tunic to smuggle it home. “I already am thinking about it.”

Chapter 19--“Why am I taking you?”

The next afternoon Mahrree was at the Briter house helping snap beans for dinner with Salema, who munched one right after the other.

“Mama,” Salema said to Jaytsy, “why are they so good this year? They just taste so . . . green.”

Jaytsy grinned. “I lived on green beans when I was expecting you. You must have acquired a taste for raw beans then.”

“Well, whatever it is, they’re wonderful,” she said, trying to find a more comfortable position as she looked through the window toward the barn. She was due to deliver at any time now, and her mother, mother-in-law, and grandmother kept a close eye on her, waiting.

But Salema wasn’t as worried as they were. She was sure she could handle delivering this baby on her own. That’s what worried the women. And worried Lek, who begged them to never leave her alone, or him alone with her.

“A twinge?” Mahrree asked as Salema repositioned herself again.

“No, just typical back pain. Sewzi!” she called. “Bring me a pillow, please?” Salema looked out the window again.

“Watching for Lek?” Mahrree asked taking another handful of beans.

“Yes. He brought the boys and me here before he took off. Papa Shem needed him to take care of something, but I’m not sure what.”

“Think he’ll be back for dinner?” Jaytsy asked.

“I’m not sure. He’s been gone for over an hour now.”

“Well, I’ll be sure to put something aside for him in case he’s not back,” Jaytsy said, watching her daughter closely. “That looked like a twinge, Salema.”

Salema sighed. “Mama, I know a twinge when I feel one. I’ve done this before, you know.”

Jaytsy shrugged. “I know. I also know the more babies I had, the less time I had to prepare. What was a long rocking pain with you was an excruciating hiccup by the time I had Young Shem.”

“I appreciate your concern but I really—” She stopped short, took a quick breath, and held it.

Mahrree and Jaytsy looked at each other expectantly then side-long at Salema.

“Yes, it’s him! Lek’s back. As I was saying, I really can handle this. And no, I’m not feeling birthing pains, so if the two of you would *stop watching and questioning me*, I’d appreciate it. I’ll have Calla over tonight before I go to bed analyzing my every move, I’m sure!”

Jaytsy and Mahrree looked at each other, a little embarrassed.

Lek burst into the kitchen door and looked at his wife eagerly.

“No, Lek. Nothing. I’m fine.”

Lek sighed in relief and sat down on a chair next to her at the table. He automatically took a bean, bit into it, then pulled a face.

Salema sighed at him. “Why do you do that, honey? You hate raw beans.”

Lek continued to grimace, his lips smacking unpleasantly. “Every time I see you wolfing them down I think, maybe I’ll like them this time. Blech.”

Mahrree chuckled and patted his arm.

“So what did Papa Shem need you to do?” Salema asked, taking the half-eaten bean out of his hand and finishing it off herself.

Lek spat out the rest of the bean into his hand and, slightly disgusted with himself, looked to Mahrree for assistance.

She handed him a cloth.

“Papa needed me to find Dr. Snelling,” Lek said, wiping his hands. “He received a message from the scouts that they may need some help.”

Jaytsy put down the bowl she was carrying to the table. “A doctor? It’s not for Honri, is it?”

“No, Uncle Honri’s fine. It’s another rector who’s supposed to be coming home in a few weeks, the one who was in Mountseen, or whatever province Thorne’s numbered it. Honri has been in Edge ever since he brought Mrs. Yordin there, and had a feeling he should visit Rector Cox in Mountseen. When he got there, he found Cox suffering from chest pains and shortness of breath. Honri’s getting him to Edge, and Papa’s sending an emergency retrieval team to bring him home. Dr. Snelling expressed interest about going down if he were

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needed.”

“That explains a few things,” Jaytsy said. “I wondered where Peto and Cephas were off to this afternoon in such a hurry. They must be helping get the supplies ready. When does the team plan to leave?”

“In the morning,” Lek said. “Dr. Snelling was quite excited. Mrs. Snelling, on the other hand . . .” He chuckled softly.

“She realizes he’ll be back in just a few days, right?” Salema said. “He’s just helping the ill rector come home.”

“She does. Look, I need to go over to Aunt Lilla’s. Uncle Peto asked me to tell her he’ll be home late. While I run over there, would you please—” He gestured to his wife above her head.

Salema sighed loudly. “I know what you’re doing, Lek. You’re just going next door and will be right back. I promise I will not deliver this baby during those five minutes you are away.”

Mahrree snorted as Lek blushed.

He patted her on the shoulder and tentatively walked to the kitchen door.

“Just go, Lek! I’ll still be sitting here, eating beans.”

Lek nodded at her, then sent a pleading look to Jaytsy and Mahrree.

They both winked back at him.

Young Pere was in his bedroom pretending to study his anatomy notes, but his mind was too far away in Sands to remember anything useful about the spleen.

The side door opened, and he heard his cousin Lek’s voice. “Aunt Lilla? Kanthi said you were here.”

“Tidying up in Peto’s office, dear,” Young Pere heard his mother call from the other side of the house. “Are you coming with good news?”

Lek walked past Young Pere’s open door and into Peto’s office at the end of the hall.

“No—no baby yet. Aunt Lilla, Uncle Peto’s going to be home late tonight.”

Young Pere crept noiselessly into the hallway to hear his cousin’s muffled voice. His mother responded, and he caught the name of Assistant Ahno.

“Yes,” Lek was saying. “They hope to leave by dawn. Dr. Snelling will stay tonight at the Second Resting Station with the other scouts. Papa’s there with Uncle Peto making sure they’re well supplied.”

Young Pere’s heart pounded. An emergency retrieval team, leaving at dawn.

There were no coincidences, his father often said to their congregation. Everything happens for a reason, every opportunity arises as a challenge, a temptation, or an opportunity.

He already had the jacket and the notes. What he didn’t have, however, was Woodson’s extra training. But did he really need *that*? He’d read Calla’s book, he was clever, he had charisma, he was his grandfather’s grandson . . . What more did he *really* need?

Heat surged through his body, making his hands tingle and the hairs on his neck stand on end. He’d prove it to them, to all of them—especially to Muggah and Eltana Yordin. What did little old women know about the world and the army anyway?

He already knew enough about the world to conquer it.

Now he just needed to sneak into it.



Peto arrived at the Second Resting Station to see the head of the scouting corps waiting for him. As Peto reined Clark 14 to a halt at the porch, he smiled reassuringly.

But the scout frowned. “You arrive alone, Rector Shin. Am I to guess that you weren’t successful in getting me a doctor?”

“No, I was,” Peto told him as he dismounted. “Dr. Snelling’s wife is doing last minute fixes to the trousers we found him. In case the doctor has to go to any shops in Edge—”

“Province 8,” the scout corrected him.

“—whatever. Anyway, in case Snelling needs additional supplies, we don’t want him looking out of place in the village.”

“Clearly you haven’t been to the world in some years, Peto,” the scout said, shaking his hand. “The fashion of the world is *to* look out of place. Anything goes.”

Peto chuckled. “Well, we want Snelling looking respectable, which is tougher to do. The worldly trousers we had were a bit too loose and long. Snelling’s a small man, and we didn’t want him tripping over himself. Unless that’s a new trend too, Woodson?”

“Why am I taking you?”

Woodson grinned. “Who knows. In the last week that may be the latest big thing. It’s hard to keep up with the world sometimes.”

“But somehow you do it.”

Peto followed Woodson into the Second Resting Station, and marveled as he always did how the young man who was his decoy in Edge when the Shins were smuggled out was now the head of the entire corps.

But it was only fitting, he decided. Woodson’s family had originated in the world, too, and Woodson was their third child, so Salem snuck them out. But not quite soon enough. Woodson was born in the forest just above Edge, and always had an affinity for the trees. In fact, if he stood straight and motionless, he resembled an oak, even in his face which had acquired a slightly gnarled texture over the years. Only to himself, Peto thought of him as “Barkman.”

Inside the expansive Resting Station were six other men, dressed in the green and brown mottled clothing of scouts, and each preparing his pack. They glanced up and nodded their welcome to Rector Shin.

“Dr. Snelling will be here in less than half an hour,” he told them. “He’s quite excited to be of service, so you may need to rein him in a bit. Remind him it’s only a quick in-and-out job, and that he shouldn’t speak to anyone if it can be avoided.” He glanced around. “Where’s Guide Zenos? I thought he was briefing you about his brother-in-law Honri? He had a few loose strings he wanted tied up in case he needed to leave the world with you.”

Woodson waved some pages. “Zenos left us his Honri notes. There seems to be a problem with a family west of here. Apparently Rector Anth and Guide Zenos have been counseling a couple. We’re not sure what happened, but Rector Anth came here in a hurry hoping the guide could help him. Shem filled us in enough before he headed out.”

Peto nodded. “Good. If you have any questions, I may be able to help. In the meantime, I see my nephew Cephas was thorough with getting you supplied. He’s headed back to the main storehouse now, so if there’s anything else you can think of, just send a tower message and we can make another delivery before you leave in the morning. The First Resting Station has the collapsible poles for the net litter. Be sure to take those in case Rector Cox’s situation is worse than we expected and he can’t ride—”

Peto was interrupted by a young woman hurrying into the Station. “Rector Shin! There’s an urgent tower message for you.”

“Sorry, men,” he said to the scouting party who nodded for him to check the message, and he rushed outside. The tower nearest the Second Resting Station flew the general’s banner—now the banner for Rector Shin—the emergency banner, and smaller flags spelling out RECTORY.

“The rectory?” Peto whispered to himself. “What would be going on at the rectory? There are no events or—”

A knot tightened in his stomach.

“Young Pere!” he whispered. He spun and ran back into the station. “I’m terribly sorry, gentlemen, but it seems I need to run off as well. Assistant Ahno should be here soon with Dr. Snelling. I hate having to leave like this but—”

Woodson patted him on the back. “Believe it or not, Peto, we’ve done this before. Take care of what needs to be done, and trust the Creator will fill in for us the bits and pieces you and the guide didn’t get to tell us about.”

“Good luck, men,” Peto told them. “Have a safe journey there and home, and I’ll keep you in my prayers.” He jogged out of the station and grabbed the reins of Clark 14. As he mounted and spurred the horse into a run, he ran through his mind all that could have gone wrong.

There were far too many possibilities.



Dr. Snelling and Assistant Ahno arrived a short time later, Ahno huffing to catch his breath.

“Guide Zenos here?” asked Ahno. He was a couple years younger than the guide, but the heavy-set man was not nearly in as good physical condition, nor was he used to riding so hard. Neither was his horse, which was frothing outside.

“No, I’m sorry,” answered Woodson. “Guide Zenos had an emergency to attend to, but he left us the plans.”

“Well, gentlemen, you need to start readying the horses.”

Woodson startled. “What do you mean, readying the horses?”

“You’re supposed to be on the trail in the next hour!” Ahno told him.

“What?”

“The storm!” Ahno pointed up the canyon. “You can’t see it from here, but down in the valley it’s obviously headed for the canyon. On

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my way here I ran into one of Rector Shin’s boys. He told me the rector wanted you to leave as soon as possible to avoid the rain.”

Woodson looked back at his men. “But Peto left us less than half an hour ago—”

“And I ran into his son about fifteen minutes ago, just before I met up with Dr. Snelling here. From the valley we saw the storm moving in from the east. Big heavy clouds. If there’s a downpour—”

“I know, I know,” Woodson said in irritation. “The canyon channels the water into a small river that can last until tomorrow noon. The horses can’t manage the canyon in that.”

“Isn’t the glacial fort reachable by nightfall?” Dr. Snelling asked eagerly.

“Yes,” Woodson sighed. “I suppose we best get ready. We have to beat that storm.”

The seven men were jogging toward the barn when another rider joined them.

Assistant Ahno smiled. “Ah, you’re the one I met. Does Rector Shin still want them to leave now?”

“Yes, sir,” the young man said, sliding off his mount. His size caught Assistant Ahno by surprise. So did his features. “And I’m going with them.”

Woodson stopped. “You’re the younger Perrin, aren’t you?”

“Well *that’s* obvious!” Assistant Ahno laughed softly.

Young Pere cringed briefly. “Just Perrin, please. And yes, I am.”

“Why am I taking you?” asked Woodson as he folded his arms.

“Part of my studies, sir.” He nodded to Dr. Snelling. “Dr. Toon wants his medical students to get experience in real-life emergencies, and suggested that I accompany Dr. Snelling as an assistant. If that’s all right with you, sir? Dr. Toon apologizes for not coming with me to explain the new program. He’s engaged with a patient right now, but we didn’t want to lose this opportunity—”

“Sure! Why not?” Dr. Snelling smiled. “Toon always has excellent ideas!”

Woodson narrowed his eyes at Young Pere. “Your father’s all right with this?”

“Who do you think sent me?”

Woodson shrugged and nodded when he saw Young Pere’s pack already over his shoulder. “All right then. Perrin the Youn—, I mean, Perrin—” Woodson sighed. “I’m not sure if I can call you that. I never dared call the general by his first name, even though he asked me to

several times. How about I just call you Pere?”

Pere nodded. At least the ‘Young’ was gone.

“So Pere, how fresh is your horse?”

He glanced back at the weary animal he “borrowed” from Uncle Deck. “That one’s not a Clark.”

“That’s all right,” Woodson said. “We’ve got a few Clarks and GrayClarks in the barn. Come saddle one up.”



Half an hour later the men were almost ready to leave. Assistant Ahno was securing the packs on to the pack horses when another horse rode up to them. The men were startled as they noticed the woman with long blond hair pulled back into a ponytail.

Young Pere did a double take when he saw her. She was slender, maybe in her early thirties, and startling beautiful with sharp yet delicate features. She wore dark colored breeches and a dark top, and a pack was slung across her shoulders. Traveling clothes of the women of Salem.

Woodson walked up to her. “Can I help you?”

“Yes. It looks like you’re leaving. May I join you?”

Woodson blinked at her. “We have another tag-a-long? You know, people don’t just *casually* join an emergency retrieval team. We put visitors through training about world language differences and customs . . .”

His voice trailed off when he saw her determination. He tried one more thing. “And women come only with their husbands, for protection.”

The woman looked at him with hardened eyes. “I no longer have a husband. But I do have a great aunt in Edge who recently lost her husband and is desperate for family. The rector there had been working with her, trying to get her ready to come to Salem, and has been sending me messages about her. He was trying to set up a visitation for me, and it was supposed to happen in a few weeks, but I just found out your plans have been pushed up. I’m ready if you are.”

Woodson slowly shook his head. “I’m sorry, Mrs. . . . What was your name?”

“Just call me Amory.”

“Well, Amory, Guide Zenos is very particular about who goes on

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these trips—”

“Yes, I know. I spoke with him not too long ago. He’s been tutoring me on the ways of the world when he’s had time, and he’s the one who told me about the emergency trip to Edge. He’d be here himself to give you permission to take me, but some of my neighbors have been having some marital problems that grew a bit violent. He’s there now with our rector trying to sort it out. It wasn’t exactly the best time to pull him away just to come introduce me to you, wouldn’t you agree?”

Woodson scratched his head. “No, you’re right. You’re fortunate to run into us. We weren’t scheduled to leave until morning, but with the approaching storm—”

“Yes, I think it’s quite providential that I happened to run into you just now. Must be the hand of the Creator. I’m ready to go,” Amory hinted.

Woodson turned to the rest of the scouting party. They nodded to him as well.

“Well,” he sighed, “it’s *only* a quick in-and-out. Come to think of it, that’s how my first venture into the world was.” He nodded to Young Pere. “I was your father’s decoy that night. The scouts put a lot of faith in me even though I wasn’t yet fully trained, so I suppose it’s time for me to put some faith in two others.” He looked at Amory and Young Pere. “Rule one: talk to no one but who we allow you to, make contact with no one without our permission, and keep a low profile. Quick in-and-out. Understand?”

Young Pere and Amory both nodded and said, “Understand.”

Woodson walked over to Assistant Ahno and shook his hand. “I thank you for your help, Assistant. When Rector Shin or Guide Zenos returns, I assume you’ll fill them in on our departure?”

“Of course, of course! May the Creator guide and protect you until you return.”

Peto reached the Main Storehouse to find Cephas standing outside, talking to a couple of young women. He was grinning at the conversation until he looked up and saw his uncle riding fast.

“Uncle Peto, something wrong?”

Peto reined Clark 14 to a stop. “Do you know anything about the emergency message?”

Flight of the Wounded Falcon

Cephas frowned. “Emergency message? No, I didn’t see one.”

“It was for the rectory, but I just came from there and everything is quiet. No sign of mischief, or fire, or—”

He paused when he saw the inquisitive faces of the two girls.

“—of *anyone* else. I was hoping you might have heard something.”

“No, I’m sorry, Uncle Peto. Do you want help looking?”

Peto scoffed in exasperation. “I don’t know what I’m looking *for*! I’m going to ride for home, see if the message was from there. If you hear or see anything, let the towers know, all right?”

“Of course, Uncle Peto. Good luck!”

Peto spurred Clark 14 and headed west.

“Dear Creator, what’s going on? Father, do you know?”

YOUNG PERE HAS DECIDED TO FLY AGAIN, PETO. THIS TIME HE’S SUCCEEDING.

A few minutes later Peto burst into the door of his house. “Lilla!” he bellowed. “Now!”

She came from the kitchen, flour on her hands, surprise on her face. Sakal and Centia came from the kitchen, too, alarmed to hear their father shouting.

“What’s wrong?” Lilla asked, brushing her hands on her apron.

Peto grabbed her by the arm. “We’re riding—NOW! Sakal, Centia—finish dinner yourselves!”

Lilla’s eyes were huge as Peto dragged her out the side door. “I don’t understand—”

“Young Pere’s trying to fly again—”

She sprinted for the barn.

“This is your last chance to glimpse the valley,” Woodson said as the horses climbed higher up the canyon. The rain was beginning to fall and the view of the valley was quickly obscuring. “If you want to wave goodbye, do so now,” Woodson called as he waved to the valley. “Silly tradition, but . . .”

Dr. Snelling and the other scouts twisted in their saddles for a quick wave.

Young Pere didn’t bother. He was too focused on what lay ahead, planning his moves for the next few days. Getting out was far easier

than he imagined. Amory had it right—the Creator’s hand must have been involved. There was even a rainstorm covering his tracks as he left his confines, just like a storm had washed away the tracks of another escaping party, many years ago.

Assistant Ahno didn’t question the directions from his father, the men in the tower accepted his message with a nod, and Woodson hesitated for only a moment. There certainly was one advantage to living among people who are completely honest in all things: they were amazingly gullible.

Young Pere was a little disappointed with the ease of his success. The only difficult part was timing everything, but even that came together in just a few minutes. That Uncle Shem didn’t arrive while they were getting ready was another stroke of luck. Whatever couple was fighting, he sent them a silent thank you. He hoped taking over the fort in Sands wouldn’t be as simple. He was looking forward to a real challenge.

He put his hand on his pack again just to make sure it was still secure. Inside and folded tightly was Lieutenant Roarin’ Yordin’s jacket, along with a pair of blue trousers that closely matched it. Tucked inside the jacket was a list of all the officers he was supposed to memorize, which he’d get to later. Mrs. Yordin would forgive him for not saying goodbye.

Young Pere noticed Amory didn’t turn around, either, to wave farewell to Salem. She merely pulled her overcoat tighter around her body and adjusted the hood to keep the rain off her face. She glanced at Young Pere again, as she had many times in the last hour, and gave him a faint smile before his horse fell in line behind hers as the trail narrowed.

Chapter 20--“I don’t even know how to say it.”

Peto watched, unnoticed by his sister’s family, as they sat around the enormous eating table. He stood partially concealed in the kitchen as they reached over each other and asked for help and spilled food and occasionally stabbed someone with a fork.

It was customary in Salem that the day before Holy Day was a day of preparation, so that nothing unnecessary needed to be done the following day. Those evenings would bring the entire extended family together for a large dinner, with leftovers for each family to share the next day after the congregational meeting so even the cooks could have a day of rest.

Deck and Jaytsy’s table was full to overflowing that night, as it was every other week when it was their turn to host the married children. Mahrree was in her customary spot, and Jaytsy had slid herself over to be where Perrin used to sit. The added presence of Lek and Salema with their two boys, Cambo with his wife and son, Bubba with his wife and twin girls, and Holling with his wife and baby daughter had the effect of pushing Yenali and Young Shem to one of the two smaller children’s tables set up in the corners for the grandchildren.

Peto smiled dimly that the same thing would happen in his house later, but with much less energy because of what they already knew.

He stepped fully in the doorway, quietly waiting for someone to notice his presence over the chaos of dinner. He wasn’t in a hurry to share his news. Still, it couldn’t be put off.

Deck finally looked up from trying to get a piece of bread to his granddaughter. “Peto! What brings you here? Lilla’s cooking is much

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better than Jaytsy’s.”

That brought a howl of derision and laughter from his children.

Mahrree shook her head and smiled at Deck, while Jaytsy put her hands defiantly on her hips.

Peto saw the momentary reprieve and took it. “I’m just here to see if Sewzi has learned anything new from her aunt. The herbs on those turkeys look familiar.”

He made his way around the table, ruffling hair and poking children, but paused at Salema’s large belly and patted it.

“Never come out . . . never come out . . . never come out,” he said to the bulge.

“How’s *that* supposed to help, Uncle Peto?” Salema laughed.

“Maybe I’m the opposite of Calla. She tells the girls when to come out, maybe I’ve got some gift for boys. They tend to do the opposite of what they’re told, after all,” he winked as the family laughed.

But Mahrree squinted knowingly at him. He only reverted to his youthful obnoxiousness when he was avoiding something.

Peto made his way to stand behind his brother-in-law at the other end of the room. He snatched a turkey leg from his plate and sampled a bite.

“Hey! That’s not yours!” Deck exclaimed, to more laughter. Deck rarely ate meat, and had given up beef years ago, just like Guide Gleace. None of the ranching boys ate beef, either. They raised cattle because they loved them alive, not necessarily on their plates.

But on Deck’s plate today was one of many wild turkeys which were slowly taking over the western side of Salem, and they had to be culled because no natural predators ventured so far into the valley. Because nothing should be wasted in Salem, on these rare occasions Deck ate poultry. Except for right now.

Peto chewed thoughtfully on the turkey leg, pointed it at his fifteen-year-old niece, and said, “Very good, Sewzi. This family will survive.”

Sewzi beamed with delight.

“Do you have any other reason for being here other than to criticize my cooking?” Jaytsy said, trying to conceal a smile.

“What you mean is, am I here for any other reason than to compliment your daughter?” He dropped the turkey leg on Deck’s plate and wiped his hand on the back of his brother-in-law’s shirt.

Deck covered his plate dramatically with his hands to avoid further thefts. His younger children and grandchildren giggled.

Peto knew he shouldn't procrastinate, but he didn't know how to proceed. As the laughter died down, so did his smile, and soon everyone was watching him, noticing the change in his demeanor.

"I did come for another reason. I don't even know how to say it," he said with such soberness that everyone at the table fell quiet, probably for the first time ever.

His eyes met Mahrree's, who stared at him in dread.

"Young Pere's joined the retrieval team heading for Edge."

"Peto, no!" Mahrree cried as the Briter family gasped. "He promised me we would discuss this!"

"*What?*" Peto exclaimed. "You knew?!"

"No, it's not like that," Mahrree said hurriedly, standing up. "I'll go talk to him—"

"Mother, it's too late."

Mahrree stopped. "What do you mean, it's too late?" She turned to Cephas. "They're not leaving until morning, right?"

Cephas looked at his uncle.

Peto's face was drawn and tight. "They saw a storm coming in from the southeast and decided to leave as soon as the supplies were ready. They're already gone."

Cephas was on his feet in an instant, shoving the chair behind him. "Uncle Peto, we might be able to catch them—"

"Already tried," Peto cut him off. "Lilla and I just came back from the canyon entrance. I've never seen her ride so hard."

The family waited in heavy silence for him to continue.

"By the time we got there, only Assistant Ahno was there, and he was mortified when he saw us. Apparently Young Pere claimed Dr. Toon had sent him to assist Dr. Snelling. Ahno had no idea Young Pere was leaving without our permission."

"Young Pere *lied?*" eight-year-old Yenali exclaimed, stunned to hear that anyone she knew lied.

Jaytsy hushed her.

Peto nodded sadly before turning to Cephas. "That emergency I was talking about that was supposedly happening at the rectory? I went back and spoke to the tower men about the message. They showed me the note sent up to them. It was in Young Pere's hand—his diversion to get me away from the Second Resting Station."

Mahrree's eyes grew wide. "*Why, that little—*"

“I don’t even know how to say it.”

Peto continued, addressing the stunned Briters, “He gave them an additional message meant for Shem telling him he was needed at home, but the tower men already knew Shem was dealing with a crisis in the south, so one of them rushed over to the Zenoses to see what the problem was. Naturally, there wasn’t one. While I raced home answering the first diversionary message, Young Pere found Ahno, told him I gave orders for them to leave immediately because of the approaching storm, and, well . . .” Peto shook his head. He hadn’t encountered so much deviousness since he left the world.

He also missed seeing Yenali counting on her fingers how many lies Young Pere told.

Mahrree sat down, stunned. So did Cephas.

“He could have worked for Geneva,” Jaytsy whispered. “With stories like those.”

Peto scoffed lightly. “Father said I could’ve had a career in strategy planning, but it’s Young Pere who has the real talent. And, unfortunately, he was right about the storm. It was already raining in the canyon when we arrived. The retrieval team will be lucky to get past the more treacherous routes. There’s no way Lilla and I could risk going up. Already the water was funneling through the entrance. The canyon will be impassable until the morning,” he finished in a whisper.

“Oh, Peto,” Jaytsy exhaled. “What can we do?”

Peto only shrugged.

Mahrree couldn’t speak louder than a whisper. “I just don’t understand it. Yes, we talked last night, but he never hinted at anything like *this*.”

Sewzi began to cry softly.

Peto moved over to behind his mother and hugged her in her chair. “He’s been harder to reach. And ever since Father . . .”

He decided not to finish that sentence.

“He has to make his own choices, and deal with the consequences.” The last words choked in his throat.

“Peto,” Deck’s voice was very quiet, but sounded booming in the gloom. “Do we know if Edge was his final destination? If Thorne should see him, with his looks, should he be discovered . . .”

The married children at the table glanced at each other in alarm.

Mahrree hid her face behind her hand.

“The last report was that Thorne was leading a large contingency

down to Midplain,” Peto said. “Apparently there have been some disaffected soldiers there and threats of rebellion. Honri’s source didn’t think Thorne would be back in Edge for at least a season or two.”

Deck’s shoulders sagged in relief, but his eighteen-year-old son shifted in agitation.

“Uncle Peto, we’ll just go get him back,” Cephass decided. “He’s always been like this. We’ve retrieved him from trees, families of skunks, when he was stuck in caves, and when he wanted to see that forest fire up close. We’ll just bring him home again.”

Peto couldn’t answer, because he knew the retrieval team was already gone.

Viddrow chuckled softly. “Remember when he wanted to see how thick the ice was?”

Holling smiled. “I think I was fifteen. So was Barnos, so you must have been thirteen, Vid, and he and Cephass were twelve. He had a good plan, at least. He laid down on the bank and slid himself out across the ice, spread eagle, to avoid putting too much weight on any one part. We all heard the ice cracking, but he was sure it was further down the pond. Then suddenly, sploosh! He was gone.”

Some of the younger children giggled, but the adults didn’t smile.

“He was sick for weeks. He coughed so hard I think he cracked a rib, didn’t he?” Viddrow added with a sad laugh.

“That’s enough,” Jaytsy said sternly to her sons, and looked at Peto who was lost in thought, staring at nothing on the table. In a soft voice she added, “We nearly lost him.”

Mahrree nodded. “There were many nights we thought he wouldn’t make it to the morning. To get Lilla to leave his side was almost impossible. She’d allow only Perrin or me to stay with him at night.” Mahrree looked at the children around the table. “Your mother and Aunt Calla took care of the Shin family for those weeks, so your aunt and uncle could spend all their time with Young Pere. If you boys hadn’t gotten him out of the water when you did, he probably wouldn’t have made it.”

Cephass turned solemnly to his uncle. “But that’s the point. We got him back. It took all of us to pull him out of the water, and we even got wet ourselves. But we saved him, Uncle Peto. Let’s just do it again.”

Not for the first time did Peto wish Young Pere had a sliver of Cephass’s thoughtfulness. “Young Pere’s been very blessed to have family and cousins who rescue him every time he’s reckless. But this

“I don’t even know how to say it.”

is different. He’s moved himself out of our reach, and should he fall in the water again, none of us will be there to pull him out.”

His nieces and nephews looked down at their plates.

Deck sighed heavily. “Peto, I don’t know what to say, except that we will all pray for him, always.”

Mahrree added, “And the Creator knows where he is. Young Pere’s not out of His reach.”

“But Muggah,” Cephas said, trying to be gentle, but his doubt was clear. “If Young Pere’s not listening?”

“All we can do is hope,” Mahrree said to him, “that sometime Young Pere will learn to listen.”

Yenali piped up. “He always listened to Puggah. Maybe the Creator can send Puggah to him.”

Stillness filled the room as all eyes looked at the eight-year-old, who took a squirting bite of her corn on the cob.

Peto’s tears would no longer be held back. “That’s a good plan, Yenali,” he whispered. “And it’s all we’ve got right now.”

A few minutes later Peto walked with Mahrree to the Shin house. Neither of them spoke, too lost in their own thoughts and fears.

Lilla was waiting outside, facing the direction of the canyon as if from several miles away she could see any progress of her son, making his way up in the thunderstorm that clouded her view. She glanced over, saw Mahrree and Peto approaching, and rushed to hug her mother-in-law.

“We couldn’t get there in time! I can’t believe he’s gone! Just like that! No message to us, no goodbyes, nothing? As if he didn’t care what this would do to us!”

Mahrree stepped back and held Lilla’s arms, trying to still her agitation which made her entire body tremble. “I’m so sorry, Lilla. Somehow it will be all right.”

“Do you really think so?” Lilla asked.

Mahrree paused, knowing that she said the words flippantly, desperate to see poor Lilla calmed, but it wasn’t working.

“I hope so,” Mahrree said. “And I pray so. But honestly, I don’t know.”

“I don’t know yet either, Mahrree!” Lilla wailed. “I can’t feel anything about him. Usually I do. Usually I can feel when he’s about to do something stupid again. And then I would wait for the yell, or for the children to come tell me where he’s stuck or bleeding or both, but not now.” Panic was rising in her tone. “It’s as if he’s gone beyond

my reach, beyond my ability to feel him! Mahrree, what will we do?"

"All we can do is pray and ask for help."

Lilla turned to the canyon again.

Peto wrapped an arm around her as she sighed. "I know who could have stopped him." Without another thought, and with no reservation, she looked up to the sky and said loudly, "Dear Creator, please hear me!"

Behind her, Peto and Mahrree exchanged looks of surprise, then watched to see what was going to come out of her mouth next.

"If it's Your will," her voice, despite her volume, began to quaver, "please send Papa Pere to bring home my boy!"

Peto wrapped her fully into him as she began to sob.

Mahrree patted Peto on his arm as he led her into the house. Several children waiting at the door came to their parents' aid, leaving Mahrree alone in the garden. She felt the same as Lilla, but not as loudly. No one *ever* felt as loud as Lilla.

She looked to the sky over the mountain, darkening from the setting sun and the storm that was covering it. Normally she loved that violent color of gray and blue, with jagged lightning cutting in with lines of white.

But not tonight. Tonight, the color of the sky terrified her.

"Dear Creator," she asked quietly, "if it *is* Your will, please send my grandson help. And Perrin, if you can, go find Young Pere and stay with him. Don't leave him until you can bring him home to his mother and fath—"

And then she could no longer speak, because her breath was gone, because an enormous warmth suddenly surrounded her, like a large blanket.

But it wasn't a blanket. She could even smell him, earthy sweet, and the intensity with which he enveloped her was nearly overwhelming. She stood in that blissful state for a few moments, fully wrapped in all that was her husband.

ARE YOU SURE, MAHRREE?

"Yes. I'll be fine without you. Look how many men and women you've given me to care for me. I understand now what you've been trying to tell me: I don't need you nearly as much as Young Pere does. Oh, but how I will miss you!"

IT'S ONLY TEMPORARY, REMEMBER? BESIDES, YOUNG PERE IS WHY I HAD TO PASS ON. HE'S MY CALLING NOW. THE CREATOR KNEW HE'D DO THIS AND THAT SOMEONE NEEDED TO GO WITH HIM. MAHRREE, I HOPE

“I don’t even know how to say it.”

YOU CAN FORGIVE ME, BUT I VOLUNTEERED FOR THIS.

Tears were dribbling down her cheeks. “I know,” she whispered. “Somehow I knew that.”

IT’S EASIER TO GET FORGIVENESS THAN PERMISSION, ESPECIALLY ABOUT DYING.

She chuckled pitifully at that, her tears increasing. “Stay by his side, Perrin. Don’t ever leave him. Please. Knock some sense into him, and then come home with him.”

I WILL. I ALWAYS LOVE YOU. AND I’LL COME BACK AGAIN, WITH HIM. I PROMISE.

And then . . .

He was gone.

As quickly he’d appeared, he’d vanished. Perrin was gone, truly gone, headed south.

Weakness, emptiness filled her unlike anything she’d felt since the day he died. But she wasn’t alone, because something else came. Softly, carefully, consolingly.

She found her thoughts full of her father as her mind heard the words, *See why I always liked him?*

The pounding on the door startled the two elderly women who lived in the house, but their housemate, Eltana Yordin, only glowered at it. She was slightly suspicious that whoever was beating down their door with such urgency may have been someone who had finally pieced together that she’d been coaching Young Perrin Shin for many weeks. It was about time.

With deliberate slowness, she opened the door.

“Where is he?!” bellowed Shem Zenos, and the sisters shrank in astonishment.

But he didn’t notice, because he was glaring at Eltana with fire she didn’t think the guide possessed anymore.

While Young Perrin was overdue for their discussion that day, she wasn’t about to make any of this easier.

“Why, whoever are you talking about?” she asked with disgusting sweetness.

“Young Perrin Shin! Assistant Ahno told us he’s headed up the canyon to Edge!”

Eltana blinked at that. No, the plan was for Sands, in about four

moons—

When she didn't respond immediately, Zenos stood taller. "So you didn't know, then?"

She nearly exclaimed, *He's what!?* But instead she said, as calmly as she could, "When did he leave?"

"A few hours ago. I've been trying to piece together exactly why and for what purpose, and the trail has led me here. What's his intention?"

The two sisters quickly stood up and bustled away to the kitchen.

Eltana didn't invite in the sergeant major, and saw behind him two younger men, likely rectors from other areas. Based on their coloring, they definitely weren't Shins, thank whatever creator may exist. She wasn't sure why they were there, although she was fairly confident Salem didn't have any kind of incarceration.

Stunned to realize that Perrin had already left, and realizing she had to cover her involvement in it—just in case there *was* incarceration—she firmed her stance. "Perrin Shin was interested in returning to the world, and he and I spoke about it on occasion—"

"They found *your* notes, Mrs. Yordin!" Zenos shouted.

Her jaw clenched. He was supposed to burn those, or take them with him. Never leave evidence, she'd told him repeatedly. *Never leave a trail* . . .

"What do you want from me, Sergeant Major?"

"Answers!"

She firmed her stance. "I don't have any for you."

"What did you put in that boy's head? He's grieving, he's irrational, and he's impulsive, as you now see."

Her mind was spinning, trying to figure out what Perrin was doing, and . . . He left without even saying goodbye to her?

She realized she was still being yelled at.

"What else did you give him? I saw the notes—names and locations in Sands. That's his final destination, is it? Some of those names were those who betrayed Gari. Do you expect Young Pere to exact revenge?"

"No!" she shouted back. "He's too inexperienced. They'd destroy him first."

The foolish boy left the notes. Oh slag, he left the notes—

"Oh, *wonderful*," said Zenos, oozing with sarcasm. "You've sent him to be butchered, then?!"

"NO!" she cried again. "I sent him to catch them in their lies! To

“I don’t even know how to say it.”

gather information! Then, once he’s been trained up a bit, finds his footing, gathers our allies, learns to wield a sword—”

Zenos sagged. “Oh, Eltana, what ideas have you fed him?”

“Perrin can do anything!” she declared, hoping that was true but beginning to doubt it. The slugging boy *left the notes*—

“He’s NOT PERRIN!” Zenos roared. “He’s NOT his grandfather! He has the looks and the voice and far too much of his confidence, but not the steadiness, and not the ability, and *certainly* not the wisdom. Eltana, you’ve set Perrin’s grandson on a road to self-destruction.” He leaned against the doorframe and held his face in his hands.

She didn’t know what to do with the abrupt change in the sergeant major. For a moment she thought he almost might be sobbing.

“He *can* do it,” she insisted, but she felt her own confidence flagging. He was supposed to get more training. They had four moons—

“You underestimate him,” she decided, hoping she believed that. “All of you do. He’s capable of far more than any of you realize.”

Zenos’s hands slid off his face, and he delivered her the most cutting glare she’d ever felt. And having lived with Gari Yordin, that was saying something.

In a voice that shook her to her toes, Zenos said, “It’s you who underestimates the world. It will crush Young Perrin Shin. Your selfishness is devastating an entire family. I hope you get the satisfaction you’re hoping for, because it’s going to cost far more than you ever anticipated.”

There was nothing more to do but slam the door in his face, because suddenly she felt drained and hopelessly weak. She stumbled to the first chair she could reach and collapsed into it.

Gripping her head, she murmured, “Left too soon. Oh, you left too soon. Again, Perrin, you’ve left me too soon . . .”

Later that evening Mahrree sat rocking Morah, who cried softly, as Peto and Lilla tried to explain again to her and Centia exactly where, or where they *thought*, Young Pere had gone.

The rest of the family sat in the gathering room quietly listening, shaking their heads, and softly sobbing.

Mahrree kissed her granddaughter’s head as she whispered, “But he said I was part of his team, now.”

Mahrree didn’t know exactly what that meant, but she understood

the sentiment—they were losing their team. Two were now gone.

Until that evening she'd never noticed how present Perrin had still been. Sometimes it felt as if he hadn't even died six weeks ago. He was always still there to talk to, and a few times she was sure she heard him laughing. He was always somewhere, nearby.

But his lingering wasn't meant to be permanent. He had greater work to do besides playing with his grandchildren and lying next to her in bed at night while she read. He was far away on a mountain side, heading to Edge, trying to find a lost lamb.

Or rather, a stupid young ram.

Morah slid off of her lap, kissed her Muggah good night, and Hycy held her hand as she trudged sadly off to bed.

Relf comforted his mother as Barnos put his arm around his father. Lori and Jori would be arriving shortly, Mahrree was sure. The tower message was sent to them over an hour ago, and both young women were as solid on horseback as their mother. The rest of the family sat on the sofas together, sighing and sniffing, helpless.

Kew came and stood behind his grandmother, as if desperate to find something to do. At thirteen, he was rapidly becoming another copy of Perrin. Over the season, he'd grown taller than Mahrree, and his brown hair was darkening to almost black. But his eyes were far more gentle than Young Pere's, as was his quiet and frequently clumsy demeanor. In an effort to help, the poor boy tried massaging Mahrree's shoulders, and she tried not to wince in pain. Instead, she appreciated the intention and patted his hand gratefully, hoping he might ease up a little.

But he didn't, because the sudden knocking on the door was so loud and urgent that he accidentally pinched Mahrree's neck in alarm.

The rest of the family jumped in their seats as Nool began to open the door.

Shem shoved it the rest of the way and hurried in, as if he'd been running for hours and didn't know how to stop himself. They hadn't seen him since the crisis began, but messages had been flying back and forth as everyone frantically rushed around accomplishing nothing. Mahrree nearly shrank back as she saw Shem's expression. His earnestness was almost frightening as he went straight to Peto.

"Any word? Any updates? He's still gone, right?"

Peto, momentarily startled by Shem's intensity, stammered, "N-no. Nothing new. He's still gone."

"And you did *not* give him permission, correct?"

“I don’t even know how to say it.”

“Of course not!”

“Did he ask to go? Did he hint at all—”

“Yes,” Mahrree blurted miserably.

Shem spun to her. “What?!”

That time she did shrink back as the full force of his barely contained rage was shifted to her. “Last night, we talked. All right, we yelled. He told me he wanted to be a scout, and was asking for me to convince all of you to let him go. But I didn’t!” she exclaimed as Shem began to huff. “I told him no! Actually,” she knew she had to amend that, “*actually*, I told him we both needed to pray about it, then discuss it again in three days. Shem, I was trying to buy us time!” she defended as he clenched his fists. “Woodson’s course doesn’t even begin until next week, and I figured I’d have a solution for his request by then!”

Everyone stared at her, Shem the hardest. “What, *exactly*, did you tell him you’d do? Did you tell him you’d help him?”

Mahrree swallowed. It was no use lying to the guide, and that’s who he was right now. Not her little brother, but the Creator’s guide who, she suspected, already knew the answer. “I told him,” she confessed nervously, “that if—*IF*—the answer to my prayer was that he should go, that I’d help him. But I told him it’d be a disaster! That he shouldn’t go!” she immediately added as Shem rubbed his forehead vigorously in the best Perrin tradition. “I wasn’t ever going to give him permission, Shem! And I was going to tell you and Peto and Lilla about our conversation after he came back to discuss things with me. I was sure . . . I was sure he’d change his mind.”

But something had changed in Shem’s countenance, and he stared at Mahrree. “You told him it’d be a disaster. That he *shouldn’t* do it.”

Suddenly Mahrree saw her mistake. “Oh, no,” she murmured.

Lilla’s eyes widened with worry.

Sometime during that conversation, Jaytsy and Deck had arrived and were standing anxiously at the open door, listening, along with a burly man who was vaguely familiar to Mahrree.

“I’ve just come from Eltana Yordin’s,” Shem said heavily. “She definitely was coaching him, but she seemed alarmed he was already gone. I suspect that she may have said something along the same lines as you, Mahrree: that he wasn’t ready to do this.”

“So *naturally*,” Lilla spoke, her voice pitching shriller with each word, “he decided to prove everyone wrong! Oh, that stupid boy! It’s

a raw bacon and egg pie day today, that's what it is! With sour cherries and mushrooms on top—”

Peto was already pulling her into him, and she sobbed against his shoulder.

“One thing a Shin can't do,” Shem said, suddenly sounding weary, “is to accept when someone in authority tells them *not* to do something.”

Mahrree held her face in her hands. “It's the Stupid Shin trait, all right,” she said despondently. “Someone issues us a challenge, and we unwisely chase after it. Lilla, I'm sorry your son took after the wrong grandparents. He read Calla's book recently. Or rather, *mis*-read it. He took from it only the elements that fit his agenda.”

“I had to talk Perrin out of it,” Shem whispered, as if he were speaking words he never intended to. “Out of doing Eltana's bidding to go down in the world and take it over.”

“Well, maybe if Young Pere had been listening in,” Mahrree sniffled, “he would have been talked out of it, too.”

“He likely was,” Lilla said, pulling away from Peto, her face blotchy and furious. “He's *always* eavesdropping. That's probably how he heard about the retrieval team, when Lek came to tell me! And if he heard you and Perrin talking,” she said to Shem, “he likely heard only what he wanted to hear, shoved that in a sandwich, and ate it!”

She turned to sob into Peto's shoulder again. “I knew he was going to do this!” Lilla choked out between sobs. “I knew he was going to do this someday!”

Shem sighed, then noticed the Briters at the door, and the man standing apologetically behind them. He beckoned him to come in.

“Good evening,” the man said awkwardly to the family that stared at him. His voice was much quieter than such a large man should have. His eyes were bloodshot, and one of them was bruising and swelling. In his hands was his straw hat, crinkling quietly.

“Kellen,” Shem said kindly, “exactly when was the last time any of us saw Amory?”

Mahrree frowned, trying to follow what was going on.

Kellen looked down at his feet. “Probably a little before dinner time. You and I were talking out in the field about, about *her decision*. The rector left her alone to come speak with us. When we got back, we couldn't find her.”

Shem turned to Peto, Lilla, and Mahrree. “Do you know Kellen

“I don’t even know how to say it.”

and Amory Riling?”

Peto shook his head, and Lilla glanced up from his shoulder to shrug, her eyes too blurry to focus.

“Would Young Pere?”

“Not that I know of,” Peto said, looking confused.

Shem turned again. “Mahrree?”

Mahrree smiled sadly at Kellen, now remembering his name and face. The first time he walked into her world history class, she thought he was the very definition of the phrase “big and burly.” But she’d never known a gentler young man. Now he seemed as timid as a wounded sparrow.

He tried to return Mahrree’s smile, but it was a pitiful attempt.

“Kellen was in my world history class some years ago,” Mahrree told Shem. “Amory was also one of my students, I think a year or two later. But I don’t think Young Pere would know either of them.”

“What’s this about?” Lilla asked.

Shem didn’t immediately answer but seemed lost in thought. Or rather, lost in contemplation. “Amory is most likely also with the retrieval team—”

He stopped, closed his eyes and sighed.

Mahrree swallowed in dread. She knew that behavior of his. He was being told something, and she already knew it wasn’t good.

“No, she *is* with them. Ahno couldn’t remember her name, but it’s Amory. She told Ahno she’d obtained permission from me while I was counseling a couple. But what she failed to tell him was that *she* was one half of that couple, and I did *not* give her permission to abandon her husband and three daughters.”

Kellen was sagging, and Deck took his arm and led him to a chair.

Shem stepped over to put a comforting hand on his shoulder. “We’ll get you through this, Kellen. All right?” He shook his shoulder a little.

Kellen looked up at him, doubtful.

Deck remained by his side, his hand on his other shoulder.

Shem looked around the family. “I need to tell you all that this will not end easily.” He took a deep breath before dropping the next load on them. “It’s been impressed upon me that neither Young Pere nor Amory will be returning with the team when it comes back next week. They will not be back in Salem for . . . quite some time.”

Lilla cried out and again buried her face in Peto’s chest.

Mahrree hid her face behind her hand again, and Kew sat down

hard next to her.

Kellen leaned over in his chair and held his head.

Shem could barely choke out the next words. “You deserve to know and to be prepared. Their leaving will bring great turmoil to all of Salem. I am sorry. For all of us.”

Quiet sobs were all that was heard in the room.

Peto, still holding Lilla, looked Shem in the eye. “Guide Zenos, what would you have us do?”

Shem turned to Peto. “Well, we pray. We pray as if it all depends on the Creator. Then we get to work as if it all depends on us. At first light, I’ll send a group after the retrieval team. Hopefully they can pick their way through the mud. We’ll do all we can to reach them.”

“But you just said—” Mahrree began to point out that he’d told them they wouldn’t be coming back soon, but Shem’s sharp glare stopped her. He tilted his head toward weeping Lilla, and Mahrree understood. Even when there’s nothing to be done, something had to be done anyway. Just to know you tried.

Shem glanced over at Deck, then at Relf, Barnos, and Wes. “There’s something more. We didn’t finish marking the Norden route. We need to do that, as well as mark each of the other routes and resupply the emergency caves. Now, in the next few weeks. Before the harvest needs us.”

The room gasped.

“All of the routes? Guide, *why?*” Jaytsy asked.

“I’m not entirely sure, but I have the distinct feeling that we won’t be able to do so in the coming years. We’ll send only a few men on each route, on horses, to complete the markings as quickly as possible. Peto, you and Cephas move up your plans on resupplying the caves. See if the volunteering families can do it by the beginning of the next moon. If they ask why, just tell everyone we’re trying a new procedure. There’s no need to alarm anyone, especially since I know for a fact that Idumea’s armies aren’t coming next year.”

“Shem,” Mahrree pressed gently, “then . . . *why?*”

She felt sorry for Shem tonight, who seemed to be shouldering the burdens of the entire valley. “Sometimes we just do what we’re commanded to, because we’re faithful. We don’t need reasons; we just need to obey.”

He looked around the room of stunned family, and something in his firm demeanor melted slightly.

“But,” and he waited until everyone looked at him, “we still have

“I don’t even know how to say it.”

time. And now, we’ll kneel together. If you hear a loud cracking noise, don’t be alarmed. It’s not a lightning strike or a breaking tree. It’s just my knees.”

Even Kellen’s somber face turned to a small smile as Shem kneeled with great emphasis, and a distinct and loud cracking sound filled the room.

Mahrree cringed, and Shem smiled at her discomfort.

“Your turn, Mahrree. How loud can you crack?”

Now the entire family smiled sadly as Mahrree stood up from her chair and winced as she kneeled next to Shem, supporting herself on his shoulder. There were only a few small popping sounds.

Shem shook his head in disappointment. “Should’ve been in the army, Mahrree. That’s how to properly ruin your knees. Either that or run a few races.”

The rest of the family and Kellen joined them in a large circle and listened to Guide Zenos pray for guidance, strength, wisdom.

When he prayed for someone to watch over the lost ones, Mahrree felt another stab of loneliness. When he asked for those at home to be consoled, she felt her father close again.

What she really wanted to feel was Young Pere’s hug from last night. She had no idea it’d be the last time, and she tried desperately to think what her last words were to him.

It was something about always loving him, wasn’t it?

Then again, it didn’t matter what she said, but what he remembered; what he shoved into that sandwich of his and swallowed down to take with him.

Didn’t she call him a ridiculous boy?

When Shem finished the prayer, the room felt slightly lighter, with a tiny bit of hope. Enough, Mahrree hoped, to sustain them.

She went back to her chair and dabbed at her eyes, while Peto and Deck spoke with Kellen. The young husbands huddled together, waving over Kew, Nool, and Hoyal to discuss the tree marking needs, and the rest of the family consoled each other. The sound of galloping horses approaching the house indicated that Lori and Jori had arrived, and Lilla tore out of the house to greet them, followed by Hycy.

But Shem came over to Mahrree and kneeled again in front of her for a private conversation. First, there was more cracking.

“Do you do that on purpose, knowing how it makes my insides squirm?” Mahrree asked.

“Yes, I do,” Shem confessed. “I can make them crack as loud as

I want. I was just hoping to see something else on your face besides that miserable expression again.”

“Well, you’re *such* a ray of sunshine on a bleak, dark day.”

Shem shrugged. “Guides don’t tell you what you want to hear, but what you *need* to hear—”

“Shem, it’s all my fault,” she interrupted in an urgent whisper. “I totally messed up with him.” Trembling, she said, “Is *this* why I wasn’t allowed to go with Perrin when he died? *This*?! To say all the wrong words to my grandson and send him running into the world that he can’t handle?”

“Oh, Mahrree—no!” Shem said, grabbing her hands to hold them. “This is not your fault, not in the least! You can’t . . . *you can’t* think like this. You’ve had enough experience with him to know that he’ll do whatever he sets his mind to, no matter the evidence around him that it’s a bad idea. The Creator could send a mountain to fall on top of him to stop him, and still Young Pere would find a way to disregard it.”

She could only bob her head noncommittally. He was trying to make her feel better, but on a raw egg-and-bacon-pie day like today, nothing was going to work.

Shem could see that, and he sighed. Then he said, “My visit at Eltana’s didn’t go well.”

Mahrree couldn’t help but smile wryly at that. “I’m sure it didn’t. What did you learn?”

“She was startled to hear that he’d left already. Clearly, that wasn’t part of her plans. Nor was him leaving her notes in his room for you and Lilla to find when you were searching it for clues.”

Mahrree grumbled. “I’m sure she told him something like ‘hide all evidence of this clandestine collaboration,’ and like an innocent Salemite, Young Pere had no idea what ‘clandestine collaboration’ means. Oh, Shem. He’s just too stupid to survive down there!”

“I’ll try to get more out of Eltana later,” Shem promised. “Maybe something that can help us. I wasn’t entirely in control of myself when I confronted her,” he admitted.

A corner of Mahrree’s mouth lifted into a smile. “You mean, you let her have it?”

“That, and then some more, I’m afraid.”

“I only regret that I missed witnessing you chew her out,” Mahrree told him. “But it’s an image I’ll cherish for the rest of my life.”

Shem’s face was a mixture of regret and pride. “Ask the women

“I don’t even know how to say it.”

she lives with about it if you need more details. I think I terrified the poor things.”

Mahrree wanted to smile at that, but she just couldn’t. “Shem, I don’t know how much more I can take. Now I’ve lost both my Perrin Shins.”

“Our Perrin is gone as well, isn’t he?” Shem whispered. “I could feel someone else was missing besides Young Pere.”

Not for the first time that night Mahrree felt the tears building.

“Ah, Mahrree, I’m so sorry,” he whispered. “I think I know how you feel. I don’t know what I’ll do without my big brother whispering in my mind. He went to find Young Pere, didn’t he?”

Mahrree could barely get out the words, “I told him to go.”

Shem leaned forward and put his forehead against hers. “I don’t know yet what will happen to Young Pere,” he whispered, “but if anyone could reach him besides you, it’s Perrin.”

He kissed her on her forehead, then stood up with a little bit of effort and a little more creaking.

Mahrree winced at his noise.

Shem walked over to Kellen. “Let’s take you home. Your little girls will you need you tonight. I’ll speak to Rector Anth so that he and his wife can work on getting you some help until your parents arrive. It’s fitting that tomorrow is Holy Day. We all need a little rest after today, I think.”

Peto and Deck each gave Kellen an encouraging embrace, and he wiped at his eyes. “Thank you, Guide. All of you. I hope you find your son.”

“I hope you find your wife,” Mahrree told him.

“She hasn’t wanted to be my wife for some time now,” Kellen said despairingly. “I don’t really know what she wanted. She just kept saying she wanted something more, that she wanted out. She was insisting on a termination of marriage today,” he admitted, looking at the floor hopelessly. “I just know I love her. I think I always will. But I’m not enough for her, I guess.”

Shem put an arm around him. “No more guessing, no more worrying about what should’ve been. All we can do now is take care of today and start working on tomorrow. Your daughters will be worried, and Mrs. Ling has a strange idea that children should be in bed before sundown. Not the most fun baby tender we could find, is she? I’m sure we can find someone more agreeable. We are all family, after all. We have help on every side.”

Chapter 21--“You’re going to have to do much better than that.”

It was darkening by the time the retrieval team reached the glacial valley fort. The riders were drenched, but they’d avoided most of the dangerous runoff. At the fort obscured by tall pines they could change, eat, and sleep before the next leg of the journey down to Edge. Province 8. Whatever.

The guards at the fort were surprised to see them arrive early, and that there were ten in the group instead of eight. But it wasn’t a problem. The fort was supplied to take care of the needs of fifty people, with room to sleep twenty-five at a time.

Young Pere and Amory found themselves in the narrow eating area of the fort, filling up on stew while the team discussed travel arrangements in the front reception room, and Dr. Snelling received a tour of the long narrow building that followed the contour of the large stand of pines and aspens that surrounded it.

The two tag-alongs ate in awkward silence for a few minutes, occasionally glancing at each other with polite smiles. No one had conversed while riding up the mountain to avoid exposing themselves to the rain, and now Young Pere felt uncomfortable sitting so close to a woman he didn’t know. Finally, he thought of something to say.

“I’m sorry to hear about your uncle.”

But she didn’t hear him, because at the same time she said, “You’re Perrin Shin’s grandson, aren’t you?”

They looked at each, confused, then chuckled.

“What did you say?” Amory asked.

“I’m sorry . . . I don’t remember now.”

“But you’re a Shin, aren’t you?”

“Yes, I am. Call me . . . Pere.”

“You’re going to have to do much better than that.”

“That’s right,” she nodded with a smile. “*Young Pere*. I was sorry to hear about your grandfather. Rather sudden, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, it was,” Pere mumbled.

“I saw him a few times when he came down to our tower station,” she recalled. “I was only a girl when they were building the one next to our home, and I’d go out and watch. He was quite unforgettable, wasn’t he?” she said, a little dreamily.

Pere didn’t know how to respond to that. She had the same far-away look in her eyes Mrs. Yordin had when she talked about his grandfather.

“I’m a little surprised they’re letting you go,” Amory said. “Would seem rather dangerous, I’d think, to let the world know the Shins still exist.”

“Why do you say that?” he asked cagily.

“Because your grandmother would.”

Pere sneered slightly. “My grandmother?”

“Yes. She was my world history teacher. Told us all about the ‘demise of the Shins’.”

Pere scoffed. “She’s *everyone’s* world history teacher. And she didn’t tell you *everything*. I know. I had to take her class as well.”

Amory smirked. “So why are they letting you go?”

Pere hesitated to remember his story, which he hadn’t yet rehearsed enough. “As part of my training to become a doctor.”

Amory sat back and smiled demurely. “No it’s not. You’re lying.”

“I am not!”

She rolled her eyes. “Salemmites are terrible liars. You’re going to have to do much better than that.”

“Why do you think I’m lying?”

“Because you hesitated to respond, your eyes darted when you spoke, and your shoulder twitched. You’re giving yourself away. You have to control your eyes, your body, and especially your breathing. Don’t twitch, don’t back down, and don’t blink. Here, watch me.”

She leaned in close to Pere and her sparkling green eyes held his brown ones.

“But first I have to admit something, although I can’t believe I’m saying this because I just barely met you. Looking into your eyes is having a startling effect on me,” she said in a sultry tone, “and there’s nothing I want more than to slide my hands all over your chest to find out just how firm you really are.”

Pere knew he wasn’t breathing and he didn’t know how to start

again. But he did know enough not to let his eyes bulge as he stared at her in shock.

Amory leaned back and smiled. “You believed me there for a moment, didn’t you?” She tossed her blond hair as if forgetting it was tied back in a damp ponytail.

He remembered not to inhale again and gave her his well-practice half smile back. “Of course not,” he said staring back into her eyes.

Amory smiled. “Much better. Good eye control. But your shoulder twitched again. You’ll need to work on that if you want to pass yourself off as whatever you’re planning to do down there.”

Pere swallowed hard. “You won’t expose me?” he whispered.

“As long as you don’t expose me,” she whispered back.

Pere smiled, still feeling a bit shaken by her closeness. “That was quite a line there.”

She chuckled. “That’s how I started. Sweet talking my *husband*,” she said with agitation. “If I could say those things to him without flinching, I knew I could say anything to anyone. He was such a simpleton. He believed me, every time.”

“How did he . . . pass away?” Pere asked carefully.

Amory scoffed. “He’s not dead. He wouldn’t know how to die. All he knows is how to put wheat in the ground, take wheat out, then do it again and again. Nothing is duller than being married to a wheat farmer. Can you understand dull, Pere?”

“Oh, yeah. I understand dull.”

“I’m sure you do. You’ve been stuck in Salem like me. It’s not like I didn’t try to love him or try to see him as something more,” Amory said, rather flippantly. “But after twelve years you begin to realize that’s as good as it’s going to get, and that’s depressing. I’ve been wanting to get away from him for a while, and told him I wanted a termination of our marriage. He could go anywhere, do anything. He could even have the girls. He was the one who wanted them in the first place. But,” she sighed and picked at her stew, “I was too convincing earlier in our marriage. He was sure I *adored* him and that if I talked to Rector Anth and Guide Zenos enough, I’d remember how much.” Amory shuddered. “It was just too much. The stupid man couldn’t get it through his fat head that I wanted *out*! Even when I threw the kettle at him, he just stood there and let it hit him in the eye.”

“So you are part of that fighting couple Shem left to see?” Pere guessed. “I wanted to thank you for that. He’s my uncle, in case you

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didn’t know. He never would’ve let me leave, but you were a sufficient diversion.”

She raised an eyebrow. “That’s right. I forgot he’s your uncle. No wonder you were in such a hurry to get the team moving before he returned.”

“Yeah, I’m the one who told them to leave early because of the storm. Great timing, huh?”

“And for that I should thank *you*. I was planning to spend the night hiding in the barn until morning. Instead, I’m already out of Salem. But I’m telling you, Pere, you’re a terrible liar. Your guilt is all over your face. But there are ways to improve that. You need to think differently.”

“How?”

Amory glanced around the narrow room. Her eyes rested on the mug and she held it up. “Water, right?”

“Yes.”

“Is it always water? When it freezes, we no longer call it water. We call it ice. It’s changed. Is it still water?”

Pere narrowed his eyes at it. “It’s a *form* of water.”

“That’s right. Still water, in a way. Its form has changed. Now what about when it’s boiled away or evaporates?”

“When it’s steam?”

“Yes, is that still water?” she prodded.

“I’m not sure. You can’t even see it anymore, unless it hits something cold. Then it turns back to water”

“But what about outside on a hot day?” Amory said. “I put a bucket of water outside for the dog, and a few hours later it’s gone. You can’t see anything.”

“Well, sort of,” Pere said. “Enough evaporates and it eventually becomes clouds.”

Amory held up a finger. “So are clouds considered water?”

Pere thought for a moment. “Not really, I suppose. They hold water. They *are* water, in a way.”

“But you wouldn’t look up into the sky and say, ‘What interesting water formations,’ now would you?”

Pere smiled. “No, you wouldn’t.”

“Pere, you remember that axiom they had us practice with handwriting when we were young? ‘Nothing is more beautiful than truth’?”

Pere’s eyebrows furrowed, wondering where she was going with

this. “Yes,” he said slowly.

“Now think about this, who’s to say what is beautiful, and what is true? I mean, my second daughter is a repulsive thing, but still people croon and say, ‘Oh, what a beautiful child!’ Something can be oozing out of her nose, her hair’s impossible to brush, and she has a lazy eye. Still my husband’s grandmother will say, ‘How adorable!’”

Already Pere could tell he wasn’t dealing with the most loving mother in Salem. “There was a baby in our congregation a few seasons ago. Really quite an unpleasant looking thing, but you’re right—everyone said how beautiful he was. I don’t know how that mother kissed his face.”

Amory scoffed. “I produced three of those. The oldest is so shy now she won’t even make a peep, and the youngest just whines and whines. And my middle girl? Hideous, as you’ve heard.”

Pere didn’t know whether to chuckle or silently weep for those girls.

“Beauty is subjective, Pere,” Amory plowed on, already forgetting the daughters she’d left behind. “For some, nothing’s more beautiful than a cow, while someone else thinks nothing’s more beautiful than a flower. Different people, different definitions.”

Pere nodded. “I think I get what you mean.”

“So if beauty is subjective, isn’t truth as well? Isn’t truth what each of us decides is real and meaningful for ourselves?”

Pere thought about that. “But The Writings say there is only one truth.”

“Who wrote The Writings, Pere?”

“The guides.”

“And who are the guides?”

“Men chosen by the Creator.”

“And are men ever mistaken? Do they ever not quite get the truth *exactly* right?”

He hesitated. “Well, sure. But not when they are acting as the guides.”

“And how do you know when your uncle is acting as the guide?” Amory pressed. “Has he ever made a wrong decision or told you something that didn’t work out right?”

Pere sighed and remembered when the guide asked him to fast for his grandfather to ask for another miracle. None came.

“I can see by your face that he has,” Amory said quietly. “You need to work on that. Pere, truth changes its form, just like water. One

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moment it’s ice, an hour later it’s a cloud. It’s still there, but in different forms, with different names and different ways of showing itself.

“I told the scouts that I have no husband,” she continued. “In my mind, I don’t. That’s my form of the truth. I don’t need Guide Zenos’s permission to terminate my marriage. He can have his own truth, but he has no right to impose his truth upon me. Your thinking and reasoning have been controlled by Salem since the day you were born. But I’m telling you, it doesn’t have to be that way. You can see whatever truth you wish. And when you understand *that*, you’ll have no more problems telling anyone anything.”

Pere tried to follow all of that, and his mind got caught up in water and ugly babies and cows.

“I never lie, Pere,” Amory said firmly. “I only tell *my view* of the truth.”

He smiled, as coyly as she had earlier. “You say you never lie, yet a few minutes ago you looked me in the eyes and told me what an effect they had on you.”

“There are many levels of truth, Pere,” she said with a flirtatious grin. “Just like there are many shades of blue. I’ll leave it up to you to imagine just how much blue I really meant.”

Pere looked down at the table in embarrassment. He was used to being the one in control of the swoon.

“How old are you anyway, Pere?”

“Eighteen.”

Amory groaned. “That’s too bad. I thought you were a lot older than that. You look older.”

“That’s good to know,” Pere said, looking up. “How old are you?”

Amory sighed. “Thirty-four, last season. On my birthday I decided I didn’t want to spend the *next* thirty-four years stuck in the same life. I’m still relatively young, still rather attractive—”

Pere didn’t mean to cough in surprise at her humble evaluation of herself, but he did.

Amory smiled slyly at him. “Oh good. Thank you.” Her green eyes sparkled. “I still have time to find something better for myself.”

“You think it’s in the world?”

“Don’t you?”

Pere shrugged.

“What are you going for anyway?” she asked.

Pere hesitated. “I’m not really sure I want to confide that much in

you.”

To his surprise she shrugged. “That’s all right. I’m not telling you everything either.”

“So there’s no aunt you need to visit?”

She scoffed as if that were obvious. “What’s your final destination, Pere?”

He raised one eyebrow at her.

She smiled in understanding. “So, do you have a plan for getting away from the scouts once we reach Edge?”

“Perhaps,” Pere answered. “Do you?”

“Not completely. I don’t really know anything about the world except what I learned from *your* grandmother, and that was several years ago when I was at the university.”

“Do you . . . need some help?”

“I can help you in return, you know.”

“Help me how?”

Amory smiled in a way that unexpectedly stirred him. “We can discuss that later, once we’re safely in Edge.”

It was still dark outside when Pere gently shook Amory’s net litter. She was asleep, alone, in the forward office, and the guard was outside in front for the night.

Her eyes immediately popped open and she quietly slid out of the litter. She grabbed her pack and overcoat, and slipped out the side door, following Pere. He already had on his overcoat and pack, and they hurried to the stables.

Pere repositioned his pack. It was much heavier now, with food to last several days and a few handfuls of gold and silver slips taken from the supply room. He had wrapped them in Yordin’s lieutenant’s jacket to muffle their noise, and hoped it’d be enough. He didn’t know how much money it was, or how much they’d need.

“Can you ride bareback?” Pere whispered to Amory as they crept back to the end of the fort. “We’ll get out much faster if we don’t need to saddle up.”

“Yes, as long as the horses don’t run.”

“We’ll gallop to the end of the valley, but then the trail narrows so the horses will have to walk single file. You’re not afraid?”

Amory shook her head. “Look, the two moons are nearly full. The

“You’re going to have to do much better than that.”

storm’s passed. We’ll be fine.”

“We just need to get past the guards posted at the end of the valley. Let me handle it.”

They slipped into the stable and a moment later came out with two horses.

“This is just too easy,” Pere muttered as he and Amory mounted. It had to be a sign. Now all he needed was the guards to be gullible one last time. They walked the horses away from the fort before spurring them into a fast gallop south to the end of the valley, about a quarter mile away. Pere knew where the guards would be hiding and slowed down at the mouth of the dark valley. The two bodies dropped out of their hidden platforms in the trees just as he imagined they would.

“Where are you going so early in the morning?” one of them asked, jogging up to Pere.

He glanced over to make sure Amory’s hood was up as planned. He could see nothing of her face.

“Sir, we’re in a great hurry. Dr. Snelling here is concerned about the rector’s health. We decided to get an early start.”

“A doctor? Great!” said the second man. “I hope you have a moment. You see, I’ve had this pain right here—”

Pere shook his head. “I’m sorry, we really need to be going. Dr. Snelling has lost his voice riding up in the rain last night, and it’s too dark to properly see you anyway, sir. But we’ll be back in a couple of days. Dr. Snelling can certainly see you then.”

“But what if the pain is gone by then?”

Amory cleared her throat roughly, sounding convincingly male.

Pere nodded and turned to the guard again. “Please, time is of the essence. Dr. Snelling is eager to get down.”

“Of course, of course. I hope you feel better, Doctor.”

Amory cleared her throat again and nodded under her hood.

The guards stepped aside to allow the horses to pass. Not until they were a great distance down the narrow mountain trail did Amory finally push back her hood and chuckle.

Pere glanced back at her. The sky in the east was just beginning to brighten, and he could make out her features clearly. Even in the early morning light she was breathtaking.

“Doing all right, *Doctor?*”

Amory laughed lightly. “Will the First Resting Station be as easy?”

“Should be, since we’re not going into it. The trees are marked for an additional route on foot. I studied my father’s maps before we left. Some years ago he had the forests above Edge and Moorland marked like everything else. Once we hit the forest, we just need to find the correct route. We’ll have to abandon the horses then. It might be about a mile through the trees. You’re up to that, right?”

“Don’t I look like I’m in good physical condition?”

Pere let out a low whistle he hoped she didn’t hear. “Yep,” was all he answered as he turned back around.



The sun had just crested over the mountains. For the last five minutes Woodson and his scouts had been looking around the fort for their two missing members.

That’s when the four horses and riders came racing into the valley. While the animals were exhausted and frothy, three of the riders continued on in a gallop past the fort, while the fourth rider dismounted and jogged over to Woodson.

Woodson gestured to the three Clarks growing smaller in the distance. “What’s that all about?”

“They’re after Young Perrin Shin and Amory Riling.”

“Oh, no,” Woodson whispered, suddenly understanding. “They’re not here anymore, are they? That’s why we can’t find them.” He whistled loudly to get the attention of the other scouts and waved them back in. “Listen up!”

The rider, still trying to catch his breath, told the men between gasps, “Guide Zenos didn’t give permission for his nephew to join the team, nor for Mrs. Riling. She abandoned her family, and Young Perrin Shin may be headed to Sands.”

“Sands!” Woodson exclaimed. “What’s he going to do there?!”

“Unsure. It seems Mrs. Yordin has been meeting with him regularly. She’s not been cooperative yet.”

Woodson rubbed his temples. “The guide must be infuriated with me!”

“No, just with himself. Even Rector Shin was tricked by Young Pere. Guide Zenos just wants them brought back immediately.” He waved at the three riders nearly out of sight. “That’s what they’re trying to do. Could use your help, though. Don’t know how much longer their horses will last.”

“You’re going to have to do much better than that.”

“Of course,” Woodson sighed in frustration. He turned to the scouts who now joined him. “Go find the doctor! We need to leave now to catch our two runaways.”

Dr. Snelling came out of the fort and stretched with a broad grin on his face.

“What a fantastic place! Why, I could stare at this valley all morning—”

“Stare when we return. We’re leaving now!”

As soon as the sun came over the mountains, Pere and Amory clucked the horses into an uneasy trot down the narrow trail. The horses slipped and shifted nervously.

“Are you sure we need to hurry?” Amory called up to Pere as her horse lost his footing again. “We should be at least an hour ahead of them.”

“Yes, we need to hurry,” he answered. “As soon as they realize we’re missing, they’ll start looking for us. And if I know Uncle Shem, he’ll send a messenger to the fort telling them we’re supposed to return to Salem.”

“Well, he couldn’t send a messenger until first light—”

“Don’t be too sure. Shem was an expert at traveling in the dark as a younger scout. He could pick his way through any obstacle and find his way through anything in the blackest of nights. And he’s the one who’s been training the guards and scouts for the past twenty-five years. All of them can probably do what he could do.”

Pere was aware that his voice sounded a little admiring, and he tried to squash it.

“The retrieval team is probably already on its way. But Uncle Shem said he could do this route in four hours or less if the conditions were right. So far the trail on this side of the mountains is dry. The storm must have stopped at the glacier valley. At this rate we can make it to Edge before midday meal, but only if we hurry.”

“Sounds like you know what you’re doing. So I suppose you’re in charge, Pere,” Amory said.

“Yes, I am,” Pere whispered. Then added, “And I will be.”

Within two hours they reached an outcropping that overlooked Edge, just before the boulder field began. Pere stopped his horse and allowed Amory to catch up while he took in the village that lay below

him.

“There it is,” Pere said, disappointed. “It’s not nearly as impressive as I imagined . . .”

Amory scoffed. “This isn’t the whole world, Pere. This is just one little piece of it. Imagine this multiplied by twenty, with Idumea in the middle. Idumea is four times the size of Salem. You’re looking at . . . ‘Norden’.”

Pere tipped his head. “Hmm. Probably right. That must be the fort,” he nodded at a large wooden expanse of buildings, walls, and banners. He could barely make out figures walking back and forth like mites.

“So what are you planning to do here?” Amory asked.

Pere looked at her askance. “Nothing.”

“Come on, tell me. You’re going to join the army, aren’t you?”

Pere didn’t flinch, didn’t blink, and didn’t back down. “Absolutely not,” he said.

Amory gave him a dazzling smile. “Excellent! So you are! Well that makes sense. What else would the grandson of Perrin Shin, who is bored in Salem, do otherwise? I can hardly wait to see you in uniform.”

Pere sighed. “You figured all of that out?”

Amory chuckled. “Not too hard, Pere. But I didn’t read it on your face, if that’s what you’re worried about. You’re a quick study. So what’s your plan?”

Pere smiled slyly. “You’ll just have to wait and see, like the rest of the world.”

She smiled coyly back. “Ooh, I’m intrigued! I love surprises!”

Pere felt a knot growing in his stomach as he looked at her. He pressed his lips together firmly and nodded. “Best be on our way. The access to the boulder field is some ways down there. That’s where we continue on foot.”

Amory winked at him. “Lead on, Colonel Shin!”

Pere raised an eyebrow at her.

She raised both of hers at him.

The knot in his belly tightened.

It took Pere a little while to find the correct access point to the boulder field. There were several blind entrances and when he finally found the right markings, he groaned in frustration.

“These *are* hard to decipher,” Amory said with a sarcastic laugh. “I’m *so* glad I’m with someone as smart as you. No wonder it took

“You’re going to have to do much better than that.”

you half an hour to find it.”

Pere grumbled. “I wasn’t exactly expecting this,” he said running his hand over the precise etchings in the stone that said, “Foot Entrance” with a large arrow pointing to the correct opening. He shook his head again at the stupidity of it all. He half expected to see a container of swords nearby that said, “Take one!”

“Then again,” he said, “it’s not like anyone from Edge is going in the opposite direction. This sign is only for Salemites. They couldn’t make it any easier, could they?”

They left the horses and entered into the interlinked caves created by the large crevices between the boulders. Less than half an hour later they were out, having followed more etched arrows along the stone leading them easily through the maze. They found themselves at the forest, and before them was a chasm that spewed out steaming water.

Amory knelt by it and cautiously touched some of the water on the edge that spilled into a little stream headed down the hill. “This is amazing! I read about these, but never imagined I would see one. Hot spring, right?”

Pere knelt down next to it and tested the water with a finger. “Nearly boiling!” he exclaimed. He looked at it for a moment, then put his palm completely in the water and yanked it out again.

Amory blinked at him in surprise. “You already knew it was hot, so you put your hand in *again*?”

Pere hated it when people questioned his actions. “I just wanted to see exactly *how* hot it was, all right?!”

“Why?”

“Why not?”

“Because it’s stupid to get burned.”

“I’m not burned,” he said, shaking his hand and ignoring the burning sensation. “Come on. This is when the trip gets really interesting. Right there, see the slashes? Now those are what I’m looking for. Watch your step. The ground can be treacherous, so don’t stray.”

Amory stepped in behind Pere who started carefully through the thick trees. They hadn’t traveled too far when a strong smell reached their noses.

“Ew, what is that?” Amory scowled.

“I’m guessing that’s sulfur.” Pere sniffed the air. “My father said it smells like rotten eggs. It means there’s activity nearby. All the more reason to stick to the path.”

“What path?” Amory said, still scowling.

“This one,” he said, pointing to another directional slashing on the trees. “The angle at the top shows the direction we go, the number of slashes underneath tell us how many tens of paces before we need to look for another marked tree. Two slashes, twenty average paces, due south. Now, if you look from where we came,” he said as he turned around—

And stopped.

He scanned the thick forest behind him, panic rising slowly in his gut.

“What is it?” Amory asked.

Pere didn’t answer but continued to look at the trees, the panic now reaching his throat and choking it. Frantically, he rushed back to the tree with the bear-like slashes and noticed something he hadn’t before.

“What is it?” Amory asked again, more urgently.

“Uhh . . . there are no markings to get back,” he said. “When we mark the trees to the ancient temple site, we mark the backs of them on the way down, to help those who may need to return to the valley. But these backs aren’t marked. Wait a minute . . .”

He spun and raced up through the forest to the boulder field, sprinting until he reached the boulders.

And his heart fell.

There were no etchings on the rock saying, “This way to Salem.” All of the boulders, and the cracks between them, looked exactly the same.

“All right,” he told himself, “no problem. I’ll just mark them now. The foot path was right before the hot spring, which is . . . Where’s the hot spring?!”

Just that quickly, he was lost.

“Hot spring, hot spring, hot spring,” he muttered uselessly as he jogged up and down the boulder line, but there was no spring anywhere, as if the meadows had swallowed it up in the last ten minutes.

“All right, all right, all right,” he tried to calm himself. “Just head back down to the trees. They’re only trees. You can handle this. Just find Amory again . . . Where’s Amory?”

Suddenly he realized something: getting into the world was simple. Getting out was not.

Throwing caution to the wind, he bellowed, “Amory? Amory!”

In the distance he heard a faint call back. “Pere? Where did you

“You’re going to have to do much better than that.”

go? Pere!”

He followed the voice, trying to watch his footing as well as watch for markings on the trees.

“Pere! PERE!” her shrieking eventually grew louder.

“I’m coming, I’m coming!” he called. “I hear you. Keep your voice down!” and he finally broke through the underbrush to find her in the same place he left her. Or so he assumed.

She rushed over and threw her arms around him.

“All right, I’ll admit it. This forest is scary,” she whimpered into his neck. “You were gone only a few minutes, but that slick of mud there began to bubble! This place is so weird!”

Pere took a deep breath and tried to still his heart. It shouldn’t have been beating so quickly, and he realized part of the problem may have been that Amory wasn’t releasing him. She likely needed more comforting, he decided, based on her frantic panting now into his chest and judging by the fierceness of her embrace, as if he were the only man alive who could keep her safe. The proper thing to do in such a situation, he realized, was to help calm her down.

“It’s all right, it’s all right,” he repeated as he ran his hands over her back. “We can still see the markings going down. Right there on that tree. I’ll just slash the rest of trees as we pass them, so when we return we can make it at least this far back up.”

She pulled away from him a little and looked up into his face. “When are you planning to return?”

He was aware that his arms were still wrapped around her body. Her surprisingly firm and narrow body. “Not for some time. I just plan to keep all my options open.”

She looked down at his chest and, as if suddenly realizing she was still hugging him, abruptly stepped out of his arms.

“When are *you* planning to return?” Pere asked, feeling immensely embarrassed and unsure of what do with his hands now that they weren’t touching her anymore. Remembering what he needed to do, he reached for his pack and pulled out his knife.

She watched his every movement. “I haven’t decided yet. I’ve been so concerned about getting down that I hadn’t planned that far ahead. I’m not even sure if I *want* to return.”

“Really? What will you do in the world, then?”

She smiled demurely at him. “Tell me all your plans, and I’ll tell you all of mine.”

Pere eyed her. “Understood. Let’s get moving. This may take

longer than I anticipated.”

Amory exhaled. “Twenty paces, due south? Let’s go.”

It was less than a mile through the forest, but even with its steady slope it took Pere and Amory a couple of hours to reach the end of it. His stopping to slash the backs of the trees was only one of the causes for their delay. The other was staring in surprise at the violence of the ground around them.

In one clearing, a hot fountain of water shot into the air at least thirty paces above them. Not too far beyond that they found enormous caverns spewing steam and emitting low growling noises that sounded as if the ground was alive and not entirely happy about it.

They skirted another barren clearing where all vegetation was withered, and the corpse of a deer lay rotting near a vent of some kind, as if whatever it was emitting poisoned the animal.

At each new wonder they stared in amazement and tried to remember the name of the natural event they were watching. Pere almost wished he’d paid closer attention in his world history course. He’d heard his father and grandparents discuss these phenomena multiple times as he grew up, but never paid attention, because why should he care about something he’d never see?

Now he carefully picked his way around, behind, and terrifyingly near some of those things his grandmother had tested him on last year.

They knew they were nearing the end of the forest because of a loud rhythmic sound they heard coming through the trees. At first Pere thought it might have been another belching cavern, but as they neared the deep beating sound, it didn’t seem natural.

Pere and Amory cautiously approached the edge of the forest and stared in amazement at the most bizarre view they’d seen that day.

Before them was a vast field, the grasses trampled flat by the presence of several hundred people. Most of them looked to be about Pere’s age and they were . . . bouncing. That was the best way he could describe it. Bouncing to the rhythms that came from a slightly raised platform where five men—

He guessed they were men, but Pere wasn’t quite sure as he looked at their hair which was much longer than Shem’s or Puggah’s, so actually they could have been women, but their bodies didn’t look quite right—

Where five *people* beat out rhythms on enormous drums.

Pere felt the pounding in his gut and the urge to bounce along with the people trampling the grasses. He noticed that, strangely, no one

“You’re going to have to do much better than that.”

seemed to be looking at anyone, but past each other. Yet somehow they were bouncing and gyrating into each other, and in such deliberate ways that he felt the need to look away, except that curiosity kept him staring at the scene.

No one in Salem would *ever* consider standing that close to someone they weren’t married to, and they *certainly* wouldn’t collide repeatedly into the body of someone else.

All at once Pere was overwhelmed with feelings of shock, fear, anger . . . and fascination.

“Oh my,” Amory whispered next to him. “What *is* this?”

“I have no idea,” Pere whispered back.

“It certainly isn’t a Holy Day meeting, is it?”

Pere had completely forgotten that today was Holy Day. It felt like it was no day at all, just a piece of time taken out for him to witness.

He scanned the perimeter and saw tall posts to hold torches, lighting the area as the sun went down. A river ran nearby the field and Pere saw many more people lying on the banks of it. When he looked again he realized that what he thought were individuals were actually two people, rolling between the trees and kissing and—

Pere’s chin dropped.

Muggah *never* mentioned anything like *this* in his world history course.

“Oh *my*,” Amory whispered again.

Pere couldn’t even respond. They needed to find a way to introduce themselves into the society of Edge, but this . . . *this* was . . . oh, *my*.

“We can’t go there!” Amory said to Pere, gripping his arm.

He exhaled in relief.

“Not looking like *this*,” she said in disgust. She turned him to her and looked him up and down. “But I can fix it. Come with me,” and she began to pull him to an old shed that stood on the edge of the forest.

Pere was too stunned to speak, so he followed her into the small abandoned building and she shut the door behind them. The shed reeked of old urine and something else Pere didn’t know how to define, nor did he want to.

“This is better. We can analyze them without drawing attention to ourselves. Look at their clothes,” she said, peering out the small, broken window.

“I have been,” Pere breathed.

“They look a bit like ours, but after a bad storm. I think all those rips and holes are deliberate. Some are certainly well positioned, aren’t they?”

Pere tried not to look at the group of girls that swayed to the drums about twenty paces away. They wore more holes and tears than cloth, revealing much more flesh than he’d ever seen on someone older than a toddler.

Amory turned from the small window and evaluated Pere’s clothes. “Yes, I can fix this. Take off your shirt.”

Pere hesitated. “Why?”

“I’m going to make us look like them. Come on, take it off!”

He’d forgotten that scouts to the world usually brought along “worldly clothes,” as they called them. They needed to blend in with the villagers, but all he had in his pack was Yordin’s uniform, and he wasn’t ready to put that on yet. Not in front of Amory.

Reluctantly he unbuttoned his shirt and handed it to her. Immediately he felt exposed, especially as Amory took a deep breath and smiled at his broad, bare chest.

He folded his arms tightly in front of himself.

She took his shirt, struggled for a moment to rip off the collar, then gripped it with her teeth and tore it like a starving dog tossed a steak. Then she twisted the torn collar, and the cloth that came with it, into a short rope. Draping his shirt over her shoulder, she next released her tightly bound hair and let it cascade past her shoulders.

Pere stopped breathing again, unable to take his eyes off her long, blond waves.

She tied the rope around her head like many of the other young women wore their hair, then pulled some bits of hair here and there for a messier look.

No one would have believed she was a thirty-four-year-old farmer’s wife. Pere certainly had a hard time remembering that as he watched.

Amory peered out the window again, looked at Pere’s tattered shirt, and glanced at her own tunic. Without warning, she peeled it off over her head.

Pere gasped. His eyes grew large before he instinctively put his head down and covered his eyes with one hand.

“Oh Pere, do grow up. Look at those women out there. They’re wearing less than me right now. I still have my undergarment on—”

“You’re going to have to do much better than that.”

Pere heard another ripping sound that sent a wave of nausea through his belly.

“—which now looks better.”

He couldn’t help himself, and parted his fingers to steal a glance.

Amory had torn the lower portion off her undershirt to reveal her torso, which—he also couldn’t help but notice—was slender and curved. The upper half of her was still covered, barely, by thin white cotton.

Amory noticed his glance. “So, what do you think? Not bad?”

His heart pounded so loudly he was sure she could hear it.

“I wouldn’t know, Amory,” he mumbled.

She smirked. “I’m sure you wouldn’t. We have to create new names for ourselves. It’s the fashion now, I’ve heard, everyone re-names themselves. I was thinking of something supernatural” she said, taking up her tunic and ripping it judiciously. “Maybe something like, Dancer from the Stars. I think that’s what they’re doing out there, dancing. Certainly not like our dances, is it?” She tore off strips of his shirt to tie onto hers, creating a chaotic top.

Pere grew light-headed as he watched her between his fingers, which ludicrously shielded him from nothing. She slipped on her abbreviated creation, and a thought flashed through his mind that he shouldn’t have been staring at her, but he dismissed it.

Amory now looked like one of the young women out there, so he dropped his hand from shielding his view.

She raised her eyebrows and smiled in a way that suggested all kinds of meanings, but Pere only understood a couple of them.

He felt a jab in his chest, just above his heart.

NO, YOUNG PERE! GET OUT, NOW!

He could picture his grandfather clearly, as if he stood in the small gap between him and Amory, like a faint fog. He almost heard the words as distinctly as he felt them.

DON’T LOOK AT HER, YOUNG PERE. NO MORE.

Amory rearranged bits of her hair. “Wish I had a mirror. And why are you looking at me like that, *Perrin*?” she said with disdain. “You looked just like him then. Your grandfather?” She fussed with the cloth fringing her exposed torso, trying to expose more of it.

“What was that?” he mumbled.

She glanced up. “You did. You looked just like Colonel Shin—*General* Shin—right then. All stern and humorless.”

“He had a sense of humor,” Pere defended weakly.

“Sure he did,” she said dismissively. “I even heard him laugh once when I was watching them build the tower. Really quite unforgettable . . .” Her voice trailed off as if lost in a memory. “I saw him come in, you know. When they first arrived in Salem? I must have been about nine years old. Now *that* was a man!” Amory stared off into the distance.

Pere frowned. He’d never heard someone describe his Puggah like he *was a man*.

As if that wasn’t bad enough, she kept going. “I remember the day he arrived. ‘The colonel’s here!’ That was the news. Oh, you should have seen him! I could tell every woman in the valley was staring at him. I think they all lined the road just to sigh. He was in his late forties I guess, and oh, was he impressive! I wished then his jacket wasn’t inside out. He was probably covered in ribbons and medals.”

Pere had no idea how to react to her description of his grandfather.

YOUNG PERE, GET OUT!

Amory looked at him. “You know, he must have appeared a great deal like you at your age. Just look at you. Ah, I have my chance, don’t I? *How firm are you?*” she reminded, and placed a long, sleek finger on his bare shoulder and slowly slid it across to his neck.

Pere froze in place.

“I was always intrigued by army officers. I was envious of Mrs. Shin, especially when she was telling us stories about what their life was like years ago. My mind would always wander to picturing him younger. I imagined Colonel Shin had huge, round shoulders, just like these.”

Pere swallowed hard as her hands ran across them, and then slid down to his chest which she patted.

“My, but you *are* solid,” she said, evaluating his chest and tipping her head.

It was too much. Pere couldn’t even swallow. He gathered up all his courage, and felt oddly that some of it was borrowed from the colonel.

“Amory, please stop,” Pere’s voice trembled.

“Not yet. I told you I could help you as well, once we got to Edge. You look like a man who could use some *help* right now.”

He barked a nervous laugh. “Uh, I’m not exactly sure what kind of help you think I need, but I’m pretty certain this isn’t . . .” He didn’t know how to finish, unable to think clearly. All he could do was stare

“You’re going to have to do much better than that.”

into her dazzling eyes and feel her hands on his flesh.

Slowly, almost cruelly, she removed them.

“All right, Pere. I’ll let you think about it for a while. Let your mind consider ways I could *help* you. We used your expertise to get here, and I can thank you by sharing some of mine. There’s a reason why my dull, dense husband would never willingly let go of me.”

GET OUT, YOUNG PERE!

“I have an idea,” she said, giving him that same smile with multiple meanings—meanings that he was beginning to discern. “We spend a few hours out there learning about life in the world,” she slid her hand up to his shoulder again, “then we come back here and compare notes. Maybe then you’ll have some idea of how I can thank you.”

Pere’s blood was coursing through his veins with an energy he’d never before encountered. Something that made him want to grab her and, and . . .

Her hand slid off his shoulder. “I think we’re almost ready,” Amory said, picking up his shirt. She tore it twice, lengthwise, down the front. “Your shirt, or what’s left of it, should blend in now. Besides, those women will want to see a little muscle.” She handed it to him reluctantly. “Put it on.”

Pere quickly did so, and felt another jab that reached his belly.

GET OUT, NOW.

“Just one more detail,” Amory said. “Take off your trousers—”

“No!” Pere said loudly, startling even himself. “They’re just fine, I’m sure!” He fumbled with the remaining buttons on his shirt without trying to look at her, but he noticed the shadows playing across her face as she considered him.

“Fine, Pere,” she said with that same smile that both disturbed and intrigued him. “We’ll be back here soon enough anyway. I can make modifications then, if necessary.”

One more time he heard the voice almost as distinctly as he felt it. It was a general’s command.

PERE, GET OUT, NOW!

He made his decision.

I will get out, he said to the voice in his mind. I came all this way, and now I’m going to go learn about the world.

“Let’s go,” he said to Amory. Pere walked out the door and felt distinctly that something was left behind. The stabbing feeling, the voice in his mind, the presence of . . . yes, it was Puggah. It was all

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gone.

As he walked down the hill to the crowd he felt absolutely nothing at all. Finally, he was free.

Chapter 22--“Oh, are you *new*?”

Pere knew it was morning only peripherally, and he was aware that he was lying in the dirt among the trees that ringed the grassy field. Performance arena, he remembered it was called.

But his eyes refused to open. On his face he felt the odd sensation of cold morning fog and burning sunshine. He was also aware that the tops of his ears hurt, although he couldn't fathom why.

He rolled to his side and several rocks jab into his ribs. But trying to sit up was surprisingly difficult, since his head seemed to weigh another twenty pounds.

“You're Fogged,” a lazy voice came to him from a nearby tree. “Don't try to get up too soon or you'll feel it even more. Just wait, Bucky. Enjoy the haze.”

Pere tried to open his eyes and managed only a squint.

Another man, perhaps a couple of years older than him, was propped up against a nearby tree.

Somewhere behind him, Pere heard the sound of water, and it rushed with annoying loudness. He would have covered his ears to block out the noise, but parts of his body felt unusually numb, except for the tops of his ears which throbbed.

And his head, which now pounded as if someone were using it as a drum.

“Good batch of Enhancements last night,” said his companion, who was slowly slumping down the tree but didn't seem to notice. “Some nights the batches are weak, but last night's . . . Well, I can see you're still feeling it too.”

“Enhancements?” Pere mumbled.

“The vials, Bucky! Oh, are you *new*?”

Pere didn't appreciate his condescending tone.

The man, scruffy in both face and clothes, tipped over to a dog-

like position and crawled over to Pere. Grabbing his face roughly, he twisted Pere's head to look at one ear, then the other.

"Your right ear looks good, but they botched the left pretty bad. That's probably going to get infected. Shove your head in the river. That always helps. Do it several times a day, till they're better. Best to try for upstream, but at this time of morning, you're pretty safe from the others using the river."

Pere did his best to focus on his neighbor and saw that the upper ridges of his ears were studded with jagged bits of metal and broken glass.

The man fingered his own ear. "Had it done last year sometime. It hurts less when you're in the Fog. The stinging should stop in a few weeks. Looks good, my friend! Trust me, dunk your head. Just over there."

Understanding only bits and pieces, but thinking that showing his head under water sounded pretty good right now, Pere struggled to a similar dog-like position and crawled toward the sound of the water. It was deafening by the time he saw it, a moderately-sized stream, maybe three feet deep.

Something blocked his path, and he couldn't figure out how to negotiate it.

His neighbor called to him, "Just crawl over her. She won't notice. She was Fogging until early this morning."

So it was a body, Pere concluded, and he did his best to crawl up and over the object that felt like a squishy log.

Dutifully he made his way to the water's edge and plunged in his head. Almost instantly his ears went numb, matching other parts of his body. He wasn't sure if that was a good thing or not, so he waited patiently until he could make a decision. Or until he felt better—

Something pulled hard on his neck, dragging him out of the water.

"Bucky, you nearly drowned yourself! Come back up, before someone else takes our trees."

Pere crawled after his companion to the trees and noticed several other bodies in similar conditions of half-awakeness. At the nearest available tree trunk, he fell flat on his face into the dirt and was only vaguely aware that mud was forming in his hair.

"I'm not Bucky," he muttered as he tried to determine if his feet were still attached to his legs.

"I know you're not Bucky," the man said, irritated. "It's just a name. You know, bucked from the house—Bucky. Left the confines

“Oh, are you *new*?”

of the chicken coop—Cooped. Just a label, Buckers.”

“There you are!” a piercing voice walked up to him.

One of his eyes tightened into a cringe and stayed that way. He squinted into the punishing sunlight to see a girl with rumpled light brown hair and a pale face standing over him. His attempt to roll over to his back to try to see her more clearly was stopped by a sharp rock stabbing him in the spine, so she crouched by him instead.

The first thing Pere noticed was her scent. He’d encountered badgers that stank more pleasantly. Next, he noticed her clothing, or lack thereof. He couldn’t find a safe place to look at her. The thin strips of fabric wrapped around her body were carefully placed in only some areas, and showed considerably wear and dirt, and flesh, in others.

Shifting his gaze to her eyes, he noticed they were strangely vacant and hard to focus on. Maybe it was all the smeared paint around them, making her look like some kind of bizarre animal.

“Watch out for her,” his neighbor said idly, but with an edge. “Lolo’s a sow.”

The girl fell on all fours and hissed at him before shouting, “Shut your mouth!”

Pere stared at her, once the words stopped echoing in his brain. He’d never heard a human hiss like that.

“Bucky,” her voice dripped with concern as she ran a finger through his wet hair. He considered that she could have been a pretty girl, but right now she looked . . . bland. And unfamiliar.

“You were clumsy,” she said in a low and saucy voice, “but I think that was the Fog. Tonight, no Fog. We’ll try it again.”

“Stay away from her, Cooped!” the lazy voice sounded amused.

“You leave him alone!” Lolo yelled at him.

Pere sucked in his breath at the noise so close to his now-throbbing ears.

“I’ll find you here,” she promised. “There’s no performance tonight, Bucky, so the trees will be less crowded,” and she planted an unexpected kiss on his mouth.

She must have been mistaken as to who he was. He wanted to set that straight, if only to get her to leave.

“Pere,” he muttered as he tried to push her away, but his arms were strangely weak.

“What?” she asked.

“I am Pere, not Bucky.”

She made a face as if trying on the name. “Pear? I guess that’s better than Plum.”

Did she really think that was funny? By the sincerely confused expression on her face, she didn’t. She didn’t look like she could recognize anything as funny. Or interesting. Or intelligent. She just *was*.

“I’ll find you tonight, Peary,” she reminded him.

As she moved to stand up, she squeezed him in a place no female in his memory had ever touched him before, probably since he was a baby in changing cloths.

Pere froze in shock. Her startling grab released a new memory in his mind, and it was raw, vivid, and nauseating.

He *did* know her.

As she sauntered away, Pere crawled as fast as he could back to the river bank, and retched violently along the edge. The only thought in his mind was, “No, no, no, no, no . . .”

“That’s it,” called the lazy voice again. “Now you’re doing better.”

He slumped along the bank, sweating.

“No, no, no,” he muttered. “I *didn’t* do that. It wasn’t me. I *don’t* do that. I *wouldn’t* do that. No . . .” he whimpered. “No, I *did*! With her! No!”

Vomiting into the river not only cleared his belly but also his head, and memories from the night before flooded his mind, albeit in a jumbled mess. Desperate to retrace his steps and regain himself, he reached for his pack—

Where was the pack?

Frantically he felt along his body and back, but there was nothing but his torn shirt.

“I must have dropped it, I must have dropped it,” he mumbled anxiously, looking around. But there was nothing.

He scrambled back up to his tree, sure it’d be there, waiting for him—

Nothing. Nothing but dirt and mud and crushed grass.

His neighbor at the tree laughed, seemingly at nothing, or maybe at him, crawling around like a terrified dog.

“You, hey! A pack. Quit laughing and help me! I had a pack. Did you see where it went?”

The man chuckled and pointed at a butterfly before he responded with, “A bag-like thing? When was the last time you saw it?”

“Uh,” Pere tried to remember the evening and night of blurred

“Oh, are you *new?*”

images.

Dancing, Amory, drinking down those little vials, kissing one girl, bouncing against another, eating something he'd never tasted before, another vial, another girl, drinking something foul that sizzled in his mouth, dirt, that girl Lolo, lying in the dirt with her . . .

His belly heaved again.

Nothing made any sense, like someone ripped out all the pages in a book then tried to read them again out of order. “I don't know when I last had it,” he admitted.

“Did it have any food in it?”

“Yeah. Three days' worth.”

“Hmm. Any metal slips?”

“Bunch of slips of silver and gold.”

“Ooh. Any clothes?”

Another wave of nausea hit Pere. General Yordin's first uniform, Mrs. Yordin's most treasured possession. And his knife. And his list of officers in Sands—

“Yes!” he nearly wailed.

The man scoffed as he pushed himself upright against his tree again. “So a bag-like pack full of food, gold, silver, and clothes, and you wonder why you can't find it?”

“Yes!”

“Bucky, it's been lifted.”

“Been what?”

“Lifted. Flied away. Sunk to another existence. Oiled by the carps. Twinked with clasmids.”

“What?!”

“Sto-len, Bu-cky!”

He sagged. Just when he didn't think he could get any lower, he was handed a shovel.

“Creet, Bucky, just where are you from? Between Flax and Waves?”

The phrase sounded familiar. He couldn't remember why, but it sounded safe. “Yeah, something like that,” he mumbled holding his head as the reality of what happened began to squeeze his brain.

The man laughed. “So you admit to being an idiot? That's corn.”

“How do I get it back?” he whimpered. “I've got to get it back! I've lost it all—everything. More than everything!”

“You *don't* get it back. It's gone. Forever. All in one night. Poor Buckers.”

“Isn’t there . . . law enforcement or something?” He began to sob like a little boy, and he didn’t care. “Someone who can help?”

“Some villages still have law enforcement, but here there’s only the fort, and the only time they help anyone here is when they’re looking for new recruits. It’s gone, Bucky From Between Flax and Waves. Rooster,” he snapped his fingers, “you are *rich*.”

Less than half of what the man said made any sense, but he knew sarcasm when he heard it.

“No, no, no, no,” Pere mumbled. There was nothing left in his belly to retch, but it tried anyway.

Then he remembered, and hope stabbed into him like a sliver in his finger. Amory! Maybe she had the pack, and was keeping it safe for him, because she saw that he was *compromised* during the night.

“Hey, you again. Stop watching that butterfly for just a moment. I was with a woman earlier yesterday. Blond, green eyes, uh . . .” Pere tried to think what else he remembered of her.

The man smiled, and it turned into a leer. “Oh yeah. I think I remember her. Whew! She was some piece of experationism, wasn’t she?”

Pere wished the man would speak with words everyone knew.

“I didn’t see her after the sun went down,” the man continued. “She took off with a uniform that wandered down here. Some boy looking for a diversion I think.”

“A uniform?” Pere asked, gall rising in his throat again.

“Yeah, but I don’t know the rank.”

“So somebody *in* a uniform? She wasn’t just *carrying* it?”

The man tipped his head. “You are a real snock, aren’t you?”

Pere sobbed for at least an hour. Periodically he’d get up, search the area again, then sit again and sob some more.

Once he even tried to climb the trees, in case he’d tossed the pack up there for safe keeping, but after he fell the fourth time because he couldn’t get his arms to coordinate with his legs, he gave up.

The man against the other tree told him that what he was feeling was normal, he saw it all the time. It was just the enhancements wearing off.

But Pere knew it was far more than that. He had failed. Completely and totally failed. In everything. There wasn’t one thing Pere

“Oh, are you *new*?”

could think of where he *hadn't* failed.

When he couldn't sob anymore, he laid in the dirt, hopeless, alone, different body parts going numb then feeling pain then numbing again.

He watched with only passing interest as the other bodies around him slowly came to life, vomited in the river, then staggered away. He laid there the rest of the morning and well into the afternoon wondering what to do next, but he couldn't control his thinking or focus on anything useful.

He tried not to think about Lolo, but she kept forcing her way into his mind no matter what he did. She must have been at least pretty, he tried to convince himself. Why else would he—

Maybe it really didn't happen but was just a strange dream. Tonight he'd look at her again, try to figure out if all of this were real or not. Maybe tonight he'd feel something, anything, besides the throbbing of his ears.

Whatever thought wasn't Lolo was Amory, in the shed before. He wondered what happened to her, if she went back to the shed to wait for him, if he tried going back, where she was now. She wasn't any of the Fogged bodies that were around him.

He tried to forget about her as well, but when he did all he could think about was his family in Salem. They would obviously know about his disappearance now. He couldn't think of them either.

Finally, in the late afternoon, he pulled himself to his feet. He felt something, and he was pretty sure it was hunger. Stumbling out of the trees, he found himself on what he assumed to be the edge of Edge Province 8. Whatever.

There were houses, gardens of rock and turf, and cobblestone roads with horses and wagons and people. Something seemed odd about the people, but he couldn't focus on any of it properly. He just stood on the first corner he came to and sighed miserably.

This was not how he anticipated making his entrance to the world. Dirty, torn clothing, no food, no slips of metal, no clue as to where he was, and a complete failure.

This was supposed to have been the first of many great moments: standing defiantly with a slight smirk, knowing that in a few short moons, he'd be leading the army, having overthrown Lemuel Thorne and announcing to the world that he was Perrin Shin; maybe even General Perrin Shin, who knows. And it was all going to begin today as he paid for a ride to Sands and began his undoing of the world.

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Instead, it undid him.

He skulked along the road, feeling exposed and vulnerable. “Now what?” he asked in a quiet whimper. “Where do I find help?”

CROSS TO THE OTHER SIDE, THEN TURN LEFT AT THE NEXT ROAD.

Obediently, Pere stepped out into the road in a halting shuffle. A wagon narrowly missed him but he didn’t care. He was half sorry it didn’t hit him. He got to the other side of the road and walked down it until he came to the next road where he turned left.

“Now what?”

JUST KEEP WALKING, AND LOOK AROUND.

Pere walked slowly and looked hazily at the houses. Rock. Wood. Windows. Gardens of grasses. Rock. Flowers. Same again. And again.

LOOK.

A door opened at one of the houses. Pere stopped as he saw the seventy-five-year-old man step out.

Uncle Honri.

Pere darted behind a wagon stopped alongside the road, crouched, and bit his hand.

THAT’S WHAT YOU DO NEXT. GO TO HIM. LET HIM TAKE YOU HOME. YOU CAN FIX THIS, YOUNG PERE. EVERYTHING. JUST STAND UP. HE’S LOOKING FOR YOU.

“No, no, no. I can’t. I can’t let him see me like this! I can’t let him know how I’ve failed. No!”

THERE’S NO ONE ELSE. THIS IS WHAT HE DOES. LET HIM HELP YOU—

But suddenly there was another voice, or something else, and it slid into his ear.

he can’t help you. you’ve gone too far. no one will understand, especially in salem. no one will want you back now. you’ve made too many mistakes. besides, you’re not done here yet. you can try again. try everything again. just one more time. this time it will be better. fix it all on your own.

Another voice burst in.

THAT’S NOT TRUE, YOUNG PERE. YOU CAN STILL GO BACK. IT’S THE ONLY WAY—

“No!” Pere said loudly. From somewhere he found his strength, leaped to his feet, and ran in the direction from where he came. “No!”

“Oh, are you *new*?”

They had just finished a late midday meal, having put it off while they frantically searched northern Edge for Young Perrin Shin. Finally, growing light-headed with hunger, Honri and the scout accompanying him had headed back to Honri’s rented room for a quick sandwich.

Now Honri, holding open the door for the scout, heard footsteps retreating behind him. He turned and saw the back of a tall boy running in ragged clothing and shouting, with sunlight glinting off the glass in his ears.

Honri sighed. So many young men in trouble, and so little time. Maybe he could find that boy again after he found his brother-in-law’s nephew.

The scout stepped out of the house and watched as the boy dashed dangerously across the road in front of an ox cart. “What was *that*?”

Honri shook his head. “Another grassena boy.”

“A what?”

“Grassena boy,” Honri repeated. “One of those who practically live up at that grassy arena. That’s how they came up with the name here in Edge. Woodson probably taught you the name the rest of the world calls them by: vial heads?”

The scout nodded. “The pain mixture they altered years ago. Similar to our Pain Tea, but far more addictive. I remember learning about that in training. What was he shouting?” he asked as the two men began to walk down the road.

“Who knows,” Honri sighed sadly. “It’s the vials. Puts them into a stupor for hours, then when it wears off they imagine all kinds of dangers, hallucinations, and visions. They just live for the next batch of vials to be delivered. They give up all that they have for it: clothes, valuables, slips of gold and silver they steal from home, even food. Then they spend all night dancing to the drums.”

“Not much of an existence, is it?” the scout commented.

“None at all. I’ve tried going up there a few times since I arrived, seeing who I can bring out of there. Every village has someplace similar. I had some success in Sands, and I’ve made some strides with two boys since I came here a few weeks ago. One’s thinking about going home and the other is considering joining the army. Not as if that’s the greatest alternative, but it’s better than being a vial head.

“As for the grassena girls,” Honri continued, his tone growing despondent, “it’s even more tragic. I don’t know of anyone trying to help them. There have even been a few babies born and abandoned.

A few have survived. Not sure the girls even realized they were expecting.”

The scout shook his head in amazement.

“The real tragedy,” Honri said, his voice growing quieter as they walked down the side of the road, “is that those babies are some of the few being born anymore. Then to lose them?” He sighed heavily. “Shem wanted me to try to learn why the birth rates have dropped so much in the past few years. I’ve found out why from the two boys I’ve been working with.”

The scout, seeing Honri didn’t want to continue, gently cleared his throat. “Maybe if you tell me first, it’ll be easier to explain to the guide.”

Honri smiled sadly. “In a few generations, there won’t even be a world to worry about. The population isn’t being replaced. These girls, as soon as their bodies start changing into women, go to the doctors and ask for The Drink.”

The scout stumbled in his walk he was so surprised. “Willingly?”

“Eagerly,” Honri sighed. “What was forced on women for generations now is sought out as early as possible. The combinations of herbs that destroy their bodies’ ability to have children is in demand. And the girls are very young. Fifteen, fourteen, even thirteen—”

“Why?”

“So they won’t have any . . . *consequences*,” he said. “It seems they just want to indulge in the emotions of the day with whatever boy attracts their attention, and they don’t want the worry of conceiving. And even worse, if they find out they have conceived, they take The Drink to deliberately destroy the baby and their fertility.”

The scout stared at him in shock. “But . . . but . . . that’s . . . that’s . . .” The scout couldn’t find the words.

Honri gave him an understanding look.

After a moment the scout could speak again. “But The Drink is irreversible. Once they lose that ability, it’s gone forever.”

Honri smiled sadly. “Most fifteen-year-olds can’t think beyond what may happen tonight. They care nothing for their future selves because they hardly care for themselves today. They’re becoming more animalistic all the time, just looking to satisfy urges. Nothing more.”

The scout’s gait had slowed to nearly a crawl.

Honri took his arm to bring him up to speed with the old man’s walk. “It’s your first time to the world, isn’t it?”

“Oh, are you *new*?”

The scout nodded. “I went through Woodson’s training, but I just never imagined—”

“And you’ve hardly seen anything yet. Up at the grassy arena, they pull out a few bodies each week. Some spend so much time pursuing the vials they forget to eat and starve to death.”

“What are their parents doing for them? Isn’t there someone to stop them?”

“Who?” Honri asked. “Besides me? Most of their parents don’t know what to do with them, so they quit trying. The community doesn’t care; this isn’t ‘home,’ remember?” Speaking the word ‘Salem’ was forbidden in the world. “No one here remembers they are all family. It’s always someone else’s problem.”

The two men walked quietly for a moment before Honri spoke again. “I tried once going to the trees to see who I could reach. I saw so many young people headed there, I figured it was another performance or something. But what I saw . . . Well, let’s just say an old widower like me shouldn’t be seeing such things.”

The scout only blinked, not daring to wonder what Honri saw.

Honri scoffed sadly. “Rector Cox told me that not long ago he had a young couple come to him wanting to take vows together. It’s become so rare that anyone wants to commit through marriage anymore, especially since all laws pertaining to marriage were eliminated, but Cox was thrilled to see someone serious about the concept.

“Turns out they weren’t as serious as he hoped. They thought it was a good idea to make sure no one stole their ‘mates’. And then they asked Cox how ‘long’ their marriage would be for.”

“How *long*? What an odd question.”

“That’s what Cox thought. He told them the Creator intended marriage to last their entire lives, even beyond, if they chose it. That wasn’t the answer they were looking for.”

“What *were* they looking for?”

“Something to bind them for a couple of seasons, then be over. They both didn’t think they would want to stay together too long. Once the excitement wore off, you see, it’d be time to find someone new to *experience*.”

“Experience?” the scout nearly shouted. Honri patted his arm to quiet him. The scout lowered his voice. “Marriage isn’t an *experience*, it’s . . . it’s . . .”

“Much more, I know,” Honri said. “But consider this—if you have a society which no longer understands real love, whose only

concern is satisfying their urges, why would anyone want to be in a relationship for more than a few seasons? Why would anyone want the commitment of bearing and caring for a child? They're destroying themselves, deliberately," he finished in a solemn whisper. "How do I give my brother-in-law that kind of news?"

The scout was silent, not knowing what to say.

Honri tipped his head. "That boy," he said, slowing in his gait. "The one who was running. Quite tall and large, wasn't he?"

"Yes," said the scout.

"There are very few men in Edge as tall as that. As tall as Young Pere."

The scout looked at him in disbelief. "You think *that* was Young Pere? Honri, he's been missing for only a day and a half! That boy looked like he'd been down the river and back in a flood."

Honri scratched his chin. "Let me show you where the grassena youth live. Just so you know. Just so I feel better."



Pere ran all the way back to the field, the only place that felt anything like a home to him now. He flopped helplessly on the grass.

this is where you belong now.

He lay there for how long, he didn't know. His belly was gnawing and he even resorted to chewing on a blade of grass, just to see. It had no flavor at all.

He half hoped Lolo wouldn't find him, but was also hoping she would. He wanted another chance, just to see. But he also found his empty stomach lurched whenever he thought of her. After a time, he heard footsteps and looked up.

"Bucky! I thought we were going to meet by the trees. You don't look so good. The vials must have been really strong last night. Come on. Let's go find someplace more private." She pulled on his hands and righted him.

He looked her carefully in the face. She was pretty *enough*. Her hair looked a little better than this morning, and her eyes were . . . not that bad once you got past the yellow paint around them. A little muddy, but all right. And she cared enough to find him.

She pulled something out of a grungy bag that was slung on her shoulder. "Hungry? Found this along the way. I didn't think you'd get to eat today, with that look in your eyes."

“Oh, are you *new*?”

Pere didn't even ask where she found it, but wolfed down the cold and greasy bacon pie. “Thank you,” he remembered to mumble between bites. And she cared enough to feed him.

They walked slowly to the river bank. Lolo was talking but Pere didn't really hear her. She was saying something about a friend who ditched her the night before, but Pere couldn't remember seeing any ditches around the area.

The two men stood at the wooden posts that signaled the opening to the Grassy Arena. They watched as the tall boy and a girl, about fifty paces away from them, wandered into the trees.

Honri sighed. “It's been a while, but that's not the way I remembered Young Pere carried himself. He walked exactly like his grandfather.”

The scout nodded. “He doesn't look familiar to me, either.”

“And now that I remember, the boy by the rectory had tagging in his ears.” Honri said. “That's not the one we're looking for, but he's still one of our sons. Dear Creator, will You please help whoever that poor soul is to come out of the trees again? And help that poor girl find a way out of there, too?”

“Let's try the markets,” Honri suggested. “I know Woodson and the others were going to check there for Amory, but there are a lot of shops to investigate. Surely he'd be curious about those. I'll bet he's peeking in some windows, wondering what cuff frills are all about.”

“Then I was worried you wouldn't be here—”

Pere only dimly registered what Lolo was saying.

“—that I wouldn't find you, but then I thought, you're not that kind of boy, are you, Peary?” She stopped in a stand of trees.

Pere had finished his food and stared at where he was now, wondering how he got there so quickly. He still wasn't sure if he wanted—

Without warning, Lolo stood on tiptoe and gave him a messy kiss. Without thinking, Pere kissed her back.

Five minutes later, as Pere rolled onto his back in the dirt, he came

to some conclusions.

Lolo *was* a sow. Which made him nothing more than a swine.

He watched her vaguely as she slipped back on her strips of clothing. Only for a moment he wondered where he had thrown the rest of his. He tried to feel something, but couldn't. Sometime in the last five minutes everything he was inside died, but his body just kept going. He would have preferred to feel pain, if he could. He glanced into Lolo's eyes and felt only loathing. The beauty of her was only skin deep, and her skin was surprisingly transparent. He hated everything about her. About himself.

He'd never felt so filthy. All he wanted to do was wash himself, wash her off of him somehow. But he couldn't even manage to get up the desire to crawl to the river.

Lolo finished fixing the strips of fabric around her body and knelt down next to him in the dirt. "That was much better, wasn't it?" She ran her hand down his arm.

Pere couldn't even feel sick. He felt nothing. She started to lean to kiss him, but he grabbed her wrist. "Just leave," he snarled.

Lolo's face went pale, but Pere didn't care. Suddenly she slapped him across the face with her free hand.

Although his cheek was bright red, he barely felt it as he glared at her. But he was finally feeling something: rage and revulsion.

"I'm sorry, Bucky! I'm so sorry!" she wailed. She went to hug him but Pere grabbed her other arm and pushed her above him easily like a bale of hay.

"Just leave," he repeated darkly.

A tear fell down her face and splashed on his bare chest, and she nodded, terrified.

He shoved her off so violently she landed on her feet.

She took a few awkward steps backward and said in a timid voice, "Tomorrow, Bucky? I mean, Peary? The Performance? I'll come find you." She took off running into the trees without waiting for an answer.

Pere rolled into the dirt and wished somehow it could bury whatever was still alive in him. Just finish him off.

Why did he do it? He already knew the water was hot. Why did he have to test it again? The first time with Lolo might have been the vials, but this time it was all him. He had gone too far. There was no returning now. Ever.

was it the 'sweet union of souls' your father said it would be?

“Oh, are you *new*?”

No. She has no soul. Leave me alone.

seems you have no soul now, either.

Shut up.

wasn't it at least a thrill?

For a moment. But then disappointing. Nothing that my cousin Lek would get all passionate about.

maybe you did it wrong.

Shut up.

and now you're lying in the dirt. again.

Just leave me alone.

yes, definitely gone too far now. no going back now. why would you want to face your family like this? no wonder cephas is your father's favorite.

Shut up.

he wouldn't lie to his family, deceive his rector and guide, abandon his responsibilities—

Shut up.

—then recklessly play with the Creator's greatest gift. how did your father put it? “what truly makes a man is presenting to his bride that which he kept sacred as a symbol of trust—”

Just stop, just stop . . .

now you think i should just stop? why not a few minutes ago, before you lost your ability to become a true husband? before you took the Creator's greatest gift, the act of creating new life, and wasted it on a sow—

Please, just stop . . .

she probably doesn't know any better, but you? who could have been taught better than you?

I know! Shut up!

what will you do now? you have nothing. you are nothing. no one in salem could ever tolerate seeing you again. can you imagine the look on your mother's face, on your grandmothers' faces when they hear what you have done? your sisters? did you imagine them watching you and turning away in shock? why are you still breathing? taking up space? you're nothing . . . nothing—

He lay there for hours, waiting for the rest of the dark to come.

At some point in the night he realized he was dreaming, and felt icy cold water, and remembered hands grabbing at him, then pulling him on to a frozen shore. He was twelve, and heard shouts that came from a distance, then saw nothing but black. He relived the hot bed

and chills that wracked his body for days, and felt the cough that cracked his ribs. It was night, and his eyes opened because of a sharp pain in his chest. There was a figure sitting in a chair next to him. In the dim candlelight he could just make out hands supporting a head, and a large body leaning forward, rocking worriedly. The pain increased in his chest and a ragged cough forced itself out. Young Pere's eyes closed as he fought against it.

"It's all right, Young Pere," he heard a deep whisper in his ear, moving him quickly to an upright position. "Let it out. I know it hurts, but you have to get it out. You can beat this. You *must* beat this. You can't let it fester in you! It's not too late!"

It was Puggah, and he was pleading—

Pere's eyes opened again. He saw rocks in the dim moonlight. He saw dark trees, felt a sharp pain in his chest, and heard the river rushing by. He was miles away from home, alone and unwanted. As his eyes started to close again he thought he saw a shadowy figure sitting on a rock nearby, holding its head in its hands and rocking.

"Puggah?" he breathed. He thought he saw the figure quickly leave the rock to come to him, but his eyes closed in despair before the figure reached him.

In the morning he sat and stared at the stone where he dreamt Puggah sat.

It was bare and cold.



Peto sat up suddenly in bed, sweat dripping off his forehead. He struggled to catch his breath and looked around his dark bedroom. Assured that he was safely in his bed, he rubbed his eyes.

"What is it?" Lilla whispered quietly.

"Nothing, my sweetie. Go back to sleep."

"You had a bad dream, didn't you? Was it about Young Pere? Please tell me!"

"I don't know if it means anything but . . . remember when he was four and he didn't believe that swimming was more complicated than he thought?"

"Deck finally caught up to him down the river," Lilla said. "One of the many times he nearly drowned."

"He's drowning now, Lilla. Not in water, though, but in the world."

Chapter 23--“You can stay, look around a little.”

The only thing that got Pere moving again the next day was hunger. He wandered out of the grassy arena and stumbled into the village. It might have been near midday meal by then, but he wasn't sure. He didn't go left this time, but right, to not risk seeing Honri again.

He didn't get very far before he wondered where he was going. What does someone do when they have no home, no food, and no silver? What would he do in Salem? They didn't have this problem in Salem. But if they did, where would they go? The rectory.

And, of course, the only people in the entire village of Edge who knew him were at the rectory. He could never face them.

Pere continued toward what he thought might be the village center. Maybe there someone would take pity on him and give him a few slips of something. Certainly he looked to be in need. He glanced down at his clothes. Shredded by Amory, filthy from dirt, from sick, and from not bathing in two days. If he wandered into Salem like that, dozens of people would rush to his aid, he was sure. He just needed to get where he could be seen.

As he ambled along the main road past side roads leading to homes, he briefly remembered that this was where his father, aunt, and grandmother grew up. But it was all dreary and dull, nothing memorable. While he passed a few people here and there, all of them seemed to be too busy to pay any attention to him.

Eventually, he passed a large amphitheater, fully enclosed, with signs on the outside walls telling villagers what performers were coming. He didn't bother to look at the announcements.

But that was where *they* met.

That was where they chanted “General.”

That was where she got them all in trouble—

It didn’t look like anything he had ever pictured in his mind. It was blander than he’d imagined. Just a building.

He trudged along a road where wagons and horses with riders went by, but no one looked at him. Surprised and discouraged, he soon found himself on the edge of a large green. Ahead some distance were two middle-aged women, chatting as they walked toward him, trailing several goats behind them. They were likely coming to stake the goats out at the green, and Pere thought they looked like typical grandma types. Certainly they’d have some compassion on him—

In the village green Pere noticed a tall tower, but it, too, was disappointing. Not as high, and certainly much narrower than in Salem. A banner was going up, solid blue.

Pausing to look at it, he thought, That’s *it*? No other colors or shapes to spell out messages? What dull thing would a dull blue banner mean?

His attention was drawn to rumbling coming down the road, and the two women with goats quickly moved off into the green ahead of the horses. No wonder, because there were about thirty of them, cantering toward him and filling the road. He dove off to the side like the women had, and stared in surprise at the riders.

There were all in blue, all of them soldiers. The Army of Idumea, right there, rushing past him—

He glimpsed one man in the middle, an officer judging by the number of shiny and garish medals all over his uniform. In the moment Pere saw him, he noticed his longer hair, blond and wavy with gray streaks—

And then they were gone, heading around a curve, as all roads in Edge seemed to have.

“Hm. Seems the general’s back,” he heard one of the grandmothers murmur, uninterested. He spun around to face them, but neither looked at him as they led their goats deliberately past as if he were nothing more than a dead tree.

Pere twisted again, the sound of the horses already in the distance. That was it. That was Thorne.

Pere could only stare.

He’d imagined it would be so much grander somehow. He’d heard about fanfares, and rather expected one should be playing the moment he laid eyes on the man he was intent on taking down.

“You can stay, look around a little.”

He expected something to *happen*, not just that his nostrils be filled with the scent of fresh horse dung right in front of him.

But that was it. Simply and dully.

Edge wasn't nearly exciting as his grandmother had made it out to be in her history of the world class. Nothing was as it was supposed to be.

He looked over in hope at the two women, staking their goats, but neither of them glanced in his direction as they talked, then turned, then walked away.

Pere's stomach grumbled. But he stood there, for probably another ten minutes, astonished at how *normal* and *regular* Edge seemed to be. Nothing special. Nothing—

No. He came here for a reason, and he was still going to accomplish it. He just needed to eat, to sleep decently, to get the last of the vials out of his head, and rethink everything. It could still . . . it could still . . .

He sat down on the grass, disheartened. The goat nibbling on his trousers finally got him up and moving, because if he didn't, he'd have no clothing left whatsoever.

The markets. The shops. He'd heard about them, and remembered they should be near the village green somewhere.

It shouldn't have taken him so many minutes to locate them, seeing as how the many buildings surrounded the green he was standing in. And he realized, as if parts of his mind were finally waking up, that he'd wandered past a few shops to get there, and that there were hundreds of people around, one of whom might actually take notice of him.

He stepped onto a corner where two roads crossed and waited for someone to rush to his aid. Several minutes later, no one had purposely looked at him. A few times people noticed him, but regarded him only as if he were a pillar on a porch that needed to be avoided.

Perplexed that he was so seemingly invisible, he stepped back from the corner and leaned against a building to watch people. Maybe, he considered, he could figure out who might be approachable. But everyone seemed so unusual, and again he had the sensation of waking up, of finally noticing a few things.

First was the clothing. Some people were dressed in shiny fabrics with multiple layers and extra edges that seemed to serve no purpose. A few of those people did notice him, but only to send him a look of disapproval.

Pere also discovered that no one was dressed as he was; rips and tears were not the ‘fashion.’ But what was, he wasn’t quite sure. It was difficult to discern any kind of style. People wore colors and textures and designs he had never known existed, with patterns and stitching that might have taken the seamstresses weeks to complete. A few people who passed him wore such thin fabrics cut in such carefully revealing ways that maybe a few days ago Pere would have been shocked and embarrassed by the large sections of flesh they revealed. Now he realized even those people were better dressed than he was.

He found himself unable to discern who was male or female. Women wore trousers and men wore skirts. Or, at least, he assumed as much. For some, there was nothing in their clothing or hair or way they walked that gave him a clue as to their gender.

But most unusual were the people’s faces. It was the paint that truly mystified him. He’d heard that some women wore paint, but here everyone did. Many he was sure who were men, and others who were obviously female, accentuated their eyes with strange colors—blue, red, brown and even white and orange. Some reminded him of patchy dogs he knew in Salem, with various blotches of color in random patterns on their faces.

Then there were the cheeks, with red circles painted as if to somehow make the wearer more beautiful. Or to make them look like targets. Some had even painted their entire faces. People with dark skinned hands had remarkably white faces, and those with sand colored skin on their hands sported dark brown and even black faces. It was as if no one was satisfied with what they had been born with, or they wanted to be shrub, he deduced, when a green-faced person strolled by.

A few faces truly startled him, leaving him wondering where their lips were. Eventually, Young Pere realized the owners had painted their lips the same color of their faces. Others took an opposite approach, painting not only their lips, but even large swaths around them in a contrasting color. Massive lips in white, black, blue and red were everywhere, so much so that when he saw a pair of light pink lips on a young woman—*maybe* it was a woman—those untouched lips looked unnatural.

That seemed to be the goal: distort everything into something unrecognizable. And that was . . . attractive?

It was the same with people’s bodies. There were very few he could see that weren’t distorted in some way. At least, he couldn’t

“You can stay, look around a little.”

imagine what illnesses or disabilities would cause some people’s shoulders that one wouldn’t match the other, or why some women (men?) had such pronounced chests, hips and even rear ends. How they sat on them perplexed Pere. Bulges came from balled up strips of cotton, he discovered, as one undefinable person hustled past him and a wad slipped out of the trousers. Greatly flustered, the person stopped, retrieved the wad and, to Pere’s amazement, dropped the trousers right there in the road way and replaced the cotton in a patch on the knee to make it more knobby. Several other body parts were revealed to be padded, and as people moved past, it didn’t seem to strike any of them as unusual that someone was partially dressed in the road way to adjust his (her?) undergarments.

Oh, nope. That one was definitely a male.

Then again, several people seemed to be dressed in little else but skimpy undergarments, more daring but less shredded than Pere observed at the grassy arena. The shimmering cloth must have been the silk his grandmother described. Some wore layers and layers, which must have cost a bagful of coins according to how expensive he’d heard it was. Even more amazing was that several people were accompanied by animals also dressed in the silk. He observed a small dog, a goat on a string, and even a sheep garbed in silk as if its natural wool wasn’t substantial enough. The leashed pig, however, didn’t seem to enjoy wearing a frilly tunic.

Pere didn’t understand any of it. Nearly every person he saw wore so many colors to mask their real features as if what they were born with wasn’t good enough for the world. They were like paintings little children did of people, with everything too bright or too dark and ill-proportioned. It would have been amusing if it wasn’t so grotesque.

And grotesque was all he could think when he saw their hair. His hair must have looked tame and dull in comparison to the strange colors and styles he saw. The villagers used pigments and paints, and even mud, it seemed, to force their hair into the oddest of shapes. One person walked by with sticks and bones protruding from their hair. And then there was the squirrel woman, with an actual dead squirrel strapped to the top of her head. Wait, no—the tail was twitching. It was still alive, and Pere was mystified.

Eventually he did see a few people who were dressed like him, and without face paint or animals in their hair. One sat on the road corner and held a small, sloppy sign that read, “Need food.” There was a glazed look in his eyes as he stared off into a distance. No one

paid him any attention.

“FIFTY PERCENT OFF!” boomed a voice across the road, and Pere nearly jumped out of his skin. “SALE ONLY TODAY!” shouted a stocky woman, painted head to toe, and gesturing wildly at passers-by. “OUR RUFFS ARE MORE ELEGANT THAN *THEIR* RUFFS DOWN THE ROAD—”

“NO, THEY’RE NOT!” shouted another voice, this one male, apparently from down the road. “YOURS ARE MADE WITH INFERIOR SILK WORMS! BUT OURS—OURS ARE THE BEST! AND A NEW STOCK, JUST IN!”

Pere covered his ears, astonished at the shouting match that was making his head pound. But no one seemed surprised. In fact, it seemed to be a signal. Now another person came out of a building, and began to shout, “OUR BRASSIERES ARE THE MOST UPLIFTING THINGS YOU’LL STRAP YOUR—”

Pere bolted from the road, not because he didn’t know what brasieres were, but because the man shouting about them stood right next to him and bellowed. But first, he gave Pere a mighty shove out of the way.

He jogged down between two shops and paused, listening to the calling and shouting that now filled the road, everyone screaming for people to come into their shops.

Eventually, cautiously, like a kicked dog wary of every boot, Pere emerged again further down the road, where only a young woman held up a sign, wriggling it around in annoying ways, stating that *Our buttons are more buttony than anyone else’s!*

She didn’t shove him off her porch. She deliberately didn’t pay him any attention as he lurked behind her, probably because she knew he had no silver and no interest in buttony buttons.

Pere was fascinated—disappointed, but fascinated—that no one cared about him or his appearance. No one seemed to realize he was in distress.

He must have stood there for ten minutes before finally a man did approach him, but accompanied by two soldiers with their swords drawn. The soldiers’ faces, without any decoration, looked bland in comparison to everyone else.

“Get off my building!” the man raged at Pere, his large painted brown lips making his words seem even louder. “Don’t need boys like you scaring away my business. Off now!” he gestured as the soldiers continued to approach.

“You can stay, look around a little.”

Pere’s mouth dropped open but he obediently shuffled off down the road. He glanced back and saw the soldiers still following him, so he began to jog, then run, and looked nervously back again. But the soldiers had stopped at a corner, as if they didn’t have to go any further.

Pere tried to catch his breath as he considered what to do next. He slunk between two shops toward the alley in the back.

Leaning against a tavern, he noticed an enormous rubbish pile behind it. He’d heard about these but never expected to see them. There were no piles of trash in Salem. Any leftover food was eaten the next day, or given to animals, or buried in the composting bins. He couldn’t ever remember seeing clothing or jugs or paper tossed away as he saw in the alley. Clothing would become rags, then knotted into rugs. Broken jugs could be given new life as planters for seeds, and used up paper could be used as kindling.

But here? He passed broken crates that could have been placed in the woodpiles alongside the buildings, and cracked glass that would have seen another life as artwork. There were a great many objects that could have been used, cleaned up, or fixed.

His belly twisting in hunger gave him another thought that a few days ago would have disgusted him. But everything was different a few days ago.

He strolled along the alley, carefully picking his way around the heaps that stood behind every building, until he began to smell something not as distasteful. The pile in front of him held all kinds of half-eaten possibilities. He kneeled near the heap and started picking at a mixture of vegetables and meat, trying to figure out what it might have been. Not much different than eating the leftovers off his little brothers and sisters’ plates, he assured himself. We are all family, after all—

“Hey! Hey! You! What do you think you’re doing?!”

Pere looked up to see two more soldiers rushing toward him, swords drawn.

“I . . . I . . . I’m just finding something to eat,” he stammered in alarm.

One of the soldiers slashed the air with his sword and sneered at Pere. “So you thought you’d steal from the shops?”

Pere pointed at the rubbish heap. “No one wants this! It’s . . . it’s *trash*.”

The other soldier shook his head at his companion. “Did you hear

that? No one wants it. *It's trash.*" He glared at Pere. "But did you *pay* for it? Did *you* toss this out here in the alley?"

"But . . . but . . ."

"I'll answer for him," the first soldier said. "He didn't. And because you didn't, you filthy grassena slag, you don't get to *touch* it either."

The second soldier gestured with his sword. "Go down to the dump at the river, like everyone else too lazy to work. You can pick at whatever's left down there. This load will be there in two days. Remember what you liked, and you can find it then." He took another step forward and aimed the sword at Pere.

Pere slowly stood up, staring at the metal inches from his chest. Swords were much longer than he imagined. And sharper. The first soldier pointed his at Pere as well, giving him yet another specimen to examine closely.

Pere swallowed. "The river?" he asked weakly.

The first soldier sneered at the second. "He's so fogged he doesn't even remember where the river is!" He turned back to Pere and waved with his weapon. "Yep—that way. You can smell it. Smells a lot like you, you slagger."

The second soldier laughed and lunged threateningly at Pere.

Pere spun and took off running down the alley, hearing the cold laughter following him. His legs felt weak and he didn't know how much further he could run as he darted across a roadway.

"Let him go," he heard one of the soldiers call. "He's out of our district now anyway."

Pere glanced behind him as he stumbled to the other side of the road to see the soldiers had ended their pursuit. He jogged into another alley, fell on to the ground in a sweat, and leaned against a building to rest in its shade. He had time only to take a few deep breaths before he heard another voice.

"Ah, Creet. Not another one. I swear the heat brings them out like flies!"

Pere looked up into the severe face of a middle-aged woman. Her features were made even more hideous by enormous arched eyebrows that were painted in purple on her flabby face. She was holding a broom and threatened to sweep him away.

"You don't belong here! Scat! Off with you. We have a contract with the soldiers to make sure none of you end up over here. I'm filing a complaint!"

“You can stay, look around a little.”

Pere got to his feet, and the woman didn't even blink at his size. He held up his hands in surrender. “I'm going ma'am, I promise. I just . . .” He thought of asking for her a piece of bread, but when he saw her firm her grip on the broom handle, he took a few steps back. “I'm going.”

He took a turn, and another, and found himself at the end of the market place again. Worried about soldiers he saw approaching, he ducked into a shed, which wasn't a shed.

“Don't worry,” said the woman, sitting on a stool at a narrow desk. “I won't throw you out. You can stay, look around a little. All of you boys like to. I need someone to keep me in business.” She giggled sadly and nodded at the wall.

Pere looked around and noticed shelves from floor to ceiling, packed with books. On the shelves were written numbers. Likely how many slips of silver needed to secure each one, he decided.

He nodded his thanks to the woman, just a pace away from him. She nodded back, her thick brown hair streaked with gray, bouncing along with her head. It was a strangely youthful hair style for a woman around sixty, long and curled, but with ends that looked like a rat had nibbled on them. But then again, nothing was considered strange here.

The shop was small. Compared to the others in the market, it was pitiful. Books, it seemed, by the lack of other customers, weren't in demand.

“I know what you're looking for,” she said to Pere. “All of you come looking for the same thing. You're familiar, so I'm sure you've been here before. Just go ahead.” She turned back to her book.

Pere shook his head. “But I've never been here before.”

The woman looked up at him. “But I'm sure I know you . . . Ah, you've been recently tagged. That explains it. Your type thinks you were born yesterday.” She hopped off her stool, set down her book, and took him by the arm. “Over here, Son-boy. Take your time.” In two strides she was at the other side of the shop and pulled down a large book. The enormous amount of metal around her wrists clanged and tinkled as she moved. “The woodcuts explain it all. Just be gentle with it.” She handed it to him, patted his arm, and smiled. “I know I've seen you before. Can't quite place it, but . . .” She shrugged and went back to her stool.

Pere opened his mouth to speak, realized he didn't know what to say, then turned to the book. He opened it, wondering why this

woman thought he—

His eyes nearly popped out of his head. He stared at the image on the page, blinking in shock. No . . . why would someone have woodcuts of—

He quickly flipped the page, sure that what he saw was a mistake, and found another image.

At first, it didn't make any sense. He stared at it for a few moments, turned the book, then suddenly—

He nearly dropped the book in astonishment. This wasn't a mistake. This was deliberate. Someone had put pictures of . . .

He knew he should just put the book back on the shelf, but the pages flipped again, as if opened to the same pages over and over. This time he saw—

This time he did drop the book.

"I said, be gentle!" The woman giggled sadly. "You boys . . ."

"I'm . . . I'm sorry," Pere stammered as he picked up the large book, making sure it remained shut. "I just didn't . . . I didn't realize . . . This wasn't exactly . . ."

"Ah, I understand," the woman nodded. "Put it back next to the others. I see the problem. You actually *like* this person."

Pere looked at her, perplexed.

"You need to know how to win over the heart that's attached to those *other* interesting parts." She waggled her eyebrows and giggled again.

Pere had never heard a woman her age giggle so much. It sounded rehearsed, unnatural. He shoved the book with the shocking diagrams back on to the shelf.

The woman had left her stool again and was at the adjacent wall, her finger running along different titles. "I think I have just what you're looking for."

Pere made his way over to her, where all the titles filling the shelves had similar words: betrayal, poison, passion, night, pride, buxom.

He was sensing a theme.

The woman bounced her thick hair behind her as she handed him another book. "Sorry, Son-boy—this one's got a lot of words, but it's a short book. And a favorite. All about how to win the heart. How good are you at flexing your muscles?"

Pere looked up from the book in his hands. "Good at what?"

“You can stay, look around a little.”

But she was staring at his bare arms. “I know I’ve seen you before. There’s something so familiar about you. Got any silver to pay for that?”

Pere shrugged apologetically.

“It’s all right.” The woman sighed. “Just skim it here, put it back on the shelf when you’re done, come back tomorrow for more advice if it doesn’t work. And don’t drop it.”

Pere nodded obediently and opened the book. His shoulders sagged in relief that it was only words.

The woman went back to her stool while Pere read a sentence, then another, then . . .

It was the woodcut book all over again, but with descriptions. As if the shocking images weren’t burned into his mind already, now there were words to go along with them.

He snapped the book shut and turned to the woman.

She was engrossed in her own story, chewing on her lower lip as if it were someone else’s.

Pere cleared his throat. “Thank you, Mrs. . . .?”

“Sareen. Just Miss Sareen. That’s what all you grassena folks call me. Find what you needed?”

Pere nodded lamely. “Does it all . . . *work*?” He held up the book of . . . instruction, he guessed it could be called.

She giggled again. “Of course! Not for everyone, though,” her voice trailed off with a douse of regret. “If I had access to some of these books when I was your age, a certain young man in blue might have been mine, instead of dying in the forest. I just didn’t know how to sway him. You know what I mean? Check chapter seven—*that’s* what I mean.” The sad giggle was back.

“I will,” Pere said as politely as he could. “Uh, thank you, ma’am. For . . .” he paused, unsure what to thank her for, then realized she was the first person who hadn’t chased him away. “For everything.”

“Of course,” Miss Sareen smiled. “Always here to help.” She turned back to her book and resumed chewing on her lower lip as Pere ducked out the door.

“*Thank you, ma’am,*” Sareen mumbled to herself. “How sweet. No one says *ma’am* like that anymore.”

A minute later, Sareen's head snapped up and she gasped. Dropping her book, she raced outside.

He was gone.

Trembling, Sareen stumbled back into her shop, listening to her memory play over again and again the words, "*Thank you, ma'am.*"

She sat down, shaking her head. No, there was no way . . . absolutely no way . . .

But *that voice*. She used to tend the young children of *that voice*. Used to clean the kitchen and make dinner when little boys were invading the house for After School Care in the house of *that voice*.

That voice . . .

Had once belonged to Perrin Shin.



Pere jogged south past a large block wall that proclaimed Edge of Idumea Estates and Country Cottages. The gray wall continued for several blocks, as if daring Pere to think of going any other direction than away. Finally, the wall ended and he found himself walking toward smaller homes and larger fields in the distance.

Farms. Orchards. *Food*.

Pere glanced around nervously as he continued down the road trying to act like he belonged there. Fewer people were in the area, and the ones he saw in the fields wore recognizable work clothing, but still more ruffled, purposely cut, and lopsided than anything he'd ever seen before.

To his left, he noticed a large, lush garden behind a small farmhouse. He walked as nonchalantly as he could, casing the area, as if he were playing Bad Men-Good Men with his cousins again, to see which way he could most easily slip into the tall corn that was nearly ripe, then crawl to lower shrubs and vegetables where he was sure he could find something ready to harvest and eat. He turned down a perpendicular alley and made his way to the garden.

Looking around, he spied no one, then squatted out of view. He fell forward on all fours ready to start crawling toward the garden when found himself face to face with the ugliest, wettest, and most misshapen dog the cosmos had ever produced.

"Uh . . ." was all he got out before the animal began to snarl.

He leaped to his feet and jumped backward as the brown thing started to bark. He lunged at Pere but was restrained by the rope

“You can stay, look around a little.”

around his neck. Pere looked quickly around but saw no one running to yell at him.

“Nice dog,” he said, trying to sound believable. “I don’t want your bones or anything, I just want to slip into . . .” That’s when he noticed the dog was tethered to another rope that ran the perimeter of the garden. Another barking caught his attention, and a second hideous dog with drooling jowls came running around the corner, tethered to the same perimeter rope. It joined its friend in barking furiously.

Pere took another few steps back and jogged to the end of the garden. The rope did indeed go all the way around the garden, and the dogs followed to keep up their barking. In this distance, Pere heard a third dog, probably on the other side of the garden.

“If I just jump,” he said to himself, “over the rope . . .” He peered into the garden and saw a few more dogs tied to stakes, standing, panting, and eagerly waiting for him to try. Their sole purpose, it seemed, was to keep intruders away from the garden. He was too weak for that battle.

Pere sighed heavily and went back to the side road. There was another farmhouse further along with an orchard. He walked in the shade of tall trees that lined the road, hoping the shadows would hide him.

As he neared the orchard he groaned in frustration. Over each tree, and there were probably four or five dozen, were elaborately woven nets. The trees themselves were pruned in such a way that the nets could fully cover them, yet still allow in sunlight to reach the fruit. No birds, squirrels, and certainly no slaggy grassena boys, whatever that meant, could get to any of the fruit. Anything that fell off the trees was caught by the nets that fully encased the trees.

Nothing even for the worms to nibble.

Pere sat down in the shade of a tree in and looked longingly to the orchard. Several berry bushes grew alongside, but were also fully covered. He looked around for birds or any other animals to see how they accessed the food, but he saw nothing. The area was unusually free of animals, and even silent, except for repulsive barking dogs. He heard another one in the orchard.

Only later did he ponder the conceit of hoarding all the crops. In Salem it was an accepted fact that the land produced because the Creator willed it to. He wanted to feed not only His people but His animals as well. A certain amount of fruit and berries and gardens being

nibbled upon by birds, insects, deer, and rabbits was not only accepted but expected. No critter was ever shooed away. It was an honor to feed the Creator's creatures.

There always remained plenty for people, with surplus to be put into storage, and extra purposely left out for the animals to forage in the Snowing Season. At the Eztates, several stalks of corn remained unharvested all winter, and many bushes, along with two nut trees, had been planted solely for animals to scavenge from. And they never, ever took all the fruit out of the orchard, because then what would the raccoons and badgers and bears eat?

But here? The people kept it *all*, probably so they could throw it away later into the rubbish piles. The animals got nothing. Nor did starving throwaway boys.

Pere held his head in his hands and would have felt like weeping if he felt anything at all. The heat of the sun sapped whatever strength he had left, and he laid down alongside the road in the thick grasses, wondering what to do next. After a few minutes of realizing no one would come to his rescue, he reluctantly got up and wandered to where he thought the river was.

He still wasn't sure how he reached it, but after half an hour of trudging past more guarded gardens and inaccessible orchards, he found where he was supposed to go.

He smelled it first. Behind a little hill and sheltered by dozens of tall trees that seemed purposely planted to hide the area was an enormous section of land covered in stinking trash. He was at the southern edge of town, and the heaps extended for probably a quarter mile down the river. All kinds of birds flew above the heaps, picking at them and squawking loudly.

He had expected to feel some sense of hope as he reached the dump, but the sight and smell were worse than anything he'd yet experienced. There was no place to get anything to eat, even though he saw about twenty people walking around and climbing on the heaps.

Pere leaned against one of the trees in despair, then slid down it until his behind landed in something squishy he chose to ignore. He watched the people in tatters climbing over the heaps, many of them short and skinny. It took him a moment to realize they were children. They tossed down items to equally tattered adults. Clothing. A shoe. Perhaps a blanket.

If no one cared about children, who would care about him? Why

“You can stay, look around a little.”

should anyone care about him? He was useless, worthless, and as disposable as everything else.

The sound of an approaching wagon made him look up. It was another load of rubbish coming to be dumped.

The people at the piles scattered to the tree barrier to watch what was coming in. The wagon hit a dip in the ground near Pere and a few items fell off the wagon. Something rolled to Pere and stopped at his feet. An apple, with one bite taken out of it.

He stared at it for a moment, wondering why someone would throw something away after just one bite. Maybe it wasn't ripe. Maybe it was rotten.

Pere picked it up, started to wipe the dirt off of it, but instead quickly took a bite. It was perfect.

He wolfed down the apple, even swallowing the seeds and stem, and glanced around to see if anything else had fallen. He looked up just as the wagon was dumping its contents, and the other people stood around like hungry dogs, walking around, pointing, sniffing.

A soldier with a drawn sword stood by the wagon on guard as the three workers quickly shoved everything off with long sticks. After they finished, they climbed back on the wagon, the soldier took a few steps back, sheathed his sword, then hopped into the bed.

That seemed to be the signal. The grungy masses rushed to the new pile, grabbing whatever they could as the wagon pulled away. A small child got pushed roughly to the side but jumped right back in, snatching bits expertly.

Pere had considered walking over there to see what he could salvage, but the ferocity of the beggars surprised him. He looked down around his feet again as the wagon jostled by, dropping a few items the workers hadn't fully shoveled out. Another item rolled over to him. A cob of corn, still with the husks on it, but chewed on the top by an animal, probably a raccoon.

Pere shucked the corn and evaluated the kernels. They were on the small side, but he took an experimental bite. It was perfect.

In less than a minute the corn was gone, the cob tempting him to see if it was edible as well. It wasn't, he discovered. Pere sat down again against the tree, still feeling hungry, but not so ravenous.

An idea came to him as he felt the apple and corn strengthening him. If he ran through the alleys, he could snatch things as he passed, and run out of the jurisdiction of the soldiers in the area. It was obvious none of them wanted to go further than they had to.

He stood up and, without a look back to the beggars, started on his way back to Province 8.

BY THE WAY, YOUNG PERE, YOU'RE WELCOME. GO TO THE WESTERN SIDE. THERE'S A BAKERY WITH A CLUMSY ASSISTANT WHO DROPS EVERYTHING.

Soon Pere was back in the province. This time he had a feeling he should head to the west, to avoid the soldiers he had already encountered. He followed his nose to a bakery and slipped between it and another shop. Watching from the shadows and drooling, he noticed a young woman step out of the bakery and toss on to the pile a cake which, judging from its smashed nature, had recently fallen to the ground.

Pere waited until he heard the door shut, glanced down both sides of the alley to make sure it was clear, then slipped out, grabbed the cake, and darted back into the shadows. He held his breath and waited to hear anything as the still-warm cake began to crumble in his hands. Realizing no one had spotted him, he took a sample, then devoured the cake.

He analyzed the pile again, spotted a few biscuits, seized them, stuffed them into his pockets, and ran down the alley just as two soldiers came around the corner. They stopped pursuing him a few roads later, leaving Pere to stand on another corner, tired but feeling fuller.

For lack of something better to do, he began wandering into the stores. Nothing like these existed in Salem. All they had there was the main storehouse. If you needed trousers, you went to the aisle with trousers, chose a color and size, then took them home.

But what he saw in Province 8 was far more unusual. Trousers of every color, texture, and shape. And pins on them with numbers. He watched as a man took a pair of trousers up to a desk and give a handful of slips of silver to the person behind. Pere looked with despair at the clothing. He had no silver and no way to replace his torn clothing.

“Are you planning to buy anything?” asked a woman sharply next to him.

Pere jumped a little, especially at the purple surrounding her eyes. “Uh, well, I’d like to, but—”

“Let me guess, no silver?” the woman snapped at him. “Then get out!”

Pere left that shop and wandered to another, this time only looking into the windows. Another shop of clothing. Why they needed two shops with clothing was beyond his comprehension. The more

“You can stay, look around a little.”

he looked around the less he understood. There were shops for only tunics, or only silk tunics, then only collars for the silk tunics. And then ruffles for silk tunics.

Then there were the shops for hats, each more ridiculous than the next, with feathers and clumps of cotton and shapes that did nothing to shield the wearer from sun or rain. There were shops for men, for children, for women, and more for women. He tried to picture his mother or aunts wandering in such places. They’d probably find it a waste of time.

But he had plenty of time to waste now, and one shop caught his attention, practically pulling him inside. Weapons: knives, bows and arrows, hatchets and best of all, swords, of all shapes and sizes.

Once *he* had suggested to Salemites that they extend the length of their knives to swords, but they said that was one of the reasons why they left: they didn’t want to live where the sole purpose of an item was to take a life.

Pere couldn’t understand that. The glossy steel and the intricate detail on the hilts made his mouth water in desire. He stared at one display cabinet for at least half an hour, ignoring the shopkeeper’s dirty looks as he gingerly fingered the knife blades, longing for the knife he lost in his pack.

He finally forced himself out when the shopkeeper began to follow him around. But there was still more to see. Shops for food, leather goods, household goods, furniture, pots and pans, cloth, and one that sold only things that smelled nice. Pere was exhausted just looking at it all. He couldn’t imagine what he would do with most of it if he could acquire it.

He sat under the shade of a tree near some stables around dinner time to nibble on his biscuits, and he watched the people scurry by. It wasn’t that they didn’t acknowledge him, they didn’t greet *anyone*. No one seemed to know or recognize anyone, maybe because each person’s body was misshapen, and different face paints would drastically alter the look of someone they knew.

Then again, nearly everyone looked off in a distance, not really seeing who they passed. And he noticed something else: there were very few children.

Occasionally he saw a mother carrying a baby wearing elaborate clothing that he was sure it would outgrow in just a season, but he expected that by dinner time, when school and chores were over, there’d be a rush of children running through the roads and in and out

of shops completing errands for their parents, or delivering messages like they did in Salem. But there weren't any flocks of children hanging on parents' clothing, or waving to other friends, or being patted on the head by adults.

During the afternoon he had seen a child here and there with a parent, and those children behaved in bizarre ways. They'd stand listlessly watching the horses and carriages go by without once trying to chase them, or they'd look at the clothing with their mothers—something Pere could never imagine caring about—or they'd kick at the dirt as if nothing else was interesting.

One child in particular intrigued Pere. He held a small wooden toy that required him to shift pieces back and forth into different shapes. Pere had sidled over to watch him as he stood outside while his mother entered a store selling something called lace. Pere tried to see the point of the toy. The boy would create one shape and whisper, "Yes!" then create another shape and moan quietly. It was mystifying.

When the door to the shop opened, Pere quickly retreated between two buildings as the boy's mother marched out and down the road, but her son didn't notice. He continued to manipulate the wooden shapes until his mother returned a few minutes later, grabbed him by the ruff of his sleeve, and without a word dragged him along. The boy never once looked up.

As dinner time passed, Pere began to believe there simply weren't any children to see. Maybe a few days ago he would have been mortified by that thought. But now he could see the benefits. Without so many children to care for, these people could spend more on elaborate clothing for themselves and tack for their horses. He'd seen several horses decked out in gold and silver implements that didn't add anything but weight to the animals.

Fewer children also meant fewer bodies competing with the beggars. For some reason that thought made the hole in his chest, the one he'd been trying to ignore all day, feel bigger.

He got up and he slipped down another alley in hopes of finding something else to eat, his strange day replaying in his head. Several hours of exploring the shops did give him something new to look at, but none of it was . . . satisfying. Different and diverting, yes, but empty.

But did he feel happy? Many people he saw seemed happy. He even heard laughter a few times. But Pere couldn't imagine anything

“You can stay, look around a little.”

that could make him laugh right now. He felt hopelessly empty and unfamiliar in his own skin.

By the time it was dusk he drifted back to the grassy arena, the only place that felt like home so far.

Peto woke up that night and looked up at the dark ceiling of his bedroom. It was a dream, he tried to reassure himself, but in so many ways it wasn't.

He was back in Idumea as a young teenager, touring the city with his grandmother, parents, and sister. They had ridden in the carriage out of the garrison and past the trash heaps. Peto saw a man in torn clothing, digging through the heaps looking for something to eat. Peto had been shocked by that. No one back then in Edge had ever scoured the rubbish looking for food.

The experience had stayed with Peto, and had helped him see the benefits of a Salem-like life when he first came from the world. It was one of the reasons becoming a rector appealed so much to him, why he accepted the calling when Guide Gleace issued it: he always wanted to make sure no one ever went without.

He rolled over and looked at his wife. She was asleep, but he'd heard her weeping earlier. He touched her pillow and it was damp. She hadn't stopped weeping for days.

The dream played hazily in his mind again. Idumea. The trash heaps. He and his family riding by in a large and fancy carriage.

The man rooting through the trash looking for food had looked over at him.

It was Young Pere.

Peto sighed. At least he was still alive. For now.

Chapter 24--“We give you a bed, a uniform, and a purpose.”

For the next however many days—Pere lost count and suspected he missed a few in another Fog—he scavenged for food behind houses and stores, and slept under the stars like a mangy dog. Every day he seemed to feel duller, less like himself, more like just a body walking with no purpose. He never could think too far. He couldn't think of anything, really. The numbness of his mind seemed to turn all colors into shades of gray, and all emotion about the same hue.

After two more Performance nights he was uninterested by the whole thing. The first Performance had been a dizzying mixture of noise, bodies, and sensations. It was exciting and new and rough.

The second Performance had all the same elements, but made his head pound and his stomach churn. He thought briefly that may have been the effect of the dinner he shared with Lolo and her friends. He hadn't asked where it came from, and they didn't seem to want to talk about it. He left her quickly after he finished eating and avoided her the rest of the night.

He did, however, encounter another girl whose face he'd never remember again, and inexplicably found himself later rolling in the dirt with her as he had with Lolo two nights before. The act still felt raw and empty and filthy. He couldn't figure out what he was doing wrong, although he was sure he did it right. Maybe he needed to find yet another girl.

By the third Performance, Pere found the music, torches, noise, and even the bodies monotonous. It was as if the same obnoxious note was played loudly over and over again. At first it was intriguing, then only interesting, then tediously dull.

He had to get out of it.

One evening he wandered toward Province 8 again and found

“We give you a bed, a uniform, and a purpose.”

himself walking past a burial field. That’s where he belonged, dead. He ambled among the headstones before stopping and dropping between two markers.

“Give me one good reason why I shouldn’t just stay here until I die,” he said out loud.

BECAUSE YOU HAVE A FAMILY THAT STILL LOVES YOU AND NEEDS YOU.

That a voice came so clearly to his mind didn’t even intrigue him. He just answered it as if it were the first passer-by who bothered to speak to him. “They don’t want me. They could never want this.”

WHAT DID YOUR GRANDMOTHER SAY, THE LAST THING SHE SAID TO YOU?

“That I was a ridiculous boy.”

THAT WASN’T THE LAST THING SHE SAID. WHAT DID SHE SAY, AS SHE HUGGED YOU?

Pere didn’t answer.

SHE SAID SHE LOVED YOU, DIDN’T SHE? THAT NO MATTER WHAT YOU DID, SHE WOULD LOVE YOU.

“She didn’t know I would do all of this.”

SHE HAD AN IDEA YOU WOULD.

“It was just words. No meaning.”

THAT’S NOT TRUE AND YOU KNOW IT, YOUNG PERE. FIND YOUR WAY TO THE FIRST RESTING STATION. THEY WILL DRESS YOU, FEED YOU, AND GUIDE YOU HOME. JUST TAKE THE FIRST STEPS TO GET THERE.

“Why would they? I offer nothing in return. I do nothing for them. Nor will I ever.”

OUR FAMILY NEEDS YOU. THERE’S AN EMPTY CHAIR AT THE TABLE. YOUR MOTHER SETS IT EVERY MEAL, JUST IN CASE YOU SUDDENLY APPEAR. DO IT TOMORROW, WALK THROUGH THAT DOOR, AND WIPE AWAY ALL HER TEARS. LET HER LAUGH AGAIN.

“Shut up. You know nothing of my mother.”

WHO DO YOU THINK I AM?

“In my head, you sound like Puggah. But he’s gone.”

YOUNG PERE, I AM YOUR PUGGAH, AND I AM RIGHT HERE.

“Just shut up. Leave me alone.”

I NEVER WANT TO LEAVE YOU ALONE. ALL OF YOUR FAMILY NEEDS YOU. LOOK AROUND YOU, YOUNG PERE. LOOK WHERE YOU ARE.

“I’m with death.”

YOU’RE WITH YOUR FAMILY.

Reluctantly, Pere looked at the stones next to him. On the right were the words Cephas Peto. On the left, the stone read Hycymum

Peto. Pere scurried to his feet, breathing fast, and took a few steps back until he bumped into another stone. Hogal Densal. Tabbat Densal.

He hugged himself nervously. “You can’t see me. You don’t know what I’ve done. It’s just a coincidence that I stopped here. This means nothing. Nothing.”

IT’S A SIGN, YOUNG PERE, TO GO HOME TO THESE NAMES AND MANY MORE WHO MISS AND LOVE YOU.

“Shut up. Just shut up!” he cried and darted out of the burial ground into the safety of trees. He sat down in the dirt and rocked.

HOGAL, I KNOW HE HEARS ME.

Oh, no doubt about it, my boy. He’s remarkably in tune with you.

SO WHY DOESN’T HE RECOGNIZE ME?

He thinks he’s arguing with your memory, not you. He thinks it’s all in his mind.

PERHAPS, HOGAL, IF HE THINKS I’M ONLY HIS MIND, THEN MAYBE THAT’S WHERE I’LL STAY. HE’S ALREADY LET THE OTHER SIDE IN.

“You can’t see me,” Pere repeated to himself in the trees. “You don’t know what I’ve done. None of you are there . . .”

The next night Pere was more deliberate in where he walked to avoid the Performance and girls and headstones. There was a curfew—someone at the grassy arena had to explain that to him—and he wasn’t allowed in certain places two hours after dark, but he still wasn’t sure why.

He wandered in a roundabout way to the fort, walking through quiet neighborhoods and wondered which was his grandparents’. Why they had loved all of this, he couldn’t imagine. The houses just beyond the fort were overrun by weeds and vines, and smelled like old urine. Only stray meows of cats and the occasional sound of a breaking jug suggested that anyone lived there. Sporadic candle light flickered in some windows, but other than that, it had a deserted feel. He’d heard about the newer homes in carefully laid out segments with intricate gardens maintained by poorer people, with gates that kept

“We give you a bed, a uniform, and a purpose.”

people like himself out. But he didn't bother to try to explore there.

Suddenly he stopped walking, unsure of why, and stared at an empty lot. There'd been a house there, but by the damaged stone foundation that remained, it appeared it had been destroyed by fire. What was most unusual was the ground before him.

Flowers. Wildflowers, the same kind that grew up by the glacial fort. But they didn't have wildflowers here. He's heard his grandmother mention that, many times. Yet here, in front of the shell of a burned out house, was a garden of wildflowers.

The village had been aptly named. Pere was growing Edgy just being there.

That night he'd intended only to see the fort walls, but he found himself drawn closer to it. He told himself he was merely interested in trying to find Uncle Deck's house and farm, just to see if it was as unimpressive as everything else his family used to love.

Before the gates of the fort he walked past several houses and buildings where soldiers stood around saying trivial things to women dressed in strips of fabric like Lolo. Some soldiers held mugs of mead, and others, by their dog-like positions on the ground, had already reached their limit.

Pere passed a branding booth and paused long enough to watch a soldier be marked with a black X on his arm. His agonizing screams elicited laughter from his fellow soldiers as they patted him on the back. Pere felt a pang of loneliness as he walked past, and looked back again at the young man who was now holding a wet towel to his arm and sharing a strained smile of triumph with his friends whose arms and necks were scarred with different brands.

Pere looked around, confused. The Briters' farm should've been here, just outside the gates, but instead he saw a vast field before a hillside that didn't look natural. On top of the hill was a large flat area which Pere assumed was for leaders to watch the activity below.

But his attention was soon turned by a sign he saw on a building beside it. It read, “Come See How The Army Eats For Free!”

That dragged him to the long, low building that stood at the very entrance of the fort. The tall iron gates which secured the fort were swung wide open tonight. Without another thought, Pere wandered into the hall, found the line for food, took a plate full of something he couldn't quite identify, and dully sat down to eat. After his past week or so of living off of trash heaps, the food was absolutely . . . adequate.

A body in a dark uniform sat down across the table from him to

watch him eat. Pere noticed but didn't care.

"Well, son," said a fatherly voice across from him. "Looks like you've needed that. Rough time out there?"

Pere gave the uniform only a moment of his attention and responded with a quick, "Yes, sir," before downing another mouthful of something gray with brown bits in it. There was something about the uniform . . . Pere gagged momentarily and glanced up just far enough to read the name patch as he choked down the food.

YORDIN.

Maybe it wasn't him. Maybe it was someone else with the same last name.

"Excellent answer, young man!" The man slapped the table.

Pere swallowed and looked up into his face. He was in his late thirties or early forties with dark brown hair. His rugged face was unfamiliar, but his hard, hazel eyes were just like his mother's.

"That's the way to respond: 'Yes, sir'! With respect like that, you're already two weeks ahead of our newest recruits!"

Pere looked down again at his plate and tried to find his appetite.

Major Yordin folded his hands and placed them on the table where Pere could see them as he tried to take another bite.

"You can eat like this three times a day if you wish. We give you a bed, a uniform, and a purpose. You get to stay away from your parents' house—"

Pere's head shot up at that.

Yordin nodded knowingly and shifted to the next speech. "We get strong men like you all of the time. Need to see the world, right? Need some space, right? Need to explore and taste some freedom? That's what the army is all about, son! Freedom . . . and food!" He slapped the table again.

Pere blinked at the motion that rattled his plate. From somewhere in the back of his mind, a flicker of hope lit up. Maybe, just maybe, it could all *still* work. He could still get into the army. They would give him a uniform. He could get transferred to Sands. He wouldn't be an officer, but at least he'd still be there . . .

He barely listened to Yordin extolling the virtues of army life while he finished his dinner. His mind was racing with new possibilities. He remembered to nod at appropriate times to let Eltana Yordin's son believe he was still listening.

"Well, young man, if you like what you've heard, we can sign you up in the morning. We'll even give you a place to sleep tonight.

“We give you a bed, a uniform, and a purpose.”

Better than the trees, I can promise you that.”

Pere must have looked alarmed because Major Yordin patted his hand. “We get many grassena boys here. We’ll get your head cleared out. And I know just the way to get you started: peach pie. Do you like peach pie? First harvest of the year, just been picked.”

The news hit Pere strangely. He was missing it. Their orchard would have the first peaches coming ripe as well. Ever since he was little, he raced his father in the mornings to snatch the first ripe peaches—

“Yes, I do,” he mumbled.

“Good! I’ll be right back.” Major Yordin smiled and went to the kitchen.

Pere was aware there were other soldiers around him eating, but he paid no attention to them. He just stared at the table.

A moment later Yordin returned and put the slice of pie in front of Pere. He leaned forward and smiled mischievously. “Now, don’t tell the general, but I think this was supposed to be his slice. But I lifted it for our newest recruit. What’s that face for? Pie stolen from the general doesn’t bite—you bite it! Don’t just stare at it, boy, dig in!”

It certainly looked like peach pie, but it had no flavor. He ate it all.

He spent the night in a tent outside the walls of the fort, on a reasonably comfortable cot, with two other young men who would be signing up in the morning. Pere didn’t realize how exhausted he was until he lay down. He wanted to try to plan, but instead he fell quickly to sleep and dreamt of nothing.

In the morning he went back into the large low hall and ate another nondescript meal that he didn’t have to dig out of a trash heap. That was all he needed, something to fill him.

As the rest of the soldiers filed out for their duties, Pere was left with about twenty other men who finished gulping down their breakfast while waiting for the sergeant of recruits to arrive. Some of the young men walked around the building reading the signs on the walls and the descriptions of army life. Pere just studied the patterns in the wood of the table and waited to turn his life over to someone else for a time.

The sergeant over recruiting strode in with two more soldiers—one, a fresh-faced, eager lieutenant, the other a tired looking sergeant. But the sergeant in charge, with numerous stripes and ribbons that

Pere didn't recognize but likely signified his rank, stopped and reviewed the new soldiers. He was maybe fifty, with mostly gray hair, a hardened brown face, and no ability to laugh, or so Pere assumed.

"Well, let's see what the cat has coughed up for us today. My, my," he drawled as his gaze slid over the young men. He didn't seem too enthusiastic about what was before him.

Suddenly self-conscience about his raggedness and filth, Pere slumped behind another young man with torn clothing.

"Major Yordin was right—such an *excellent* group of recruits." He sighed almost in despair as several mistook his sarcastic tone as complimentary, and tried to stand at attention.

The young lieutenant next to him beamed brightly, also apparently not understanding sarcasm.

"Let's just get this over with," the sergeant grumbled. "Men, welcome to the army. I am a sergeant major, which means you don't mess with me, but you do everything I tell you to. Now form a line—"

But the lieutenant standing next to him was pulling on his jacket sleeve, and the sergeant major scowled at him. Still wearing an inane grin, the lieutenant leaned over and whispered something to the sergeant.

"Oh, yes," the sergeant major said dully. "*The story.*" He took a deep breath and put on the fakest smile Pere had ever seen. "Men!" he said in a sickly, cheery voice, "I'm to tell you *my story* about joining the army to motivate you and help you see just what you can accomplish, so here it is. I joined years before any of you were born because frankly, I had nothing better to do—"

The lieutenant was tugging on his sleeve again.

"Yes, yes—what I *meant* to say was, I had just returned to Edge, things weren't going well for me, and I needed some meaning in my life. The army gave me that meaning. I served here, then in Grasses, then even in Idumea itself. Then," he glanced at the lieutenant whose smile had gone rigid, "*then* things got really interesting in Idumea, and many of us marched away to the south leaving the last High General of the united world to be killed by sergeants like me, and then they killed the Administrators, while the cowardly chairman of the world was burned to death in his mansion." All the while the sergeant major kept on his wooden smile, and a few of the new recruits tried to match it, although not sure why.

"Then, I was serving in the furthestmost forts in the south, until Sargon betrayed the men I most revered and trusted. So I did the only

“We give you a bed, a uniform, and a purpose.”

thing I could—I resigned.”

Now the lieutenant’s smile had grown brittle, but the sergeant major’s became more genuine.

“I bounced around for a few years, doing this, doing that, making my way north again, until General Lemuel Thorne sought me out himself.” The genuine quality of his smile took on a new fake sheen. “Seems that other forts tend to forget that Thorne is in charge, so he has to go to them and *remind them*, so he can’t spend as much time here as he desires. He wanted someone with roots in Edge—yes, yes, Province 8, I remember, Lieutenant—he needed someone *steady* and *reliable* to hold down the fort here, and thought I was the man to keep intact Fort Shin—Yes, yes,” he said irritably to the tugging lieutenant, “we call it the Fort at Edge, although some call it the Fort at Province 8—Really, Lieutenant, these boys can’t remember their own names, what does it matter? So, men, here I am again, back in the army for the past, oh, nearly two seasons again, bringing *steadiness* and *reliability* to the northernmost reaches of the world. And this week, I’m helping recruit soldiers. Lucky me. Lieutenant, how was that?”

The lieutenant beamed and grinned as if he’d written the speech himself. “We’re very lucky to have a sergeant major with so much experience as—”

“*Anyway*,” the sergeant major cut him off before the young officer could launch into his own speech. “Form a line, tell me your name—as well as you can remember it,” he added in irritation, “then we’ll proceed to get you bathed and outfitted. *What is that smell?*”

Several of the young men sniffed their armpits and frowned in apology.

The sergeant major plopped into his chair as if this was the most detestable chore in the world, and put a few sheets of papers in front of him.

Pere got in line at the end and remembered that sergeant major was the rank of Uncle Shem; the highest rank an enlisted man could attain. This seemed rather menial work for someone of that stature, or maybe they really thought new recruits were important.

He listened as the men in front of him gave their names. The sergeant major frequently shook his head at their creativity, and occasionally gave a piercing glare when the young man in line hesitated for several moments trying to remember his name for the week.

Pere almost smiled at some of the attempts.

Tranga Dulbush.

Third Shoe.

Not My Sister If I Had One.

Harold.

“Is that your first or last name, soldier?” the sergeant major demanded.

The young man paused. “Both?”

“Harold Harold?”

The young man nodded eagerly.

“Next!”

Suddenly Pere was in front of the sergeant major, and when he answered automatically with, “Pere Shin,” he nearly gasped in terror.

Why did he say that? Why didn’t he remember the name he and Mrs. Yordin had come up with? *Briter!* It was supposed to be Lek Briter! There were dozens of Briters in Sands . . .

But the bored sergeant major didn’t even look up at him. He merely sighed as he wrote it down. “Another one, huh? At least you showed a little restraint in your creativity, turning Perrin into Pere. That was his grandfather, you know. Of course you don’t know. No one knows that anymore,” he droned as he wrote. “Still, you must be at least the fifteenth Private Shin in the army this year.”

Pere gulped and stared at the sergeant major who continued filling in the sheet before him.

“Yes, you’re none too clever. You just look on the board,” he indicated one of the walls Pere had ignored, “choose a name of a commander and think, ‘If I take his name, I’ll be like him.’” The sergeant dipped his quill into the ink. “Not even sure why anyone chooses Shin. He didn’t have the happiest ending, you know. Died in the forest. You’ll be learning all about that history in training. Then you’ll probably want to change your name as well, just like everyone else. We don’t even bother issuing you name patches for your uniforms for the first few weeks because of that. So Private Quack-Quack,” he sent a severe look over to a man squatting on a chair, “you have a little time to come up with something more *respectable*.”

He looked up at Pere, then did a double-take. His quill stopped moving.

“Interesting,” he began slowly. “You know, you actually *look* like him. Like Shin.”

Pere immediately stood at a close approximation of ‘attention’—but not too perfectly as he had practiced with Mrs. Yordin—and stared off into the distance to avoid eye contact.

“We give you a bed, a uniform, and a purpose.”

The sergeant stood up for a closer inspection, and Pere hardly dared to breathe as he focused on a point beyond the sergeant’s head.

“You know, boy, the more I look at you . . .”

Pere was unsure if he should try to look differently. He offered an experimental scowl that stopped the sergeant major’s voice.

He scoffed slightly and shook his head. “Well, if they had survived, you could’ve been their son. You look a bit like him, too, but I only saw him a couple of times when he was a teenager. Or I guess their grandson by now.”

The strangest desire to speak overcame Pere, and before he knew it, the words, “Sir, did you know him?” bubbled out. Again he felt gripped by panic, but the sergeant major actually offered a real, albeit small, smile.

“I did. He taught me how to hold a sword when I was young. Made me want to be a soldier.” His voice softened just a notch. “My friends and I would watch him run the troops through their paces. He was only a captain then, and there were only one hundred soldiers here. But he was a good man. Outstanding man, actually. Made me feel I was worth listening to. So did his wife,” his voice became softer.

The other men who had already given their names stopped their quiet conversations and tried to hear the sergeant.

The lieutenant blinked in surprise, probably wondering where this story was coming from, and the other sergeant, who had been napping most of the time, opened his eyes.

“She was my teacher for a time,” the sergeant major continued in a faraway tone. “Later they gave me a chance when no one else would.” His voice was now just above a whisper. “He saved my life, more than once.”

The lieutenant held out his hands. “Yes! Now *that’s* a story—”

The sergeant major cleared his throat roughly enough to shut up the lieutenant, and he looked down at his paperwork. “Good people, no matter what they say. Tragic end. It was all Zenos’s fault.”

He cleared his throat again. Still looking at his papers, he rambled in a loud and official voice, “Welcome to the army, Private Shin. I hope you have better luck with that name than the original. You and all the other recruits will report directly after midday meal to begin training. If any of you have any questions, you may ask for me until you are assigned to your duty sergeants. My name is Sergeant Major Qualipoe Hili. And no, you may not call me Poe. Only the general is

allowed to do that.” He glanced up once more and regarded Private Shin who still looked straight ahead.

Pere shifted ever so slightly, waiting. There was something vaguely familiar about the name of Poe Hili. Pere hadn’t bothered to look at his name patch before, but he had a feeling he should have recognized the name from Calla’s book.

Sergeant Major Hili’s mouth moved as if he wanted to say something else. Finally, he whispered, “Remarkable.” In a louder voice he added, “You’re released, Private Shin. In the army that means, go get in another line.”



Shem sat back in his chair and grinned, for the first time in over a week, as he sniffed the head of the black-haired newborn in his arms.

“Salema, for the third time—perfect!”

Salema, lounging on the sofa, beamed proudly. “I told all of you I could do it myself. But, if Mama and Muggah and Calla all wanted to sit by and watch, I suppose that’s fine with us, right Lek?”

Lek, sitting next to her, still hadn’t quite regained his color, even though his son had arrived three hours earlier. “Yes, I did well as the catcher,” he said, a bit woodenly.

“And a well done to you, too, son,” Shem winked at him.

Salema leaned back and sighed in smug satisfaction.

Jaytsy sent a sympathetic look to her son-in-law. For the past couple of hours she had been plying him with apple pie, trying to revive him. Salema had, indeed, delivered the baby herself, reaching down and pulling him out after a few hours of laboring, with her husband as coach and assistant catcher. She had insisted their two sons watch, so they could witness a birth other than cattle, and they did so between their fingers and with comments that consisted of, “Oh, gross. *GROSS!*”

Salema had relented to let Calla and Jaytsy help take care of her boys, with Mahrree on call to fetch a midwife should they need one. But the grandmothers could only cheer and encourage from the sofas as they held their grandsons who watched in morbid fascination, but they never lent a hand; again, Salema’s orders.

Fennic had readily kissed his new baby brother, but Briter wasn’t about to touch him until he had a second bath.

“We give you a bed, a uniform, and a purpose.”

Now Calla had gone to her home to make them dinner, Mahrree had left to check on the Briter household, while Jaytsy remained at Lek and Salema’s as baby tender.

Shem cuddled his sleeping grandson. “Oh, did we need this today. Excellent timing, Salema.” His eyes were already dripping. “You know, I think he’s going to take after you. He already has the hair.”

“It’s Puggah hair,” Salema smiled. Her other two sons had Lek and Shem’s light brown hair, but Perrin Zenos’s was black and slightly curled. “So we named him well.”

Meiki, Shem’s eighteen-year-old daughter, burst through the door, crooning. “I knew it! I was sitting in tutoring and I thought, ‘I bet he’s arrived!’” She hurried over to pull the newborn from her father’s arms. “Come see Aunt Meiki!”

“Hey, I was holding that—”

“He’s so chubby already, Salema! Look at those cheeks.” Meiki squealed. “I could kiss them all day!”

Shem frowned at her. “Wait—tutoring? What were you being tutored for?”

“Math,” Meiki said blithely, sitting down with the baby and inspecting his tiny fingernails.

“But you’ve never needed a tutor in math before. That’s one of your best subjects,” Shem pointed out.

But Salema was smirking at her sister-in-law. “What’s his name, Meiki?”

She glanced up, her cheeks flushed. “What? Who?”

“The math tutor? The one you wanted to sit by this afternoon on a day when there are no classes?”

Shem raised his eyebrows in expectation, and Lek looked concerned. Jaytsy handed him another slice of pie.

“Oh, um,” Meiki hesitated. “I wasn’t really being tutored. Just watching, helping . . .” But, feeling her father’s steady gaze, she blurted, “His name’s Clyde.”

“*Clyde*,” Shem stated carefully. Meiki was his oldest daughter, named after his mother who he lost when he was only a toddler. Now he realized he might be losing his daughter, too . . .

No, no. Not *losing*. This was what she was supposed to do: find a good young man who she would be happy with, and continue the cycle of families . . .

Still, he gritted his teeth as he watched her nuzzling the newborn as if she wanted one too. “Do I need to meet this *Clyde*?”

Jaytsy, seeing how nervous Meiki was growing under her father's unwavering watch, said in a teasing manner, "Shem, do you need help with calculus?"

Shem cast her a withering look that made his children chuckle. To Meiki he said, "Is that what he tutors?"

"He tutors everything in math!" Meiki gushed. "He's brilliant! Give him any four digit figures and he can multiply them instantly!"

"Well," Shem began, "that's handy—"

"He's in his last year," Meiki plowed on, "and he's going to be kept on as a professor next year—the youngest in mathematics they've ever had!"

Shem slowly nodded. "Well, always good to have a mathematician around."

Jaytsy frowned, but with a playful glint in her eyes. "Is it? How many big numbers do you have to multiply each day?"

Again Shem widened his eyes at Jaytsy, who chuckled at him as if to say, *Relax. This is a good thing. This isn't a boy from Edge, you know; he's from Salem.*

Meiki rewrapped the baby in his blanket and gooded at him. "Hewwo, wittle Pewwin. Hewwo!"

"Well," Shem said slowly, remembering that she *was* eighteen, and this was the age most young women starting thinking seriously about young men.

But it was . . . well, there was *always* something else, wasn't there? He didn't even get to relax and enjoy his newest grandson for ten minutes before a new concern popped up right before him. He sighed at his oldest daughter, beaming about a mathematician and probably calculating what their own baby may look like.

"Bring him around the house sometime, Meiki. I may have some figures that need figuring—"

"Oh!" Meiki suddenly exclaimed, looking up from the baby. "The house! Oh, Papa—I almost forgot. Woodson came by and—"

Shem sprang to his feet. "Woodson?! Why didn't you tell me?"

Meiki blinked at him. "I just did—"

But Shem was already bolting from the house, sprinting to his own. He glanced up at the tower, but there was no other banner except for the light blue dotted one signifying that a new baby boy had just been born in the area.

"Why's he here?" Shem murmured, rushing into the house and nearly crashing into Calla.

“We give you a bed, a uniform, and a purpose.”

She read his face. “No, nothing about Young Pere.”

Shem almost sagged to the floor in disappointment. “Then why—”

Calla was already gently steering him to his office. “Just talk to him.”

Shem headed into his office to find Woodson rising from his chair. Shem shook his hand. “Sorry to keep you waiting. Meiki got distracted by her new nephew and some mathematician, and failed to tell me that I had a visitor.”

Woodson nodded formally and sat down after Shem gestured to him that he should. He seemed uncomfortable. Then again, Woodson always looked uncomfortable indoors. He needed to be in the trees, dressed in brown and green camouflage, not the blue tunic and black trousers that looked overly stiff on him.

He rubbed his palms nervously on his legs as Shem sat down behind his desk. “The news isn’t promising, is it?” Shem said, knowing that Woodson didn’t like beating around the bush, unless it was an actual bush in an actual forest.

Woodson shook his head miserably. “Guide, I’m so sorry. We’ve checked everywhere we can think, had everyone searching, but we can’t find either of them. It’s as if they’ve vanished!”

Shem smiled ruefully. “Rather like what we’ve been doing over the years. For once, the tables have been turned on us. Woodson, the evening they left, it was impressed upon me that neither Amory nor Young Pere would return soon. I appreciate your diligence, but we should call off the full-time searches. We’ve made our best efforts, but it’s done for now. The supply scouts can keep their eyes open for us.”

“Yes, Guide,” Woodson said, sounding defeated. “I have come also to . . . to tender my resignation. I let my guard down and was gullible and allowed—” He stopped, because Shem was holding up his hand.

“I won’t accept it, Woodson. I need you as the head of the scouting corps, and I simply won’t let you quit. When Jothan retired, he said the same thing I did: you were the best replacement for him. I still believe that.”

Woodson’s face went wretched. “But, Guide, I failed! I took two unauthorized people into the world, and—”

“It’s not your fault, Woodson.”

“But—”

“*It’s not your fault,*” Shem repeated, sharper. From a nearby shelf he pulled out a piece of paper. “Here’s a list of whose fault it is. Peto and Lilla Shin. Mahrree Shin—”

“Wait,” Woodson tried to interrupt. “It’s not *their* faults—”

“—Relf Shin, Salema Briter Zenos, Morah Shin, age seven—”

“Wait a minute, Guide,” Woodson tried again.

Shem sighed. “And many, *many* more names of family who have come to me in the past week to confess that it’s *all* their fault. At the bottom of the list is Shem Zenos. Shall I add your name below mine?”

Woodson smiled wanly. “I get it, Guide. But I feel—”

“Betrayed,” Shem supplied simply. “We all do. It’s such an unfamiliar feeling, so we feel guilty instead, because that’s the closest emotion we know. But Woodson, there *are* actually two people at fault here: Amory Riling and Young Perrin Shin. No one else is responsible for their choices, only them.” He crumpled up the piece of paper and threw it dramatically into the cold fireplace.

Woodson watched it land. “There was nothing written on that, was there, Guide?”

Shem smiled wryly. “This is why I need you, Woodson. You see through everything. Now, see through this, and get back to work. Rector Cox is improving, I’ve heard, but Honri’s going to stay in Edge until the first snows, looking. Surely there’s work for you to do on the other side of the mountain, and you seem itching to get back out there. You look terrible in blue and black, by the way.”

Woodson smiled, looking immensely relieved. “Thank you, Guide.”

“Sometimes I envy you, you know” Shem whispered. “*Out there.*”

“I know,” Woodson whispered back. “You were a fixture in that forest for so many years. I keep telling you—if ever you want to spend the day with us, we’d love to have you. We’ll keep you safe, you know that.”

“And I keep telling you,” Shem leaned closer, “that I can never go back there again, to be that close to the world again. I’m not worried about my safety, but everyone else’s.”

Woodson nodded, knowing full well that the night he was born in that forest, Shem plunged his long knife into the heart of a Guarder to ensure his family could escape.

“The offer still stands, always,” Woodson said, getting up. “Go kiss that new grandson of yours for me. There’s a training course for

“We give you a bed, a uniform, and a purpose.”

new scouts that’s been postponed, but since I’m back, I guess I should be getting ready to teach it again. But first, I need to change.”

Chapter 25--“I’ve always been able to count on you.”

Deck rode fast with his son Viddrow and nephew Nool toward the Idumean Trail, the southernmost route to the ancient temple site.

It was a race, after all, but his heart wasn’t in it. No one’s was. He had hoped the speed of the horse would help jar the odd feeling that accompanied him, but so far that hadn’t happened.

Early that morning, much of the family had met again to say goodbye to the men heading to the routes, but it wasn’t anything like the laughing, teasing departure of less than a season ago.

First, there were no little ones. Just wives and mothers saying goodbye, and Con and Sam Cadby were too busy helping their father and neighbors with the grape harvest to take two days off.

Second, they were breaking up into separate groups. It felt wrong for Deck to watch his Cephas go with Peto, Boskos, and Zaddick. They’d be re-marking the Back Door route, which hadn’t seen anyone for six years. While it was the shortest and quickest route, it was also the steepest and most dangerous. That’s why they had newly official Dr. Boskos Zenos, who had recently passed his final exams. They also had to find an emergency storage cavern, so they needed an extra man.

But splitting up the families?

Deck knew Peto felt it as well. He had patted Deck on the back before they left and whispered, “I’ll take good care of your Cephas, I promise. Just like you’ll watch my Nool.”

The rest of the men and teenage boys were divided up to take the other three routes. Cambo Briter led one group, Lek Zenos, who became the father to Perrin Zenos only three days earlier, took another, and Relf Shin led the third.

“I’ve always been able to count on you.”

Shem wasn’t coming either, but he had seen them off with a prayer that promised those staying at home that each man would return safely *this time*.

But Mahrree insisted on tearfully hugging and kissing each one again anyway. That morning she was worse than Grandma Trovato.

Noticeably missing were two men named Perrin Shin. That was the oddest part of all. These trips had always been led by the general, and as the men mounted their horses, they half expected to hear his deep voice bellowing that it was long past time to go.

Instead there was only a subdued Shem wishing them well and expecting them home for a family dinner the next evening.

Deck was rarely a man to show emotion, but as he nudged his horse over to Shem, he felt his chin trembling.

“Sure you can’t come along, Guide? Doesn’t seem right to be going to the temple site without you.”

Shem patted Deck’s leg. “I have three ill assistants and we’re a little backed up because of . . . everything.” Then he sighed and added in a whisper. “There are a great many things not right today, Deckett Briter. Thank you for being one of the things that is. I’ve always been able to count on you.”

Deck cleared his throat, nodded to the guide, and clucked his horse into a gallop before anyone could see the tears in his eyes.

They were riding light, with only a pack for their food and a bed-roll. Peto had tried to lift the mood of the day by suggesting they race to see which route was the fastest from the Eztates.

Relf’s group, finishing the Norden route, had protested the idea. “We have the farthest to go!” Kew reminded his father.

“Yes, you do,” Peto acknowledged. “But that route is mostly marked, and you won’t be stopping by your grandmother’s, either. Besides, whoever gets to the site first also has to gather all the firewood for the evening.”

“So it might be good to come in *last*?”

Peto nodded. “That’s the way races in Salem are supposed to work, Kew.”

Almost everyone had laughed, even though it wasn’t that funny. They just needed something to get them smiling.

Peto barely twitched his mouth. No one had seen him smile in the nearly two weeks since Young Pere had bolted.

It wasn’t long before Deck, Viddrow, and Nool reached the southernmost trail. They called it the Idumean trail because it paralleled

the canyon Guide Gleace had envisioned would be the route of the army of Idumea. Their route went straight through the forest, up the steep hillside, and followed along the tops of the peaks that curved and split. Taking the right-hand fork of the split led travelers directly to the temple site. Taking the left-hand led them back down into the dead valley.

The men slowed their horses as they approached the first two marked trees signaling the trailhead, and pulled out their knives.

Viddrow nodded at his cousin and, leaning from his horse, deepened the slashes on the tree. He and Nool proceeded to ride into the trees, but Deck didn't continue. He just remained, staring at the forest. A moment later Viddrow and Nool came back out.

"Papa? Something wrong?" Viddrow asked.

When Deck didn't answer, the cousins looked at each other, shrugged, and rode back to Deck.

He smiled dimly before whispering, "Rector Shin, how look the trees?"

Nool and Viddrow glanced sadly at each other as they remembered their grandfather's routine before entering any trail.

"Very well," Nool said quietly, saying his father's part. He didn't finish with, "General Shin," but skipped to the next line. "Guide Zenos, shall we continue?"

Viddrow wiped his nose on his sleeve. "Of course. It's a beautiful day to do the Creator's work."

Deck nodded once. "Please tell me there's not much more to this," his voice cracked, "because I'm already getting hungry. Let's get moving."

"Let's get moving," his son and nephew repeated quietly.



Private Shin fell onto his new cot in exhaustion and pain. His ears were blazing, this time because the bits of metal and glass recently imbedded into the tops had been removed.

"Can't have the sun glinting off your taggings and giving away your position," was the explanation why several new recruits spent time flinching in the surgery wing under the indelicate hands of the surgeon's assistants.

At first, Shin welcomed the idea of resting on the cots after running in the surprisingly hot Harvest sun, but when he realized there

“I’ve always been able to count on you.”

was no Fog to cover the pain, he began to envy those dropping outside from dehydration who were now dragged past him to another part of the surgery.

Shin had asked if they could numb his ears, but the surgeon shook his head. “Don’t need sedation for just that.”

“Not sedation, sir,” Pere winced as the assistant pulled out another jagged piece of metal, “just the brown stuff.”

“What brown stuff?” the surgeon demanded.

“The numbing agent,” he gasped, “what you use before stitching. Numbs the flesh of the area.”

“I’ve never heard of anything like that! You grassena boys. You see all kinds of things no one else does. Just bite down and tough it out like a real soldier. You’ll be done in half an hour.”

He made a mental note to be more careful in the future with what he said. He probably would have learned in Woodson’s training that the numbing agent tragically didn’t exist in the world.

On his way out of the surgery wing, he stopped and looked at himself in the mirror. The last time he saw himself properly was in Salem. He’d been avoiding this, even after his first bath and fitting for his uniform. But having had his taggings removed, he decided it was time to see what the worldly Private Shin looked like.

He wasn’t prepared for what greeted him. He couldn’t pull his gaze away from his ears. Even though the taggings had been there for less than two weeks, the rough and now bleeding cuts across the top of his ears would leave scars that would not fade quickly, if ever. He could never go back to unscarred ears, but if he had to choose between the taggings and the scars, he preferred the scars.

He tried next to look into his eyes but couldn’t focus on himself, as if his eyes refused to acknowledge the person in the mirror.

Instead he searched his face. It was more worn and rough than he remembered, and he seemed to have lost a little weight. Still, it was a good look for a soldier. And he looked less like Perrin Shin the elder. He tried to smile at himself, now wearing the basic blue jacket and trousers, but he gave up as soon as he tried. Wondering fleetingly what Puggah would think of him in a uniform, he felt a flicker of hope. At least here he was safe. He was fed, clothed, and away from girls like Lolo and Amory and temptations to get fogged.

He stepped out of the building into the hot sunshine. The snugness of his uniform gave him a sense of security, and he could understand why Puggah had liked the army. He was now, entirely and wholly,

Private Shin. They'd told him to live, think, believe, and act like army, every moment of every day. There was no more Pere, or Perrin, or especially *Young* Pere. Only the private. The army was now his salvation.

He walked to his barracks and lay down on his cot for a few minutes as the surgeon had ordered. For some reason his thoughts were filled with his mother. He thought he could see her weeping as she did when he jumped off the school house roof, but he shook the thought away. She had twelve other children to worry about. She didn't have room or time to worry about him.

Having the trouble-maker gone was probably the biggest relief she'd had since he was born.

Lilla needed to bake. It was the only activity which soothed her, and she needed a *lot* of soothing with all of the boys and men gone, again.

They would be back. Shem had gripped her by the arms as she watched miserably out the window as they rode off, and assured her, over and over, all of them would be back. She stared deep into his blue eyes, but saw no deception. There never was any in his eyes.

"Bread," she finally said as she heard the last of the men and boys' horses leaving the Eztates.

Shem blinked at her.

"With dried cranberries. And sugar. Maybe a glaze on the top."

"Sounds delicious, Lilla," Shem told her with a hint of a smile.

"You have three ill assistants, right?"

He nodded. "Fevers, chills. I think they accidentally infected each other at our last meeting."

"They need sweet cranberry bread," Lilla decided. "To make them feel better. So does Salema and the boys, with Lek away. And maybe another dozen families."

"So you'll be all right?" Shem asked cautiously as Lilla made her way to the pantry and brought out a bag of flour and a crock of dried cranberries. "I don't need to send over Calla—"

"I'm baking, *aren't I!*" she shrieked, and slammed down the crock which, shockingly, didn't shatter. "I'm making something new, right? I'm going to make EVERYONE feel HAPPY with FOOD!"

Shem took a protective step backward. While he was used to

“I’ve always been able to count on you.”

Lilla’s volume, he’d never seen his sister-in-law so on the edge of madness. “Of course you are. And it’ll be wonderful, as usual.”

“Of course it will,” she agreed dismissively, heading back to the pantry for the bag of sugar. “Everyone loves my cooking. I needed to use up these cranberries anyway. *He* always hated cranberries.” She wiped her eyes. “I can clean them out before he returns . . .”

She sat down on the stepladder, disheartened.

What was he eating? Where was he sleeping? Was he in danger? Was he starving? He was a large boy, and no one could feed him quite as well as his mama. He always came home for dinner. He loved her cooking. He always raided the pantry late at night. How was he surviving—

Lilla wasn’t at all surprised to feel her oldest sister’s arms around her, hugging her from behind.

After ten minutes of sobbing, Calla gently said, “Cranberry sweet bread? Leave it up to you to come up with something that sounds so interesting. How can I help? And let’s not use any knives today . . .”

With the men on the mountain, and the university on break for early harvest, Lilla under Calla’s control in the kitchen which would be churning out three dozen loaves of cranberry bread, and Jaytsy spending the day helping Salema and the boys, Mahrree decided it was a good day to go back to the temple. Perrin needed to know they were marking the trails—all of them.

She found his blue chair, still by the window, and the fat pine tree pushed a little out of the way, but that was all right. She didn’t need privacy. She sat down on the chair, closed her eyes—

But he didn’t come. Not like last time.

She meditated, she pondered, she asked the Creator to let him know about the trails—

Still nothing.

Come on, she thought. Just for five seconds, that’s all she needed. And then she remembered. She didn’t “need” him, but *wanted* him. Well, that should have been enough, right? She closed her eyes again, squeezing them tight almost childishly, as if she had to go through some little routine to get her way. After a few minutes, she felt her father.

No, you don't need him.

She murmured softly, "But my heart does."

Mahrree, Mahrree . . .

Her father wasn't alone. Today, Mahrree felt distinctly that her mother was there, too, and she grinned at the sensation. A handful of times she'd felt her mother, and she knew Hycymum was there as support. She and her father were there together, forever. She'd known before in her heart that her parents had accepted the agreement she and Perrin had done for them in the temple, but moments like this reminded her just how wonderfully binding it could be.

"But if *you* can both be here, surely *he* can, too . . ."

There were more coming, and Mahrree felt that they were just beyond her range of perception, just slightly out of focus for her soul's eyes to see. But she felt them, and that awareness was more intense than merely seeing. She smiled as she felt Relf and Joriana, together, and if she could only go a bit further, feel a little deeper, she was sure she'd find their son Perrin . . .

Two more came to her, and she recognized them, too: Tabbitt and Hogal Densal, also together. She nearly opened her arms to embrace everyone, but knew she'd get some looks from others in the temple wondering just what poor, lonely Mrs. Shin was up to now. Instead she grinned, and knew the Densals grinned back.

But you can go no further.

It was distinctly Hogal Densal, and her mind felt as if it were hitting a block wall. On either side of her now seemed to be Hycymum and Joriana, as if ready to escort her somewhere.

"No!" Mahrree whispered urgently. "He's here . . . just a bit further."

No, Mahrree.

That was distinctly Joriana.

You have to let him go for now. He can't come back to you. Not yet.

"Why not?"

You know why not.

That was her father, Cephas.

We all heard what you made him promise.

Drat, she thought. "To never leave Young Pere's side."

And he won't.

There was another one, definitely Relf.

Young Pere needs him, especially right now, especially where he

“I’ve always been able to count on you.”

is. You don’t need him, Mahrree.

“Is he in the army?” Mahrree breathed.

No one answered her. No one needed to.

“Don’t tell Lilla!”

She had the impression no one was planning to.

But he knows what’s going on at home, Mahrree.

Hogal.

He’s not alone with Young Pere. I’m his companion, seeing as how I had so much experience with rebellious young men named Perrin.

Mahrree could almost feel his eyebrows waggling, and she nearly giggled.

He knows about the men marking all the trails, he knows about the new baby’s arrival, he knows . . . everything.

“And he knows how much I miss him.”

That goes without saying, Mahrree. Let him do his job, and you do yours.

“And what’s that?” she whispered despondently. “Saying the wrong words to my grandchildren to chase them away?”

Mahrree.

That was her mother, she was sure of it.

How many times did I say the wrong things to you, yet I didn’t chase you away?

That time Mahrree did chuckle softly. “Thank you,” she whispered to them all. “For coming. For tolerating my loneliness. My childishness.”

There was loving chuckling in return.

You still have a great work to do.

That was Tabbie.

I tried to tell you the night after Perrin joined us.

“I know. Calla told me.”

And, as Perrin said, all of this is only temporary.

“It feels like a lifetime, already.”

When you’re on our side, you’ll realize just how brief a lifetime is. Just wait . . .

“What’s the work I have to do? How will I know it when I’ve done it?”

Her father answered.

You’ll know. Everyone will know.



Deck's group was the second to the ancient temple site that afternoon. His son Cambo's group had, as expected, arrived first, taking the route which started just beyond Deck's pasture lands.

Relf and Kew Shin, with Holling Briter, arrived a few minutes after Deck. Kew was thrilled that they hadn't lost, and that his brother Hogal and cousins Cambo and Bubba had already gathered enough firewood for the night. Now some of them walked around the ancient temple ruins waiting for Peto and Lek's groups, while others lay down in the grass and enjoyed the warm sunshine.

Deck walked to the edge of the large tableland and looked down at the lush, green, silent valley in front of him. He sat down and wondered when he would be back again, and why they wouldn't be coming for "a time," as Guide Zenos put it.

While the air was usually dry in Salem, here it always felt heavier and humid; today, it was saturated. Deck found it difficult to fully fill his lungs and it made him nervous. He didn't like sitting around, staring into that peaceful valley which waited for bloodshed. Even though Shem had promised no one would be injured, Deck felt the need to go find the other seven men.

A voice in the distance caught his attention. "And the next winner is, although we don't have winners, Lek Zenos and company!"

Deck turned around to see Lek, Wes Hifadhi, and Barnos Shin arrive through a break in the trees, smiling and waving.

Deck jogged over to them. "Any news of Peto? Sometimes you can see the Back Door from the Upper Middle Route."

Barnos nodded. "We spied Papa not too long ago. They should be here soon."

Deck breathed a little easier. "Good, good. I'll just . . ." He didn't finish but headed over to a forested area where the Back Door route would finish. He walked through the trees up the incline about twenty paces where the upper ridge of the bowl of the mountains dipped a little. He reached the top of the ridge and looked down the other side.

The last two hundred or so paces up that section were grueling. It was a climb up a steep rock face. Sure-footed children and healthy adults could handle it, but the elderly, expecting women, and little children would struggle. Deck sighed in relief when he saw four horses on long tethers for the night at the bottom of the slope a few hundred paces below, and four men climbing their way up the face.

“I’ve always been able to count on you.”

“Everyone doing well?” Deck called down.

Peto looked up. “Yes. Everyone else get in all right?” He placed his hand carefully on another jagged rock and pulled himself up.

Deck nodded. “You’re the last ones in.”

“All the firewood collected?” called Zaddick Zenos from the bottom of the rock face.

“Sure is.”

“Then we win!”

Deck smiled and sat down on top of the ridge to watch their progress.

“Come on down, Papa,” Cephas called up. “You can jump from there, roll down that steep grassy area, and join us in climbing back up.”

“As tempting as that sounds, son,” Deck said, making sure his sarcasm was obvious, “I don’t think Boskos needs to practice stitching my flesh or binding my bones today.”

Zaddick chuckled. “No, he’s already had a bit of doctoring practice.”

“Zad!” Boskos said with some irritation, crawling upward a few paces ahead of his younger brother.

Peto reached the top of the ridge and took his brother-in-law’s outstretched hand. He held on to it for a moment.

“Thanks for not jumping. Cephas and Zaddick plan to go down that way tomorrow to see if they can. It was Young Pere’s theory that he didn’t get to test six years ago. Broken arm. I guess Boskos better be ready. To be honest, Deck, I’ve been feeling uneasy all day,” he said quietly. “When everyone is at the site I might be able to rest my mind.”

“Why do you think I’m up here watching for you?” Deck slapped Peto on the back. “I haven’t been able to keep a clear head either.”

“I think Boskos had the same problem,” Peto said, watching as Cephas reached the top. “He took a bit of a spill earlier.”

“Is he all right?”

“Yes, as long as you don’t talk to him about it.”

Boskos reached the top a moment later, with fresh cuts and scrapes on his face and arms that Deck ignored, with Zaddick close behind.

The five men jogged through the forest and came out at the ancient temple ruin to be greeted by cheers of welcome. Half an hour

later the men and boys sat around the fire eating their dinner and talking about the condition of the routes.

Lek kept eyeing Boskos as they ate, and finally asked, “So, Bos—the scratches?”

Zaddick grinned at Cephas and elbowed him, but Cephas shook his head in warning.

Everyone watched for Boskos’ response. He groaned before he answered. “I slipped.”

Lek tried not to smirk. “Slipped on what, Bos?”

“Unsure,” he said, taking a bite of his dinner.

“Oh, I saw what it was,” Zaddick offered, too eagerly.

“What was it, Zad?” Lek asked his youngest brother.

“A *flower*,” Zaddick snorted.

Cephas tried to keep his face straight for Boskos’ benefit, but nearly everyone else burst into laughter.

Even Peto smiled.

Nool noticed and nodded to Relf to look at their father. Relf elbowed Barnos and the two of them smiled at their father’s briefly lighter mood.

“A flower?” Deck asked carefully.

Boskos sighed. “Not an average flower. Barely fit the definition. Some big, smelly, *slimy* thing on the rock up the trail. After we tethered the horses.”

“He *stepped* on it,” Zaddick announced, “and the next thing we know, he’s rolling down the hill back to the horses!”

Lek tried to stifle his snort as his brother and cousins laughed. “I’m sorry, Bos, but . . . a flower? That is funny. Anything permanently injured?”

Boskos finally looked up from his dinner with a reluctant smile. “Only my dignity. Papa’s still a true guide.”

The men chuckled and Peto’s smile remained. After a moment he quietly said, “Father hated that route.”

Everyone stopped laughing to listen.

“Boskos knows why now. That last climb? Try taking that in the Snowing Season.”

Relf’s eyebrows rose. “Papa, you did it in the snow?”

“I was so eager to see if it could be another route,” Peto explained, “when we first started scouting for paths, that I didn’t want to wait for the snow to melt. Besides, I reasoned we should try the routes in all kinds of weather. I was around eighteen and a bit heartsick over a

“I’ve always been able to count on you.”

girl with a loud laugh who didn’t notice me at a wedding some time before. I needed a distraction.”

“Was she at our papa’s wedding? Maybe our mama’s youngest sister?” Lek asked with a knowing smile.

Peto nodded. “My father was so eager for me to find a way to feel needed in Salem our first year here that he agreed to do just about anything, even explore the Back Door. I didn’t realize it at the time, but he was worried about avalanches. Apparently Shem had told him a few stories, and when he saw large swaths of forests that were wiped out by snow slides, he was even less thrilled about going. But he did. He knew it was important to me, so he went.” Peto stopped for a moment and stared at the fire.

Deck broke the silence. “Tell them what happened, Peto.”

Peto’s dim smile returned. “We left the horses down by the river, as we did today. Then we climbed all the way to the top to see where it came out. That’s when Father tried to sit down to rest, and slipped instead.” Peto looked up at Boskos. “But he tumbled more than a couple paces, Bos. He *slid*, and boy, did he slide on that snow!” Peto began to grin, for the first time in weeks. “All the way down the entire slope!”

The men began to smile and the teenage boys laughed.

“And did he stop when he reached the horses?” Peto continued. “Nope. He kept on sliding, right past them. They even turned and watched him zip on by!”

Now everyone was laughing.

Peto almost did. “The only thing that stopped him was the river. One big crash! I could hear the ice breaking from where I was at the summit.”

“He must have been freezing!” Hogal said in awe.

“Just about,” Peto told his twelve-year-old son. “But he was also furious, and that kept him warm. I came down to help him, but I don’t think I ever quit laughing, and he could hear me. That canyon echoes, if you haven’t noticed. You see, it wasn’t a gentle slide. No, not General Shin. He fought it all the way down, flailing and kicking and tumbling. He even took out some innocent little evergreens. I was sure I heard a few army words echo through the canyon. I don’t think these mountains *ever* heard such language before!”

Even Deck was laughing.

Peto finally chuckled.

“I remember when they came home,” Deck said. “They were a

day early and Perrin was still chilled to the bone, including his hair. Mahrree had wanted him to cut some of those longer locks, but he had refused. Since he and Shem had left the army, they hadn't cut their hair at all. They were both looking rather scruffy by then. He had to let Mahrree cut it when he came home, though, because when Peto fished him out of the river, some of Perrin's hair was already freezing and Peto broke off a lock just to see if he could."

Peto finally laughed, along with everyone else.

His sons watched him in delight, reveling in the sound.

"He was all lopsided in the back," Peto chuckled. "My mother thanked me later for making him have to get a trim." Peto watched the fire and laughed again at the memory. "This was his idea, you know," he said softly, "Finding the emergency storage cavern today."

Everyone fell silent as they watched Peto.

"I was going through his desk a few weeks ago and found his last notes. One thing he wrote was for us to find an emergency storage spot on the Back Door route. Knowing him, Boskos, he had that ugly flower grow there just to get you to slip, just to get me to remember our first trip." His chin began to tremble but he looked up at his nephew. "Thanks for tumbling."

Boskos nodded back. "Anytime. It looked like the kind of flower Uncle Perrin would design. Not really his talent."

"Uncle Peto," Cephas said, "I've never seen anything like it in these mountains or in the books. Maybe we could name it the One-of-a-Kind Ugly?"

"Agreed," Peto grinned.

Boskos looked up to the stars beginning to appear. "But Uncle Perrin," he called, "couldn't you have put that hideous thing a little *lower* on the trail?"

Everyone burst out laughing again, and Peto nodded and wiped at his eyes.

As they set up their bedrolls around the fire, Deck felt a bit more at ease. At their family prayer before bed, his son Bubba prayed that they would all reach home safely again, especially the one who was farthest from home.

No one had said his name that day besides Peto, but it was clear Young Pere was on everyone's minds. Even after they began to lie down for the night, Peto continued to sit by the fire, poking it with a long stick.

Deck sat next to him. "I have to confess, I couldn't enter the forest

“I’ve always been able to count on you.”

until we did the little routine.”

Peto glanced at him and smiled. “You too? Your Cephas started it for us.”

“Cambo told me he and Bubba and Hogal made it to the second set of trees before they realized something felt wrong,” Deck said. “They rode back out to the forest and asked Rector Shin how the trees looked before they continued on.”

Peto poked the fire again. “Lek, Barnos, and Wes had a little argument as to who’d start it. They voted that Lek should begin since he was the oldest. And Relf told me that he and Kew and your Holling had already planned to do it before they ever arrived at the Norden route. Maybe that’s why they made such good time.”

Deck sighed. “I always thought it was a silly tradition, but today it meant so much to me. Somehow it invoked his permission.”

Peto nodded, not caring about the tear that slid down his cheek.

“Have you felt him recently?” Deck whispered.

Peto shook his head. “No. He left when Young Pere did.”

“That’s what Jaytsy and I thought. That’s all right. That’s who needs him most now. We all have each other, but . . .”

“That’s the only thing that keeps me going, Deck,” Peto confessed. “What I keep telling Lilla. We know he’s watching him. That’s why he had to die, Deck. I’m sure of it. The Creator already planned out Young Pere’s protection before he even made his escape.”

Deck put an arm around his brother-in-law. “Then He has a plan for him to come home as well.”

Peto’s shoulders sagged. “If only he will. He’s already rejected so many other plans, he can still reject this one.”

Deck didn’t know what to say to that. He just awkwardly hugged his brother-in-law and stared into the fire with him.

When Mahrree arrived home that evening, she was greeted by three cheerful girls: Ester Zenos, Sewzi Briter, and Kanthi Shin. The fifteen-and-sixteen-year-olds were holding pages, expectantly.

“There you are, Aunt Mahrree!” Ester said. “We’ve been waiting for you. We finished our Punny Poetry entry for the rectory recital at the end of the week, but we need some critiquing.”

“Yes,” Sewzi said, sounding slightly disappointed, “our mothers

all say ‘It’s wonderful, girls!’”

“But we know that our Muggah,” Kanthi nodded to her, “would actually give us some *real* advice.”

Mahrree smiled. “Well, then, let’s see what you’ve created,” and she led them back to her wing of the house. After she made herself comfortable on the sofa, the three girls launched into their creation.

It was a charming tale of three bickering crows, although what constitutes bickering in Salem is merely a difference of opinions in the world, and Mahrree could think of a dozen ways to *really* heat up their argument. Then there was the rhyme which really wasn’t a rhyme, and the cadence was off in one section, and it would have been better if they had memorized it, but Kanthi—the budding writer—could never remember exactly how words were phrased because she kept rewriting as she went, and that joke fell a bit flat, but if they—

She stopped with her mental list because suddenly all she could see before her was the memory of Young Pere, scowling after he’d experienced Mahrree Shin, Critic at Large.

And how it had chased him away.

Oh, sure, her mother reminded Mahrree that nothing Hycymum had ever said chased Mahrree away, but Hycymum had been a sweet, silly, shallow woman, incapable of chasing away even a squirrel with a broom. She’d had nothing of Mahrree’s caustic nature which, even after twenty-five years in Salem, she still struggled to keep from bubbling over.

Her heart sank to her knees as she watched the three darling girls who she loved so much do their best, their eyes darting over to her as they read their lines, anxious for her approval, and likely fearing her criticism.

They had done their best. Who was Mahrree to point out anything more? What if one of these dear girls was silently at the edge of some breaking point, like Young Pere, and the very next words that would come out of Mahrree’s mouth might be the ones that shoved her over?

No, she couldn’t do it. She wouldn’t do it. She wouldn’t be responsible for sending another grandchild away to prove some point to Muggah.

The girls were finished, clutching their pages earnestly and waiting for her judgement.

Mahrree beamed as brightly as she could. “That *was* wonderful, girls. Very charming! I agree with your mothers.”

“I’ve always been able to count on you.”

Ester grinned, as if having passed some test, and Sewzi nodded in relief. But Kanthi tipped her head.

“Muggah, didn’t that line where the crows were analyzing the carcass feel a little off? Like the rhyming scheme lacked something?”

Mahrree pretended to ponder that. “Well, perhaps it did, now that I think back on it. But your delivery was so delightful I didn’t even notice. You have a few days to work on that line, if you really feel you must.”

“Yes, we should probably look at it,” Ester said, making a note next to it. “Well, if that’s it then?”

“That’s it,” Mahrree said firmly.

“I think we should memorize it,” Sewzi said, casting an apologetic glance to Kanthi. “That way we won’t be holding the pages.”

Kanthi bobbed her head. “I’ll try, I’ll try.”

Mahrree smiled sadly to herself. See? They didn’t even need her anymore. They spotted the main problems themselves, and she didn’t have to make any of them feel the worse for it.

“You’re coming, right?” Sewzi asked Mahrree. “To the performance?”

Mahrree produced The Dinner smile. “Of course! Wouldn’t want to miss it.”

Private Shin lay in his cot, tired but not as exhausted as the other new recruits. There was something to say for having been raised on an orchard and cattle ranch. He knew how to work and it showed. He completed every physical requirement in near record time while the other flabbier, weaker young men stumbled and flailed.

Just minutes ago the men had grumbled at the news that they would be rising at dawn to continue their training, but Private Shin merely smiled. That meant he got to sleep in an extra hour than he would have if he still lived over the mountain.

A few days later, Mahrree didn’t go to the girls’ performance of the squabbling crows. She claimed to be suffering from a headache: a worldly lie, but a convenient one. She also didn’t attend the concert that several of the children were in the next day, claiming she was

tired, and when Viddrow brought her a paper to review for his class, she suggested that his mother Jaytsy critique it instead.

Soon she realized that she had to vary her excuses, because after her third “headache,” Lilla insisted that Boskos examine her for something more serious. So over the next couple of weeks, Mahrree developed minor joint pains, or needed to work on something for her classes, then discovered that being a baby tender was the best thing she could do with her evenings, letting her adult grandchildren have a night out. It wasn’t as if anything she said to toddlers would push any of *them* into the world.

And if anyone came to her door, she turned them away—with a reassuring smile and saying only that she was busy at the moment, but maybe later—because she was determined to never, *ever* say the wrong thing to any of them again.

Chapter 26 -- “So General Thorne is the most reasonable person in the world?”

Private Shin’s basic training was quite extensive, not only in teaching him soldiering, but also in explaining how each soldier played a vital part in bringing order to chaos.

Initially, he had a problem in that Mahrree Shin kept coming out of his mouth. He hadn’t realized how much of her he’d carried until he heard her arguing with the lecturing sergeant in only his second week. She had bumbled out of him, quite unbidden, when the sergeant said, “The duty of the soldier is to ensure the safety of the citizenry as they go about in pursuit of their desires—”

“So what constitutes ‘desires,’ sir?” Shin hadn’t even noticed he asked the question until everyone was looking at him, bemused.

The staff sergeant, who was clearly unaccustomed to anyone interrupting his lectures, yet was a surprisingly patient man willing to entertain questions, stumbled for a moment until he came up with, “Well, uh, whatever they want to do.”

“Anything, sir? We defend them in any behavior? But what if what they want to do may cause harm to someone else? Who do we protect or stop?”

The staff sergeant glanced around as if that answer were obvious. “Stop whoever is doing the hurting.”

“But what if the person doing the hurting claims that I, as a soldier, am interfering with his right to pursue his desire?” The strange thing was, Shin wasn’t even entirely sure what kind of scenario he was talking about, but the sergeant shifted uncomfortably, as if he knew precisely.

“That—well, true, true—that can be a difficult issue. There are

laws intended to protect those who are innocent, laws each of you will be drilled on so that you can enforce them—”

“Who makes the laws?” Again, Shin wasn’t sure why he said that, but suddenly he was interested to know. In Salem, the laws were derived from The Writings, from the guides and their assistants, then sent out to all of Salem for them to argue, debate, then finally vote upon. A three-fourths approval was needed to enact any law. Shin had seen that happen only a couple of times in his lifetime; Salemites didn’t need many laws since they governed themselves. In fact, all of their laws fit easily on one sheet of paper which younger students penned to practice their handwriting.

But he immediately realized that one page wasn’t the case in the world. The staff sergeant was indicating to his assistant to pass out something that was in a crate, and dropping on the desk of each soldier was a thick volume which contained at least a hundred pages.

Each of the new recruits groaned.

“Glad you brought this up, Shin. Only a few villages still maintain a separate law enforcement group. We find it’s more efficient to let the soldiers do that task. Open your books to the first page, and notice that the law code is broken up into twenty-three different sections, each with subsections detailing specifications—”

Shin, boggled, thumbed through the dense print. “I’m probably breaking half a dozen of these without even realizing it,” he muttered.

The sergeant heard him and chuckled. “Yes, indeed; I think I broke ten of them in a very vivid dream last night!”

While the men laughed, Shin frowned at the book. “Why so many laws, sir? We can’t even enforce all of these. Who cares how many holes an outhouse has for a fishing campsite anyway?” Shin pointed to a crude illustration of a law-complying privy.

The sergeant held up a finger. “Every law is enacted in response to a problem, accident, or situation wherein a citizen felt they were endangered.”

Shin picked through the jargon. “So . . . someone makes a mistake, and suddenly there’s a law against it? What in the world happened to require a two-hole fishing privy?!”

The sergeant’s expression went wooden. “The laws are designed to protect everyone.”

“Or strangle them,” Shin mumbled.

“What was that?” the sergeant snapped.

“Nothing, sir. Nothing. Who, sir, by the way, came up with all of

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these?” he asked again, realizing that question he asked earlier hadn’t been answered.

The sergeant puffed up his chest in what hinted would be a long-winded explanation. “All of these laws are quite reasonable—”

“Except that we don’t have the time and resources to . . .” Shin squinted and read out loud, ““Ensure that all flour used in a home kitchen be sifted properly before being used to avoid unground pieces breaking the tooth of someone who consumes the baked goods.”” Shin scowled. “Seriously? Inspect someone’s flour? That’s reasonable? Sir?” he added hastily when he realized how cynical he sounded.

The sergeant narrowed his eyes. “Surely there was a reason why that reasonable law was written, and it was written, Private, by the general himself: Lemuel Thorne!”

Oh, how Shin wished he could have kept back the words, but they flew out of his mouth. “So General Thorne is the most reasonable person in the world?” It was the snort of derision that followed his statement which got him in trouble.

“Private Shin!” barked the sergeant. “Do you have a problem we need to address with one hundred push-ups?”

“No, sir!” Shin responded hastily. The push-ups wouldn’t be a problem to accomplish; he just didn’t want to be known already as a trouble-maker. “I apologize, sir. It just seems to me that General Thorne’s abilities are wasted on something as menial as law-making.” He thought that was a pretty good salvage of the situation.

The sergeant’s demeanor softened slightly. “General Thorne has taken it upon himself to lead this people, to help them live as freely as they can, as painlessly as they can.”

“So,” Shin started again, trying to follow the reasonable thought, “lots of rules makes people freer, and also takes away all their pain? Sir, that doesn’t follow. Freedom means taking risks, experimenting, and yes—making mistakes, which frequently result in pain. But that’s life, isn’t it, sir? How can anyone ensure that no one will get hurt or make mistakes? The whole point of life is to learn from our mistakes!”

When no one answered, but stared at him, open-mouthed, he added meekly, “Sir?”

The sergeant tilted his head, truly perplexed, before he said, “You’re a real snock, aren’t you?”

He still didn’t know what snock meant, but he was pretty sure it wasn’t a compliment.

He, and his fellow new recruits who shot glances of annoyance at him, were then subjected to a long and dull lecture about the importance of upholding every rule and law, even if they didn't understand them, in order to maintain order and discipline.

Only two minutes into it Shin had started daydreaming, and when the sergeant finally finished, red-faced and panting from exertion about fifteen minutes later, Shin obediently agreed to enforce whatever laws he could remember.

"So," he ventured cautiously as he scanned the laws, some of them bordering on the insulting, "what you're saying, sir, is that people of the world are incapable of controlling themselves or acting sensibly, so we have to *make* them act like . . . the adults they're supposed to be? They're really that stupid?"

The sergeant held out his hands with a grand gesture and announced, "Finally Shin catches on! Where have you been, boy? Been fogged for half your life, or did you just drop out of the clouds last week?" As the rest of the soldiers chortled, Shin bobbed his head since the comment was partially true. He hadn't realized he'd dropped into a world where people had to be told to not let their dogs attack their neighbors' chicken coops, or be reminded that stealing clothing off the line was wrong.

"The world is like a flock of sheep," the sergeant told the class. "Willing to be driven by whoever will get them to the easiest pasture. All they want is to eat and breed and relax. We, men, as General Thorne has repeatedly stated, are the sheepherders. We alone keep the senseless flock safe from the wolves like Sargon and the soldiers in the south. Without us, and without the leadership of General Thorne, our villages would be destroyed in days. This," he picked up a copy of the laws, "is our sheepherder's staff—"

"Not this, sir?" asked a private even more cocky than Shin, and he drew his sword and waved it about proudly.

The sergeant smirked at him. "That, too. But you don't get to fully enjoy using that until your first year is over. A few of you, judging by the scars in your ears, were vial heads, and you need a year of being clear of the vials before you get to earn the right to use that weapon in combat in the south."

Shin guiltily rubbed an ear.

"The world," the sergeant continued, "is like a stubborn horse—yes, what is it, Private Quack-Quack?"

The private with a perpetually dazed look about him asked, "I

thought they were sheep, sir?”

The sergeant sighed. “We use several metaphors in the army.”

Quack-Quack’s hand was going up again.

“A metaphor,” the sergeant exhaled loudly, already guessing his next query, “is a comparison. A way to think of one thing like another. Private, just put your hand down and try to keep up, all right? It’ll make sense in a while. Or a year,” he added in a mutter. “Horses,” the sergeant picked up his lecture again. “Think of the citizenry *also* as stubborn horses, the kind that you know are thirsty, and you drag them to the river, but they won’t drink. But they *need* to drink.” The sergeant began to pace. “Sometimes, they have to be forced for their own good. Forced to do that which will save them and protect them and let them live another day.” The sergeant paused and looked directly at Private Shin, as if waiting for some kind of rebuttal.

But Shin was thinking about the times he’d watched his uncle use his whip to get the most stubborn bulls where they needed to be. It wasn’t as if he ever actually whipped the animals, just cracked the whip right next to their ears, and they startled in another direction. He glanced up to notice the sergeant gazing at him.

“No comment, Shin? By the way, how long until you come up with a better name?”

“No comment, sir. Actually, I agree with you. I’ve seen some pretty stupid bulls in my time. Horses can be the same way. And I’ll probably change my name the same day Quack-Quack does.”

A corner of the sergeant’s mouth ticked up. “The sooner, the better—for both of you.”

As they dismissed for midday meal, Shin was pondering the many laws he had to shove into his pack and came to a realization: Salem was a very easy place to govern. The world, however, was infinitely harder. The task before Lemuel Thorne was ultimately more difficult than the one before Shem Zenos.

And, unexpectedly, Shin felt a sliver of respect for General Thorne: the leader of insensible, lazy sheep-horse people who had soldiers like Quack-Quack guarding them. That the world was in only two pieces was quite a remarkable feat.

That afternoon basic training became much more interesting when they began to learn how to use those swords they were so eager to initiate. An older man, a long-since retired master sergeant who still enjoyed running the soldiers through their paces, took their weapons, then handed them back to see how they gripped the hilts. Private

Shin took it as he thought he should, but seeing the slight frown of the man, adjusted his grip, twisting his hand just a bit, as if feeling someone else doing it for him.

The old officer nodded. “Perfect. Spirits of the soldiers guiding you today, boy?”

Private Shin scowled at the odd comment but knew no response was wanted.

He was first to mount a horse and charge the dummy made of straw at the end of the field. The task seemed easy enough, and as he made his pass, he sliced the head clean off.

It was the shouts and exclams of the training officers and sergeants that caused him to wheel his horse around and return back to the line, worried that he’d done something wrong.

“How the slag did you do that, Private?” the old master sergeant demanded to know.

Shin shrugged. “I’m, I’m not sure, sir?”

“Well, go again! Aim for the heart this time. Go on!”

That time he sliced the dummy in two. It was only made out of straw. He couldn’t figure out what the big deal was, until he observed the rest of the new recruits struggling to even stay on top of their horses without dropping their swords.

The old sergeant kept watching Private Shin out of corner of his eye, and after the last soldier tumbled off his horse, never even making it to the new dummy, he strode over to Shin.

“The spirit of Lieutenant Shin must be with you, boy,” he said in a quiet voice. “I heard he did that his first times, too—destroying the dummy in his first go. I’ve never seen a new recruit match that skill, at least not without the help of the dead soldiers.”

“Dead soldiers, sir?” Shin dared to ask.

The old man nodded to the forests behind them. “They’re out there, boy. Some of them good, some of them rotten, some of them lost. But they’re in those trees, and they’re watching us. Sometimes, they even help.”

That wasn’t the first time Shin had heard someone refer to the “spirits,” and it struck him as odd that for a world that didn’t teach The Writings, there were a lot of people obsessed with what they called “other-natural.” It seemed they wanted something to believe in, something more powerful than themselves.

The soldiers especially seemed to be hoping for an extra advantage, someone to nudge them in the correct directions, and a few

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of the recruits glared enviously at him that afternoon after training.

That night he pondered what he remembered of The Writings, but he was sure there wasn't anything in there about the spirits of the dead haunting the forests. But the former vial heads certainly believed they did. Apparently the vials made people remember things that never happened, plaguing them for up to a year after they quit taking them.

So far he hadn't suffered any long-term effects, unlike some of the other men he trained with. The next morning, one former grassena boy fell to the ground, sobbing uncontrollably about stepping on an insect and taking its life, and later, Quack-Quack, during inspection, burst out laughing because a passing leaf told him a funny story. But there were others, soldiers who Shin didn't think had ever used the vials, who also thought the forests were haunted.

That afternoon they learned how to patrol the border near the forests—a useless activity, Shin was sure, because no one ever went in or out. But many of the soldiers became edgy as they passed a fresh spring just inside the tree line.

“That was where he was, when he left his horse,” one of them muttered.

“Who?” Shin asked, turning around in his saddle.

“Seriously? You're asking me who? Men, he just asked ‘Who?’”

The soldiers laughed nervously.

“*He is Zenos, Private,*” the training sergeant leading their group explained. “The greatest traitor in the world, remember? Slag, you just learned all about him two days ago! His spirit still haunts this forest. He can't leave it. This is where he was killed by Thorne, and this is where he waits to emerge again to get his revenge. He's just waiting for a weak soldier to go in so he can possess his body.”

“But that's not all of it, sir,” called another recruit. “The colonel wants revenge, too. My grandmother told me that he's the one trying to leave—”

“No, it's supposed to be Zenos,” said another man. “My uncle remembers that—”

“But I heard it was all of them,” called yet another.

“It probably is,” yet another man decided. “Just listen to the noises that come out of there! I heard General Thorne took a group of soldiers in there a few years ago trying to find a way through, and they encountered all kinds of evil traps, poisonous gases, and even a patch of extremely hot ground where the Desert of the Dead meets the world. That's where they are all stuck, trying to leave the Desert

to come back to the world.”

“That’s true. I heard that too. The forest used to be a nice place before the Shins and Zenos were killed. Then it turned evil.”

“Not quite. It was a little bad to begin with, but after the Shins died it became a lot worse. No one goes in there and comes out normal. That’s what happened to Colonel Offra. The forest drove him crazy. He was in there once, for a few days looking for the Shins, and found their bones. He came out crazed and never recovered.”

Private Shin recalled what Mrs. Yordin had said about the stories and histories at the forts. Several juicy ones were competing for supremacy that day.

“Hey, quiet for a minute,” a soldier called out, “and you can hear them. That ‘ooohing’ sound? That’s them!”

And that was all Shin could take.

“That’s a pigeon!” he scoffed. “Seriously, why would a spirit go ‘oooo’? What’s the point?”

“To scare people away,” a soldier scoffed back.

“But if the colonel wants to possess someone, why would he scare them away?” Shin pointed out. “Wouldn’t he stand in the trees and say something like ‘Come on in, boys—I’ve got bacon’?”

One of the soldiers chortled nervously. “I might go in for bacon!”

“Private, are you trying to tell me you don’t believe in the ghosts of the forest?”

“I’m not sure,” Shin answered the inquiring sergeant, remembering that he had to buy into the stories somewhat in order to appear loyal. “But it just doesn’t make sense. What are they waiting for, if they’re out there?”

“Then, Private,” the sergeant said before any of the recruits supplied another debatable explanation, “how do you explain the evil of the forest?”

“It’s always been like this,” Private Shin said. “There have always been mud volcanoes and hot water and whatever. It’s not necessarily evil, it’s just nature being nature. It’s just what the ground is.”

“Not like *this*, son.”

“Are you sure?” Shin pressed dangerously. “What proof do we have?”

“We have the proof of the man who was in the forest before and after the Shins: General Thorne,” the sergeant declared, sitting taller. “His word is good enough for me. He saw it turn evil, Private. Ask him yourself about it some time. He loves to tell the story.”

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The *story*. He was supposed to believe the stories, and judging by the glare in the sergeant’s eye, he was moments away from being put on report for insubordination. He had to shut up, he knew that. His typical “test all things” attitude was going to get him shunted straight out of the army if he wasn’t careful. This wasn’t Salem, where possible truths were poked and examined and even dissected before being probationally accepted. This was the world where the man with the most power insisted that you believed what he declared. Simple, tidy, safe.

Shin decided at that moment to stop questioning everything—at least, out loud—and just listen and accept. He realized that if he wanted to infiltrate the army and expose Thorne for the liar that he was, he needed first to know what all of those lies were.

He nodded once to the sergeant who had stopped his horse to watch him, the rest of the recruits also eyeing him nervously, wondering what would happen to the private who could never shut up.

“Sir,” Shin began respectfully, “I look forward to hearing General Thorne tell the tale. When, sir, might we expect the honor?”

“Soon,” the sergeant said. “He’s expected back in a week or so, and he always looks forward to meeting the new soldiers, especially the ones who have chosen such unfortunate names.” He sneered slightly and started again along the tree line, the rest of the recruits falling in.

Shin remained silent and listening for the next week, absorbing all he could about the army and its philosophies, and discovering that quite a lot of it was similar to Salem. General Thorne sought to make a world which believed and thought and worked as a well-functioning unit, like the cogs in millworks, fitting and moving in tight conjunction together. The problem was, quite frankly, that the world was simply too stupid to fully grasp the general’s vision.

Shin could believe that. He’d heard his grandmother go on enough about the shallowness of the world’s schools, and the density of its students, now the leading adults of the villages. On several occasions, Shin was startled to find himself feeling pricks of sympathy for Thorne’s goal, especially when he first began the dull task of patrolling the roads. Citizens couldn’t even be bothered to watch if the way was clear before darting out between wagons, nor did they even think to watch the few children who frequently got lost because their parents became too distracted in a shop.

The soldiers had to bring every victim to the doctors, break up

every fight, and resolve every quarrel, because no one seemed capable of thinking through a problem on their own. And, Shin had to admit, the soldiers had no additional ability, either. Quite frequently, they were in the middle of those conflicts, adding more victims, and contributing to the general disorder they were supposed to be improving.

Ruling the world was proving to be a nearly impossible task, and Shin was beginning to understand why his grandfather had said no one man was fully capable of doing it. Certainly not Shem Zenos, Shin thought privately.

By the time General Thorne returned to Edge—Province 8—three weeks later, Shin was growing more intrigued about the character of the man who believed he could conquer and govern the entire world. Several times a day the recruits were told stories about Thorne’s difficult past and celebrated accomplishments, and while Shin was initially dubious, he grudgingly had to admit that some of the tales were likely true. When his fellow soldiers first struggled to wield their heavy swords properly, the old sergeant had them take their weapons in their opposite hands, then told them, “How much more difficult is it now? I want you boys to think about Captain Thorne, the most highly skilled young officer this army had seen in decades, losing the ability of his fighting arm to that lightning blast. He had to relearn every sword and knife skill he already knew, but now for his left hand. If you boys think this task is too difficult, realize that our commander has already done it—twice!”

Back in his barracks, Shin tried swiping and slashing with his left hand, just to prove to himself that it wasn’t so different. But it was, and again a flash of respect for Thorne surprised him.

When he heard at midday meal that General Thorne would spend a few minutes addressing the new recruits later, a bubble of eagerness and anxiety filled his gut. He wanted to look Thorne in the eyes to see for himself the man who chased his family out of Edge, who now thought he could wrest the south from Sargon.

He also wanted Thorne to see him. He hadn’t changed the Shin name patch—although all the other ‘unfortunately named’ soldiers had, Quack-Quack now being known as Private Mallard—because he wanted to observe Thorne’s reaction to the younger version of Colonel Shin. He was hoping Thorne would regard him with respect, and maybe even worry, seeing the resemblance. Most importantly, he was hoping Thorne would be afraid of what he’d see in Private Shin’s

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eyes, recognizing a man his equal, or even capable of surpassing him.

The private practiced his steady glare on his mount in the best Shin tradition at the training field that afternoon, but he didn't realize how edgy the creature had become until he heard the shouts came for recruits to line up: the general was striding toward them. Obediently, Shin stepped into position, holding his horse's reins tightly. But his mount had other ideas and reared, yanking the reins out of Shin's hand and bolting for the forest.

His sergeant spun to Shin, furious. “Don't go making me look bad in front of General Thorne, boy—GET YOUR HORSE!”

“Yes, sir!” was all he could respond, torn between wanting to stay to meet the general, but knowing he'd look ridiculous as the only soldier without a mount. He sprinted after his animal which was headed for the fresh spring at the edge of the forest. The horse darted into the safe patch of woods, and Shin hesitated at the tree line, knowing his sergeant was likely still watching him. But he had to get the horse.

He strode into the sparse trees, grumbling under his breath. “Stupid animal. A Clark would never be so skittish as to hide in the forest—”

But was struck with the impression—and reminder—that the original Clark loved being in the forest. The notion came from the right side of his mind, and he glanced around, realizing that he was in the haunted forest, after all. Who else but a dead colonel would remind him of that horse fact.

He hesitated to move, his horse shying away from him. Shin knew he was there, his grandfather, as if bouncing eagerly on the balls of his feet, just waiting for his grandson to acknowledge him. Ideas trickled into his brain, that his hand adjusting on the sword, and his deftly destroying the straw dummy weren't entirely the private's skill, but the ability of a seasoned general. He hadn't just inherited Perrin Shin's ability, he'd inherited Perrin Shin.

And if he just opened his mouth, just acknowledged his grandfather's presence and desire to help, he'd be there far more distinctly—

Private Shin snatched the reins of his horse and pulled the animal from the spring, annoyed at the insinuation that his skill wasn't entirely his own, and dubious of the kind of help the former colonel would try to offer him.

Shin clenched the reins more firmly, striding purposefully back to the training field to get away from those thoughts, but instead found himself marching straight into memories. One that flared up

before him was watching through the knotholes in the Zenos's barn as his grandfather and uncle sparred in secret. On more than a few occasions, the men picked up long, thick rounds of wood and battled each other as if they held swords. It was the laughing and shouting that brought their sons and grandsons to spy on them and watch them bruise each other.

Just as the private wondered why this odd memory was before him, he remembered something: General Shin, tossing his stick into his left hand and swinging it as deftly as if it were in his right. Sergeant Major Zenos did the same thing, lunging and whacking with his supposedly-weaker arm as easily as if it were his dominant.

They had trained with both hands.

ALL SOLDIERS HAD BACK THEN, SIMULTANEOUSLY—

Shin stormed past that memory, pushing through it like an inconvenient waterfall. But he wasn't sure with whom he was angry: the old sergeant who had made it sound as if Thorne had to relearn all his fighting skills, or the old man trying to show him the supposedly glorious story of Thorne having to learn to fight all over again was a lie.

There were more memories his grandfather was trying to throw in front of him, Shin could feel it, but he wanted no more images to wrestle with. Besides, they all felt like delaying tactics, trying to keep the private from meeting the general, whose lectures were pointed and brief, and whose time was limited.

Shin needed to look Thorne in the eyes and see for himself why Colonel Shin was trying so earnestly to keep him away. If he could just face him—

But to his disappointment, General Thorne, flanked by his guards, was already quick marching to the fort. Shin sagged as he watched Thorne's back enter the gates a couple hundred paces away. The man was tall and broad—not as large as the former colonel, but formidable in his own way. Curiously, he didn't wear his cap, as if he wanted everyone to recognize him by his sandy hair, touched with gray highlights that were visible even at this distance. Shin also noticed he didn't have the regulation short-cropped haircut, but wore his hair longer in the back, a slight wave over his collar, and tucked over his ears in the front. He reminded Shin a little of the paintings of lions he had seen at the university in Salem, with their imposing manes.

He strode majestically, readily returning a salute with his left arm, as if he'd done that his entire life, and vanished through the gates.

Shin was struck with an idea that he was sure was entirely his

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own; both generals, the one in Edge and the one in Salem, had been giving him stories, and neither of them was telling him the entire truth.

Chapter 27--“The world seems to be heavier for you today.”

They had created the new emergency shelter on the Back Door route three weeks ago. That meant it was now time to fill it, especially since there was a brief lull in the harvest.

Peto, standing at the wide loading doors of the largest storehouse in Salem, showed one of his ever-rarer smiles as he surveyed the crowd that had assembled that morning. There were hundreds of volunteers—entire families—waiting to fill their wagons with the dried foods, medical supplies, blankets, and the herb-treated planks which would be made into crates on site to hold everything securely in the emergency shelters on each of the five routes.

Peto gripped the supply lists as emotion overwhelmed him. He'd never done this without the General of Salem. Now he was simply the rector, trying to fill very large boots.

The hundreds of Salemites, however, beamed eagerly at him, full of far too much confidence.

“Thank you,” Peto began, too quietly, he realized. He cleared his throat and announced more loudly, “Thank you all for coming out on this fine morning. It seems the good weather will hold through today and tomorrow, according to Professor Torrich and his new air pressure reading device. Beyond that, we're not sure. So no lolly-gagging on the trail.”

The crowd laughed good-naturedly, even though it wasn't that funny, as if they were trying to force joy back into Peto Shin. Everyone knew about the Shin family's recent sorrows, and tried to alleviate them.

Peto chuckled obligingly, as one does for an expectant crowd. “You've already been placed into five columns, and in just a few mo-

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ments we’ll be loading you up based on the route you’ll be completing. Those taking the Back Door route, I’ve been assured you realize the peril of the last few hundred paces.”

Several families nodded, and a few little boys jumped up and down excitedly.

Peto sighed to himself. There was a reason he was sending Dr. Boskos Zenos on that route again. In fact, he would be at the rock face by now, waiting. The families wouldn’t have been as eager if they had seen the rock face themselves.

“It was among General Shin’s last notations, to make sure an emergency shelter was established on the Back Door. I thank you all for fulfilling the general’s last order.” That he said all of that without choking up was, he decided, his triumph for the day.

But many Salemites sniffled on his behalf.

Peto plastered on another happy face. “Well, what am I doing, delaying all of you? Let’s get loading! Back Door route, right here in the middle in front of me. The other columns, file up behind the assistants . . .”

No one else could hear what he had to say, because a few wagon drivers were already backing up their wagons to the loading bay, the jangling of their horses and the creaking of their long wagons drowning out his words.

Peto smiled at their enthusiasm. He didn’t have anything else to add, anyway. It wasn’t as if he had to supervise anything, either. Everything in Salem—from the retrieving of the items from the shelves, to the boxing, to the loading, to the checking off on the charts—was so orderly and precise, he probably could’ve stayed in bed all day and no one would’ve known the difference.

But it was his calling to be there. To nod gratefully to the women who organized the traffic in the storehouse and frequently called out directions to avoid collisions. To smile approvingly to the men handing down the goods from higher shelves to be loaded into the moving carts. To point needlessly to indicate that it was the next cart’s turn to unload into the waiting wagons. To shake the hands of those leaving the storehouse and heading to their routes.

General Perrin Shin had created the plan years ago to improve flow and move goods swiftly. All Rector Shin had to do was follow the plan, like everyone else.

Yet Salemites looked at him as if he held some importance, some power to help them like his father had. It wouldn’t do any good to

explain he wasn't a general. He was just the son of a great man, merely pretending to be as good as him.

Still he smiled and waved as another wagon pulled up in front of him, waiting for its load for the Back Door. Only two wagons were needed, since the wide crevice created by the rock slide a couple of years ago, and now turned into the last emergency shelter, wouldn't be able to hold too much.

"I'm looking forward to this, Rector Shin," the driver of the wagon exclaimed. "Should be an interesting climb. My sons and I are eager for it."

Peto smiled at the three young boys bouncing in the seat next to him.

"Glad to hear it, Mr. Rescatar. Now, what about your wife and daughter?" He looked over to the side where the man's wife and teenage daughter stood by the wagon, checking a list of all that was to be loaded in there.

Mrs. Rescatar looked up and forced a smile. "Well . . . at least I get to wear breeches," she said, and held up a leg to show off the wide trousers that women wore occasionally in Salem.

"I'm glad to hear you're *so* looking forward to this, Mrs. Rescatar." Peto smiled bleakly.

"Ha!" She smiled grimly back at him.

"Quite a drive, all the way down from Norden," Peto commented. The Rescatars were neighbors of his in-laws, and their daughter Febe frequently helped Grandma Trovato gather her eggs.

"I have a brother on the edges of The Quiet Fields, rather close to the Back Door," Mr. Rescatar explained as he took another crate and placed it in the wagon box. "We haven't seen much of each other, and we stayed with him last night. Things haven't always been the easiest with him." He gave Peto a look with all kinds of meanings.

Peto nodded back sadly. "Understood. Was it a good reunion?"

Mr. Rescatar looked at his wife for her opinion.

She shrugged. "No bloodshed or bruising, so . . ."

Mr. Rescatar turned to Peto. "About all that could be expected. We were hoping he'd want to go with us on the route—he's always been an adventurous one—but he's talking about going to one of the dissenter colonies again."

Peto winced. "I'm sorry. Sometimes when someone gets an idea . . ." That was all he needed to say.

The Rescatars regarded him with complete understanding.

“The world seems to be heavier for you today.”

“Yes,” Mr. Rescatar grunted as he put another crate in, “when someone gets an idea . . . What’s this for?” He reached into the crate and pulled out an iron cooking pot with a handle.

Peto checked his master list although he already knew. “There are no pots listed to be in any shelters.” He was about to ask Mr. Rescatar to hand it over to him so he could put it back in the storehouse when he found himself saying instead, “Just take it along. I imagine there’s room.”

Mr. Rescatar looked at him dubiously. “A pot? For . . .?”

Peto shrugged at the silliness of it too, but something in the back of his mind told him it needed to go.

“Just take it. Stash it somewhere. The pot needs to be in that shelter.”

Mr. Rescatar nodded at Peto’s authoritative tone and, without another comment, set it back in the crate.

“It’s a good idea to stock the shelters with medical supplies,” he said, changing the subject when the next crate was handed to him. He peered inside. “Numbing agent, bandages,” he set down the crate to hear a few bottles clank together. “Oops. I better be gentler with that one.”

“That’s all right,” Peto said. “Dr. Toon assured me the bottles were all well-protected. We didn’t want to store medical supplies until we had a proper way to do so. The treated crates will make sure someone won’t unravel a bandage only to find a family of mice in it.”

Febe Rescatar shivered at the thought, and her mother chuckled.

“And what are these?” Mrs. Rescatar asked as thick, knotted ropes were handed to her for placement in the wagon.

“Net ropes—slings. The kind they use to transport expecting mothers out of the world,” Peto told them. “Should someone be injured, and unable to move on their own, we can still carry them with the slings and poles. The logs that are cut and used to mark the entrances for the emergency shelters will also be the correct length to hold the slings.”

“Clever!” Mr. Rescatar declared. “But how will the net slings work on the rock face of the Back Door?”

“Likely not too well,” Peto admitted, scratching his chin.

“Well, let’s just pray no one needs them, then,” Mrs. Rescatar suggested as she tried to fold the heavy ropes into some kind of fashion. Eventually she gave up and tossed them onto the crates. “Febe,” she turned to her daughter, “is that everything?”

She looked over the list and nodded. “Got it all. I guess we’re ready.” Her voice lost a bit of enthusiasm.

Peto smiled sympathetically. “Febe, I’m guessing you’ll beat all your brothers up that rock face.”

She squinted at his suggestion of a race.

“That is, *if* you were to have a race,” he fumbled. “Not that we encourage—”

It hit him again. His father and son, both who loved to race, were gone. It was these random pangs of remembering that undid him. The moments that stopped him mid-sentence because sudden grief took all his breath.

Mr. Rescatar noticed. He hopped on to the loading bay and gave him a quick, one-armed hug. “You’re doing an excellent job, Rector. We all appreciate you and your family. We’ll get out of your way, now.”

A few minutes later the Rescatar family, along with dozens of other Salemites, headed out. Some turned north for The Quiet Fields, now covered in falling red, orange, and yellow leaves from the nearby forest, which always reminded Peto of Paradise.

Where he imagined General Shin sat and watched him trying to do his job.



Some weeks later, Salema heard her front door open.

“Just me,” called a familiar voice.

“Grandpa Shem!” her little boys cried.

Salema smiled, wiped her hands on a towel, and left her kitchen for the gathering room. Her sons were already hugging their grandfather who had crouched next to them on the floor.

“Papa Shem, what brings you here today?” Salema asked as she came into the room. He looked up at her, and she sighed when she saw the gloom in his eyes. “Oh, I forgot. It’s Counsel Day, isn’t it?”

Shem nodded.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I can’t seem to keep track of the days.”

Shem stood up and gave his daughter-in-law a quick kiss on the cheek. “Not at all. That’s how it’s supposed to be with small children in the house. If you know when the sun sets, I think you’re doing very well.”

“Do you need Perrin?” she guessed.

“The world seems to be heavier for you today.”

The expression on his face said it all.

“I just put him down, but I’m sure you won’t wake him.”

“Thank you.” He removed his overcoat, because the first snowflakes of the new Snowing Season had fallen that day, then went up the stairs to his son and daughter-in-law’s bedroom. Quietly he opened the door and made his way to the cradle. He smiled as he saw the tiny boy with tufty black hair just like his mother’s, just like his great-grandfather’s.

Shem scooped up the infant, now two moons old, breathed in his scent, and listened to his grunts and groans as he stretched in his sleep. He sat down in the rocking chair, positioned the baby on his chest, waited to feel the rhythm of his own heartbeat, then patted the baby’s back at the same rate. He closed his eyes and thanked the Creator again for the healing power of the babies.

Quietly the door opened again, and Shem wasn’t surprised to see the frame filled with a massive, dark man.

“Jothan,” Shem whispered so as to not disturb the sleeping infant, “do you follow me everywhere?”

“Of course I do. Your big brother asked me to. Salema let me in,” he told him as he sat on the bed next to Shem’s rocker. “And no, I don’t follow you *everywhere*, but I do remember seeing my grandfather wear the weight of Counsel Day home each week. Sometimes he needed a listening ear.”

Shem nodded in gratitude. “This reminds me of the forests above Edge, years ago. Only, instead of sitting on a log in front of a hot vent chatting about the world, we’re sitting in my son’s bedroom.” He paused. “Now that I say that out loud, it suddenly sounds awkward.”

Jothan chuckled, deeply and quietly, and even Shem smiled.

Without thinking, Jothan folded a crumpled baby blanket on the bed, turning it into a neat square. “The world seems to be heavier for you today,” he hinted, and began to fold the pile of clean changing cloths Salema hadn’t yet had time to get to.

“Perhaps,” Shem said. “Three couples were granted termination of their marriages. They’d been struggling for quite some time . . .”

“It’s not your fault, Shem. If out of a population of one hundred fifty thousand, a handful of marriages fall apart each year, that’s still an excellent ratio—”

“But it feels like a community tragedy,” Shem murmured. “Somehow, we failed.”

“We all always fail,” Jothan told him. “Then we keep trying.”

That's the Creator's way, you know. To keep trying?"

"Thank you, Rector Hifadhi," Shem smirked. "We also have a few who have petitioned to go to the dissenter colonies."

"And you're letting them go?"

Shem shrugged. "Choices, always, in Salem."

Jothan nodded his agreement. "But there's something else. Something you're afraid to tell anyone."

"Oh, there was some good news, today," Shem said. "Peto and Cephas reviewed the trails, and now, four weeks after the resupply groups, there's no evidence anyone was ever there. We were worried the trails would be overrun, or appear too obvious, but once again, Salemites were careful."

"Shem, I'm not sitting here folding changing cloths because it'd make my wife proud of me, or because I can't abide a mess, which I can't. I'm waiting for the real news. The one that nearly forced you to crawl home today. What happened?"

Exhaling long and low, Shem finally said, "A scout reported in. Fortunately after Peto and Cephas left—"

Jothan sat up. "News about Young Pere?"

"No. No, still no sightings of him. It's been eleven weeks, you know," Shem said, sounding mystified. "We've scouted every province in the area all the way to Sands, checking with everyone we have. We even subtly questioned the contacts we found on the list Eltana Yordin had given him, and none of them have seen him."

"I heard you even employed your food supplier scouts," Jothan said. "That they asked for tours of the forts on the pretext of trying to see him?"

"And *nothing*, Jothan. I'm making Honri come home in the next week, before the snows in the mountains get too deep. He's stepped up his search, but I worry that Young Pere's changed somehow and that no one would recognize him at this point—"

"Except for maybe family," Jothan suggested.

"I still won't let Relf go," Shem whispered.

"Why not? He doesn't look anything like a Shin or Zenos—"

"*No*," said Shem with such finality that Jothan rocked back.

"No more Shin boys are to be lost to the world."

"Relf's as solid as the stone he cuts," Jothan insisted, "and would make an excellent scout—"

"What, has he been working on you too?"

"No, I just thought—"

“The world seems to be heavier for you today.”

“He’s petitioned me three times,” Shem said. “And he’s not the only one. Even Zaddick requested to go search—”

“Oh, do *not* send Zaddick!” Jothan exclaimed, but quietly. “He’s the spitting image of you at that age, and if Thorne happened to see him—”

Noticing a worried look come over Shem at Thorne’s name, Jothan slowly nodded. “And there *it* is. *That’s* the big problem. What did that scout from the world tell you?”

Shem patted his dozing grandson as he searched for the words.

“Practice on me, Shem, before you have to tell anyone else. Like Peto—”

“You mean, like Kellen Riling.”

Jothan frowned. “I don’t know the name.”

“Husband of Amory Riling.”

“Oh,” Jothan said, dread building in his voice. “What happened to her? Has she passed?”

Shem scoffed lightly. “That would be easier news to deliver.”

Now Jothan slowed in his folding. “Something’s harder to do than to tell a man his wife’s died?”

“This won’t affect only Kellen,” Shem whispered. “It could affect all of us, in some terrible way. The scouts spotted Amory, and it was definitely Amory, in a fancy silk dress and floppy hat hanging on the arm of her newest conquest.”

Jothan dropped the changing cloth he was folding. “Oh no . . .”

“Oh yes. Lemuel Thorne has a new mistress.”

Jothan exhaled at the news, and silently the two men sat, lost in thought about this latest development, until Jothan finally said, “Would it be terribly tacky to ask Kellen if Amory talks in her sleep?”

“Oh, Jothan,” Shem murmured. “That was truly indelicate.”

“Sorry to make you smirk,” Jothan said, and the two men looked down to compose themselves. Jothan folded another stack of changing cloths before they could look at each other again.

“Can I confess something to you, Jothan?”

“I’ve got another pile of changing cloths to get through, Shem, so go right ahead.”

It took Shem a while to say, “No one worked harder than you and me to get Perrin to Salem.”

“That’s for sure.”

“Jothan, did he finish his work?”

Jothan paused in mid-fold. “Perrin’s work? Marking the paths?”

“Yes. Did he finish *all* of it?”

“Well . . . yes. Why? Do you have doubts?”

Uncharacteristically, Shem shrugged.

Jothan nearly dropped the cloth. “What’s worrying you?”

“I just always thought,” Shem said in barely a whisper, “that Perrin was . . . that maybe he was *the Deliverer*.”

Jothan relaxed and smiled. “Perrin, *the Deliverer*,” he chuckled.

Shem didn’t expect that. “You . . . you didn’t think so?”

“I heard my grandfather Tuma discuss that passage a few times. He said to look at each sentence, standing alone. Perrin fulfilled marking the paths, but the line following about the Deliverer coming before the Destruction—well, that was something different entirely.”

“Oh.”

“This is really bothering you, Shem?”

“It’s not like I doubt,” Shem was quick to assure Jothan, who had no doubts himself. “I just kind of wished . . . had expected, I guess, ever since I met him, that he’d be the one . . .”

Jothan’s gentle smile never faded. “Still you have that glint of adulation in your eyes. You’ve never recovered from your little hero worship of him, have you?”

Again Shem shrugged. “Sounds childish when you put it that way.”

“No, not at all. Sounds like a little brother missing his big brother. Shem, are you worried about The Last Day?”

He scoffed. “Of course! I’m the guide, now. The youngest there’s been since the first two. I worry that . . . I’m not wise enough. That I may miss something. The Creator’s told me I’m not missing anything important, but—”

“So you have *no inkling* as to who the Deliverer is?” Jothan cut him off gently.

Miserably, Shem shook his head. “I’ve prayed and prayed, and the Creator simply won’t answer that question. I need to know when to expect him, Jothan. I need to prepare this people for whenever he makes his appearance, so that they’ll follow him on the Last Day, should it happen in my lifetime. How will I even recognize him?”

Jothan continued his smile and said, as he folded the last pile of changing cloths, “You’ll recognize him as easily as I have, when the time is right. I have no doubts. Never have.”

Shem blinked at him, baffled and slightly envious.

“I’m hoping he’s gone for a very long time.”

Chapter 28--“I’m hoping he’s gone for a very long time.”

Corporal Pere Shin, now over his own Company of Ten, and the newest recruit ever to hold that position, tried to walk confidently up the stairs of the command tower. He’d never been up there before, but had heard plenty of stories. For having been in the army for less than three moons, being called up to the command tower was a great honor.

Or great trouble, depending upon the circumstance.

But he’d been an exemplary soldier, as he’d always suspected he would be, although he had yet to make his impression on General Thorne. Not that he didn’t try to meet the man, but something always interfered, just as it had that first time when his horse ran spooked to the fresh spring.

It was as if he wasn’t allowed to face the man. Part of the problem was that half of his Ten were former grassena boys. Each time General Thorne was to give a speech or walk through the troops, one of Shin’s soldiers had an incident he had to take care of. Once one of them was convinced he was a baby and wouldn’t leave the barracks until Shin fashioned him a changing cloth. Then he missed another presentation when one of his men wandered out of the fort and was headed back to the grassy arena. Shin physically dragged him back, and wondered if his size and strength were the reason he was made a corporal so early in his career.

Yet another time, one of his Ten sat near the fort walls and tried to become “one with the grass” by “rooting” himself to the ground. By the time Shin pried him away, with the soldier weeping about “losing touch with nature,” Thorne had finished his lecture and was leaving. Shin never got his opportunity to speak to the general, or

even to see him face-to-face.

It wasn't as if he was frequently where the general would be, either. All he did was patrol the roads with his Ten. Soldiers who had been serving for more than a year got to do the exciting stuff: stationed at the southern and western parts of Thorne's territory, they were preparing to launch an offensive to reclaim Idumea from General Sargon, practicing with swords, hand-to-hand combat, wrestling—

While Corporal Shin kept peace and order in Province 8 by pacing the roads and making sure people didn't block the exits at the arena or amphitheater.

Boring. Much like Salem, he admitted to himself on occasion. The world was the same, just . . . different.

Sure, there was the occasional gang of thieving ten-year-olds, and the grassena boys who stole from the rubbish heaps making huge messes Corporal Shin and his men had to clean up—he now understood why soldiers chased him away the first couple of days.

But neither his patrolling abilities nor his Company of Ten, nor even his lack of meeting General Thorne was why he was trudging up the stairs to the command tower this rainy afternoon.

When he reached the forward command office, he knocked nervously on the door frame to get the attention of the major, a man in his early forties, who sat behind the desk. He was engrossed in a report, his lips silently moving, and his brow furrowed as he seemed to struggle with a passage. The major's head snapped up at the knocking, relieved for the reprieve of trying to sound out something difficult. He greeted Shin with a hopeful smile.

“You're the one who can do calculations?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good, because I've got a mess and I don't need to mess up again. I don't know how much your sergeant told you?”

“Not much, sir,” Shin said, trying to hide his trepidation. He'd volunteered to “help with some numbers” only because he was desperate to do something possibly interesting. His Ten joined another group that day, since Shin was required for something *important*. But if the “numbers” required calculus, which hadn't been his strength, he was going to create a bigger mess.

“It's the supply wagons,” the major told him. “The ones which reached General Thorne at Province 4 were not adequately loaded, but I'm telling you, *they were*. But for some reason, they're low on

“I’m hoping he’s gone for a very long time.”

boots, blankets, and swords. Now that Raining Season is here, they kind of need some of that. We need to resupply them and, to be honest, Corporal,” he lowered his voice to near a whisper as he scratched the brown curly hair on his head, “figuring isn’t my greatest strength. But Sergeant Onus said it’s one of yours?”

This would be simple enough. “I’m happy to help if I can, sir. What needs to be done?”

“Come with me to the command office. I really don’t need anyone seeing that a corporal is helping me, if you understand.”

“Of course, sir.”

Shin followed the major into the command office and was attacked by a flutter of nerves. After serving for only two and a half moons, he certainly didn’t expect to stand in *the* Command Office.

He hesitated at the door and stared at the large office, strewn with files. Immediately his attention was drawn to the imposing desk in the middle of the room, with a big chair behind it, and cabinets lining the entire back wall except for where the window was, opening to the southeast. The history of the room detained him in the doorway.

The major was picking up some papers from the desk when he noticed that the corporal wasn’t following him.

“Don’t worry. General Thorne’s miles away and not expected back for a few weeks. That means I have time to clean all of this up, once I figure out what’s happening.”

The corporal nodded uncertainly.

“I know,” the major said sympathetically. “This room has the same effect on everyone. But you’ll get used to it. In fact, you’re going to sit behind that desk, but only because I can then shut the door and no one will see the state of this office. The general’s *very* particular about not misplacing any files. And when something’s out of order, the entire fort can hear him. Personally,” the major said in a quiet voice, “I’m hoping he’s gone for a *very long time*.” He grinned as Shin forced himself into the office and headed to the back of the desk.

“Oops, but don’t sit in *that* chair. Somehow the general knows when someone’s been sitting in it, and he always thinks it’s me.”

The major slid the enormous oak chair over to an unoccupied corner and turned it to face the wall so that no one was tempted to use it.

“And he’s usually right,” he added guiltily. “Take that old one, over there. Just put those files anywhere. I’ll figure out where they belong later.”

Shin obediently lifted the precarious stack of files from the seat

of another large chair and tried to place them on the floor in a way that they wouldn't topple. He then slid the chair as quietly as he could behind the desk.

Something on the armrest caught his eye. It looked like teeth marks, as if something had been gnawing on it.

"Now," the major said, gesturing to the chair. "Make yourself comfortable, son."

The tone of his voice changed, as did his stance and cadence.

"I just want to ask you a few questions and I'm sure you won't have a problem remembering the correct story."

Corporal Shin stared at him and his odd demeanor, terror building in his gut.

"Ah, come on! That's dead on. It's hilarious!" the major said, disappointed.

Shin was baffled. "Sir?"

"It's the desk. It's *got* to be the desk." The major shook his head at it. "It sucks all the humor out of people."

Corporal Shin shrugged apologetically.

"I was doing *him*. General Thorne? I sounded exactly like him." He struck the pose again, something Corporal Shin had seen only from a distance. The left hand on his hip, his right arm dangling.

"But I've never met the general, sir," the corporal explained. "Sorry."

"Really? Never met him? He's pretty thorough about shaking the hands of the soldiers who take the name of Shin." The major nodded at his name patch.

"I just always seem to miss him, sir."

"How long have you been serving, anyway?"

"Two and a half moons, sir."

"And already been made a corporal over ten men? Well done! Must be the ability to do math and count to ten. That's *his* chair, by the way."

Corporal Shin froze. "I thought you moved General Thorne's chair."

"I did. I mean, that's *Shin's* old chair you're sitting on."

Something in the corporal warmed up slightly, without him wanting it to. His fingers were over the gnaw marks on the armrest, and the idea came to him that his father left those there, over forty years ago.

Toddler Peto accompanied Puggah here—

“I’m hoping he’s gone for a very long time.”

“I used to do him, too,” the major said. “Want to hear? Although you’ll never know if I got it right, it’s still pretty funny.”

Corporal Shin nodded, afraid to tell him no.

The major cleared his throat and changed his stance, raising one eyebrow.

The corporal held his breath. So far, so accurate.

“Son, I’m concerned about your well-being. Let’s *talk*.” The major smiled expectantly at Corporal Shin.

He swallowed. Dead on. It could have been hilarious. He tried to smile at the major but the effect of seeing the impersonation jarred him.

The major shook his head sadly. “I blame it on the desk. I’ll do it for you later, outside. It’s always funnier outside.”

“I believe you, sir.”

“For that I thank you. Now,” he said, handing the stack of papers to the corporal. “Here are the details of what I know we sent out four days ago, and the list of what they actually received. I’m supposed to figure out what happened.” He sighed. “Thorne believes that Edge, I mean, *Province 8*, is the securest fort in the world, so, lucky us, we get to be the northern army’s supply center. This isn’t the first time there’s been a discrepancy.” He waved uselessly to the stacks of papers around him. “I’ve kind of fallen behind in a few things, as you might be able to surmise, and I’m . . .” He suddenly appeared anxious. “Look, Corporal, my future is in your hands. Please don’t fail me or the army,” he implored, and Shin thought it strange for a mature officer to be pleading to a young soldier. “If you fail, I may have to incarcerate you.”

Corporal Shin nodded soberly back.

The major burst into a grin. “Creet, I’m only joking, boy! Can’t lock you for messing up numbers, or I would’ve been gone a long time ago. It’s not like General Thorne’s going to kick *me* out of the army. Relax a little, soldier. This is a great assignment. Better than marching around Edge in the rain now, isn’t it?”

“Yes, sir. Of course.”

The major patted him on the back. “I need to run to the stables to get their numbers. We’ve had a problem with missing tack and saddles. I’m hoping you might be able to figure out something with those as well. You shouldn’t be interrupted here, but I’m going to shut the door anyway on my way out, just in case,” he nodded conspiratorially. “I know what you’re thinking.”

“Sir?”

“You’re thinking, how can a major not do math, right? How did I graduate from Command School?”

“Not really, sir—”

“Good! Because it’s none of your slagging business, boy!” he shouted.

Corporal Shin gulped.

The major rolled his eyes. “Creet, boy, relax! I’m going to get a smile out of you somehow behind that desk, if it’s the last thing I do. By the way, it was my teacher’s fault that I struggle in math. She was terrible. Everything she taught me was completely wrong. But then again, considering who it was, what else could I expect?”

Shin gave him a small, fake smile.

It satisfied the major and he slammed the door behind him.

The corporal let out a long breath and looked around. He was sitting at *the desk*. In *the chair*.

His hand ran along the armrest again and lingered at the chew marks. Definitely left by a teething baby. He didn’t know what to think about that. He felt an odd mixture of nostalgia and revulsion, but couldn’t take time to ponder that, because he had a major to impress.

He laid out the pages across the desk and looked at the mess of numbers sloppily scrawled, and digits with no labels.

LOSS.

The word came quietly to him and he mentally put it aside for a moment. Over the past many weeks, he’d learned to listen to those little nudges from the right side of his mind, and never had they been wrong. He set to rewriting the numbers and information in a more organized manner, looking for a pattern.

LOSS ALONG THE WAY.

Shin stopped and considered the phrase, then went back to work.

FIFTEEN PERCENT.

Now he knew what to aim for.

He didn’t know how long he spent jotting down numbers, recalculating the major’s columns, matching them to the more careful lists from the supply barns, and tracking the discrepancies, but he was so involved in his work that when someone knocked at the door, he answered without thinking.

“Come in!”

The door swung open. “Lannard, I was—”

“I’m hoping he’s gone for a very long time.”

But the voice stopped suddenly.

“*Oh Creet!*” it whispered.

Shin didn’t look up but held up one finger, not wanting to lose his concentration at the end of the long column which already took him five minutes to tally. He was aware someone was staring at him as he finished writing the last numbers, and finally he looked up. “Sorry to put you off there, sir. I didn’t want to lose track again. Can I help you?”

Sergeant Major Hili stood in the doorway with his mouth slightly open, his face ashen. “No, sir!” he answered quickly, then shook himself slightly. “I mean, *No, thank you, Corporal*. I was looking for Major Kroop.”

“Well you found him,” said a voice coming up the stairs. “Just on my way back from the stables. So I see you’ve discovered my little genius who’s going to fix everything?” The major grinned at Corporal Shin as he came to the doorway.

Sergeant Hili turned slowly to him. “You don’t *see* it, Lannard?” he whispered. “You, *of all people*, don’t see it?”

The major shrugged. “See what?”

Sergeant Hili turned back at the corporal, almost fearfully.

Unsure of what had come over the sergeant major, Shin hastily bent over his work again. But he was aware of Hili, nervously shaking his head.

“Nothing,” Hili whispered. “Just don’t *ever* let Thorne see *that*.”

Major Kroop chuckled. “Not planning to. I hope to have all of this figured out long before he’s back. What have you got for me so far, Corporal?” The major sat in a chair on the opposite side of the desk and put his feet up on the edge of it.

Sergeant Hili shifted uncomfortably at his casualness.

Corporal Shin cleared his throat and leaned across the desk, holding up a piece of paper. He pointed with the quill to the bottom of the column.

The familiarity of the movements caused Sergeant Hili to suck in his breath. Growing more worried, he shut the door as Major Kroop took the page of notes.

“Sir, could it be that there is . . . loss along the way?”

The major’s feet came off the desk. “What do you mean, *loss along the way*?”

“Your numbers aren’t off . . . well, not too much, really. Forgot

to carry a seven here,” he said, indicating the untidier pages. “Neglected to add this column. I think you might have forgotten to add a couple numbers here . . . But overall, those *minor* errors don’t account for the lack of supplies that reach General Thorne. Could it be that soldiers are maybe profiteering from the supplies along the way?” Corporal Shin held his breath in anticipation of the men’s reaction.

Major Kroop sighed and glanced up at Sergeant Hili.

Hili nodded back once. “Yes, Corporal,” the sergeant said, unsurprised. “We considered that. We had quite a problem a while ago, and now it seems it’s returned. So now what, Lannard?” he asked the major. “We rearrange all the divisions *again* to have different drivers of the supply wagons? Thorne won’t be too happy about that.”

“Why not just create a driving corps,” the corporal suggested, “and rearrange their routes weekly? If no one has a consistent route, they won’t be able to maintain their contacts,” he repeated the thoughts that had been quietly placed in his mind. “And perhaps some incentives as well? Those whose wagons reach the general untouched receive . . . I don’t know, extra days off? Extra mead?”

Kroop smiled at Shin. “Little genius, I’m telling you!”

Hili wasn’t convinced. “The idea of a driving corps has merit, but it would take a few days to organize that. We don’t have that kind of time for this shipment. We could do the incentives, but I’m not sure they’d be enough. Some of the supplies go for very high rates, worth much more than a bottle of mead.”

“Then . . .” The corporal pondered for a moment. When no solution came to his mind—at least, not a solution *he* approved of, he came up with one of his own. “Pad the supply wagons, sirs. If we’re losing fifteen percent, then put in an *extra* fifteen percent so the correct amount reaches the general. Just don’t tell anyone extra has been put in so they don’t sell off more than we expect.”

“I like it!” the major grinned.

But Hili was dubious. “And how will the general react to that? We’re usually short on supplies here as it is. The shortage is going to eventually show up somewhere, sometime.”

The corporal hadn’t considered that.

“We don’t tell him!” Kroop decided.

Hili rolled his eyes.

“General Thorne *would* figure it out,” Shin agreed reluctantly. “Don’t you think he already suspects this is happening?”

“Yes,” Hili said. “He does. And he’s expecting us to stop it.”

“I’m hoping he’s gone for a very long time.”

Shin looked down at his numbers again. The only solution he saw was the one being quietly whispered. Since there was nothing else, he asked, “Sirs, when does the next supply train leave?”

“In the morning,” Kroop said. “After the rain stops, hopefully.”

“Why not now?” Shin said. “I’ve already figured out what you need to pack.”

“Because no one wants to travel in the freezing rain, Corporal!” Major Kroop pointed out the obvious. He was good at identifying the obvious.

“And no one would want to profiteer in it, either. Would they?” Shin reminded him.

Hili began to smile for the first time. “We have a lot of rain-shy soldiers. If forced to travel now, they’d most likely go as quickly as possible without any stops. They could be at Province 4 before midnight. I think it’s worth a try.”

Major Kroop grinned and gestured to the corporal. “If this works, I’m putting you in for a promotion! Isn’t he great? And Thorne has yet to meet him.”

Hili’s eyebrows went up. “Really? Interesting,” he said, examining the soldier. “Lannard, why don’t you take the corporal’s numbers and start the soldiers gathering supplies? The corporal and I will be down in a few minutes to help. I wanted to look at some of his calculations again.”

Major Kroop jumped to his feet and grinned at the corporal. “Good work, young man. I’ll see you downstairs in a few minutes.” He snatched the supply list Shin held out and slapped Hili on the shoulder as he bounded down the stairs.

Sergeant Hili continued to analyze the corporal.

Shin swallowed and didn’t know where to focus his eyes. He’d never felt anyone stare at him so keenly.

Hili closed the door, then walked to the desk, leaned across it, and put his face right in front of the corporal’s.

“I remember when you signed up. You kept the name of Shin, I see.”

“Mostly, yes, sir. I changed it a little, though,” the corporal said, trying to look the sergeant in his hard eyes.

Hili nodded slowly. “Boy, do you now remember your real name? Who you *really* are?”

Shin swallowed hard. “Yes, sir.”

“Just to make me feel better, tell me your *real* name, soldier.”

His mind went blank. It was so hard to remember old lies. “Uh,” he gripped the armrest for support and found himself saying the first thing that popped into his head. “Puggah.”

Hili’s eyebrows furrowed. “First or last name, boy?”

“Clark,” he said quickly, grasping at something else familiar. “Clark Puggah.”

Hili stood back up and made a face as if he smelled something disgusting. “Clark? Who makes up a name like *Clark*? And I can see why you don’t want to be known as Corporal Puggah.”

Corporal Shin dared a small smile.

Hili relaxed, his smile growing genuinely easy. “Come on, son. Let’s go help Major Kroop. He’s going to need it. Decent enough man, but between you and me, he hasn’t got a lick of sense in him anywhere.”

Ten minutes later the sergeant and the major watched as the young corporal directed the other soldiers in packing the wagon. Somehow he’d taken over the task, recommending that the more valuable items, like swords and blankets, be placed at the bottom, with heavy bags of flour piled on top of them to make swift access more difficult.

Major Kroop elbowed Hili. “Why didn’t a boy like that go into officer training?”

Hili shrugged. “He could still go to Province 6 to the university for a time.”

“No, don’t tell him that’s an option,” Kroop said. “I don’t want to risk losing him. He’s going to make me look good, I’m sure. Let’s find a way to get him assigned to the office.”

“That’s a bad idea,” Hili said in a low voice. “Honestly, Lannard—you don’t see it? Look at him. He’s the spitting image of *Shin*!”

“Nah, I’m not falling for that anymore,” Lannard said breezily. “I’ve given up the vials for good, now. And I only get the quality mead. But nice try though, Poe.”

Hili gripped his arm. “Lannard, what if they *did* make it out of the forest?” he whispered. “Seeing *him*, I can’t help but wonder if Colonel Offra was right.”

“Now *you* believe that story?” Kroop rolled his eyes. “Offra’s unstable, Poe. I finally believe it, now that everyone keeps telling me I should. How can you believe anything he said?”

Hili sighed and watched the corporal again. Shin was gesturing in

“I’m hoping he’s gone for a very long time.”

a way that made the hair on the back of his neck stand up on end. It was far too familiar.

The major was watching him too. “Besides,” he said, his enthusiasm waning as his surety crumbled, “they couldn’t have had any more children—”

“*Grandchildren*, Lannard!”

“Oh,” Lannard murmured. “*Grandchildren*. But why would he come here? And for what?”

“I don’t know,” Hili said, rubbing his hands anxiously. “I really don’t. And why would he be so obvious as to use the Shin name— Oh, what am I saying!” He chuckled tightly. “I asked him his real name before we came down here, and he remembered it.”

Major Kroop looked visibly relieved. “Good. What was it?”

“Puggah.”

Major Kroop snorted a laugh. “Seriously? Puggah? Even Shin is better than that.”

Hili smiled, more at ease as well. “That’s what I thought. Especially when I heard his first name: Clark.”

Kroop started to snort again, but it choked him. Finally he coughed out, “*Clark?*”

“Yeah. Who makes up such a name for a boy?” Hili shook his head. “I’m going to go give our boy genius a hand.”

The major nodded feebly as the sergeant walked over to the wagons.

“No one gives a *boy* the name of Clark,” he whispered to himself. “But someone *did* give that name to his *horse*.”

Timidly, he peered at the corporal at work.

Put on him twenty-five more years, some touches of gray hair, twenty more pounds of bulk and muscle, and . . .

Suddenly Lannard was sixteen years old again, and he did what he always did as a teenager in serious trouble: he ducked behind a large crate and bit his knuckles to keep from hyperventilating.

“Major Kroop, you can’t be serious!”

“I am. For once. I mean, just think about it for a moment, all right?”

Sergeant Onus looked over at Sergeant Major Hili who was slowly rubbing his forehead, his eyes closing in fatigue. It’d been a

long day, and now it was turning into a very long night.

“I must admit, Major,” Onus said to the trembling man across from him, “I’ve never seen you so disturbed.”

The three of them sat around the large desk in the forward office talking in hushed tones. Despite the darkness of the night, the room glowed like midafternoon. Major Kroop had lit every candle and lantern he could find.

He nodded at the younger sergeant. “Did you ever know Colonel Offra?”

“No, never had the pleasure of him screeching at me, but I’ve heard stories about him. He started having problems shortly after the Shins were killed.”

“That’s right, he did,” Kroop nodded eagerly. “He grew worse and worse over the years. What else do you know about him?”

Onus looked at Hili who nodded encouragingly, if not jadedly. “That Offra believed . . . the Shins were slaughtered in the forest. He found bones. But then he started to say they were still *in* the forest, like spirits. Eventually he went completely mad. Now he just runs into one fort after fort, shouting and terrifying all of the soldiers.”

“And you’ve heard what he’s shouting?” Kroop asked nervously.

Hili sighed and turned to Onus. “This is where it gets ridiculous.” To Lannard he said, with his last bit of patience, “Look, I *wanted* to believe Offra. He was a good man, but deeply troubled. That’s why no one’s been able to keep him as an officer. That’s why he’s living off of trash heaps and running from one village to another, spouting like a rancid mud volcano. What happened this afternoon with the boy—that was just coincidence. I shouldn’t have said anything to you. The more I think about it, the less I see the resemblance. Just a coincidence. Just one of those things.”

“No, no it’s not!” Kroop insisted. “*You’re* the one who got me thinking about it, and now I can’t think about anything else!”

Onus held up his hands. “What is this all about? What does this have to do with my corporal?”

“How much do you know about him?” the major asked urgently.

Onus shrugged. “Not a whole lot. Problems at home. Joined the army to get away. Very obedient, excellent soldier, natural leader. And he’s fantastic with a sword. You should see him. He’ll be great in the offensive on Idumea, if it ever happens.”

Major Kroop had gone completely white. “Fantastic with a sword?”

“I’m hoping he’s gone for a very long time.”

Hili punched his shoulder. “Lannard, stop it! You’re going to make yourself insane.”

“Would one of you *please* tell me what this is about?” Onus demanded.

Major Kroop’s hands shook and he pulled a candle closer for its light and warmth. “Offra would *say things*. That Shin would *return*. He’d come back to *avenge his family*.”

Onus raised his eyebrows dubiously, worriedly. “I heard something like that once, but Shin would be in his seventies by now—” He noticed Kroop trembling.

“Not unless he *already died*,” Major Kroop whispered. “Not unless he died eighteen years ago and was *reborn* somehow. Not if he came back to Edge, reenlisted, and is waiting to . . . to . . .” Major Kroop licked his lips nervously. “You know it was me, don’t you? It was me who told Thorne things about *her*? Not that I realized what was happening, you know. I was just giving him information so that I could exercise his horse Streak. Those mentor moments, you know? ‘What did you learn in school today,’ kind of things? But he was writing them down, and sending them to Genev and Chairman Mal, and the next thing I know she’s being accused of sedition, and *I* was the source of all their evidence! Oh, Creet! Poe, what if he’s coming after me?!”

“STOP IT!” Hili shouted at him. “Get a grip on yourself, Lannard. That boy this afternoon is NOT Colonel Shin come back again.”

Onus’s eyebrows had never gone down. If they could have gone up higher, they would have. “Sirs, while Corporal Shin is a good soldier, I haven’t seen anything in him over the last season that would indicate he’s . . . Colonel Shin. Wouldn’t he know a lot more? There’s a lot I have to teach him.”

“But not if he started out as not knowing who he was. Or maybe he’s faking it!” Kroop insisted. “He’s plotting. He knew we’d have a problem today and . . . Oh, *CREET!* I did my impersonation of him *in front* of him! He just stared at me and didn’t laugh!”

Hili couldn’t shake his head any harder. “You’re often just *not that funny*, Lannard. Would you quit this nonsense? Have you ever, *ever* heard of someone coming back from the dead and starting over again?”

“No, but maybe it’s something we all do!”

“Then in your previous life you were a complete idiot, Lannard. Next I hope you’ll be a roach so I can stomp on you,” Hili snapped.

Onus fought his smirk. "I never knew Colonel Shin. I was only a boy when he was lost. Sergeant Major, is there a resemblance?"

"Oh yes," Poe admitted. "Not perfect, but pretty close."

"Couldn't he maybe just be distantly related?" Onus suggested. "A couple of years ago we met some cousins of ours. We had the same great-grandparents. But their daughter looked almost exactly like my sister. They could've been twins."

"That could be the case, Lannard," Hili lightly punched Kroop in the shoulder again, and he nearly leaped out of his chair. "Maybe *this* Shin is a distant relative who just happens to look like the original. I remember him from when I was a boy. He was about thirty when I first met him, and I promise you, that corporal is not the same man. Eerily familiar, but *not* the same. And he's NOT coming to get you!"

"Can you promise me that?" Major Kroop demanded, quaking.

Hili sighed. "As far as I can, Lannard."

"Is that good enough?" Lannard asked.

"What do you want from me?" Hili raised his voice. "He was of great help this morning. He went straight to work, made YOU look good, which is quite an accomplishment I must point out, and gave us some excellent ideas. He even re-organized some of your supposedly already organized files! Does that sound like something an *avenging* Colonel Shin would do?"

Lannard bobbed his head stiffly. "Maybe he's just trying to win us over? Gain our confidence before he . . . before he strikes?"

Now Sergeant Onus rolled his eyes, and sent a sympathetic glance to Hili. "Sirs, I promise I'll keep a close watch on him for the next few days. See if I see him doing anything . . . colonel-like."

Major Kroop nodded vigorously. "Excellent, excellent. Please, please do. As soon as you see anything, let me know, will you?"

"Anything like *what*, Lannard?" Hili asked impatiently.

"I . . . I don't know. *Something Perrin-like.*"

The next morning Sergeant Onus did his best to keep his promise, but he wasn't sure what he was looking for in the large young man who was standing supposedly at ease in front of his desk, but was far too rigid. The soldier had been assigned to him after his initial training, and Onus had been happy to take on the natural-born leader. Too many of his soldiers were natural-born layabouts.

“I’m hoping he’s gone for a very long time.”

“Corporal Shin, how did it go yesterday with the major?” he asked.

“Fine, sir. He just needed someone to fix his math. I found a few discrepancies.”

“He was quite impressed with you.”

“Thank you, sir. I didn’t really do that much except carry the seven.”

“Well, when it comes to Major Kroop, it doesn’t *take that much*,” Onus said as if he were sharing the worst kept secret in the fort. “Ever since Major Yordin went to take over the western forts for Thorne two moons ago, and Kroop was left in charge of supplies—let’s just say your services may be required again. If you don’t mind? Not exactly what you signed up for, but . . .”

“No, sir, it’s not a problem at all,” the corporal said. Back, straight; stance, perfect; eyes, fixed in the distance; focus, sharp.

Perrin-like?

Onus hesitated. “Uh, Corporal, Major Kroop was wondering about *your family*.” The sergeant watched Shin’s face intently.

There was a slight twitching which the corporal tried to stiffen away. “Yes, sir?”

Onus suppressed a smile. There *was* something there. Then again, there usually was. Who didn’t have problems with family?

“Your real name obviously isn’t Shin, is it?”

More stiffening. “No, sir.”

“What is it?”

The corporal seemed prepared for this. “Briter, sir. Lek Briter.”

“Briter? I think I’ve heard that before.”

“Yes, sir. Lot of Briter families in the Sands area. Northwestern half of the world is filled with—”

“No . . .” Sergeant Onus said slowly, dragging out from memory the history he’d learned since coming to the fort in Edge. “That’s not where I know the name from.”

“There’s something else,” the corporal offered. “A distant relative of mine was married to the Shin’s daughter. Some of our family was in Moorland a long time ago. My grandmother told me the story once. Most of those Briters moved to Mountseen—I mean, Province 4—after the land tremor destroyed Moorland. I understand I also bear a slight resemblance to Colonel Shin. Probably related there as well, but since no one remembered any family lines, there’s no way I can know for sure.”

Onus relaxed and smiled. "That's right! So instead of using your real name of Briter when you enlisted, you chose an even *worse* one?"

Corporal Shin chanced an embarrassed smile. "I was a bit in a fog then. I had just read the Shin name off the boards and suddenly there it was, on my uniform. It just seemed easier to keep it instead of change it again."

"And then you didn't give your real name of Briter to the sergeant major yesterday, did you?"

"No, sir," the corporal sighed. "I'm sorry. I was aware that he knew the family, and I was worried that the name of Briter might upset him. So I made up another name."

"But it seems *that* name may have upset Major Kroop even more!"

"I'm sorry, sir. I'll try to be more careful in the future."

"Tell me, son, do you ever get confused as to who you *really* are?" Onus asked with a kind smile.

"Yes, sir," he confessed. "More often than I care to admit."

Onus chuckled. "That's all I needed to know, Corporal. Good work yesterday. They'll probably use you again, once Major Kroop recovers. Thank you and you're dismissed."



Corporal Shin saluted and turned smartly out of the office. He walked out into the cold sunshine and marched back to his barracks, turning over the conversation in his mind to think if he said anything wrong. The problem was that he wasn't sure what the wrong thing *was* anymore.

He strolled past his barracks, deep in thought. He didn't have to lead his Company of Ten to their posts at the Edge of Idumea Housing Estates for another few minutes, so he had some time to think about Major Koop. He didn't realize he'd startled him, although the major did give him an odd look when, after the supply caravan left the compound yesterday, he told the major he was ready to see his impersonation of Colonel Shin again now that they were outside.

Inexplicably, Major Kroop backed slowly into a wall.

But Shin knew he had surprised Sergeant Major Hili when he was sitting at the desk. The entire situation had felt very unusual in a familiar sort of way. Or maybe familiar in an unusual sort of way.

“I’m hoping he’s gone for a very long time.”

He felt pricks like that frequently, as if part of his mind was suddenly turned on when it saw a face or a building, or heard something, as if he knew it long ago even though he was experiencing it for the first time. It was at those times that Shin did believe in the spirits of the soldiers so many men quietly mentioned. Or, at least, he believed in one bothersome spirit, formerly known as Puggah.

His grandfather seemed to accompany him everywhere, whispering little things now and then that the corporal occasionally listened to. He certainly seemed to be right about that fifteen percent loss in the supplies, so there were times he was helpful.

Then there were times he was decidedly not. Shin had the feeling his grandfather was involved in preventing every possible meeting he could have had with General Thorne by spooking the horse, upsetting his men, or distracting the general from looking in Shin’s direction. The incident with the changing cloth reeked of Puggah’s mischief. It didn’t seem fair that Puggah used susceptible minds to keep Shin away from General Thorne. But he’d run into him, eventually.

And then . . . Well, Corporal Shin wasn’t entirely sure what he now hoped to see in General Thorne’s eyes, because over the past many weeks, he’d found a number of reasons to actually admire the man. He really had overcome a great many hardships, succeeded in battle an astonishing amount of times, and was leading a very difficult northern half of the world in the best ways imaginable, and everything would be even better once he reconquered the southern half and reunified the world.

And, Corporal Shin had to admit, he wanted to help Thorne accomplish that.

The problem was the rest of the forts in the north. Handfuls of soldiers kept causing little rebellions here and there that Thorne had to go quash. It was simple enough to Shin: if every petty person just quit squabbling, then the real work of warfare could begin. Thorne could be marching his entire army south to Idumea and wipe out Sargon, then things could get really exciting. Why, Shin could actually be making a difference in the world, if everyone would stop rebelling.

It was following those thoughts when Puggah was least helpful, when Shin was pricked with the idea, *WEREN’T YOU SUPPOSED TO BE THE ONE LEADING THOSE REBELLIONS AGAINST GENERAL THORNE?*

That was before he understood the world.

Now that he’d been away from Salem, he could see more clearly Thorne’s plan for a unified world, and it was, in short, inspiring. In

fact, it was remarkably similar to what Shem Zenos was doing in Salem.

And that's why, Shin realized, his grandfather didn't want him to meet Thorne, and why Zenos didn't want him to go into the world. He'd discover the truth, the real truth: Thorne was simply trying to make the world like Salem, with all the people having the same goals and purposes. And because of the complacency and stupidity of the world, it was a much harder task. Good thing Lemuel Thorne was a much harder man.

Shem must have seen Thorne as a threat all those years ago. That's why he was tempted to kill him once, and certainly let him slump to the ground when he was recovering from stitching. Shin realized that everyone from Salem let into the world as a scout or rector was wholly devoted to Shem; almost tricked into believing he was the greatest leader, so much so that they couldn't see the truth about Thorne, the man who had survived countless battles, who had overcome struggle after trial, and who kept rising to the top, no matter what was piled on top of him.

Shem kept a tight control on who from Salem was allowed to work in the world, and also who was allowed to leave it as a refugee. They had to be loyal to Shem, otherwise the rumors of Thorne's greatness would spread all the way to Salem, and they'd want Thorne to be their leader.

So, too, would the rest of the world if they just spent two minutes thinking about the whole thing. It was the sheep problem, all over again—stupid flocks unable to be as visionary as Lemuel Thorne, fighting against the rod nudging them along instead of recognizing the beautiful pasture the shepherders were trying to drive them to. Senseless pockets of soldiers in other forts were also too lazy to step up to their duties to fortify their villages so that the offensive on Idumea could happen.

They all lagged behind, putting up fusses about little things, and Corporal Shin almost wished General Thorne would use a stronger hand, a more forceful nudge, to get the rest of the world thinking as they should, as Shin already did.

If they were just pushed in the right directions, surely they'd eventually see the light, just as he had.

Chapter 29--“I’ve lost my touch.”

Mahrree stepped out of the large doors of the university and looked up and down the road for her ride. Some grandson or another would be by with the wagon to take her home. They’d sit together in uneasy silence because Mahrree wouldn’t give more than a four-word response to anything her grandchildren said to her. It was just safer that way. She kept to her wing of the house every afternoon after her university courses, and every evening when she wasn’t tending the littlest ones. At dinner, she let everyone else carry on conversations, and she merely smiled or nodded in agreement, rarely saying anything more than, “Please pass the carrots.”

Grandchildren came frequently to her, but she gently nudged them all away. Eventually, they stopped coming to her door, and Mahrree sighed each night in relief that she hadn’t said the wrong thing to anyone that day, that in the morning every mother and father would still have all their children with them. She kept them all safely at an arm’s distance, as if she were infectious and they were far too vulnerable.

Mahrree wrapped her thick cloak around her tighter. While the sun was out, the day was cold, but not unbearable. If she started walking along the wet cobblestone road, she’d warm up quite nicely.

But for some reason, none of her family thought she was capable of walking the three-and-a-half miles home anymore. They all tried annoyingly to keep her company, despite her turning them away. She said barely enough that no one thought she was depressed or withdrawn, and she also made sure that nothing she ever said could be misconstrued as critical.

Besides, being alone wasn’t that bad. She spent quiet hours in her wing of the house grading papers, then reading the many, many books written by Salemites that she’d never touched before. When she first came to Salem, she’d picked up a novel or two, but found these sweet, tender people wrote disappointingly safe stories, coated with just a

bit too much syrup for Mahrree's tastes.

But now it was time that she better understood these Salemites, of whom she was supposedly one. It was time to shelve her too frequently acerbic ways and find softer, more honeyed ones. But she had to admit to herself that she'd never be as sweet and soft as Calla or Lilla.

Restless, but not impatient, Mahrree peered down the lane, looking for familiar Clarks among the many wagons and sleighs that trotted by. She'd just finished a day of lectures, but she didn't know why she bothered. She was losing her edge there, too, she could feel it. The students would be better off just reading her book each class. It wasn't as if she added anything new. The university kept her as director out of misguided pity. Who would dare dismiss General Shin's widow?

General Shin's *widow*.

What a horrible title—

A wagon rolled up in front of her and stopped, disrupting her private musings. She looked up at the driver, blinked in surprise, and grinned. "Honri? Finally back from the world?"

The spry seventy-five-year-old hopped down easily and jogged over to her.

"I am, and I'm tardy, I know. Mahrree, may I have the pleasure of bringing you home? One of your grandsons was hitching up, but I was out running errands anyway and told him I could retrieve you." Honri held out his hand and helped her up onto the wagon bench.

"Why, I haven't seen you for over a year! As long as I'm not putting you out of your way," Mahrree said as he climbed up next to her.

"Not at all," he grinned as he slapped the horses into a walk. "I was looking for you anyway."

"Thank you, but all of this is unnecessary," she sighed. "No one thinks I'm capable of doing anything on my own anymore. I can certainly walk."

"They're just worried about you, Mahrree. And I don't blame them. You mean a great deal to this community, and we all just want to make sure you're provided for."

Mahrree scoffed. "If I were any more 'provided for' I could start my own kingdom."

Honri laughed. "Well, *Queen Mahrree*, I have a gift for you I thought you might enjoy. Behind you there, in the sack."

She twisted and pulled up a canvas sack.

“I’ve lost my touch.”

“I brought it back with me when I returned from Edge a few weeks ago. I’ve just been neglectful in delivering it.”

Mahrree pulled out a large book. “History of the World?”

“The latest one to hit the schools in the world. I thought you might get a kick out of it.”

She removed her gloves and thumbed through the pages. “Oh, this will be most entertaining. Anything about us?”

“An entire chapter,” Honri said. “I’m warning you now—Perrin comes off as the greatest hero in the world, but you and my brother-in-law? Well, let’s just say I don’t believe a word of it. Never have.”

“And I thank you, Honri,” Mahrree said formally, but with a twinkle in her eye. “Maybe I’ll just skim that part.”

“There were a lot of names from Edge in the later chapters. Thought you might recognize a few, be interested in what’s been happening with them.”

Mahrree held the book to her chest. “Yes, I would,” she whispered. “I haven’t thanked you yet for the list of names you copied off at the burial grounds in Edge. Shem brought me a copy. I recognized many of them.”

“You’re welcome,” Honri said quietly. “There was sweet calmness in the area of your parents and the Densals, as if they were bidding me welcome. One of the few peaceful places left in the world.”

Mahrree could only nod.

He cleared his throat gruffly. “And I want to apologize for . . .” He hesitated. “I wanted to come by earlier to see you, tell you how sorry I am about Perrin, but I just didn’t feel like I could face you yet.”

Mahrree turned to him. “Face me? Why?”

“I failed,” he breathed out, still not directly addressing her. “I failed to find Young Pere, and our time was running out before the snows came. I tried for two-and-a-half-moons but didn’t see anyone who resembled him in Edge or Mountseen. If I were younger, not so worried about the depth of the snow in the mountains . . . Or maybe if we had a scout in the fort again, but joining the army now isn’t what it was a generation ago . . . Shem’s the one who forced me home until Planting Season, otherwise—”

Mahrree patted his arm. “Please don’t take any of this on yourself. What Young Pere did, he did by himself. I’m just glad you got out safely, and I appreciate your efforts. Woodson told me you took his scouts to every corner you could think of. You should feel no blame

or regret.”

“Thank you,” he said quietly. “And neither, Mahrree, should you.”

She exhaled. “It’s different for me. He came to me, and I couldn’t stop him, couldn’t reach him . . . I’ve lost my touch.”

Honri elbowed her as if they were fifteen. “Not at all, Mahrree. Not one bit.”

“So you put off seeing me because you thought I’d be angry with you about Young Pere?”

Honri shrugged with some embarrassment.

She elbowed him back. “Silly man. Nan would say the same thing, I’m sure.”

He smiled. “I’m sure she would.”

Mahrree sighed. “How did you bear it, Honri? Losing her?”

“When I figure it out, I’ll let you know,” he said softly. “It’s been over four years, but sometimes it feels like only four minutes. The emptiness never goes away. But if it did, I think I would feel even worse. At least the hole in my heart reminds me of how well she filled it. How well she’ll fill it again someday when I’m in Paradise with her.”

“Finally,” Mahrree breathed, “someone who *understands*.”

“I do, Mahrree,” Honri assured her. “You don’t like the Widows’ Club?”

She rolled her eyes. “Why do I want to hang around a bunch of old women without husbands?”

Honri chuckled. “You could hang around with me,” he hinted.

“Yes, please! You’re not nearly as dull and pink,” Mahrree declared. “I declare, every widow suddenly thinks she should be wearing pink. What’s that about?”

“I don’t know,” Honri laughed.

“Is it hard being back here, where Nan used to be?” Mahrree asked.

“Did you know she was the one who gave me permission to run away to the world?” Honri said, sidestepping the question. Mahrree noticed that his time in the world had taught him to become cagey, in a polite way. “She’d been ill for so long, and near the end she said, ‘When I’m gone, I want you to have fun. Have an adventure.’ I asked her what she meant by that, and she told me to be like Rector Yung.”

Mahrree smiled at that. “He ran away after his wife died and came to Edge.”

“I’ve lost my touch.”

“Nan said he told her once that was the most fun he’d ever had, serving in Edge. My children and grandchildren were shocked when, less than a year after we buried Nan, I finished Woodson’s training and headed down to the world as an old rector.”

“So was it *fun*?”

Honri pondered that. “In only the twisted ways being in the world can be fun. I wouldn’t call it fun, but it was *fulfilling*,” he told her. “Gave me something to do, besides missing her.”

“I wish they’d let me run away,” Mahrree mumbled. “But I’ve got nowhere to run to.”

“I’m realizing it’s a matter of filling in holes,” Honri said. “The holes Nan left, and that Perrin left—nothing will perfectly fit those, but pack enough stuff in, and they’re less gaping, less noticeable.”

Mahrree nodded. “I’ve been trying to do that. Good, old friends help,” she elbowed him again.

“Yes. Yes, they do.”

They pulled up to her house, and Mahrree realized she did want someone to talk to, for once. Someone not as kind and gentle and deferring, but a bit worldlier and maybe even a touch caustic.

She held up the book. “How about you come in and show me which chapters I should skim?”

“With pleasure!”

After Honri secured his team in the barn, she led him into the house and over to her wing, where she sat down on the sofa, and he took Perrin’s chair.

Her heart leaped and flopped to see a mature and distinguished man sitting there again, with short gray hair and hazel eyes and shoulders nearly as broad as Perrin’s, but, feeling strange about all of that, she opened the history book.

“So, what ridiculousness do we have now?”

Honri got up and joined her on the sofa. Again her heart went through some strange motions as he made himself comfortable next to her on the furniture which was barely wide enough for two.

“Start with this chapter, right here. ‘The Era of Thorne’.”

“Oh, save me now,” Mahrree said dramatically, and Honri chuckled.

After a moment of skimming, she slammed the book shut. “I just can’t bear this today,” she chuckled sadly. “My head’s too . . .”

“I understand,” Honri said.

“Really? Can you explain it to me?”

He collected his thoughts and came up with, "It's unfair that the likes of Thorne still get to live, while Nan and Perrin don't."

"Hmm," she said, nodding slowly. "Exactly. Sometimes, Honri, sometimes I miss him so much," she whispered.

"I miss him too, Mahrree. He was another brother-in-law to me."

When she was silent, he gently nudged her. "I'm sorry. I don't mean to bring up bad memories."

"Oh, no. Not at all. You bring up good ones. Sometimes I get lost wandering through them."

"Tell me some."

She glanced at him. "Surely you don't want to sit here listening to me going on about him."

He surprised her by smiling. "Of course I do. Don't you remember when you came over with Perrin after Nan died, and sat reminiscing with me about her?"

Mahrree looked down at her hands, still clutching the book. For some reason she felt both uncomfortable and at ease with Honri. "I do. It was . . . good."

"It was," he said, prodding her again. "Tell me what you miss most of all—Wait. Don't. Because I know what *I* miss most of all about Nan, and that's *not* really something to share with others."

Mahrree's laugh startled her, but not Honri, who blushed.

"We'd *argue*," she said to him, raising her eyebrows suggestively, then blushed herself.

Honri chuckled. "Understood. We'd *go discuss something*. Took our children years to figure that out."

They laughed together, and Mahrree felt, for the first time in moons, something light in her heart.

"Something I *can* share," she told him, when they stopped chuckling, "is something that I think you could understand, having been in the world. In Snowing Season, when we have all the different activities each night at the rectories, Perrin and I would go and be . . . critics."

"Critics?"

"Not very Salem-like, I know, and it was mostly on art nights."

Honri eyed her. "I remember a few years ago you and Perrin came to our rectory's art night, but neither of you participated. Why?"

"Because neither of us has an artful bone in our bodies! Well, Perrin could draw little trees on maps, but that was about it. So, in-

“I’ve lost my touch.”

stead of trying to draw with the artists, or making clay pots, or chiseling stone, we’d *observe*. In a worldly way, I guess you could say.”

Honri put on a thoughtful face. “With comments that only the two of you would share, right?”

“Right.”

“Comments that would stun your average Salemite?”

“Right again,” she admitted with a guilty giggle.

He smiled. “Have you tried going without him?”

“Once,” she admitted. “It didn’t go well. I was with my granddaughter Banu—she forced me to go—and I made the mistake of whispering to her about the art display one man called ‘My Impressions.’ I was more impressed that he dipped his dog’s tail in paint and let him wag it at the canvas.”

Honri chuckled. “Yes, those impressionists don’t make much sense to me, either. So what was the problem?”

“Banu said to me, ‘Muggah! How rude. Don’t say such things.’ My granddaughter, chastising me!”

Again Honri laughed. “Well I can see how not going with someone who has the same sensibilities can take away from the evening. I, for one, have never gone back to the new recipe tasting evenings. Nan used to make the best dishes, and no one could compare. I went to one after she died, and tasting other people’s creations, without her by my side to whisper, ‘That could benefit with more red pepper,’ was just too much to endure.”

“So you get it,” Mahrree sighed in relief to hear that she wasn’t the only person in Salem to occasionally share a snide remark, or miss the company of someone who understood it.

“I do,” Honri assured her. “You should go to more of those. I’d go with you, and I won’t chastise you for a stray comment here or there. I’ve got a bit of worldliness I still need to shed.”

Mahrree paused before saying, “I don’t know how to go without him.” But what she really meant was, *I’m don’t know how to go out with another man. Wouldn’t that be a betrayal—*

“You know,” Honri said, filling the awkward silence that was growing, “Perrin was the one to get me heading south after Nan died.”

She twisted to see him better. “He was?”

“He came to visit me about six weeks after she passed.” He paused to clear his throat. “Another way in which I feel like a terrible friend to you. I’ve waited far longer than that to come visit you.”

She patted him on the leg. “Don’t. Don’t feel bad. *Now’s* when I

need a friend. Your timing is perfect.”

He smiled, his tanned skin crinkling around his blue-green eyes making them almost seem happy. “Thank you.”

“Tell me about Perrin’s visit. I need a new story about him.”

“You don’t know that he visited me? Well, now—I do get to give you a gift, far better than that history book. I get to give you a new memory!”

It was tradition in Salem that after someone died, everyone who had any interaction with that person wrote up all their memories. The rector’s wife would compile them and present them to the grieving family: pages and pages of new stories, of new memories. And for the time, it was if they were there again, doing new things.

Mahrree had the Memory Book of Perrin, compiled by one of Peto’s counselor’s wives, to take the burden off of Lilla. It was one of the largest books they’d ever compiled, she was told. Mahrree had every story memorized.

But here was one more. Another new moment of Perrin.

“Although I’d started the training to be a rector scout,” Honri related, “I started having second thoughts, worried that I wasn’t up to the challenge. I guess Shem had been talking to Perrin, telling him about my doubts. Perrin came over, sat with me, let me ramble on and on about how much I missed Nan, then he said to me, ‘So why aren’t you honoring her last wish? Why aren’t you going on that adventure to the world?’ We married on the younger side, you know,” he said to Mahrree. “She was barely eighteen, and I was just nineteen. I had been planning on joining one of those expeditions to the north, which was gone for nearly two years exploring glaciers, when I first met Nan. Oh, I was smitten. I couldn’t bear the idea of leaving her for so long, so we married instead of me going on the expedition.

“Not that I ever regretted it, mind you,” he added earnestly, “but maybe I went to trade Salem’s goods with the dissenter colonies so often because a part of me still longed to go *out*.

“Perrin assured me I was up to the task of going into the world, and said that of all the men he knew in Salem, I was the most like him in ability and in temperament, next to Shem. Well, with such a glowing recommendation, how could I not accept the call to be a rector in the world? He gave me the push I needed, and the last three years have been absolutely wonderful in harrowing, frustrating, difficult, and amazing ways. And I told him that, on a visit home last year. He said then that he almost envied me, and that if you passed away, and

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if Shem would have let him, he would have gone on as well.”

Mahrree soaked in Honri’s words, imaging Perrin and him chatting, and feeling the tiniest bit jealous.

“Thank you,” she said eventually. “Today, he lives again.”

“He does, still, just elsewhere.”

Then Mahrree said, “He really would have left after I died?”

“Well, not that he *could* have,” Honri said. “He was Salem’s general and had a duty here. Nor would Shem have ever let him go south again, but it was the *idea*, Mahrree. And I was hoping you’d pick up on that.”

“What idea?”

“That Perrin would have gone forward. That I went forward, because he pushed me to. That *you*, Mahrree, can go forward.”

She could only sigh.

“Mahrree, when you left Edge, how long did you hold on to the doorknob?”

“What?” she said, startled by the turn in conversation.

“When you closed the door on your house for the last time, how long did you hold on to that knob?”

“Perrin closed the door, and maybe for a few seconds.”

“Why did he finally let go?”

Mahrree knew where Honri was going with this. “Because there was nothing left for us there anymore. Our lives were here.”

“That’s right. Do you still remember that house?”

“Every last stone and plank.”

“Leaving it doesn’t mean forgetting it. It’s still yours, and always will be. I have something else to tell you: whenever I was in Edge, I’d visit the remains of your house.”

“Oh dear. How miserable. Why?”

“Because it’s not miserable,” he smiled, and Mahrree could see why Nan had fallen so deeply for him. Not only was he insightful, generous of heart, and thoughtful, those dimples were rather charming. “Because your house, or what’s left of it, is a special place. Just the stone foundation and about three feet high of rock walls remain, but the garden—oh, Mahrree! The garden you planted!”

She chanced a smile. “Still wildflowers?”

“And how! It still baffles me that no one else realizes those flowers don’t grow anywhere else but in the vicinity of your old home. Where did Deck’s mother get those seeds, anyway?”

Mahrree chuckled. “Still a great family mystery! Apparently

she'd had them for years, and Jaytsy found them in a trunk after she married Deck. She gave them to me to plant.”

“Those flowers are found only in the valley of the glacier fort, and in other mountain valleys further north. Mahrree, when I stand there, in the middle of what was your house, I feel Salem again. I feel grounded and rooted. I feel Nan, there, too,” he whispered. “Just like I feel her in the temple here. When I sit and ponder, there she is—next to me again . . .” His voice faded away, and Mahrree wiped away a tear.

She had felt Perrin at the temple, too, until he left to be with Young Pere. She'd neglected going back for some time, now.

“Your old home is a sacred place, Mahrree. And so is this home. It harbors all those wonderful memories, but that doesn't mean you have to be trapped by them. You can go forward, too, and always have these places still to visit.”

After a thoughtful moment, Mahrree said, “I see why Shem called you to be a rector.”

“I'm here less as a rector, and more of a friend,” he admitted. “An equally lonely friend.”

“The best kind, then,” Mahrree whispered.

Quietly, Honri said, “You've been pulling away from them. All of them. Instead of going in the evenings to the rectories, you tend your great-grandchildren instead.”

Mahrree grumbled quietly. “Been talking to your nephew Boskos, have you?”

“Well, I have to confess I've been checking up about you. Boskos told me that you rarely go anywhere in the evenings, and took care of their little ones last week so that he and Noria could have an evening out. You do that with all of them, every night.”

“And what's wrong with that? Muggah, being helpful?”

“You're not talking to *anyone* anymore,” he said, knowingly.

She had the nosiest family.

“I can't risk it,” she confided. “It's that horrible critic in me. I can't risk ruining another grandchild, Honri. Of saying the wrong thing at the wrong time, and sending another child out in the world—”

“You haven't ruined anyone, Mahrree. Your grandchildren need you. I've spoken to a few, and they miss you—desperately. You're still here for a reason.”

She shook her head, still not fathoming what that reason could

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possibly be. “I can’t bear to speak to them, Honri. I get so tied up inside, anxious about being too judgmental, that I don’t even know how to honestly love them anymore. I feel so useless. I never thought I’d be in my seventies and feel like a complete failure with children, after a lifetime of teaching them. It’s just better that I stay over here in my wing, stay quiet at dinner time, stay out of the way so that no one else suffers from my . . . *Mahrree-ness*.”

“Oh, Mahrree, Mahrree,” Honri said, his grip around her shoulders strengthening as he tucked her in for another hug. “Nothing you would’ve said to Young Pere would’ve changed his mind. Don’t let him rob you of the relationships you can still have. Everyone needs you, Mahrree. Don’t *underestimate* how much they need you, but also don’t *overestimate* the power you have over them. Wait,” Honri said, sounding befuddled, “that didn’t come out right—”

Mahrree scoffed quietly. “See what I do to people? I’m having the same effect on you. Get you all mixed up so that you’re not sure what the proper thing is to do or say.”

Honri scoffed back. “That’s not it at all! I know you don’t believe me, because you’ve already made up your mind. But Mahrree, don’t lock yourself away. Don’t fade away. For your family’s sake. For your friends’ sake.”

She only nodded, half-heartedly.

“What about dance nights?” he said, and she frowned at another abrupt change in topic.

“What?”

“Dance nights. I remember you and Perrin would go, but he’d never participate in the circle dances. He’d just stand against the wall with that smirk of his.”

Mahrree almost smiled. “He hated dancing. Enjoyed the music, but hated the dancing. Too many bad memories from when he was younger, even though Salem’s circle dances are nothing like what the world had. For instance, you didn’t change partners every ten seconds in Idumea!”

“I asked him about that once,” Honri said. “And he said something like, ‘Generals do not *do-si-do*. And they definitely do not *promenade*.’”

“That sounds like him!” she agreed.

“But *you* would dance,” Honri pointed out. “I remember. You were at our rectory quite a few times, and you were even my partner on several occasions.”

The memories made Mahrree smile. “You were one of the few men who didn’t mind me tripping all over him. One of the few strong enough to hold me upright.”

“You weren’t *that* inept,” Honri began, but paused. “No, actually, you were quite terrible, always half a beat behind whatever the caller was telling you to do. I had to hold you up, or you’d be trampled by the couple behind us.”

Again Mahrree laughed, and thoroughly enjoyed that she could.

He jostled her playfully. “I think you should try it again. The circle dances? There are some slower ones, some that are more predictable. You could handle those, with my assistance. You need to get out.”

“I don’t want to,” she said, knowing that she sounded like a petulant child.

“Then if not for yourself, for me?” he said, almost timidly. “I feel like I need to get out again, be part of Salem once more, shed the last of this worldliness. But, to be honest, I hate going alone. I could really use some support, besides my children. Someone my age?” he hinted, very unsubtly. “Someone who knows the ways of the world and will forgive my slip-ups when I’m less than Salemitish?”

Remembering that he’d been Salem’s main trader with the dissenter colonies, and that he could broker any kind of deal, Mahrree began to suspect she was being *worked*.

“Is this a trick to get me out of the house?”

“No. This is a selfish request because I need a friend.”

Immediately Mahrree felt foolish, realizing that once again she’d been too wrapped up in herself to notice that someone else needed help. How childish could one great-grandmother be?

“Of course, Honri, I’ll accompany you. Only if you’ll go with me to the art displays and allow me to say a few rude things without chastising me.”

He grinned, deepening his dimples. “It’s a deal.”

“Lannard, I’m *almost* impressed,” said General Lemuel Thorne. “The supplies came in earlier than I anticipated with no losses, and the calculations on these past season’s reports are, for once, orderly and correct.”

“I’ve lost my touch.”

Major Kroop smiled proudly and stood taller in the command office. It was spotlessly neat, with every file and every folder properly put away, the cabinets dusted off, and even the quills lined up. It’d been a mad dash at the end, truth be told, because only three weeks after the corporal started helping Kroop, Thorne sent a message that he was on his way back to Edge again, and would return by the next evening. The corporal had been allowed to stay on and tidy up, mumbling under his breath, “*Finally* we’re getting things put away where they should be.”

Kroop ignored that, because he discovered early on in the frantic put-everything-away panic that the corporal had a natural orderliness to him, and as he categorized one stack, Kroop subtly slipped another in front of him. In the end, Kroop didn’t put away one file, but instead enjoyed watching the corporal do it all for him, and quite accurately, too. Or so Kroop assumed.

“So tell me,” Thorne said casually, looking up at his major, “who helped you?”

Major Kroop’s smile fell. “Sir, what makes you think I had help?”

Thorne sat back in his big chair, his right arm dangling limply. “Lannard, Lannard,” he simpered, “just how stupid do you think I am?”

The major shifted uncomfortably and Sergeant Major Hili leaned over to whisper, “I suggest you answer that one *very carefully*, Lannard.”

The captain standing behind General Thorne’s chair stifled a snort, while Thorne remained motionless, waiting for Major Kroop’s answer.

“I did have help, sir,” he confessed, never able to lie to the general. At least, not for long. “I wanted to make sure you and the troops were properly taken care of and—”

“How very noble of you, Major Kroop,” General Thorne cut him off with a small sneer. “I suppose it doesn’t matter. If you can’t do the job, at least you found someone who can. Delegation, soldier.”

Major Kroop smiled, feeling as if he’d passed some test. “Yes, sir! I can delegate with the best of them.”

“Let’s hope so,” Thorne sighed impatiently. “What’s the name of the soldier who helped you? Should we make him a regular in the office so the major has more time to work on his impersonations?”

Kroop and Hili traded nervous glances.

“Uh, sir?” Hili began. “The soldier really prefers . . . soldiering to

sitting in an office. We can use him periodically—”

“Yeah, or just once in a while,” the major interrupted eagerly, but a bead of sweat developed on his forehead, even though the temperature in the command tower was brisk because of the swirling snow outside, and the weak fire in the fireplace.

Hili rolled his eyes at Kroop’s subtlety. “His sergeant says he’s best as a corporal over Ten, and he hopes to promote him to over Twenty soon. Natural leader. His talent would be wasted in the office. We don’t want him *here*. Sir.”

All of that sounded a bit too eager to Lemuel, especially coming from Poe Hili, so he made a mental note of it. “Only a corporal, eh? Age?”

Hili cleared his throat. “Eighteen.”

“Name?”

Kroop coughed nervously as Hili answered. “Corporal Shin.”

Thorne sighed. He motioned to the wiry, pale captain behind him. “Lick, how many of those do we have now?”

“Not sure, sir. But I’ll check,” Lick said, turning to the cabinets behind him.

“Lannard,” Thorne asked, “why are you so nervous about this latest Shin? Believing one too many stories?”

Major Kroop shook his head but his eyes said otherwise. “I’m not nervous, sir. He’s just a little *familiar*, sir. But we learned he is a distant relative to the Briter family. He might be distantly related to the Shins as well. That’s why he’s . . . familiar.” Kroop bit his lower lip.

Hili pressed his together.

Lemuel took more silent notes.

“I think I have it, General,” Captain Lick said, pulling out a file from a stack labeled ‘Shin.’ “Sergeant Hili, how long ago did he sign up?”

“Just over three moons ago.”

The captain came around to the front of the desk. “I think this is the man, then. Grew up in Province 4. Left home after conflicts with his mother . . . not much known about the father . . . took the name ‘Pere Shin’ when he signed up. Has since *changed* it,” Lick added with a slight snigger.

Thorne made a motion with his good hand. “Come now, let’s have it. Nothing could be worse than Private Turn Your Head and Cough.”

Hili groaned and closed his eyes. He never could convince that one to change his name.

“I’ve lost my touch.”

But Major Kroop nodded in appreciation. “My favorite was Private Let’s Stand on Our Heads.”

“Then you’ll enjoy this,” Captain Lick announced, “he is now styling himself as Sword Master Thorne Shin.” He tried not to smirk, too much.

Thorne leaned forward in his chair and raise his eyebrows, looking almost amused. “Well, now. I see I’ve made it into the naming game. I suppose it I should take it as a compliment that Thorne comes before Shin. However, he is still called Corporal *Shin*, now, isn’t he?” He picked up his quill and tapped it on the desk. “Have I met him?”

Hili shook his head. “He told me recently that he’s always managed to miss you, and he seemed disappointed by that.”

Thorne tipped his head as if that was obvious. “Since he’s taken my name I’ll have to make sure I get to know this young man, the saver of Kroop’s skin.” He sent Kroop a frosty smile, and Lannard nodded happily. “Kroop, Hili—see to the supply lists throughout the fort. I want to compare those to a physical inventory. In fact, I’d like you to go to each area and retrieve their latest counts, right now. Let’s make sure we’re still accurate.”

“Yes, sir,” Hili said, taking Kroop’s arm and directing him out the door before he could say anything else.

Thorne nodded to his captain to shut the door behind them.

“They seem nervous,” Lick said in a low voice.

“Yes, they are,” Thorne said indifferently, not looking at his captain but studying the numbers on the sheets in front of him.

The captain stood in front of the desk. “Sir, if I may ask, why do you keep on Major Kroop? I understand why you brought on Hili. He’s been able to give us much information about the southern forts since he served there for many years, and has certainly lent a great deal of stability to the fort here. And may I add, sir, that it’s certainly magnanimous of you to pardon him so openly for being on the other side under Karna and Fadh when their coalition was battling yours and Snyd’s so many years ago. And the fact that he led out the younger enlisted men from the garrison, leaving your father vulnerable to the Sergeants’ Army? Well, sir, your generosity in forgiving him is astonishing—”

Lemuel gritted his teeth, as he always had to do when Lick went off on one of his ingratiating little speeches.

“—But, sir, *Lannard Kroop*? You could send him anywhere. Let some other fort *enjoy* his company.”

After a silent moment intended to make Lick grow uncomfortable with waiting, Thorne looked up from his papers. "Because here he's so far away from the action that he can't cause any harm. Not even to the supplies. And besides, since he was a teenager he always talked too much. Men like that are very valuable. He's how I got to know about you in Yordin's fort."

Lick straightened his jacket proudly. "When I met him I had a feeling that leaking the right information to him would get me into this office and General Yordin out of his."

Thorne nodded once. "As long as I'm careful as to what Lannard hears, *he's* my most valuable officer."

Lick straightened his back, hearing the subtle slight, but ignoring it. "So should we be worried about this latest Shin?"

Thorne waved that off. "This isn't the first time Lannard thought he saw a ghost. His paranoia comes every year about this time. He starts leaning on his mead a little too heavily to get through the cold nights. He always perks up again like a gopher when Planting Season starts. Give him another six weeks or so.

"Still," he added in a thoughtful tone, "we really need to put a stop to this naming nonsense. How can we track anyone's families this way?" he mumbled more to himself.

Lick looked at him carefully. "Are we *concerned* with tracking family lines, General?"

The general heard the surprise in his voice. "We are *never* concerned with the lines, Captain!" he insisted. "Just the names. That Lannard was spooked is not unexpected. But something has also worried my sergeant major, and I need Hili to stay solid in order to keep control of Major Kroop!"

"Yes, sir!" Captain Lick said taking a more formal stance, realizing he had inquired too much of a man who was known to not like questions. He tried to salvage his standing with the general with, "I believe the name choosing began when vial heads in a Fog could no longer remember their identities, sir. It's just become a trend with everyone that age."

"Agreed," Thorne said, now calmer. "Still, I want to put a stop to the greater nonsense. When he returns, have Sergeant Hili create a list of acceptable first and last names. Let the recruits choose sensible identities so we no longer have to call for Corporal Cough or Private Heads."

Lick snorted out a laugh but tried to pull it back in. "Sorry, sir,

“I’ve lost my touch.”

but you can be very funny.”

The general produced a long-suffering smile.

“Sir, do you want me to assist them with the inventory numbers?”

“I already know the true inventory situation,” Thorne told him. “Those numbers are accurate for what they know,” he nodded at the pages in front of him. “They just needed to go do something to make them feel useful.”

The captain turned for the door.

“One more thing, Lick,” Thorne said. “Tell Sergeant Hili that nowhere on the name list are to be the options of Perrin or Shin.”

Chapter 30--“*Run, run, run!*”

Eltana Yordin looked at the calendar on her bedroom wall and sighed.

Six moons had gone by. Six moons since Young Perrin Shin had left for the world, intent on overthrowing Lemuel Thorne and taking over the northern forts.

Well, obviously *that* hadn't happened.

The newspaper that was delivered three times a week, with updates about Salem and tidbits about the world, hadn't said anything about Thorne's assassination, or anything truly interesting at all.

Eltana had done some covert questioning—not as if she was about to ever speak to any Shins or Zenoses again—and found out that no one knew where Young Perrin Shin was in the world. The scouts investigated Edge and its surroundings extensively, checked with their contacts in Sands, but he was nowhere, doing nothing newsworthy. He had simply, disappointingly, vanished, just as Eltana had. Just as so many refugees had from the world.

Well, she decided, it serves Salem right. Let them see what it's like on the other side, missing someone.

And then she became angry. Maybe he'd been using her—her connections, her knowledge, even her husband's jacket—just to get into the world and do . . . whatever it was he was up to, likely those *youthful indiscretions* he seemed so innocently curious about. For all she knew, he sold the jacket and completely forgot his pledge to her to avenge Gari.

Stupid, slugging boy! And she fell for it! His charming smile, his borderline leer—he used an innocent, old woman for his own scheming!

“*Run, run, run?*”

It wasn't the first time she entertained that thought, and when she had, she immediately tried to console herself with the idea that such a scheming young man *could* actually overthrow Thorne, if he remembered his purpose, if he got around to it and wasn't too involved in *goat charming*. . .

But, apparently, he hadn't. Today was six moons, when he was supposed to return, and he hadn't done any of it.

Eltana rubbed her face, refusing to release the tears that burned in her eyes. Crying was for the weak in constitution. She was anything but weak.

But she was angry and worried. Angry and worried that maybe, *just maybe*, Young Perrin was just as weak as her own son. Maybe, just maybe, Thorne had gotten to him, too.

Furious, she slammed her fist on the bed, frustrated that the sound wasn't nearly as impressive as if she'd smacked a table.

No, she wasn't going to give up on him yet. She couldn't. She had no more chances, no more possibilities to bring down Lemuel Thorne. Young Perrin Shin *had* to do it. No one else could.

Just a little more time. That's all he needed.

Two more moons. She'd give him two more moons . . .

Then she might tell someone he *might* be in trouble.

Six moons had gone by.

Lilla stared at the pantry. She could always tell the date by how her supplies were stacked. After Snowing Season, the shelves were just a little thinner, but they'd still eat well. Planting Season and the new year had started thirty-two days ago, and for some reason she naively thought Young Pere would have returned by now.

Six moons was long enough for him to foolishly gallivant around the world, wasn't it? Long enough for him to miss their family? Miss her cooking? Miss his grandmother? Miss his mama?

Unless . . . *unless* he was in trouble.

Six moons. Mahrree looked at the date of the paper she was grading and realized it had been half a year since Young Pere had left.

Without anything to go on.

He was still alive—she was sure of it. Hopeful of it, at least. Lilla would undoubtedly bake up a storm this afternoon. The house reeked deliciously when Lilla was her most troubled. Lately, it had smelled marvelous nearly every day, the poor girl.

At least no one else had vanished away. Mahrree made sure of that. There was no additional grief among the mothers at the Eztates, because she didn't talk to anyone older than five years old.

All of her free time, when she wasn't tending the younger children or grading papers, was taken by Honri. Dear, sweet, distracting Honri, who dragged her out at least twice a week to different rectories where they'd snigger together quietly as Salem's secret critics, and he'd try to teach her to dance, but even the slower pieces were too quick for her lack of coordination.

Recently, they'd taken to finding books in the university library brought in from the world, and they'd read and critique those, judging them against the world and Salem, and finding everything else they could to talk about instead of missing their spouses and fearing that they had no real purpose anymore.

Probably the best thing about having Honri as a new and constant friend was that her children and grandchildren were backing off. No longer were they trying to coax her out or get her to say more than three words at mealtime or voice her opinion on something. They just regarded her with odd smiles, which Mahrree couldn't quite interpret, as she headed out the door for the evening. Strangely, their smiles were even wider whenever she went out with Honri.

Between school, baby tending, and Honri, Mahrree didn't have time to talk to anyone else in her family.

So the rest of her posterity was safe.

Calla heard something fussing with the front door and, thinking it might have been a grandchild fumbling with the handle, opened the door.

To her surprise, an elderly woman was rushing away, crushing the new green grasses.

"Can I help you?" she called after her. "Ma'am?"

The woman stopped guiltily, as if having been caught, and slowly turned around.

“Mrs. Yordin?” Calla exclaimed, and she noticed a piece of parchment flutter to the ground to her feet. She stooped to pick it up. “Were you dropping this off?”

“I just . . . uh.” She glanced around before approaching the front porch. “Wanted the sergeant major to know,” she nodded at the folded parchment.

“Please come in,” Calla said in her most welcoming tone. It’d been several moons since any of the family had contact with her, and Calla decided it was time to try to mend some hard feelings. Eltana Yordin wasn’t the woman who sent Young Pere away, she frequently reminded Lilla and Mahrree. Young Pere decided that all on his own.

Mrs. Yordin’s mouth twitched. “I know your husband’s up north for a few days, so if you could just give him—”

“*Please* come in,” Calla repeated, so imploringly that Mrs. Yordin sighed in resignation and made her way up the stairs. “Can you tell me what you want Shem to know? Please, have a seat.”

She took a chair across from Mrs. Yordin and smiled warmly.

The general’s widow shook her head. “You’ve got to be the kindest person in all of Salem,” she said, and by her tone it didn’t seem like a compliment.

Nothing could shake Calla’s resolve, however, and she continued her sweet smile.

“Anyway,” Mrs. Yordin said, nodding to the parchment Calla still held, “I realize that I probably should have said something some time ago, but . . . it’s been about eight moons now since Perrin, I mean Young Pere, left for Edge.”

Calla steeled herself. “Yes?”

Mrs. Yordin took a deep breath. “I realize now I should have told you all that he intended to return after six moons—”

Calla went rigid.

“—so he’s now two moons overdue. I was thinking, hoping, actually, that he’d be successful and that his delay wasn’t a sign of problems—”

“He was due back,” Calla said quietly, trying to keep from tearing the parchment she clenched, “two moons ago? You knew this? All this time?”

Mrs. Yordin blinked as if that was obvious.

“And you’re choosing only *now* to tell us that we should have started organizing a forced retrieval two moons ago?!”

Calla had never raised her voice so loud before, but Mrs. Yordin didn't seem to notice.

"What's a forced retrieval?"

"When someone who *should* come home, who *planned* to come home, does *not*. It means they're in trouble and need assistance or intervention. It means we fear that they can no longer act according to their will and conscience, and need us to rescue them!"

Somehow Mrs. Yordin didn't hear the fury in Calla's tone. "That's what you're trying to do with Jon Offra, isn't it? I heard you were planning to drag him home, now that you got a report he was spotted in Vines."

"Yes," was all Calla could say.

Mrs. Yordin bobbed her head. "Should be interesting, tackling him and bringing him back—"

"Why didn't you say anything?!" Calla seethed.

"What was that?"

"Why didn't you say anything before this?" Calla wasn't used to doing angry, and evidently she was failing at it, because Mrs. Yordin seemed hardly ruffled.

"Well, I'm saying it now," Mrs. Yordin told her. "I thought the sergeant major should know—"

"He's *my* nephew," Calla said between gritted teeth. "He's Shem's by marriage and by distant cousins, but he's *my* baby sister's baby!"

"I forgot about that," Mrs. Yordin said, for the first time showing a hint of remorse.

"I never have. I'm the one who comforts my weeping sister each week, who tries to encourage his grandmother, and who has to remind my husband every day that he's doing all he can. But he's *my* nephew, too!"

"I'm sorry," Mrs. Yordin said, unsure of what else to say.

"I hope you are, because I could've been giving them something more to get them through this, if only you'd spoken up! If only you told us all you knew! What else is there? *What else?*"

Mrs. Yordin sat back. "I don't . . . I don't think there's anything else you should know."

Calla sat back, a tear trickling down her cheek. "I love that boy too, you know. You think you do, but I love him more than you could ever imagine. He's got as much of my blood in him as he has Perrin's,

and here you sit and think there’s nothing wrong with not telling us that he planned to be home *two moons ago?*”

“*I said* I was sorry,” Mrs. Yordin reminded her.

Calla stood up, her hands clasped together, crushing the note. “Thank you for coming, Mrs. Yordin,” she said formally. “I shall give this to my husband when he returns.”

Mrs. Yordin stood up, a little surprised their meeting was already over, and made her way to the door. She paused as she opened it and said, “Does nothing ever upset you, Mrs. Zenos?”

Calla’s mouth dropped open as Mrs. Yordin shut the door behind her.

Furious, Calla threw the note on the floor. It fluttered, floating a little this way, then that way, until it finally settled on the rug.

“Mama, it looks like you dropped something,” Zaddick said as he wandered into the gathering room, midday meal in his hand.

“When did you get home?” she asked.

“A few minutes ago.”

“Is the horse and cart still hitched up?”

“Yes, I just needed to grab something to eat before I . . . Are you going somewhere?”

Calla was jogging out the back door, grabbing her sweater from off the hook. “You don’t mind, do you?” she called back to her son as he followed her.

“Well, I needed to make a delivery, but I guess it could wait.” He watched, stunned, as his mother untethered Clarkess 8 and climbed up on the bench of the small cart. “Where are you going?”

“To the temple!” she told him.

“But it’s closed for cleaning and repairs,” he reminded her.

“I know!” She slapped Clarkess 8 and was off.

She arrived at the temple a while later, slowing down the horse so as to approach the stone edifice in relative silence. Even though it was the cleaning weeks, the temple was still a sacred place, and she wouldn’t even try to enter because she wasn’t dressed in white.

However, those repairing the stone on the outside were, and they could find who she was looking for. Quietly she got off the cart and made her way up the stairs.

“Mrs. Zenos?” one man whispered, pausing in his work of filling in a tiny crack. “Can we help you?”

“Yes, I need my nephew, Relf Shin. Do you know where he’s working?”

“He’s out back, chiseling a new frontispiece to be put up later. Would you like me to . . .”

But she was already down the wide stone steps, and jogging along the side of the temple to where she heard the sound of metal on stone.

Breathless, she darted to the back and nearly ran into Relf, working on a large piece of white stone.

“Aunt Calla!” he exclaimed, but quietly. “What’s wrong? What’s happened?”

She gripped his arm and tried to calm her breathing. “Nothing’s wrong, but something *could* be right.”

“I don’t understand. Come sit down and catch your breath.”

“Relf,” she panted, “does Woodson still want you to go on the forced retrieval of Jon Offra?”

“Well, yes, but I’m not really considering it,” he told her. “All they want me for is in case they need to use my voice. Seeing as how they’ll be gone for at least four weeks, I’m not too eager—”

“What if you could go for *another* reason?”

A sly smile started on his face. “Is this about Young Pere?”

“It is. I know you went to Shem shortly after he left, suggesting that you join the scouting corps to try to find him.”

“And Uncle Shem said no. Said we can’t interfere with his choices—”

“He was supposed to be back by now,” Calla cut him off. “Eltana Yordin just came by and told me. She expected Young Pere to be back two moons ago.”

“Two moons?!” he roared in General Relf Shin fashion, forgetting they were in the vicinity of the temple.

Several workers spun around in alarm.

“I know, my reaction exactly,” Calla said, trying to ignore their inquiring and slightly affronted stares. “Although maybe if I’d said it as loud as you, she would’ve noticed I was upset,” she said more to herself. “But Relf, we could make a case for you going down now to find him.”

“But Offra’s in Vines, and we have no idea where Young Pere is. No one’s spotted him.”

“No one knows him like us, Relf. The world changes people, but maybe someone who’s known him since he was a baby—”

“Someone like me would still recognize him,” Relf said, already slipping his hammer into his belt holster as if he were sheathing a

sword. “Woodson’s in Salem right now, beginning training for those going on the retrieval.”

“And if you were to go *right now*,” his aunt said meaningfully, although Relf was already wrapping up his chisels, “and talked to Woodson, you could be halfway through his accelerated training program before Shem comes home in three days.”

Her nephew grinned. “Uncle Shem only wanted me to hide out at rector’s homes, easily accessible in case they found Offra. Sounded like a waste of time to me, but if I can do more—can find Young Pere who also needs to be retrieved, well, then . . .”

Calla kissed his cheek. “There’s a reason why you look like my father, so that no one would realize you’re a Shin. This is why, Relf: to get that foolish brother of yours.”

“Mama will be thrilled,” he said, putting his tools in his box, to the surprise of those working around him. He had two more weeks of work, and to be chosen to cut the stone was a great honor. But apparently Relf Shin felt the need to do something even better.

Calla gripped his ample arm. “Don’t tell her. Not yet. Shem may still not agree, and we have to get Woodson to take you on as well. Too many things can go wrong, first. I don’t want to get her hopes up too much, only to see them dashed yet again.”

“I won’t tell Mama yet, then,” he assured her. “But will you tell my supervisor why I’m leaving? I don’t want to waste another moment.”

She grinned. “Take Clarkess 8 and the cart. Head straight to Woodson’s training hall. I’ll break the news to your supervisor, and start thinking of ways to break it to Shem.”



It was early the next morning, before the sun was up on the 82nd Day of Planting, when Shem found himself sitting upright in bed, completely confused. He was sweating, panting, terrified, and unsure where he was.

The bedroom door opened, and one of his elderly assistants and his wife, illuminated only by the candles they held, stared at him, worried.

“Guide Zenos?” Assistant Choruk asked hesitantly as if approaching a bear coming out of hibernation. “Do you need something? Are you all right?”

Shem massaged his face, trying to remember what had so frightened him. "I'm sorry. Something . . . something disturbed me. Did I wake you?"

The couple, a few years older than him, bobbed their heads to confirm that he had, but didn't want him to feel bad about it.

"You were yelling," Mrs. Choruk said, almost apologetically.

"I was? What was I saying?"

She gulped. "*Run, run, run?*"

And then it trickled back to him, slowly, steadily, as if the Creator knew the images were too much for him to see again, but fed them more slowly, more clearly.

And once again, he found himself shuddering in fear.

"Choruk. Parchment. Quill. I see it."

"I'll get it," Mrs. Choruk said to her husband. "Stay with the guide."

Assistant Choruk sat next to Shem on his bed, biting his lip, while Shem continued to rub his eyes. "Is it for all of Salem to know?"

"Yes, it is."

Mrs. Choruk rushed in and set the parchment, ink, and quill on the small desk in their guest room.

"Write it, please," Shem whispered. "As I remember it."

Assistant Choruk started to get up, but Shem shook his head. "I've seen your writing. Please, your wife's hand is much neater."

Mrs. Choruk began to smile that she was afforded the honor, until she realized the guide was grave. Quickly she sat down at the desk and looked up expectantly.

"I was in Edge again," Shem began slowly, tenuously. "And I was digging, a shovel in my hands. When I looked up, I realized I was digging a mass grave, as we did back when the pox came through."

Choruk absently rubbed the old, faded pocks scars on his face.

His wife wrote quickly.

"Then the scene changed, and I watched my hands. They were no longer young, but as they appear now, and I was digging again, another mass grave."

Mrs. Choruk whimpered quietly, still writing.

Her husband covered his mouth with his hand.

“And I was in Salem,” Shem said heavily. “It’s coming back. The pox is reviving again, and it will hit us, and the world, with even more force than before.”

“Oh, Guide,” Choruk said, patting Shem’s leg. “What can we do?”

“That’s not all, is it?” Mrs. Choruk said. “Guide, why did you yell ‘Run’?”

He began to tremble, and pulled his knees up to his chest and hugged them like a frightened boy.

“No, that’s not all. Because I stopped shoveling. The ground was trembling, like it used to in Edge. And then . . . then I saw it.” He swallowed, barely able to speak, but knowing that if he didn’t, the image would remain in his eyes, demanding that he express it.

“A cloud. A storm. No, not quite, but definitely *a cloud*.” Trying to convey the enormity he witnessed in his dream, and still saw hazily in front of him, he gestured awkwardly in the air.

Assistant Choruk and his wife exchanged apprehensive glances. “Like . . . a very big storm?” his assistant offered.

“Or, or . . . what did Professor Eubank call it, that storm that came over us a few years ago, with the hole in the middle? A hurricane?” suggested Mrs. Choruk

Shem slowly shook his head. “Like nothing we’ve ever seen before. No, I’m mistaken. I *did* see something like that before, but much smaller. In Moorland. Dear Creator, the explosions in Moorland!”

“Guide,” his assistant said gently, “I wasn’t there. Describe it for us?”

Again Shem waved uselessly with his hands, but said, “A massive cloud, rising from the ground, not forming in the air. Like a mushroom, but with so many more bulbs and facets, growing, growing faster, immense, rising to the very heights of the sky.” His voice grew tighter, more panicked. “Higher and larger than anything we could ever imagine.”

Again the elderly couple exchanged fearful looks.

The old man leaned to Shem. “From what source, Guide?”

“It makes no sense,” Shem whispered. “Makes no sense, but I see it. Right there,” he pointed to the south. “It’s coming from the mountains. From the region of Mount Deceit.”

Mrs. Choruk’s whimper was a tad longer that time, but she hastily recorded every word.

“And then,” Shem’s voice began to shake, and his assistant caught his hand as if to lend him strength. “The cloud . . . the cloud began to *fall*.” He shook his head, astonished at the idea. “Down over the world, but also over us. Collapsing, smothering—Oh, it’s too massive! It’s too big! Run! Run! *Run!*” he cried.

At the side of the bed, Mrs. Choruk nodded as she wrote. “Yes, just like that,” she whispered. “That’s what he shouted earlier. Dear Creator.” With a shaking hand she recorded the guide’s shouts.

“And then what?” his assistant prodded.

Shem met his eyes. “Then you opened my door. Oh, Choruk. We have . . .” He closed his eyes, pondered, then opened them again. “Barely enough time. Just over two moons. By the middle of Weeding Season, everyone needs to be out of the world. Everyone!”

“*Middle* of Weeding Season?” Assistant Choruk repeated. “Isn’t that . . . isn’t that when you all usually went on your marking trips?”

Shem sat back. “It is. We’d leave around the 58th Day of Weeding.”

“I see now why you had to get all the trails marked last year,” Choruk whispered. “There’s no time.”

His wife whimpered again.

Shem turned to her. “Everyone we have in the world needs to be back in Salem by the 54th,” he decided, and nodded to Mrs. Choruk to write that down.

“Well,” he said suddenly, hastening to get out of bed, “I need to get moving!” He fought the blankets tangling him up, finally landing on the floor. “Mrs. Choruk, thank you for your hospitality, but I need to get back south. I need to get home! We’ve got forced retrievals to organize!”

“You mean the dump children?” Choruk said, getting to his feet. “Do we have time to get them out?”

“As many as we can,” Shem said, trying to put the blankets back on the bed. “And Offra. He’s definitely coming! And . . .” He hesitated and stared at the wall.

The Choruks shared a look.

“And Young Pere?” Assistant Choruk prompted.

Shem clenched his fist. “We’ll try. Whatever it takes, we will try. Relf,” he whispered, remembering his nephew’s pleas. “I have *got* to get home! Choruk, cancel my appointments for today and tomorrow, send my apologies, tell them I’ll send out a notice later with what we now know.”

“I’ll take care of everything, Guide,” his assistant promised.

“And I’ll get you breakfast,” his wife said, trying to stand up.

“No, please don’t bother. But instead, let me read what you wrote, make adjustments if necessary, then make me three copies. I’ll be saddling my horse—”

“Guide Zenos!” Mrs. Choruk cried as he darted out of the bedroom.

He popped his head back in, trying to appear patient when patience was the last thing he possessed this early morning.

“Change first?” she suggested and cringed as Shem looked down at his sleeping clothes.

His daughter had sewn him that set, painting the big, yellow stripes, across and up and down, herself. She thought the red dots in each white box was cute.

Today, they reminded Shem of blistering pox.

Assistant Choruk tossed him his travel bag with his clean clothes. “Perhaps in the washroom?”

Shem nodded appreciatively to them both. “This is why I need assistants and their wives.”

The next morning, Relf was detained on his way to Woodson’s training, but only briefly, because the two women holding him back were the ones most intent that he do well in the course.

“So you’re only going to be a hiding scout, right?” Lilla asked anxiously, nervous about another son going into the world. But this one had everyone’s permission and blessings and soon, intensive training.

“An *accompanying* scout,” Mahrree clarified. “Means he won’t talk to anyone, but just assist—”

“But if he sees Young Pere, he gets to talk to him, right?” Lilla persisted.

Relf tried again to answer for himself, casting a glance of *Help?* to Honri who had come over to explain training procedures to Lilla.

But Mahrree was faster. “Of course, of course. And also Jon Offra, should they track him down again. I doubt Relf will even be tested against me in the lying courses. He won’t get that far, Lilla, as Honri has been trying to tell you. Right, Relf?” she asked her grandson.

“Oh, I get to speak now? I’m never quite sure.”

Mahrree squinted at him. “You had orientation just last night, and already they have you practicing sarcasm?”

He smiled slyly back. “No, I picked that up from you, years ago. I just never dared practice it until now. Look, I need to go. They’re taking us up to the glacier fort today, then down to spy on Edge tomorrow—”

“I know, I know,” Lilla said, fussing with her son’s new green and brown mottled clothing—the uniform of the scouting corps.

And Relf had thought taking leave of his wife, son, and newborn daughter was difficult.

“Just . . . be careful,” Lilla admonished, “Do your best—”

“He’ll be back to say goodbye before Shem sends him down on the retrieval,” Honri reminded her.

“He’ll be back in two days, in fact, to finish training!” Mahrree exclaimed. “Lilla, let the man go for his orientation!”

“Thank you, Muggah,” Relf grinned at her.

But now she gripped his muscled arm, since his mother had released it. “I don’t expect miracles. I don’t even expect you to be able to drag him home. I’m just thankful that you’re going to try. I have full confidence in you. Remember that.”

Relf’s eyes softened. “This has been the longest conversation we’ve had in many moons, Muggah,” he said quietly, tossing a grateful glance at Honri. “Suddenly remembered how to talk to your grandchildren?”

She shifted apologetically, because she hadn’t realized her grandchildren had noticed she was deliberately avoiding them. But she could talk to this one; he was already on his way out. What more damage could she do to him?

“When did you get to be so sharp-tongued?” she asked him. “Oh, I know,” she added when he made to respond, “Learned it from me, and just now daring to use it.”

He gave her a quick hug. “Whatever it takes to get you talk. And I’ll find him, Muggah. I promise.”

“Don’t,” she said, patting him on the cheek. “Don’t make promises you don’t know you can keep. Just . . . *come back* to us again.”

Chapter 31--“Does the general know what you are?”

Corporal Sword Master Thorne Shin mentally reviewed his jacket and checked his sword one more time before he marched out onto the parade field with the rest of his newly-assigned Company of Twenty. He had been looking forward to the Celebration Day, despite the heat of the 52nd Day of Weeding Season.

For more than three seasons he'd heard all about the spectacle of the uniforms, horses, trumpets, and drum corps. So far, he'd not been disappointed. The speech from the overly stuffed colonel had tested each soldier's ability to sleep while standing up, but Shin thoroughly enjoyed the reenactment of Thorne's defeat of the rebels.

Once the performance got past the excessively melodramatic part of Mrs. Shin, played ludicrously by the enormous wife of a visiting major, defiantly mocking Thorne while threatening to stab a young soldier, it was solid entertainment.

His grandmother's exaggeratedly long death by arrows while falling in stages into the crevice was a noteworthy performance.

Former General Shin crying out a long “Nooooo!” while falling in an equally deliberate manner after his wife was also most effective.

Mrs. Briter's death was a bit pathetic, though; the woman of the captain playing her didn't even look like she was expecting. And the overly brawny soldier portraying Thorne flailing valiantly but unsuccessfully to save her from the Guardsers was almost amusing. But the deaths of Mr. Briter and young Mr. Shin, as they were carried off screaming by Guardsers, elicited cheers from the spectators, although Shin wasn't sure why.

The greatest whoops of appreciation, however, came with the execution of Zenos. Using a dried-up pumpkin from last year as his head, then rolling it out to the soldiers as Zenos was ‘executed’ was,

the corporal thought, drama at its best.

Shin wondered if anyone else in the crowd, or any of the stuffed uniforms sitting up on the small hill, knew how inaccurate the portrayal of Shem's premature death was. Or if anyone else even suspected that his aunt's ritualistic death by the Guards in front of a devastated and wounded Thorne was pure dung.

Still, the performance had a powerful effect on the men, something that Shin wholly appreciated. Some even had tears streaming down their faces when the soldier portraying the young Captain Thorne recited his moving soliloquy about the need to sacrifice even one's fighting arm for order and justice and peace in their land, and to destroy the evil influences that undermine unity.

Corporal Shin couldn't help but be impressed. It was rubbish, yes, but it was *good* rubbish. The kind of carefully selected, hand washed, and expertly fermented rubbish that kept the men motivated and attached to their commander.

And that was the key, Corporal Shin well knew: the power of story. Not its veracity, but its effect. The soldiers loved their general, primarily because of the stories which were mostly true. True enough. How could Corporal Shin not respect that?

As he watched the troops take their turns before the reviewing stands, he kept his eye on Thorne. Finally—*finally*—he'd see him face-to-face. Thorne sat astride his bay horse, a picture of strength. For once, Shin could take him in fully. His sandy hair he already knew—longer than regulation, but Thorne was any regulation that he chose. His straight nose came to a point and his eyes penetrated the soldiers, reminding Shin of a hawk looking for a meal. The slight scarring on his face from having the pox as a young man only added to his rugged demeanor. His right arm, always gloved, hung limply by his side, while his left hand rested on the hilt of his sword. His jacket had so many medals that it visibly sagged. The only description that came to Shin's mind was, Majestic.

Occasionally Shin wondered what his grandfather may have looked like on top of his horse, with sword in hand, reviewing the army. There were times he wondered if the old colonel couldn't have done things differently. If he *had* reined in his wife, who ironically had told Young Pere he needed to rein himself in, they wouldn't have had to leave the world.

Maybe the man on the horse reviewing the parade could have been a real General Shin, not some pretend general of essentially

“Does the general know what you are?”

nothing in Salem. And Corporal Shin may have been something more than a mere corporal. Maybe he even could have been a lieutenant by now. A real officer.

Over the past nine moons, Corporal Shin had grown to love army life. The discipline, the purpose, the violence, and even the food at times. He still smiled to himself about the “freedom” part, which, at his first recruiting meal, was the last time he heard that word in conjunction with serving in the army. But that didn’t bother him.

Now he straightened his back and, at the command, marched onto the field with ninety-nine fellow soldiers in view of General Lemuel Thorne. He did his best to make eye contact with him, wanting to see for himself what kind of a man his grandfather could have been had he not been so weak. Even with one arm, Thorne seemed to have more power than the colonel.

Shin thought for a moment that the general caught his eye, but he could only hope. He didn’t plan on staying a corporal forever. Some day he planned to be standing on top of that hill himself, and already decided that he’d be the youngest sergeant major ever. He’d looked it up once, when he had a private moment in the command tower, the age of the youngest sergeant major to date: Shem Zenos. But the name had a star by it, signaling that the man was not to be counted as anything in the army.

Shin glanced at the honored guests standing with and behind the general. Several were in uniforms, and a few were men in formal jackets with only faint smudges of face paint.

But one was a woman, largely decorated but not absurdly. Shin strained to focus on her as his group moved passed, because something was familiar about her. Her long blond hair was capped by a ridiculously large hat, and her white, ruffle-laden dress blew in the breeze and fluffed onto the officer next to her. He did his best to ignore it as they watched the parade, both seeming a bit bored.

Until she locked eyes with Shin. She leaned forward slightly and then he knew: Amory. Soon she was out of view and Shin tried to recall what the rank of the uniform was next to her. She had told him that she’d always been interested in army officers, and, apparently, she got what she came to the world for.

His unit reformed in the field to allow for the next troops to pass, and a messenger rushed up to Sergeant Onus with a note.

Onus looked up from it. “Shin!”

Shin felt a rush of anticipation and strode to the sergeant.

“Your presence has been requested at the reviewing hill immediately after the parade. You may wait here while the rest of us march back to the barracks.” Onus raised an eyebrow—if in warning or in congratulations, Shin wasn’t sure.

He stood at attention all by himself at the edge of the grounds, wondering and worrying about the message for the next half hour.

Finally the parade finished and he dutifully marched up the hill to the reviewing stands. The sight of so many officers was nerve-wracking from a distance, and up close many regarded him severely, wondering why an enlisted man was invading their borders.

But he knew how to withstand a glare. He stopped, stood at attention several paces away from the nearest uniforms, and waited.

He saw the big floppy hat make its way through the press, and yes, it was Amory. She must have sent the message and Shin’s heart both sank and jumped at that.

She hurried over to him, a small smile on her face, and stopped a few feet away.

He maintained his stance and focused just past her, noticing that the general was watching from a distance.

Amory let out a sigh. “Perrin Shin, come back from the dead!” she whispered. “Creet, you must look just like him now. So smart in that uniform. I wasn’t sure at first, but . . . Oh, it’s so good to see you, Pere! At ease—it’s only me.”

The corporal relaxed his stance only slightly and allowed himself to look at her. He wasn’t prepared for the changes he saw. She appeared much older and her face was tense, even under the light brown face paint she wore. Her smile wasn’t genuine, but she wanted it to be. Her eyes, rimmed by vibrant blue pigment, alternated between vacant and shielded. She was still beautiful, but with a dry, toughened look that reminded Shin of bread having been in the oven too long. She wasn’t the same woman he snuck into Edge with, that was clear. He wondered if he had changed as much as well.

“It’s good to see you too, Miss . . . ma’am,” and he realized he didn’t know what to call her.

“Amory,” she supplied. “Just Amory.”

The corporal nodded. “I didn’t know if you had chosen a new name or not.”

She shrugged. “I did, but it didn’t stick.”

Shin was aware that the general had turned and was facing their direction, his left hand resting on his sword, but Shin was too far away

“Does the general know what you are?”

to see the look in his eyes.

“So are you happy in your new life, Amory?” he asked officially.

Amory nodded slowly. “Yes, I suppose you could say I am. I have to admit, I have a great view of the parades.”

He struggled to know exactly how to phrase the next question. “I take it then that you have a . . . companion here?”

Amory smiled broadly. “Indeed I do! I accompany Thorne everywhere.”

The news hit him like a plank upside the head. Thorne’s latest woman, who the soldiers sniggered and speculated about, was Amory?! She reached Thorne quicker than he had? He didn’t even realize he’d been her target. Maybe he wasn’t, but she just somehow got lucky.

Slag.

“Then you and the general are . . .” He regretted the beginning of that sentence because he didn’t know how to finish it.

“I am his consort, yes.” She tried to say it proudly, but something uncomfortable flickered in her eyes.

The corporal wasn’t sure what a consort was, so he nodded a quick approval. “Does the general know what you are?” When Amory squinted harshly at him, he added, “I mean, that you’re from *the valley*?”

Her face instantly relaxed. “No, of course not. I told him I came from Coast. He thinks I used to sell dresses.”

She took a step closer to him, and Shin remembered their few minutes in the shed on their first day in Province 8. The raw, gaping hole in his chest he’d ignored for so long gnawed at him again. He’d tried many times to block out those first few days in the world, choosing not to remember any of those mistakes and deciding his life didn’t begin until he enlisted.

Usually he was successful, until he had moments like this that reminded him nothing was really completely forgotten.

“Are you happy, Pere?” she asked intently. It felt odd to hear that name again.

“I am, thank you for asking,” he said formally and resumed his in-the-distance gaze.

“Because I’ve been worrying about you,” Amory continued and took yet another step closer. “I’ve regretted leaving you that first night. I’ve worried about where you slept and what you ate. I shouldn’t have left you. I’m sorry about that.”

“I was not inconvenienced, ma’am. I am perfectly well.”

Out of the corner of his eye he saw General Thorne making his way through the uniforms toward Amory and him. His walk was hurried but he kept being stopped by men who wanted to shake his left hand.

As much as the corporal wanted to meet the general, he didn’t want to meet him like *this*, talking to Amory, his consort! The spot on the right side of his mind told him he needed to leave, *NOW*.

He cleared his throat and asked curtly, “Is there anything else you need from me, ma’am? My sergeant will be expecting me.”

Amory’s shoulders drooped. “No, no Pere. I just wanted to see that you’re all right. I suppose you are. Listen, if you ever need anything, please let me know. I’ve got connections—”

Shin grew more nervous as the general made his way closer, moving past one overstuffed man only to run into another. Thorne’s hawkish eye was keenly on the corporal, and, feeling like a mouse, Shin knew that if he were to escape, he needed to move now.

“—and it’s just nice to see someone from *the valley* again.”

“Yes, ma’am. I will remember that, ma’am. Good day to you.”

The general was quickly gaining ground and was only a dozen paces away now.

Corporal Shin saluted promptly, and Thorne absent-mindedly saluted back. The look of frustration on his face made it clear he hadn’t meant to release him so quickly.

Shin tipped his cap at Amory and turned sharply on his heel. He practiced his best quick march down the hill toward his barracks hoping he wouldn’t hear anyone calling him back.

He didn’t.



On top of the hill next to Amory, General Thorne watched the young soldier stride away, his long legs ensuring that he was gone in record time. Two thoughts were battling in Lemuel’s mind.

One nagged at him that he should pursue the corporal, spin him around, and look him straight in the eye.

The other, coming from a spot to the right and behind, told him it was just a boy, and that he’d draw even more attention to himself and Amory by pursuing him. Right now, he needed to maintain his dignity on the hill. It was his 26th celebration, after all.

“Does the general know what you are?”

“Do you need something, Lemuel?” Amory’s words interrupted the sparring in his mind.

Thorne tore his eyes away from the retreating figure of the corporal and turned to Amory, who regarded him with deliberate sweetness.

“Who was that? Why are you talking to a mere enlisted man?”

Amory shifted her stance. “I’m not sure what name he’s picked for himself. He’s just someone I knew the first night I came to Province 8. I was to try to help him find a place to sleep then, since he was new as well. I just wondered how he’d fared since then.”

Thorne stared at her. “No doubt one of many young men you helped make a bed for.”

Amory looked as if he had slapped her in the face.

He took a step toward her and hovered dangerously near. “Do not *ever* use my messenger again,” he hissed, “and *never* be caught speaking to anyone lower in rank than a colonel unless I accompany you. Not in private, and *certainly* not in public and on the parade grounds! Creet, woman, I have a reputation to maintain. It will not do for the general’s woman to be seen cavorting with enlisted men! Understood?”

Amory steeled herself. “I understand, General Thorne. It won’t happen again.” But she quickly withered.

“It’d better not, or *you* will need to worry about finding yourself a bed,” he snarled.

Amory shrunk a little more.

“Now get back in the mansion. You’ve been seen enough today. Lieutenant!” he called.

A young officer appeared at his side.

“See that Miss Amory returns immediately to the mansion. There’s concern for her safety. Take three men with you. No one is to speak to her or stop your progress. Is that understood?”

“Yes sir,” the lieutenant said. “Ma’am?” He held out his arm.

Amory took his arm obediently, if not reluctantly, and he whisked her down the hill.

Thorne waved over Captain Lick who trotted to his side. “I want you to find out who that corporal was, who Amory was talking to.”

Captain Lick strained to see where the young soldier disappeared to, but in the swirl of hundreds of milling men in blue, it was impossible. “What do you suspect, sir? Do you think he might be one of *them*?”

Thorne struggled to not roll his eyes. Lick had a tendency to get fixated on the wrong obsessions. “Sure,” he said shortly. “Go speak to the messenger she used. He should be able to supply you with the contact. As soon as you have something for me, let me know.”

The captain saluted and rushed off to find the messenger.

Corporal Shin reached his sergeant just as the men were returning to their barracks to change out of their dress uniforms.

“Everything all right, Shin?” Onus stopped him at the door of the barracks. “Thorne finally have a few words with his numbers man?”

“No, sir, it was someone else. Someone on the hill who knew me when I was younger,” he said, hoping the questioning would end so he could go to his bunk.

Onus slowly nodded his head. “Rather beautiful, wasn’t she?”

Shin swallowed. “She *was*.”

“Thorne doesn’t appreciate anyone looking at his women,” the sergeant warned. “He’ll probably be done with her in a year and look for another ‘companion.’ Just don’t get in the way in the meantime, if you know what I mean.”

“I have no intentions to do anything with her, sir,” Shin said, desperately wishing to be released from the very uncomfortable conversation.

“Of course you don’t. Just be careful, Shin.” Onus dismissed him with a salute and stepped to the side to allow him in. When he walked in to the long, low building, several of the men whistled.

“Corporal’s got someone watching him, men! Stand back—she looked like a real experationist, and Shin’s turning red.”

Shin growled in disgust as he went to his bunk. “I thought all of you were supposed to be back here, not spying on me.”

Several of the men laughed. “We were marching in the field just beyond the hill,” his bunkmate said. “Kind of obvious who came to see you, Shin.”

“You know what Thorne did with the last man who flirted with one of his women?” asked another man with a snigger.

“Don’t know, and don’t care,” Shin answered as he took off his dress jacket and picked up his regular one. “Because I wasn’t flirting, and I’m not interested in her.”

“Ah, don’t worry, Shin,” called out another man. “If she can’t

“Does the general know what you are?”

produce a son for him, he’ll send her on her way and find another woman who might. Then she’ll be all yours again.”

Shin sighed heavily and tried not to listen to them.

“How many daughters does he have now anyway?” asked another soldier.

“Last I heard it was eight or nine,” someone answered.

“It can’t be *that* many,” another said. “It’s not allowed.”

“Not allowed for *his wife* to have that many,” another soldier said. “Besides, with no more marriage laws, it doesn’t matter anymore. No one’s sure what happened to his wife. She’s probably south of Idumea now with her girls.”

“Anyone got a count on how many women he’s had? I can definitely see the advantages to being the general.”

The soldiers laughed and speculated on additional rewards to being the general, while Shin buttoned up his jacket. His stomach felt slightly sick and he had no other desire than to leave the barracks. He wondered if the general knew how disrespectfully his men talked about him, and it made Shin want to tell them all off. But, he reminded himself again, for only a few more days did he have to tolerate these small-minded, shallow thinking oafs.

He put his sword and sheath back on.

“Shin, where’re you going? We have time off until the banquet tonight.”

“I know,” he said. “Just . . . need to take care of some things.”

Several of the men oohed in his direction. “She’s not worth it, Shin. Find someone younger.”

“Careful, Corporal. Don’t bother dueling the general for her. What kind of prize is a used-up sow?”

Shin ignored their snickers as he marched out of the barracks. He headed out the northeast gates and straight for the forest where he could think, could listen to the ‘haunted breathings’ in the woods, and watch the bubbling mud from the safety of the edge.

No one thought too much of his walking along the forest’s edge. There were always soldiers patrolling it, keeping the village idiots from running into it and out again on a dare. Sometimes he encountered teachers and scientists interested in observing the changes just beyond the tree line. They always seemed grateful to see a soldier pacing along the border, as if he could keep out the unquiet spirits of the dead that still sought revenge, especially since their observations suggested the forest had become even more angry and noisy in the

past year.

But he wasn't there to see if the mud volcano was shooting further again, but to walk out his thoughts. Seeing *her* again had awakened all kinds of feelings, none of them pleasant. Sometimes he could go for a week without thinking about his first days in Province 8, without remembering Salem or anyone else.

Then there were days like this where the pain, frustration, and anger of what he thought about Amory, then what he did with Lolo and that other girl, and probably another one, he wasn't sure—well, the memory of *what happened* consumed him with guilt and remorse. Just when he thought he was past it, the past came back to chew at him again like a starving rat.

Deciding to never again be involved with women didn't eliminate the feelings, it just made them all the more acute when they arose yet again. He didn't need these thoughts clouding his judgment. There was too much coming that he needed to concentrate on.

Focus on the future, that's what he needed to do. It was coming up, within days was his guess. No one in the fort knew it, but Shin had figured it out. Each week the supply calculations were sent to him, via Sergeant Onus's office, and each week he went through the lists for Thorne's forts to make sure all was correct.

For the past few weeks there'd been a buildup of supplies at Province 2, at the southern edge of Thorne's land. Thorne even had to acquire new suppliers to fill his requests. The mass of goods quietly being stored in enormous barns was far more than the five thousand men already stationed there required. In fact, there was enough in reserve to keep nearly twenty thousand men supplied for half a season, with additional shipments still going in.

Shin could see what must be coming: the offensive on Idumea. It made perfect sense. The forts in the south knew of Thorne's celebration week, and that nothing occurred for days before, and that the soldiers were often listless and lazy for days after. Several times the south had tried to attack the north during Celebration week, but were repulsed by the battle-hardened soldiers of Province 2. And making a successful incursion all the way to Province 8 in the far north was impossible, especially with six thousand additional soldiers camping around the fort for the celebration.

But the south would not anticipate an attack right after Celebration week, or especially *during* it. And that's when Shin thought Thorne would make his move—in the next few days. All of the forts

had been compliant to Thorne’s rule for the past few weeks, so they were ready. Instead of sending the visiting soldiers home, Thorne could just as easily lead them south on an invasion.

And Shin planned to be with them. No more of this waiting around until his first year was completed. He was only weeks away from being qualified for action, and he wasn’t about to let the opportunity pass him by. Sergeant Onus had said he was the greatest with a sword he’d ever seen, and Shin was tired of using that sword only to threaten stubborn mules in the roadways. Nothing in Province 8 was worthy of his abilities.

There were plenty of men happy to guard around the arena and watch the daily fights between men and animals, keeping the citizens—including children who were obviously skipping school—from jumping into the fray. He got a little more challenge at night, when the fights at the arena were far more intense. Soldiers were then stationed throughout the arena to restrain audience members who were overly excited from watching former soldiers looking for more glory days, or criminals hoping to be freed, dying to prove their toughness; sometimes quite literally. The crowds, angered that ‘their’ animal or man lost, causing them to lose slips of gold and silver in their bets, almost became raucous enough to be worthy of Shin’s skills.

The goings on at the amphitheater, however, were generally milder and didn’t need more than a dozen soldiers to help move the crowds or keep them from pawing their favorite actors. And although Shin found the entertainments predictable and even monotonous, he was grateful for his time standing around doing nothing. He learned a great deal about the world by discovering what it considered entertaining.

This was the world: it was obsessed with violence, mating, and power. So, invariably, each play included characters losing their lives, clothing, or status. The most popular ones incorporated all three.

He couldn’t decide at first which was more uncomfortable to watch—the dramas of the amphitheater or the bloodshed of the arena. The first few times Shin witnessed the fights and plays he was shocked, then intrigued, but then grew bored. It was the same thing, every day, just like the drumming and dancing at the grassy arena. The same monotonous beat, again and again. And nothing different ever came to the province, or any province for that matter.

He knew years ago there used to be more variety—musicians, singing, debates, acrobats, and animals trained to do tricks. There was a lot of that over on the other side of the mountain, along with storytelling, and plays whose sole intent was to make people laugh—

But no one here was interested in anything else besides blood and violence and mating and power. Adults and children flocked to the entertainments often provided free of charge by General Thorne. A gesture, Shin realized, which caused the villagers to adore their general.

Occasionally he even came to the arena to watch the battles. On those evenings, the announcer turned his main duties of introducing the fighters over to the general. Thorne always received the standing applause of his citizens.

And Shin noticed something else—the amount of free entertainment increased just before another increase in taxes, or the army took another portion of crops and livestock. And because they were entertained, the citizens didn't seem to notice—or maybe they didn't care. He'd discovered over the past year that villagers demanded only a few things: food, security, and entertainment. As long as they had plenty of the last, they could pretty much dismiss the scarcity of the previous two.

It was often as Shin watched the villagers and on-duty soldiers cheering and shouting at the fights that he felt a nagging that he was wasting his time. It often seemed so fruitless standing there, waiting for an animal or person to give up, pass out, or die so he could make sure everyone left in an orderly fashion.

At times he thought, *SURELY THERE'S SOMETHING BETTER YOU COULD BE DOING*. Something he could be learning, or building, or making, or fixing, or curing.

It was also at those times he cursed the manipulation that his mind underwent for the first eighteen years of his life. It was because of *them* that he couldn't enjoy what was before him. It was *their* fault he still felt a need to accomplish something necessary and useful each day. No one else in the world seemed to be burdened by high aspirations. How much happier could he be if he were just as ambivalent as everyone else!

To keep his mind free from such frustrating thoughts while he waited—sometimes for hours—at the arena, Shin usually took his post on the outside, or offered to trade duties with another corporal

over Twenty stuck with defending the trash heaps from beggars making a mess in the alleys looking for a meal.

He hadn't understood that when he first arrived in the world and, half-starved, kneeled before a pile behind an inn. He'd thought the soldiers who chased him away were heartless.

But now he understood: a community can't function in filth and chaos. Order must be maintained, roads and alleys cleared, and those who won't earn their own wages like everyone else in the Province needed to go somewhere else. Shin didn't care where they went, just as long as it wasn't on his assigned roads for the evening.

He had little sympathy for such people who failed to see the importance of order. Sure, he was without food once, but that was only because he'd been robbed and had no connections. But he'd fixed that in just a few days. There was no good reason why these people couldn't pick themselves up and take care of themselves as well as Shin did.

Often he chased away children scavenging for food, which meant their parents were now raising another generation of equally lazy incompetents. And sometimes he didn't even see any adults accompanying the children. Where they were, well, that wasn't his concern. His duty was to keep the roads clear.

That General Thorne didn't do something more drastic about the beggars perplexed Shin. Then again, most of those begging seemed to be women. Perhaps the men at the trash heaps became soldiers later on, so it was a feeding grounds of sorts for new enlistees.

In any case, patrolling was a waste of Shin's talents, and he couldn't wait for it to end. It'd be after the banquet, Shin was quite sure, when Thorne would march out of the fort with seven thousand of his strongest men. Seven thousand and *one*.

But leaving his post to join with the bulk of the army? *That* was the part he had yet to figure out, and Shin considered options as he paced along the edge of the forest. He could fake an injury to be in the surgery wing when the soldiers left, and have a better chance of slipping in with them. Perhaps he could stage a fall, something with vague aches and pains but with no visible damage.

Come to think of it, wasn't it one year ago that he stood on top of a schoolhouse and—

“Young Pere!”

Shin stumbled in his pacing and slowed down when he heard the voice. He was at the fresh spring. The haunted Zenos spring.

He held his breath as he crept along, suddenly worried about unquiet spirits. Something *had* said his name, hadn't it? Didn't he—

“Young Pere!”

It was quiet, urgent, and definitely from the trees.

He froze in his tracks, swallowed hard, but saw no one.

A pinecone sailed dangerously close past his head.

“Show yourself!” Shin hissed to the forest, drawing his sword.

“Young Pere, come into the trees,” a low voice called to him.

The voice was familiar, but Shin couldn't imagine complying. That was . . . that was *ludicrous*. Willingly going into the forest?

Another pinecone flew and hit him in the chest.

“Oh, Creet!” Shin swore as a memory from nearly a year ago hit him as well. A pinecone, hitting Uncle Shem in the chest as they hiked to the ancient site—

“Slagging Creet!

“Ah, Young Pere, not you too. Not *you* abusing the Creator's name so casually,” the quiet voice came closer. From behind a thick shrub, the body emerged.

Shin dropped his sword in shock.

“Pick that up, Young Pere. We don't drop rubbish in the forest. The way is clear now. No one will see you. Now take seven large steps into here behind the bush,” said the man dressed in green and brown mottled clothing.

Shin glanced around him, saw no one, and, without really wanting to, but used to obeying those in authority, he stumbled in a few steps.

“That's it. Keep coming. You're probably wondering what I'm doing here,” the man smiled as Shin reached the bush.

Shin was speechless.

“I'm concerned about your welfare. Little brother, we need to *talk*,” said Relf.

Thorne was alone in the command tower, struggling to adjust his dress uniform jacket, when his captain returned.

“Sir, I have two messages.”

“Yes?” Thorne said distractedly as he tried to fix his left sleeve. It was caught on his long-sleeved formal undershirt and wouldn't slide down.

“May I, sir?” Lick didn't wait for a response but pulled down the

“Does the general know what you are?”

sleeve and straightened the cuff. “There. Most impressive.”

“Thank you, Lick,” General Thorne said through clenched teeth. “Usually Syl—I mean, *Amory* adjusts it but—”

“But nothing, sir,” the captain said quickly. “She’s one of my two messages. She’s ready and waiting to be presented at the outer room for the banquet. Apparently she’s a little excited, this being her first one and all.”

Thorne sighed. “She all ‘fropped’ up?”

The captain smiled slightly. “Yes, sir. She looks very appropriate to hang on your arm.”

“Second message?” he said, adjusting some of the shined-up medals on his dress uniform.

“I found the identity of the corporal she was speaking to.”

“Excellent. And? Is he one of your men from the land that doesn’t exist?” he scoffed with a cold smile.

The captain sighed in frustration. “Sir, I promise you—*Salem exists!*” he whispered earnestly. “And no,” he admitted. “No sign that he’s from there. But you may find this interesting—you already know him, in a way.”

Thorne looked up from his adjustments. “Who is he?”

“Sword Master Thorne Shin.”

Thorne’s eyebrows went up. “My mysterious numbers man? Creet! I missed meeting him *again?*”

Lick smiled briefly. “I’m not sure I understand why you didn’t demand an introduction on the hill.”

“I don’t need your smugness right now,” Thorne spat.

“I’m sorry, sir,” the captain stood taller as he sobered. “I didn’t realize I was being smug.”

The general squinted as he remembered. “He was tall . . . and dark, I think. His cap was pulled down so low I didn’t see his hair coloring. His eyes were dark, though. Briter was fairer, as I recall.” Thorne’s voice trailed off.

“Sir?” Lick said carefully. “The guests are waiting, and Miss Amory is—”

Thorne sighed impatiently as he reattached a large, glinting piece of medal on his chest. “Yes, yes, I know. Lick, understand this: there’s nothing wrong with letting one’s guests and lover wait a few minutes. It heightens the anticipation.”

“True, everyone is most eager for your appearance,” Lick nodded.

“Everyone looks forward to your most excellent celebration. The soldiers enjoy the meal, the parade—”

Thorne nodded sharply to get him to be quiet, and briefly wondered if any other commander had been so plagued by such a transparent flatterer.

“It’s proving to be an excellent diversion to our efforts in the south,” Thorne acknowledged to his young battle advisor. “It’s just this blasted dress uniform! Waste of cloth,” Thorne grumbled, expertly buttoning the jacket with one hand. “Lick, I want you at the entrance tonight, watching the soldiers come in. Bring me any Shins who match the description. It’s high time I met this boy. Then after the dinner, keep an eye on *her* and whomever she talks to. She’s far too easy with everyone. She’s becoming an embarrassment.”

“Of course, sir. I agree. Whoever is fortunate enough to be by your side should understand the importance of that position.”

Thorne glanced at him. “As well as you do, Lick?”

Lick readjusted his stance. “Should I be allowed to ride next to you, sir, at the offensive, I guarantee you’d never be disappointed.”

Thorne gave him a weary smile as he walked over to his desk to retrieve the rest of his uniform.

“Sir?” Lick ventured, “You mentioned the other day you were working on a plan to discover the route to Salem?”

“I did,” Thorne said casually, picking up his sheath.

Lick shifted ever so slightly. “Might I be allowed to know it, sir? I may be able to help. I know a few things . . .”

Thorne hooked the buckle of his sheath on to a button to hold it in place, then pulled the other side of the belt around his body and buckled it expertly with his left hand.

“Lick, you asked me some moons ago why I keep on Kroop. I told you it was because he talks too much. Being around him for so many years has taught me that I should keep most things to myself.” He picked up his sword.

The captain took a nervous step back. “Sir, are you suggesting *I’m* not to be trusted?”

Thorne looked into his eyes with a piercing glare and firmed his grip on the hilt. “How much did Yordin trust you, my dear Captain?”

Lick squinted under the general’s scrutiny. “Enough to see his demise, sir.”

Thorne nodded once with a cold smile and slipped his sword into the sheath. “He was an old man. I still have many years ahead of me.

“Does the general know what you are?”

I’m not ready to meet *my* demise yet.”

Lick’s eyebrows rose. “Sir, I am completely loyal to you! Why do you think I confided in you about Salem? You’re the only commander alive who knows about it, who has the potential to find and conquer it. I’d do nothing to betray you. All I’ve done is so that I can serve *you*.”

Thorne continued his smile, which grew stiffer every moment. “Very good. Sounds like you practiced that on Yordin, who likely didn’t put much credence in your claims about a secret society, so then you served him a death sentence.” Thorne stepped to the door and held it open for his flabbergasted captain. “I have many men completely loyal to me, Lick. Right now, you *are* by my side. But that can change, as you well know. I thank you for the help with my sleeve, and I understand dinner is waiting. After *you*, Captain.”

“Wha-what are you doing here?” Shin stammered at his oldest brother. “How did you get here? Why *you*?”

Relf smiled. “It’s great to see you too, *little* brother. I’m so relieved you’re still alive!” He tried to give Young Pere a hug, but Shin sidestepped it.

“What do you want from me?”

“So which question do you want me to answer first?” Relf said, his grin refusing to leave even though his brother scowled at him.

“All of them!” Shin demanded.

“Why me? Because I look the least like a Shin or a Briter or a Zenos. I’m as Trovato as anyone can be.” He ran a hand through his blond hair, purposely dirtied with charcoal to blend in with the shadows. “How did I get here? The same way you did. And no, I didn’t sneak down on my own. I’m here with a dozen men who are watching us right now, so don’t even consider exposing me. What do I want from you? I want you to listen. I’m here to tell you it’s time to come home.”

Shin took a hard step backward. “What? I am home!”

“This isn’t your home. This just happens to be where you live. You belong somewhere else. Deep down you know that. Young Pere, there isn’t much time left. Uncle Shem has foreseen great trials that are to come, and you need to come back with me now, tonight.”

Tonight?! But the offensive on Idumea—

Shin took another step away. “Zenos is a fool and an idiot. Everyone knows that! And you still listen to him? But of course—you’re *family*,” he sneered. “No wonder he chose you.”

Relf frowned. “What are you talking about? I was chosen because I volunteered, and because we suspected so much had changed about you that only someone who’s known you your whole life would recognize you. Honestly, Young Pere, you *have* changed. It was only in the past few days I realized the soldier who paces the forest’s edge alone is my brother. Young Pere, I’m worried about you. What happened to your ears? Your face is so clouded, your eyes look practically dead. We can help you—”

“I don’t need help! I don’t need any of you, especially Zenos!” Shin whispered fiercely. “Just leave me alone. I’m on the verge of doing something great, and now you’re here to ruin that? Zenos knows. Somehow he just knows. That’s all he’s ever wanted to do, mess up my life and ruin Thorne’s life!”

Relf grabbed his arm. “Young Pere, I don’t understand half of what you’re saying. Look, can you please tell me why you want to stay? Help me understand who you are now.”

Shin tensed under his brother’s touch. “No, you can’t understand. I don’t want you here, can’t you see that? I don’t want anything to do with any of you!” He wrenched his arm out of Relf’s grip.

“You can’t mean that, Young Pere. Mrs. Yordin said you intended to be gone for six moons, then return. Yes, she told us. Your time here is up. It’s been nine moons now. We thought maybe you got lost, or were hurt and couldn’t return. I’m your escort. Young Pere, don’t you ever wonder what’s happened at home? Don’t you want to know how your family is, how much they’ve missed you?”

“Why, because you think I miss *them*?” he gestured with the sword still in his hands. “I don’t! I’ve done quite well on my own here, and I don’t need anyone else.”

Relf shook his head, dismayed. “Young Pere, I really didn’t think that—”

“What, let me guess,” Shin glowered. “You thought you’d show up, that I’d fall weeping into your arms grateful to see family, and hike back up the forest with you. Well that’s not what’s going to happen. I’m fine here. I’ve got plans!”

“No, you’re *not* all right,” Relf said, his eyebrows knitted. “I can see it in your face. I’ve never known you to be so . . . lifeless, Young Pere. There’s no spark in your eyes.”

“Does the general know what you are?”

“So you came all this way to criticize how I look?” Shin spat.

Relf groaned. “No, no, no, Young Pere. I came all this way because I miss you and love you. Everyone does. Mama cries every day, Papa stares out the window to the mountains, Muggah—”

Shin shut his eyes and held up his free hand. “Stop! I don’t *need* to hear it. I don’t *want* to hear it.”

“Why is that?” Relf squinted at him. “Ask yourself, why you don’t want to know. Don’t you want to hear about the new babies? The new romances?”

“No! Nothing! Just . . . *leave*.”

“Do you want to know what Guide Zenos saw?” Relf said hurriedly, as if time was running out. “Young Pere, the pox that struck Muggah and Uncle Deck years ago—it’s rising up again. Already in *the place over the mountain* we’ve seen a few cases. The doctors are fairly certain that the Shins and Zenoses are immune because Papa and Shem never fell ill the last time around, nor did any Trovatos. But we’re worried about the Briters, because—”

“*IDON’T CARE ABOUT THAT PLACE!*” It wasn’t a scream, but the whisper was so loud that Relf flinched.

“Please, Young Pere,” Relf implored. “There’s more coming, but we’re not sure what. Uncle Shem has been impressed that there will be some kind of disaster, and it’s going to change everything. A massive cloud, but we don’t know what it means. Time’s running out. Please come home with me!” He gripped Young Pere’s arm as if wanting to drag him away. “Don’t make me return to Mama empty-handed. This is your last chance. After this . . . Young Pere, *please* believe me. Everyone from Salem is getting out. The scouts, the suppliers, the midwives, the rectors—everyone. Have I ever lied to you? Have I *ever* deceived you?”

“It’s not you I don’t trust,” Shin said coldly. “It’s *him*. It’s Zenos. And you’re just stupid enough to follow him like an idiot lamb. I’m sorry for you, Relf. You should stay here with me instead.”

Relf scoffed in disbelief. “I’m not staying with you. I have no idea who you are anymore, Young Pere. I have a family who loves me and needs me, and I haven’t been blinded by the world.”

“I’m not blind—you are!” Shin shouted in a whisper.

Relf sighed as if in pain. “This is going nowhere,” he murmured. More distinctly he said, “Young Pere, when a man is as defensive as you are, it’s only because he’s trying to deny the truth. No matter how far down you bury it, it still has a way of coming back up, doesn’t it?”

There are a great many things wrong with your soul right now. I can see it in your eyes. You're hiding nothing very well. But we can fix everything. Come home and talk to Papa. Let him guide you. You can ignore those problems as much as you want, but they will still keep coming back to haunt you. As frightened as those poor soldiers out there are of the forest, the state of your soul frightens you even more, doesn't it?"

Shin gripped his sword hilt tighter.

Relf stepped closer. "I love you, Young Pere. That's why I risked coming after you. This is our last night. I'll wait here for you until midnight. Slip out after dark and no one will see you. If they do, we can take care of that. Please, Young Pere, think about it for the next few hours. Then come home with me tonight!"

Shin yanked his arm out of his brother's grip, turned, and strode out of the forest.

"Young Pere!"

"So," Amory batted her eyelashes, "how do I look?" She spun in place as General Thorne entered the anteroom off the main reception hall. Her body-hugging peach silk dress was so close to flesh colored it was almost as if she wore nothing at all. Her golden hair hung in tight ringlets all around her artfully painted face.

"It's fine," he said dismissively.

Amory stopped in mid-twirl. "*It's fine*?' That's all you can come up with? The seamstress was working on this for weeks! I think 'stunning,' or 'breath-taking,' or 'fantastic' are more fitting than even this gown."

"Seems you already have all the descriptions in mind, so why do I need to bother repeating any of them? Are you ready?"

Amory's bare shoulders wilted in disappointment. "Been ready for a while, actually. I could have been out there for the past half hour, getting to know the officers, meeting the other wives—"

"Don't think too much of yourself, Amory," Thorne said, as if already bored. "And there are no more 'wives'—"

She stepped up quickly to him, gripped his jacket, and pulled him in to a passionate kiss. When she released him she said, "You're right, Lemuel. Would a mere 'wife' do that to you? And more?"

A small smile surfaced on Thorne's mouth. "Sometimes I wonder why I keep you around," he glanced briefly at her very flat middle

“Does the general know what you are?”

that promised no son anytime soon, “then you remind me.” But his face hardened as he pointed at her. “But you mind your place tonight! You speak only to whom you are introduced and only answer questions. Do not attempt to draw attention to yourself, and remember your position.”

“Which one?” she asked saucily.

“And none of *THAT!* No flirtation with anyone! Is that understood? Creet, woman, don’t you *dare* try to undermine my authority. You can be replaced, you know.”

Amory let go of his jacket. “I’m sorry,” she whispered. “I’ll behave myself. I promise.”

“You better,” he snarled. Grabbing her arm, he twisted her roughly to the door and escorted her out to meet their two hundred assembled guests.

Captain Lick stood at the back doors of the Main Building watching the soldiers file in to pick up their meals from the banquet. General Thorne was seated with Miss Amory who was quiet and sullen for now, but the guests were already taking bets as to how long it’d be before the general’s latest conquered territory started making eyes for a new commander. Sergeant Major Hili had been coerced out of the command tower to come take a plate of food, which he ate politely and hastily, then slipped away because he despised anything formal.

But Major Kroop was unwittingly making a fool of himself by trying to hit on every woman in a gown he met, not realizing that each had been invited by another man for the evening. The officers simply sniggered at his pathetic efforts, and placed additional bets as to which woman he’d try to convince next to head to his room for a sample of mead from his private stash, and how quickly he’d move to the next glowering female.

While Thorne and his guests sat at the large table in the hall, the soldiers enjoyed their elaborate meal in the warm evening outdoors. Lick looked for two people: first, a tall, dark-haired young man with the label of Shin. So far no one matched the description. The other two Shins he saw that evening were twin brothers who were spindly, pasty little things that shrank when Lick’s eyes silently interrogated them. He gazed down the long line of soldiers waiting to take their brimming plates, his eyes pausing only at the ones who stood taller

than General Thorne. He had a feeling Sword Master Thorne Shin was not going to be there. He'd be wise not to be.

When he reached the end of the lines, not having seen who he was looking for, Lick continued on out to the northeast entrance. He was sure he wasn't going to see the second person he was looking for either, and that was also a good thing. He surveyed the tree line for any activity. Only faintly could he hear the deep belching sounds of a steaming cavern. Not another soul could be seen anywhere.

Lick looked toward the east and wondered briefly, but still saw nothing as the sun began to lower.

He was likely on his way out and north.

Chapter 32--“You’re bringing back hope.”

It was well after midnight when the last of the retrieval party reached the First Resting Station hidden in the large boulder field beyond the forest.

The very last man to come in was Relf Shin. He walked in slowly, almost dragging his feet. The caverns, accessible only by a maze of channels between the massive boulders, were filled to capacity with nearly eighty people quietly sitting and talking in the dim candle light, or already sleeping in the hanging nets. Some were retrieval scouts, a few were the remaining scouts working undercover in the world, and thirty-eight were the last refugee men, women, and children that Guide Zenos would be able to get out for the next few seasons.

The night before, the cavern had been much noisier, filled with dump children that the supplier scouts had been gathering for the past few weeks. They lured them kindly with sweets and blankets, then explained that they could take them far away where they’d never be without food or clothing. Some older children ran in the opposite direction, knowing that such promises from such men usually led to a horrible existence. But others, mostly those under ten years old, followed trustingly.

Last night, Relf had helped the forty women who had come down with clothing and shoes to dress the arriving children who wore little else than rags, and the large group of children had set off that morning, some already with their new mothers, to meet the rest of their new families eagerly waiting for them in Salem.

It was a mixed success. While the scouts knew that a couple hundred more dump children existed—and there had been over six hundred Salem families who applied to take in the orphans—they were, in the end, able to convince only forty-six to leave the world.

Uncle Shem and Aunt Calla, Woodson, and many rectors and their wives had debated for days about how, or if, they should force all the children to leave. But in the end, they couldn't think of how to force the older children without terrorizing them, or without them putting up a fuss and drawing attention to their plight, thus possibly destroying the entire mission to rescue the abandoned children. Sedation was too risky to use, nor was knocking them out and having them wake up in a strange place the best way to begin earning their trust.

Still, forty-six children were saved, and they had to be satisfied with that, before whatever disaster would take the others they failed to reach.

The youngest child, who caused Relf to blink back tears last night as he cleaned her face and fed her bread, was not even three years old. If there weren't already a dozen families hoping to claim her as their own, Relf would have done so, especially after she fell asleep in his arms.

As he watched the large group leave that early morning, the children nervous but excited and tentatively holding the hands of their cheerful adult escorts, he felt greater hope than ever that tomorrow morning he'd be escorting home his own lost brother.

But it wasn't going to happen.

Relf stumbled to a flat stone in the cavern and sat down to hold his head in his hands. A moment later he heard Woodson, who had crouched in front of him.

"We expected this, didn't we? We knew it was a long shot. Even Guide Zenos didn't think he'd come."

"How can I go back?" Relf breathed. "How can I face them knowing I failed?"

"Hey," Woodson shook his shoulder. "You did *not* fail! You found him. You spoke to him, which is better than any of us have been able to do in three seasons. He's failed himself. You took a tremendous risk coming here, and your parents and wife and children will be thrilled to see you return safely."

"They'd be happier if I didn't come home alone," he whispered.

"You'll return with the knowledge that he's still alive. That he has a place to eat and sleep and is under some kind of control. That's hardly a failure, Relf. You're bringing back hope."

"Thank you, Woodson," he sighed. "By morning I might almost believe you."

Woodson stood up and patted him on the back. "Let's get you

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something to eat. By then your second duty should be ready for you.”

Relf finally looked up. “Did everyone else make it in?”

“Everyone’s been retrieved, except the one.”

Relf sighed at that small consolation as Woodson walked away.

A woman about his mother’s age came over with a bowl of soup and a chunk of bread. He nodded gratefully as she pulled up a stool and sat down in front of him. Her peaked face was drawn and weary, as if she’d endured an arduous life, but her hazel eyes sparkled.

“You don’t look so well, young man. Can I get you something else?”

“No, ma’am, but thank you. I just had a disappointing night. Things didn’t go as I hoped or planned.”

The woman sighed. “I know all about plans going awry. But tonight, for the first time in years, I have hope! Are you one of them, one of the men who scout out people who need to leave?”

Relf realized she wasn’t a Salemite, but a new refugee. “Not normally, ma’am. I’m an accompanying scout who came on a special assignment that failed.” He took a drink of the broth to avoid explaining any more.

The woman patted him comfortingly on the knee. “Any efforts your people make cannot be failures. This wasn’t the first time someone contacted me about leaving, but this is the first time I was finally brave enough to do it. I’ve been reached twice before, and each time I was too terrified about committing to the change. I needed time to think and to accept. And now, not only am I leaving, but so are my daughters and a son-in-law. It’s miraculous! There still is a Creator! I thought He died long ago, but all that was dead was a part of me that refused to hear Him anymore. There still is a place for us. Whomever you’ve left behind, I am sure he just needs a little more time.”

Relf tried to smile at her encouragement, but what he knew weighed down his face. “I appreciate your words. But that’s the problem: we don’t have a lot of time left. Exactly why or what is coming, none of us know. We just know the guide said everyone needed to get out and to Salem by the end of this week. But ma’am, I’m glad you’ve made it out, you and your children. By the way, my name is Relf. Relf Shin.”

The woman’s mouth dropped open as she stared at him.

Woodson was there in an instant, hovering over Relf. “Did you tell her your name?” he asked sternly.

Relf was confused. “Well, yes. I didn’t think the secrecy was necessary anymore. We’re on our way out of the world, and—”

Woodson shook his head. “We don’t reveal our most sensitive secrets until *after* we’re out of the boulders! And now you’ve just told our most vulnerable refugee *who you are!*”

“I’m . . . I’m sorry . . .” Relf said, looking at the woman whose eyes were filling with tears. “I didn’t think there was any problem now.”

“Are you *his* grandson?” the woman asked timidly. “Named after your great-grandfather?”

Woodson threw his hands in the air. “Go ahead. You’ve obviously said enough already. You Shins never follow the rules . . .”

Relf gave him an apologetic smile and nodded at the woman. “Yes, ma’am, I am. Perrin Shin was my grandfather. Shem Zenos is my uncle. His wife and my mother are sisters. I was here to retrieve my brother—”

“Enough!” Woodson hissed. “She doesn’t need the full family line, Relf.”

Relf almost chuckled.

The woman shook her head in amazement. “You don’t look anything like them, though. I never would have imagined . . .”

“Yes, it’s a bit of a surprise, I know,” Relf said. “But it won’t be the last surprise you encounter. I’m sure Woodson and his men have warned you about what you’ll find.”

She nodded. “But perhaps they should have warned *you* as well.” She glanced at Woodson and bit her lip nervously.

He groaned and shrugged. “If any two people should be introduced here, I suppose it’s you two. Relf, this woman is traveling to Salem with her *three* daughters and son-in-law.”

Relf’s eyebrows rose. “You have *three* daughters? That’s amazing! I thought the only person who had three daughters in the world was—” He paled in realization.

“Yes. Relf Shin, meet Druses, otherwise known as Mrs. Lemuel Thorne.”

Before Relf could respond, another scout called from one of the back chambers, “Woodson? He’s coming around.”

Woodson pulled Relf up by the collar, barely letting him set down his bowl and bread. “There’ll be time to chat later. Relf, your second duty’s waking up.”

He followed Woodson reluctantly. “I still don’t feel good about

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this. The man’s mentally unstable.”

“That’s why this will work so well,” Woodson said as they followed a twist and another turn back to a narrow and quiet holding area.

“But this is deceptive—”

“Welcome to the world,” Woodson said tonelessly. “Unfortunately sometimes we need to employ the ways of the world to drag people out of it. This is his last chance. We’ve been trying to get him for years, you know that. After today? There’s no hope for the man. You, Relf Shin, have been blessed with that voice that gives your family chills for a reason, and I believe this is why.”

They paused in front of the last chamber, two lanterns lighting it dimly. On a cushion on the floor, a tall, slender man with blond hair highlighted by white streaks was slowly trying to sit up. Two burly scouts on either side of him were crouched, ready to provide help or to tackle him to the ground again.

The man blinked and he held his head where he’d been hit. “What a headache . . . Where am I?” He surveyed the area and gasped. “I know this! I know this! The boulder field to the north!”

Woodson took a step closer. “Yes, Jon. This is the boulder field, and we’ve brought you here—”

“No! Why? I have a duty to perform! Colonel Shin needs to be preserved—”

Woodson nodded once to Relf.

Knowing that was his cue, he half-heartedly he said, “Colonel Shin wants—”

“*Lower,*” Woodson whispered. “*Drop your voice lower.*”

“Colonel Shin wants you to come home,” Relf said in his deepest register, “Colonel Offra.”

Jon Offra tilted his head and stared at Relf. “Who are you?”

Relf hesitated. “Who do I sound like?”

“What’s going on here? This is a trick! No, I need to go back. I know who you men in green are!”

“Yes, you do,” Relf said, keeping his voice in that tone which made Shem’s arms break out into goosebumps. “Colonel Offra, I’m commanding you to stand down. It’s time for you to retire. You’ve done an excellent job spreading rumors and defending Salem. Now, the guide and General Shin request you to come home.”

“General Shin?” Offra’s eyes went glassy. “He really wants me home?”

Relf wasn't as skilled in lying as the others, so he said, "And more importantly, I'm insisting that you come to Salem. And my name is . . . Relf Shin."

Offra mouthed the name Relf Shin. "I know that voice," he whispered. "Command school. So long ago . . . it's *you*, but it's not you."

"I'm his great-grandson." Relf could get out the truth much easier. He hesitated before delivering the next line. "I've been given a field promotion to general by the guide of Salem, and I'm ordering you to return with us. Face it, Colonel: you're going to Salem, conscious or unconscious. It's your decision."

Offra was struggling to get to his feet, using the stone behind him and ignoring the offers of help from the scouts. Trembling, he raised his hand to his head in a salute. "Yes, sir. All right, then," he whispered.

Relf returned the salute, one that Shem had made him practice for an hour so that it'd be as snappy as the original High General Relf Shin's salute.

He assumed he got it right, because Colonel Jon Offra began to sob as he dropped his arm. "That was General Relf Shin!" he said to a scout next to him. "Did you see him? He looks nothing like himself!"

"I do see him. Yes, that's Relf Shin," said the scout. "There are lots of Shins now. Would you like to meet all of them?" He spoke to Offra as if he were a lost dog, and Offra licked it up.

"I do! I do! I do want to see all the Shins! Where are they?" He looked around eagerly, and even absurdly up into the stone as if they were hiding in the ceiling cracks.

"We'll go day after tomorrow, Jon, all right? After you're rested from that headache we gave you. Let's get you something to eat—"

Relf noticed something about Jon's foot, that it was twitching. "Watch him," Relf said, dropping his voice appropriately. "Offra's been in the world for a long time." He caught Jon's eye and stared him down hard, another trick he learned, this time from his father. "Offra's not quite one of us yet, are you, *son*?"

The man was old enough to be his father, but Offra heard only the High General, who could have been Jon's grandfather. "I'm trying to be, sir," Offra whispered, wilting under that terrifying Shin glare.

Relf had practiced it on a few of Deck's bulls. Not a single one of them could stand it. Even Peto had shaken his head and said, "I swear he's in your eyes, Relf. And now, I think he's laughing at me."

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Relf felt his great-grandfather in his eyes again, and strangely felt taller and broader, too. Only because it felt like the right thing to do, Relf raised his finger and pointed it at Jon. “Do not run. Do not try to escape. Do nothing unless you ask permission first. You *will* return to Salem, and you will *never* venture into the world again. Do you understand me, young man?”

Perhaps the *young man* was a bit over the top, but considering how the original Relf Shin would have been around one hundred now, it seemed appropriate.

So appropriate that Jon fired off another salute, and whispered, “All right, then. I understand, sir.”

Relf returned the salute, feeling so snappy about it that he could have cracked a rock in half had it been at the end of it, and spun expertly on his heel—which he’d never done before—and marched out of the chamber.

Jon Offra stared after him. “That was High General Shin. How’d they do that?”

The next morning before dawn, Relf Shin sat down at the same stone table as Druses Thorne to eat his breakfast. “I hope you don’t mind,” he said when he saw the alarm of the two younger daughters. Apparently Druses had told them earlier who he was. “But I thought it’d be a good idea for us to get acquainted. I’d like you to know there are no hard feelings between our families. Actually, we’re grateful for Lemuel chasing out our grandparents and parents so we could live in Salem.” While he may have appeared to be purely Trovato, he also knew something of the Shin charm, and so to put the anxious family at ease, he pulled out his version of a Perrin grin.

Druses produced a frail smile in return, her two daughters cowered, and her son-in-law didn’t even look up from his pancakes. The oldest Thorne daughter, however, fixed on a wary glare.

Apparently he didn’t possess enough of that charm to win them over that easily. This was going to be a hard sell, he realized, when people have been so hardened by the world.

He extended his hand to the young woman, maybe nineteen, with blond hair pulled up into a loose bun, and cold, blue eyes. “Relf Shin, at your service. I’m heading up this morning with your group, should you need any help.”

The young woman took his hand and squeezed it with surprising

strength. Relf held back his gasp as a knuckle cracked.

“So,” she said, not breaking her grip or her stare, “you’re not dragging poor Offra out of here yet? The man looks almost as shocked as the folks he’s terrified over the years.” She nodded to Offra who was sitting tensely in a corner with his breakfast, gazing shifty-eyed around the room, his guards on either side.

Relf chuckled stiffly and reclaimed his throbbing hand. “No, we’ve decided he needs a quiet moving. Tomorrow a handful of scouts—”

“You mean, muscled guards,” she interrupted.

“Well, yes,” he acknowledged, “will bring him up when we have fewer distractions.”

“You mean, fewer opportunities for him to run away.”

“Versula!” her mother hissed.

But Relf cocked his head. “You like to define things your own way, don’t you? Well, go right ahead. Salem gives you that freedom, and no one will try to force you to believe anything—I promise. We offer you freedom and safety. Mrs. . . .?”

Her husband, who was in his mid-twenties, supplied, “Kiah,” he said, holding out his hand to shake Relf’s. “I’m Anoki Kiah, this is Versa Kiah, and you’ll forgive us if we’re a bit cynical.” He sat back and eyed Relf critically.

He offered his warmest smile. “Absolutely, we all understand. My own father was quite suspicious of Salemites, too, when he first came to this very cavern. He was seventeen at the time,” Relf nodded to the younger daughters who were around the same age.

They only regarded him in fear.

But Kiah’s glare didn’t soften. “So, do you make it a habit to drag people out of the world against their will?”

Relf chuckled tightly and began to rethink his idea that sharing breakfast with the Thornes would be a good idea. “No, not really. Offra’s moving is a rare occurrence, I promise. Sometimes people don’t realize where they *should* be, and we need to give them a bit of help in that regard.”

“What a convenient rationalization,” Kiah drawled and folded his arms. “Why, you could justify kidnapping half of the world with such carefully selected words like that.”

Relf pursed his lips, realizing he was being challenged. But he had excellent evidence to the contrary. “My brother is still down there, Kiah. He should have returned three moons ago.” He held

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Kiah’s glare easily. After all, General Relf Shin was still in his eyes. “I asked him to come home with us, gave him all the reasons why it had to happen now, and he refused. I am honoring his decision, although it’s heart-breaking. In Salem we don’t force anyone to do or believe anything, even if those choices carry grave consequences.” He had more to say, but the words were catching in his throat as he realized his younger brother was now trapped in the world without even a rector to help him.

Kiah said nothing but shifted his gaze to again watch Offra, who was now closely analyzing a biscuit he’d been given.

Mrs. Thorne cleared her throat. “Please forgive our lack of . . . well, *trust*.” She sighed. “We’re wary about everyone. Too many times I’ve opened the door to find soldiers standing there demanding to know my name. The only reason Lemuel married me over twenty years ago was because I was General Snyder’s niece.”

She wrung her hands nervously, and seemed to believe she had to confess everything to a Shin. Despite Relf’s attempts to motion that she didn’t need to, she launched into her story.

“Our first few years were almost happy,” she smiled dimly, almost apologetically. “I really learned to love him, you know. I helped him figure out how to write left-handed and to dress himself so he could maintain his dignity. I even organized the first few Celebration weeks they’re having right now. His mother and Grandmother Cush came to help. Once, I confess, I even played the part of your grandmother in the silly pageant they have. Sorry about that.”

Relf started to say, “Not a problem—” but she was needed to get out all her words, as if eager for someone to listen.

“Then we had our first baby.” Her smile dimmed to nearly non-existent as she glanced at Versa, whose gaze remained rigid. “Lemuel seemed to forgive me that Versula was a girl. I think he even began to love her when she was a toddler. But when our second daughter came along, I had a feeling the end was coming as well. So desperate he was for a son that he disregarded all recommendations, and less than a season after Delia was born, I was expecting again.”

Relf could tell who Delia was, a girl about seventeen who nibbled nervously on the ragged tips of her long, blond braid. She looked down guiltily at her plate and picked at a crumb from her pancakes.

“Then our third daughter Priscill was born,” Druses sighed, and the girl, about sixteen years old on the other side of Delia, rolled her eyes as if it were the dullest story she’d ever heard. Priscill twisted

her golden braid mindlessly and looked around the cavern in search for something more interesting.

“I knew then we were in trouble,” Druses said bleakly. “All he wanted from me was a son to carry on his legacy, and that didn’t seem like it’d happen.

“People said he sent me away, but the truth is I ran away with my daughters before he could do anything to us. It was 348, and everything was so difficult then. I don’t think we would’ve survived had we stayed in Edge. ‘Guarders’ or something else would’ve destroyed us. You see, according to the laws those days, if we were dead, he could marry again and have more children.

“So we fled to the southeast, and General Graeson Fadh and his wife Shaleea took us in. For nearly four years they hid us. They had a house in the compound of the fort, and within those walls he had additional walls constructed. No one ever knew we were there. We were confined, but those were good years. *Safe* years.” Her faint smile returned at the memory, but only briefly. “Then Graeson was killed,” she said dully, and whispered the next words. “It took only a day for the soldiers to hunt down dear Shaleea. General Brillen Karna had been killed several moons before. Again, we had to escape.”

She sighed and closed her eyes, and Relf wished he dared to step over and hug her. He’d never seen a woman so in need of an embrace. He hoped maybe one of her daughters would do her duty, but the three of them just stared at him, as if waiting for him to do the wrong thing, just as Anoki Kiah was.

Relf remained on his rock.

“You just can’t imagine what our lives have been like these past years,” Druses finally continued. “Hiding our identities, pretending Priscill was a cousin, not a daughter, so no one would suspect they were Thorne’s. But look at their features. Look at their hair. As blond as yours. How could anyone who’s met Lemuel not realize these were his daughters? You can’t hide blond hair like that, even though for a few years we did. After we lost the Fadhs, I cut my girls’ hair short so that I had two *sons* and a *nephew* that I cared for.

“And it worked. Versa was just seven, Delia five, and Priscill four. You can’t tell with children that age what gender they’re supposed to be. But after a few years my girls began to develop into women. Then we had to move and hide ourselves again.

“It’s truly remarkable your people found us so often,” Druses said thoughtfully. “Now that I think about it, the only one who ever knew

“You’re bringing back hope.”

where we were was the Creator. He must have told his guide. And that guide, whose name and memory my husband has spent his life slandering, is the only man who has continually tried to come to our rescue.”

Relf was amazed, not only by Druses’ story and her insights, but that her oldest daughter Versa still glared at him as if disappointed he hadn’t yet burst into flames.

Still, he tried the old Shin charm one more time and smiled at the daughters. “Please be assured that what happened in the past with your father will not come with you to Salem. The valley is a place of second chances and new beginnings. When Shem Zenos and Peto Shin greet you, it’ll be with heartfelt hugs—”

He fleetingly wondered about that, how those hugs might go.

“—and gratitude for your safety. As I said before, our family is grateful that they left Edge. We have a wonderful life in Salem, and regret nothing.”

Delia and Priscill regarded him dubiously, but to his surprise Versula Thorne Kiah nearly smiled. “Thank you, Mr. Shin. I really want to believe you. Maybe in time we all can. We keep hearing about a different way of life, but I can’t imagine it. We’ve known nothing but hiding in fear that our father would find us.”

Her husband softened and put a comforting arm around her. “That’s why we’re leaving, Versa. We’re going to where he’ll never think to find you. I just really wished I knew exactly *where* we’re going,” and he gave Relf an expectant look.

Relf shook his head. “I can’t divulge that.”

Anoki Kiah tilted his head in a, *Come on*, manner.

“I don’t think he’s even been looking for us lately,” Mrs. Thorne said to her daughters. “I understand he has yet another new woman. Probably someone else who doesn’t know how to breed boys.”

“Actually . . .” Relf began, and glanced around for Woodson. When he saw he wasn’t near, he whispered to Mrs. Thorne, “His latest woman is from Salem. And, I suppose this is to her detriment, she left behind three *daughters*.”

Versa arched an eyebrow. “And are you trying to drag her back to Salem, too?”

Relf smirked. “You still don’t approve of what we’re doing for Offra, do you?”

“What you’re doing *to* him,” Versa emphasized. “You didn’t see him when they brought him in.”

“No,” Relf admitted. “I understand he was unconscious, though. I was trying to persuade my younger brother to come home at the time. He, uh . . . he ran away to here when Amory Riling did. And no, Mrs. Kiah,” he said pleasantly to Versa. “We’re not forcing Amory home, either. You see that woman over there?” he said in a low voice, and gestured to a woman in her mid-twenties who was talking excitedly to her two older brothers who were her escorts. “She was placed as a seamstress some weeks ago to sew for Amory, who didn’t realize she’s a Salemite.”

The woman was now waving enthusiastically, apparently trying to explain what the dress looked like to her brothers, who smiled politely and tried to look interested.

“She was hoping to find any evidence that Amory wanted to return,” Relf explained. “If she seemed upset or despondent in any way, our sewing scout would reveal who she was and help her leave last night as well. But, as it turns out, Amory’s quite—” He paused, realizing he was about to reveal to Thorne’s wife how his new mistress felt about him.

Druses regarded him resignedly. “I get it,” she said. “And she’s welcome to him. I haven’t had any use for the man in *years*.”

Relf chuckled, hoping that was appropriate, and Druses smiled wanly.

“The foolish woman,” she said disapprovingly. “She won’t last long, you know. Lemuel’s fifty-one now. I suppose she’s much younger?”

“About twenty years younger.”

Mrs. Thorne rolled her eyes. “Does he *really* think he’s going to get a son to carry on his name *now*? Someone he can train up before he’s dead? He had no idea what he had. What he *has*! These aren’t his only daughters, Relf. He’s abandoned a string of women and baby girls in some bizarre quest. Females mean nothing to him except as breeding stock.”

Her two younger daughters looked down at the rock table, but Versa stared off in a distance, her lips pressed tightly together.

“I am so sorry,” Relf said quietly. “You won’t find any ideas like that in Salem. Women are as valued as men.”

Mrs. Thorne smiled in gratitude. “Relf, may I ask you a question?”

“Of course. Anything.”

“How many sons does your aunt Jaytsy have?”

“You’re bringing back hope.”

Relf winced before answering. “Her oldest was a girl, then she had five boys after that. She has seven all together.”

Scoffing quietly, Druses said, “That’s what Lemuel wanted. Well, doesn’t matter now, does it. So Relf, can I ask you another question?”

Relf smiled uncertainly. “I hope I can answer this one more to your liking.”

“I’m sure you can. The scouts told me the pox is going through Salem. They seemed relieved to hear I had it as a teen.”

Relf sighed. This wasn’t going to be a happier answer. “It’s been deadly, very quickly. Already we’re suffering great losses in the northern areas, and it’s also showing up in the world. Why no one down there is saying anything about it yet, we’re not sure. If you know it’s happening, you can try to avoid it. Our men who work as fort suppliers further south reported seeing at least a dozen cases last week.”

“Well, why publicize it, right?” said Druses sarcastically. “It doesn’t fill Lemuel’s or Sargon’s agendas, so ignore it until it becomes a deadly issue. Way of the world, Relf.”

“Seems to be,” Relf acknowledged. “The good news is that some families seem to be immune, or if someone was exposed to it nearly thirty years ago, it seems to not affect them this time.”

“Wait,” Delia spoke for the first time. “The pox is *deadly*?” Her face paled.

Relf nodded grimly. “It seems to be stronger than years ago. You and your family will be kept in isolation from those who are ill, since both of your parents were sick with it before. You were supposed to be moved to a new home in the north, but that’s where the pox is the worst right now. Of those who fall sick, about half die.” His voice was just above a whisper now. “From the losses we’ve seen already, our doctors expect we may lose up to one fifth of our population. That’s about thirty thousand people.”

“Slagging Creet!” Kiah exclaimed. “So we’re walking into a death trap! What a great change of life. *Thank you*. We’ll be dead by Harvest!”

Relf shook his head patiently. “Your parents, did they suffer from the pox when it was in the world last time?”

“How would I know?” he hissed. “They’re both dead!”

“Their faces,” Relf said calmly. “Did they have any scarring, any shallow gouges in their flesh?”

Mrs. Thorne touched a few faint marks on her face which Relf

had already noticed.

Anoki thought for a moment. “No, none at all.”

“Then they were likely immune, and so are you. My family seems to be as well. When the pox came around the first time, my grandmother became ill. Her mother died from it. But my father, aunt, and grandfather never became ill. Neither did Shem Zenos. His son is a doctor who’s treated many victims, but he hasn’t had so much as an itch.

“Our society is able to handle this,” he assured them as they fidgeted in worry. “We’re organized and we’re caring for the ill. No one’s crops or livestock are being neglected. We will survive this and no one will be without comfort. But as for the world?” Relf tipped head. “Complete chaos is coming, especially since they’re ignoring it. Mr. Kiah, can you see that? What will happen to the world if up to one fifth of it—hundreds of thousands of people—die from the pox in the next few weeks?”

Kiah sighed. “I suppose living in the forest would be better.”

“I’m relieved you see it that way,” Relf said. “You may be walking into a sick valley, but you’re leaving a future chaos.”

Kiah leaned forward. “Look, Shin, just tell me—where is this ‘valley’?”

Relf leaned forward as well. “I can’t tell you.”

“Why not?” he asked bitterly. “We’ve traveled for days from Midplain, made it through the forest, into these rocks, and I think I’ve been patient enough to get some answers!”

Versa took his arm. “Anoki, it’s all right. We can trust them.”

Kiah looked over at her. “None of this is quite what I expected.”

Versa sighed. “I know. It’s not exactly what I expected either. But this was your idea, Anoki, remember? And I was hesitant. You had to convince me to go,” her voice fell to a whisper. “But after meeting a Shin—”

She glanced at Relf who produced his most trustworthy smile.

“—it’s all right. I feel even more confident this *is* the right thing, and we *are* doing this!” Versa said with renewed determination.

Anoki sighed at the table. “Look, Shin,” he whispered, “just draw me a rough map in the dirt at our feet, then I’ll scuff it out. I just need to feel better about all—”

“Don’t do it, Mr. Shin, if you’re not supposed to,” Versa said coolly.

Kiah glared at his wife. “Whose side are you on, anyway?”

“You’re bringing back hope.”

Versa’s eyebrows rose. “We’re all on the same side, Anoki! What’s wrong with you?”

Kiah’s jaw shifted. “I promised you that I would protect you,” he said. “This does not feel like *protecting*. It’s irresponsible for me to turn your safety over to complete strangers.”

Relf ventured a small smile. “Please, call me Relf. And when you think about it, I’m not really a *complete* stranger. The Writings say we are all family, and the Shin and Thorne and Cush families have known each other for generations so, in a way, we’re as good as cousins. We even have the same coloring!” He tried to rub the last of the charcoal out of his blond hair.

Mrs. Thorne gave him a weary smile and Versa nodded. But her sisters stared at the table, and her husband glared at Relf.

They left half an hour later, Relf Shin riding with Mrs. Thorne for a time, but keeping an eye subtly on Anoki Kiah, who seemed too agitated.

But many people reacted that way to the narrow canyons, Woodson told him at the glacial fort when Relf privately told him of his concerns. “However, we’ll watch out for him. And when you see your father, be sure to let him know of your worries. He’ll be their transitioning rector while they’re at the Second Resting Station.”

Relf was quiet during the ride down the twisting canyons heading to Salem, because all he could think of now was his father. And his mother. And his grandmother.

They didn’t know yet.

They didn’t know that he’d been unsuccessful, and they’d likely be waiting at the canyon entrance with Uncle Shem and many others ready to greet the refugees.

But there’d be no Young Pere to greet.

While he hadn’t seen his wife and children in weeks, and would spend a few hours with them before he went back to help bring home Jon Offra, Relf couldn’t focus on that happy reunion.

All too soon the long train of horses and riders approached the narrow canyon opening, and all too quickly the shouts of excitement and surprise echoed in the canyon as the newest Salemites realized just how close to their new home they’d always been.

Relf had positioned himself at the end of the riders, dreading to see who was waiting with far too much hope.

There were whoops of joy, and Guide Zenos, full of smiles, hugged Mrs. Thorne and her daughters. But Shem also scanned the

crowd looking for a tall rider, until his eyes met with Relf's.

That was all he needed. In a flash, he sent the message, *It's all right, Relf. Welcome home*, before he dug up cheer from some deep well to share with the next newcomers who were thrilled to meet a real guide of the Creator.

Relf didn't know where his father was, until he noticed Peto watching him from the entrance, worry in his eyes. All Relf could do was shrug, then look away to hide his tears. He knew the Thornes were next in line to meet Peto, and he'd intended to be there with them, but he couldn't bring himself to make the introductions.

"Please, don't let Mama be here," he whispered quietly to himself, unable to look up to recognize any more faces.

It was the far-off call of, "Papa!" that caught his attention. Just beyond the entrance was a wagon, and even at the distance he recognized little Grunick as he jumped up and down and waved happily.

Relf wiped his face, nudged Clarkess 36 to skirt the refugee crowd, and rode over to the wagon.

Grunick leaped dangerously from the wagon bed, but Relf caught him easily and held his son tight. With watery eyes, he smiled at his wife Mattilin, cradling their sleeping newborn daughter and dropping her own tears.

She reached out to grip his free hand, and behind her . . .

Oh, *behind her* . . .

"I'm so glad you're home, Relf!" Lilla said bravely as tears of miserable joy wet her face. "We've missed you so much, son. Never leave me again, all right? *Never.*"

"But I did see him, Mama," Relf choked out. "And I talked to him for a few minutes."

Lilla nodded as if she already knew. "Tell Muggah when we get home. She didn't feel up to coming to the canyon." Mama didn't need to add, *Because she doubted you'd succeed.*

Relf felt someone else grip his arm, and he looked down from his horse to see his father, his chin trembling. "Missed you, son. That was a long five weeks."

"Yes, it was," he chuckled sadly, his son still wrapped firmly around his neck. "Jon Offra's going to need a lot of help, but my voice confused him sufficiently that he's willingly coming up tomorrow."

"Well done, son," Peto said, tactfully not saying anything about Relf's other task.

But Relf would. "He's in a uniform, Papa. He's a corporal, and

“You’re bringing back hope.”

he’s in Edge. And he thinks Shem’s a manipulative idiot, and I’m a clueless lamb to follow him.”

Relf had never seen his father try so hard to balance both joy and pain. The expression on his face vacillated between the two every second. “Again, well done, son,” he said, while Lilla howled with relief or grief, Relf wasn’t sure. Probably both.

“It’s all right, Lilla,” Peto tried to assure her. “He’s got a place to live, clothes to wear, food to eat—”

“Army food!” she cried in agony. “He’s living off of army food! Oh, my poor boy—”

Relf and Peto exchanged the same look: *We need to get her home, and NOW*, while Mattilin tried uselessly to comfort her mother-in-law who sobbed that army food would make her Young Pere waste away.

Shem smiled dismally at the Shins. At least Relf was home, and so was everyone else. Except for the one.

The large group was making their way down to the Second Resting Station, but Shem held back on the pretext of making sure no one was left behind.

He looked back, one more time, up the canyon, just in case—
Go home, Shem. He’s not coming.

Shem nodded once, offered up a prayer of protection from whatever was about to hit the world, and turned Silver to head into Salem. It was the 53rd Day of Weeding. Tomorrow, on the 54th Day, Offra and the last of the scouts would leave the world.

And the world would be on its own.

In the end, meeting up with the main body of soldiers was far easier than Corporal Shin anticipated. It seemed the sergeants were more worried about nervous soldiers sneaking *out* of the ranks than they were about eager soldiers sneaking *in*.

All Shin had to do was grab his pack and march out the barracks before dawn with the rest of the soldiers starting on a quick march south.

It was an offensive—just as he predicted—and it was headed to Idumea. Except, not everyone realized that. The soldiers were surprised that during Celebration Week Thorne “suddenly” decided to take nearly every last soldier who’d been serving for at least a year on a march south.

But Corporal Shin was grinning with the knowledge that he’d figured it out. In about an hour, Sergeant Onus and Shin’s Twenty would be looking around for him in dismay, not realizing that he was on his way to reclaim the grandest city in the world.

By midday meal he was at Province 4 where they picked up another one thousand soldiers, and by dinner time the troops, joined by soldiers from several other provinces, were nearly to Province 6. Rumors were flying as to what all of this meant, and finally at dinner Thorne announced to the collected army that they’d retake Idumea by next week, to shouts of joy. Dinner was a hurried affair, with soldiers invigorated with the idea of the offensive.

They had a few more miles to go before they reached their camp for the night, and the excited state of the soldiers meant it was a quick march. So quick, a commanding colonel from Province 10 called out to those in his group that, at their rate, they could make it to Province 2 by the day after tomorrow.

IT USED TO BE CALLED POOLS.

The voice was back, on the right side of his head.

THAT’S WHERE I WAS BORN, YOU KNOW. POOLS IS A MUCH MORE DESCRIPTIVE NAME BECAUSE . . . IT ACTUALLY HAS POOLS.

Shin tried to ignore the words. They hadn’t been there for quite some time, and whenever they did come he could easily push them away. But when he was tired or bored, he discovered he couldn’t disregard them as well. So he tried instead to argue them away.

It’s not Pools anymore. Nothing is as it was.

MANY THINGS STILL ARE. AND CHANGING ITS NAME DOESN’T CHANGE WHAT IT IS, SWORD MASTER. There was a sensation of cosmic smirking.

Shin shook it off.

WHY DIDN’T YOU GO HOME WITH RELF? DIDN’T YOU HEAR ME TELLING YOU TO LEAVE?

You’re not there. You’re gone. I helped lower you into the ground and threw the dirt on top of you.

THAT WAS ONLY MY SHELL. I’M STILL WITH YOU. BUT YOU’VE BECOME MORE ADEPT AT IGNORING ME.

Because I know you’re not really there. So leave now. I still have

“You’re bringing back hope.”

a few more miles before I get to sleep tonight.

THAT’S WHY I THOUGHT YOU MIGHT LIKE A LITTLE COMPANY. IT’S BEEN A LONG DAY ALREADY.

What do you want?

TO LET YOU KNOW THAT I WORRY FOR YOU AND THAT I WON’T LEAVE YOUR SIDE. I NEVER HAVE. WHAT’S COMING NEXT IS UNLIKE ANYTHING YOU’VE EVER EXPERIENCED.

I can handle it. Have you seen me with a sword?

HAVEN’T YOU FELT ME WHEN YOU HOLD IT?

Yes, I inherited your talent. Someone should put it to good use.

YOU INHERITED ME, YOUNG PERE.

And you enjoy it, don’t you? Be honest, old man—you miss the army. You miss the conflict. That’s why you’re here.

I THOUGHT YOU SAID I WASN’T HERE.

You’re not. It’s just a long way to walk still. You’re better than nothing.

I SUPPOSED I SHOULD THANK YOU FOR THAT COMPLIMENT.

Don’t mention it. So, are you planning to help me?

ARE YOU PLANNING TO GO HOME?

Maybe someday.

THEN MAYBE I AM.

I need to make a good impression.

WHY?

So I can become something more than a mere corporal. I want to become the youngest sergeant major ever.

WHY?

Why not?

BECAUSE THERE ARE FAR BETTER THINGS FOR YOU TO BECOME.

Like what?

A HUSBAND. A FATHER—

Oh please . . .

YOU WANT ADVENTURE? TRY LIVING WITH A WOMAN. TRY CONTROLLING A TODDLER. TRY REASONING WITH A TEENAGER—

Ha, ha, ha.

I’M SERIOUS.

Look, if you’re going to be this tedious, I’ll find someone else to talk to.

WHO ELSE IS THERE? THERE’S NOT TO BE ANY TALKING IN THE RANKS.

Anyone I want! Anyone I want to be in my head!

THEN I’LL JUST SIT BACK HERE AND WATCH, IF THAT’S ALL RIGHT WITH

Flight of the Wounded Falcon

YOU. GO AHEAD. BRING UP SOMEONE ELSE MORE ENTERTAINING.

I will!

I DON'T SEE ANYONE YET.

Be quiet! I'm sifting through the possibilities.

JUST DON'T CHOOSE LANNARD. WHAT A DOLT OF A BOY. AND AS A MAN? PATHETIC. YOUR GRANDMOTHER USED TO BE HIS TEACHER. I USED TO BE ACQUAINTED WITH HIS OLDER BROTHER. TOOK HIM IN FOR INCARCERATION MORE TIMES THAN I CARE TO REMEMBER. HE'S STILL UP TO NO GOOD, LIVING WITH HIS MOTHER, DRINKING MEAD ALL DAY LONG. AT LEAST LANNARD COMPLETED COMMAND SCHOOL, WITH AN INCREDIBLE AMOUNT OF HELP. I THINK THE ONLY THING HE DID ON HIS OWN WAS WRITE HIS NAME ON HIS PAPERS. AT LEAST HE CAN DO IMPERSONATIONS. THAT ONE OF ME? NOT TOO BAD, REALLY. I ALMOST LAUGHED. BUT THAT WOULD HAVE THROWN YOU. YOU ALREADY LOOKED LIKE YOU'D SEEN A GHOST. DIDN'T NEED TO HEAR ONE LAUGHING—

Would you please be quiet?

JUST PASSING TIME. PERSONALLY, I CAN'T THINK OF ANYONE MORE ENTERTAINING THAN ME.

Shin grumbled.

IT'S NOT TOO LATE, YOU KNOW. AT NIGHTFALL, YOU CAN SLIP AWAY INTO THE TRAIL ALONG THE CANAL AND HEAD BACK NORTH. I CAN SHOW YOU THE WAY. IT WILL BE BETTER FOR YOU IF YOU GO. TRUST ME. YOU REALLY HAVE NO IDEA WHAT'S COMING.

Exactly *how* are you entertaining?

YOU HAVEN'T BEEN READING THE MARKERS FOR THE DISTANCES LATELY.

Well, thanks for nothing. Now I just did. If you hadn't brought it up—

ARE YOU HAPPY, YOUNG PERE?

What?

ARE YOU HAPPY? TRULY, DEEPLY, SATISFIED WITH YOUR LIFE?

Is anyone?

OH YES. I WAS. FOR MANY YEARS. I WASN'T ALWAYS, THOUGH. WHEN I WAS YOUR AGE I MADE MISTAKES AS WELL, AND I REFUSED TO DEAL WITH THEM.

I haven't made any mistakes.

WE ALL MAKE MISTAKES. THAT'S THE ENTIRE REASON FOR THE TEST—TO COME TO THIS WORLD, DISCOVER OUR FLAWS, AND FIX THEM. WE NEED TO DISCOVER WHAT OUR HEARTS REALLY WANT, AND CHANGE THEM TO BECOME WHAT THEY'RE SUPPOSED TO BE.

“You’re bringing back hope.”

Tedious, tedious . . . *If I had any flaws, they’d only make me more interesting.*

SO YOU’RE PERFECT AS YOU ARE?

Of course.

AH. I SEE. WELL. WHAT CAN I SAY TO A PERFECT MAN?

How about, Let me get out of your way?

I THOUGHT YOU WANTED MY HELP.

I do, when I ask for it.

YOU THINK I’M UNDER YOUR CONTROL?

You are, completely. I imagine you, I control you.

I SEE. HMM. SO WHY DON’T YOU BRING IN SOMEONE ELSE FOR A WHILE? YOU KNOW WHO SEEMS TO BE AN INTERESTING MAN? CAPTAIN LICK.

Lick? Why?

HE HAS AN UNUSUAL BACKGROUND. JUST HOW OLD DO YOU THINK HE IS?

Why? Maybe mid-twenties to thirty. He’s a captain. Must have gone through the university at Province 6 . . .

YES, THAT’S WHAT ONE WOULD THINK.

What do you mean?

I DON’T KNOW. I’M NOT REALLY HERE, AM I? I DON’T KNOW ANYTHING THAT YOU DON’T . . .

Come on! What do you know?

ALL THAT I CAN TELL YOU IS THAT THORNE SHOULDN’T TRUST HIM FARTHER THAN HE CAN THROW HIM WITH THAT LAME RIGHT ARM OF HIS—

Well, that was rude.

—BUT THORNE KNOWS THAT AS WELL. I WOULD STAY FAR, FAR AWAY FROM LICK. ESPECIALLY WHEN HE’S NEAR THE GENERAL.

Why? Why do you care? You almost sound like you’re worried for Thorne.

WHATEVER AFFECTS YOU, YOUNG PERE, WORRIES ME. AND I’VE NOTICED YOU STILL HAVEN’T KICKED ME OUT . . .

Chapter 33--“Is this real?”

Mahrree had been watching for his arrival. She stood at the window, and when the horses came trotting down the lane she held her breath.

They were doing things differently with Jon Offra. Already they'd been delayed, because once Jon saw the glacial fort, where twenty-five years ago he'd spent many days with Perrin and Shem learning about Salem, he sat down on a log and could only stare at it for an hour. He murmured quietly, used to sharing his thoughts only with himself, while Relf, Woodson, and four accompanying scouts patiently waited. Jon Offra had a lot of rethinking to do. Eventually he stood up, faced the mountain where Lieutenant Radan had run away to, where Perrin had stabbed him to death after Radan had been trampled by a stampede, and where they had buried his body. Jon silently stared at the summit, his eyes clouded, until finally he said, “And now I go the opposite direction home. To another home. One that I don't know, but have always known.”

Taking those conflicting words as their cue, the scouts continued with Jon on their way. Messengers sent ahead to Salem warned that Jon was frequently stopping as if taking stock of all he saw around him, and that no one felt the need to prod him faster.

No parades were to greet him as they did for the group of orphans two days ago, and the refugees yesterday, because no one was quite sure how Jon would react to cheering and calling crowds.

Instead, Jon and his traveling companions eventually came to the mouth of the canyon where Shem, alone, was going to greet him. Where Shem was also going to break to him the news that General Shin had passed away last year.

Mahrree stepped out on to the front porch, trying to read the expression on Shem's face as he reined his horse to a stop. His eyes met Mahrree's, and communicated, *I still don't know about his stability.*

He likely doesn't know, either.

Mahrree nodded once, knowing the four guards would remain in the area. When she had greeted Relf yesterday, it was with a firm, grateful hug and the admonition to spend the rest of today with his wife and children once he had delivered Offra. There were plenty of people volunteering to help with Offra, Honri included.

She'd hesitated to call Honri for help, however, because as of late things had become uneasy between them. Mainly because she only recently discovered that all of Honri's taking her out and coming over had been leading up to something, and she had no option but to put a stop to that.

She fixed on a smile as she came down the stairs.

Colonel Jon Offra had dismounted and was slowly pivoting, taking in the houses, the ranch, the garden, the mountains, then—

Mahrree held out her arms. “Oh, Jon! I'm so happy to see you again!”

He only stared at her, as if looking for something.

Not sure what to do with his gaze, and not sure what to do with her arms still outstretched, she took a few cautious steps toward him.

He didn't move, nor did he step back.

Cautiously, she took his arms and squeezed them. “We've worried so much about you over the years. I'm so glad you finally agreed to retire and come home.”

Jon still didn't move, didn't respond, but stared deeply at her. He appeared so weary, so much older than just fifty-two. The lines in his face were deep and shadowed, but something lurking in his eyes looked almost as young as Mahrree remembered him.

She met his probing gaze, hoping he'd see what he was looking for.

At last he said, “Yes . . . yes, it really is you, Mrs. Shin.” His shoulders slumped in relief. “I had to be sure, you know.” Hesitantly, his hand lifted to touch her hair, as if her head were covered in porcupine quills.

Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed Shem nodding, so Mahrree wrapped her arms around Jon and hugged him.

He startled her by hugging back, fiercely, powerfully. He lifted her off her feet, never saying a word, but squeezing her as if both their lives depended on it.

The scouts stepped closer, but Mahrree waved them back with a finger. She could hold her breath for a while.

“I’m so sorry,” Jon whispered, still holding her securely in the air. “I’m so sorry that he died.”

“It’s all right, Jon,” Mahrree whispered back. “He was so happy for so many years, thanks to you. You let him be happy.”

“I tried. I tried so hard.”

“I know you did. You did a fantastic job. Can I show you what you did for us? Do you want to come in and see the paintings? Jon, if you could just set me down . . .”

He did, and regarded her so earnestly that Mahrree could feel the years surrounding him, suffocating him.

Mahrree peered around Jon. “Shem, I’m sure you have work to do?”

He sent her a calculated look, and she smiled reassuringly. “Jon and I have lots to talk about. We’re *fine*.” She knew the guards weren’t going anywhere, except to watch her doors for a bolting and confused Colonel Offra.

Mahrree took Jon by the arm. “Come in to our home and see the life you let us live.”

“All right, ma’am,” he said calmly, obediently, as if taking orders from a general.

The house had been prepared. No one was at home so that Jon wouldn’t be startled. Even the yard was quiet, except for activity over behind the Briters, where everyone was hiding out.

In the gathering room, Jon stopped, astonished. The paintings, dozens of them, chronologically detailing the Shins’ life over the past twenty-six years, waited for him.

“Right here, Jon,” Mahrree said softly, leading him by the arm. “This one was painted right after we arrived. Look at Perrin’s hair, still short, and still mostly black. And mine was still mostly brown. You saw Perrin the next year, when you came up with Radan.

“Then this one, here, painted a few years later, with some of our grandchildren. These ones are all grown up now, with children of their own. Perrin and I got to become great-grandparents, Jon. Because of you.”

He nodded meekly, his finger gently running along the wood of the frame. “His hair’s longer,” he whispered. “And that’s a cute little boy.”

“You met him already. That was Relf, as a toddler.”

Jon frowned, unsure.

Mahrree led him down the wall. “Our son Peto, his wife Lilla, and

some of their children. Jaytsy and Deck, their first children. Now look at this one, of Perrin and me. A few years later . . .”

He looked deeply, closely, at each painting, into each person’s eyes, searching, evaluating. When he finished, Mahrree led him to the next, until after half an hour she said, “And now I’d like to show you the last one, in our part of the house. It’s the biggest painting, but the smallest of the two of us. It’s at one of our favorite places, an ancient temple ruin just over the mountain here.”

Jon stopped before he even got near the large painting of Perrin and Mahrree leaning happily, casually, against a pillar at the ancient site.

“For our 44th wedding anniversary,” she told him. “Perrin passed away just a few weeks later. That’s how he looked, at his end.”

Tears were sliding down Jon’s cheeks, and he approached the painting in a manner of reverence. He surprised Mahrree next by kneeling in front of it, so that he could look up into Perrin’s soft smile, inches away. “I’m so happy for you, sir. It worked. It really worked. Look at the life you lived.” Delicately touching the painting, Jon’s fingers trembled.

Mahrree had an idea. She wasn’t planning to do this, but she realized he needed it. “Jon, would you like to visit his grave? It’s not far from here.”

Nodding slowly, Jon sniffed and wiped his nose on his sleeve. “Yes, please.”

Again she led him by the arm, as if he were a very tall two-year-old, and brought him outside to the boulder which stood between their two houses.

His guards followed at a respectful, but watchful, distance.

“We buried him here, close to everyone. The rocks around it are ones we all signed. Our family, always together.”

Jon was fingering the carving of Perrin’s name, slowly rubbing them as if he could rub them off the boulder.

Sensing his heaviness, Mahrree said, “Would you like a few minutes alone here?”

He nodded.

“I’ll be in the house when you’re finished. We can talk then, and maybe get you something to eat?”

He kept nodding.

Mahrree glanced over to the guards. They’d keep watch.

She squeezed Jon’s arm again, but he didn’t notice. He just stared

at the words on the stone as Mahrree quietly went back to the house to watch him from the windows.

He didn't leave, not for a long time. Peto came home from updating the Thornes at the Second Resting Station about their new house in Norden and for how long they wanted to quarantine them at the Second Resting Station, and still Jon was there, now sitting on the grave, and now talking quietly to the boulder.

Peto came in the house, concerned.

"From the way he was gesturing," she told him, "I think he's giving the general a report on the last twenty-five years."

"We should get him something to eat," Peto suggested.

"I tried already. Maybe he'll take it from you?"

Peto went into the kitchen and found the plate of sandwiches Mahrree had made Jon earlier.

He brought them out to Jon, still sitting, still talking softly to the boulder. ". . . and then there was this one time, when a soldier swore he'd heard something in the bushes, and I knew that would be a good time to build on that—Oh, what do you need?"

Peto smiled. "Colonel Offra, I'm Peto Shin. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt. I thought maybe you could eat something?"

Jon stared blankly, then decided to take the plate.

"Everything all right here?" Peto said, sitting next to Jon on the rocky ground of Perrin's grave.

"Just giving him an update," Jon said, taking a bite of his sandwich. "Lots to tell him about. I should have written it down, but I couldn't have evidence, you know."

"Yes, I know," Peto said, watching him for signs of stability, or not. "What do you think of Salem, now that you're here?"

Chewing, Jon glanced around him. "Still trying to establish what, *exactly*, is real and what isn't."

"Everything here is real, Jon. Everything."

Jon bobbed his head noncommittally. "We'll see."

Peto pondered on that for a moment. "Do you . . . do you understand that Perrin isn't here? I mean, his body is beneath us, but he's not actually *here*."

Jon eyed him carefully. "Yes. I'm not insane, you know."

Peto wasn't sure that he did.

"I know he's not here. Hogal told me."

Peto pursed his mouth, looking for the right response to that. He glanced behind the boulder to see who was working in the fields.

Some time ago, the children had leaked out of Jaytsy’s house, because there were chores to do, and Jon Offra didn’t notice any of them anyway.

Down some ways was his son Hogal, but the thirteen-year-old wasn’t one to speak to strange middle-aged men sitting on his grandfather’s grave talking to a boulder.

“Um . . . Jon? *Hogal?*”

He took another bite of his sandwich. “Yes. He told me about Perrin, that he’s down south following after your son who’s lost.” He said it so casually that Peto was startled.

“Where . . . is Hogal?”

Jon looked up, then around. “Hmm. You must have scared him off,” he said, with some accusation in his tone. “Said he was your great-great uncle, married to Joriana’s aunt,” he relayed easily. “He’s Perrin’s companion now, because Perrin vowed he’d stay next to the Lost One. Hogal keeps him informed, and will let him know of my report once Perrin has a few quiet minutes.”

Peto was dumbfounded, and couldn’t move as Jon finished his sandwich. When he finally found some words, they came out halting and soggy. “So . . . we suspected—*hoped*—that my father was . . . but you *know* this?”

“Don’t you?” Jon said, taking another sandwich.

Peto smiled almost embarrassedly. “I don’t seem to see things as clearly as you do today, Colonel.”

“Don’t call me that,” he whispered. “I retired. Or vanished. Or whatever. Call me Jon. Perrin did. He knows, you know. Everything.”

“Do you know . . . anything about my son?” Peto felt odd asking him, but, “Did Hogal tell you?”

Jon frowned. “Well, of course he did. Your son’s heading to Idumea with Thorne’s offensive.” He started on the second sandwich while Peto covered his face with his hands.

“Oh, no, no, no. This is terrible, this is horrible—”

“Why?” Jon garbled, his mouth full of food.

“He’s heading into battle? Young Pere doesn’t know anything! He could get hurt, or killed, and we’d never—”

“No, he won’t,” Jon said simply.

“You don’t understand my son—”

“You don’t understand your father.” Jon took another bite. “He’s watching him, guarding him, trying to talk reason to him. He’ll be fine.”

Peto held his breath. “You really think so?”

“Of course. General Shin talked to me all the time in the world, too. It’s how I stayed sane, even though your Gleace said it’d be hard. I heard him all the time. I heard all kinds of people all the time.”

Something in Jon’s eyes began to cloud over, as if a thick fog was settling in.

“It was . . . um . . .” His hand was poised halfway to his mouth, and everything went still.

Peto waited while Jon remained motionless.

“That boulder is real, isn’t it?” Jon finally whispered.

“It is.”

“He died, didn’t he?”

“Yes, he did.”

“Just last year?”

“Yes. We still feel the sting.”

Jon’s grip on his sandwich loosened, and it fell in pieces to his lap. “Dear Creator,” he whispered, his chin trembling and the fog in his eyes dissolving into water. “He’s really gone!”

Peto wrapped his arms around Jon Offra as he broke down into sobs, and glanced behind him to see his mother watching. Mahrree hurried off the porch and ran to the first guard she came to.

“Get Dr. Toon. Tell him we have Jon Offra, and he may need some help.”

Jon sat by the grave for hours, with various people talking to him, comforting him, analyzing him.

Shem finally got him up as the sun set, and walked him to his house where he’d stay for the night. Once Jon was asleep, Shem came over to Mahrree, along with Dr. Toon and Honri.

“Well?” she asked them for their evaluations.

“He told you about Hogal?” Shem said, his voice breaking. “And Perrin?”

“Peto told me,” Mahrree said. “I think Jon was in his right mind at that point. At least, I hope so.”

“But I’m a little worried,” Honri began almost apologetically, “that he thinks he’s been hearing Perrin for all these years. I’d heard stories about Offra when I was in the world. He frequently talked to himself, out loud, as if carrying on a conversation with someone. It wouldn’t have been Perrin until recently. So,” he winced in worry, “who was he listening to before?”

Dr. Toon shrugged sadly. “Maybe his hope of Perrin? I think he’s

“Is this real?”

fluctuating right now. He lives in three worlds: the one he knew, the one he made up to tell the rest of the world, and the real one of today. He can't quite make all of them fit together. He might not ever be able to,” he added quietly.

“The poor man,” Mahrree sighed. “Maybe if we'd gotten to him sooner—”

“I don't know that it would have mattered, Mrs. Shin,” Toon told her. “He's also seen a lot of trauma, death, violence . . . He's been broken by the world. That's the only way I can describe him.”

“So how do we fix him?” she asked earnestly.

Toon, Honri, and Shem exchanged uncertain glances.

“Mahrree,” Honri started, “I'm not sure that we can. Sometimes all you can do with a broken object is to try not to lose additional pieces.”

“There's a widower,” Toon said, “who lives south of here, and was in the army many years ago. He has a very calming nature about him. I already told him about Jon Offra, and he's eager to help. I think moving Jon to live with him, to have someone watching him day and night and talking with him, is the best we can do now.”

Mahrree sat down dejectedly on her sofa. “I feel like *we* broke him, not the world. We sent him out there to be shattered. I feel so guilty—”

“It was all Jon's idea in the first place,” Shem reminded her. “To be in the world. And then he didn't even want to come back. We had to knock him out and trick him with Relf! But we can make his final years better, and we will.”

She slumped. “If you think so. I guess all we can hope for right now are no more sudden surprises. The poor man's endured enough for a few days.”

On the 56th Day, Corporal Shin endured yet another dull day of marching and anticipation, filled with comments from a know-it-all general, but soon—*soon*—everything was going to change.

He could *feel* it!

Mahrree noticed the date, the 56th Day of Weeding. Last year, it was two days before the Marking Party. Eltana had just arrived,

they'd had a pleasant midday meal—the memory of which Mahrree now sneered at—and normally at this time of year she'd be chin deep in helping to get gear and food ready for the boys, and projects and food ready for the girls.

This year, none of that was happening, making her feel odd. Peto and Lilla, and Shem and Calla were off making sure the dump children were easing into their new homes, and Jaytsy and Deck were taking care of the cattle and farm as usual. Honri had been by already, hope in his eyes until Mahrree shook her head, patted his cheek affectionately, and sent him away again.

And that was it.

Mahrree stared out the window, feeling time tighten around her like a lasso. Soon it would be a full year. A *full year* since he died.

She didn't think she'd have to endure that long without him. But maybe something—*something*—might happen before that year was up. Maybe something to give her hope, or to signal that her waiting to be in her husband's arms again was nearly over . . .

Something *had* to happen. She could *feel* it.

On the morning of 57th Day of Weeding, Peto knew he was awakened by a tremendous noise, but as he sat up abruptly in bed he couldn't pinpoint where it came from. It was deep and enormous and seemed to rumble throughout his body.

Lilla sat up as well, staring at him in surprise. Her mouth opened to say words, but Peto didn't hear anything come out. The rumbling, astonishingly, drowned her out. Nothing ever drowned out Lilla.

Her eyes grew wide as she realized she couldn't hear herself over the incredible sound. She pointed to her ears and gestured earnestly.

Peto shook his head. She wasn't deaf. Neither was he.

And the rumble wasn't just the sound, it was the bed as well. It was shaking. Everything was shaking.

Now Lilla was screaming. Peto knew that look on her face well enough. Fruitlessly, he took her by the shoulders to try to calm her, and eventually heard her faintly beneath the continuing deep roar that, bizarrely, seemed to be somehow catching up to them.

The pitch became higher and loud enough that Peto's ears began to hurt. He and Lilla watched each other in terror.

This was no normal land tremor.

“Is this real?”

Peto had experienced dozens of those growing up in Edge. It wasn't uncommon to feel the ground shift vaguely under his feet four or five times a year. But this wasn't a shift or a jolt or even a prolonged rocking. It was as if thunder had been trapped in the ground and was trembling at a constant rate.

It didn't seem necessary to hide under the bed, especially after so long a trembling, but he wrapped a protective arm around his wife as she sobbed. A memory bumped him and he glanced at the wardrobe. It didn't seem to be making plans to fall on his bed.

After about a full minute he began to hear words.

“What is it?! What is it?! Peto, what's happening?”

The rumble began to die down as if the thunder had retreated down the valley.

“What is it?!”

“Lilla, stop shouting! I hear you. I don't know what it is,” he said, giving her a quick squeeze, then jumped out of bed. “But I'm going to find out.”

Lilla scrambled out of bed too. “Morah!” she cried as she ran to the nearest bedroom upstairs. “Centia! Sakal! Are you all right?”

Peto ran down the stairs and nearly collided into a frightened Kew.

“Papa, what *was* that?”

“Trying to find out,” and Peto rushed to the front door.

Even though the sun was rising, the sky seemed unnaturally dark. He glanced at the ground for cracks or crevices as there had been in Edge, wondering if he should get everyone out of the house in case the ground and structure showed signs of giving way, but he saw nothing immediately.

“Rector!” he heard the watchmen cry from the tower. “What do we do?”

Peto looked up at the two men who must have had a terrifying ride. “Emergency banner, now!” he called up, knowing that telling people there was an emergency was rather obvious. “Then come down until the ground stops moving!” He dashed back into the house, running down the hall and pounding on doors. “Everyone all right? Anyone hurt?”

The doors flew open to reveal panicked children.

“My ears hurt, Papa!” Hogal shouted at him.

“Shh. I know. Mine do too.”

“Papa,” Kanthi said worriedly, “does it feel like the ground is still

shaking?”

Peto took her into his arms. “It does. I want everyone in the gathering room, now. Stay away from the walls and windows. Push the sofas to the middle of the room and sit there while I get Muggah.”

His children took off as Lilla and the three youngest girls came hurrying down the stairs.

Peto rushed to his mother’s wing and was just about to open the door as she opened it herself.

“That did *NOT* feel like Edge!” she announced loudly.

“You all right?” Peto asked.

“Yes, but I don’t feel like sleeping outside tonight on the sofa!”

They hurried back to the gathering room where the family stared at them, waiting for answers.

“So Papa,” Nool asked, “what *was* that?”

Peto looked at the curtains that were still trembling. “You mean, what *is* it? It’s a land tremor, but nothing like I’ve ever experienced.” He looked at his mother for her evaluation.

“Nor I.”

Something was happening outside the window. Something he hadn’t noticed before.

“What *is* that?” Mahrree said next to him, and started for the door.

“Mother, no! It’s not safe!”

“You just darted out there a moment ago!” she reminded him, pulling open the door. “I saw you! Peto, something’s *very* wrong.”

He knew it, too, and as his mother stepped out on to the front porch and gasped, Peto hurried out and down the stairs for a better view. The rest of the family huddled protectively around Muggah.

Peto, rooted to the trembling ground, found that his mouth had gone dry, and all he could whisper was, “Mount Deceit?”

It wasn’t visible from this side of the mountains, but as he looked to the southwest Peto had an odd feeling that even if he could see it, there’d be nothing left to see.

An enormous cloud shaped like a colossal mushroom was rising and billowing from the mountains, darkening the sky. Another great rumbling noise came from it as the ground pitched more violently. Someone on the porch screamed.

Peto’s mouth dropped open in astonishment.

“It’s his dream,” his mother’s voice drifted over to him, toneless and dazed. “Peto, it’s Shem’s dream. PETO!” she cried suddenly. “Mount Deceit is awakening!”



Corporal Shin awoke well before dawn to sharpen his sword, again. At this rate, there'd be no blade left, his tentmate had commented.

Their march into Idumea would begin in just an hour and he hadn't been able to sleep at all. The large empty fields lying fallow for the season outside of Pools—Province 2—had last night become an enormous camp with twelve thousand soldiers ready to join the six thousand waiting only a few miles away near the southern border of Thorne's territory. Another three thousand from the eastern forts should be arriving soon.

Shin had stayed up late in the night watching the hundreds of campfires burning, silently trying to count the tents and horses that extended forever, and listening to the faint clanks of steel here and there.

Fantastic.

That was all he could think. It was an incredible collection of men and weapons and anticipation. Shin had thought briefly of the first offensive on Moorland. It was only seven hundred soldiers, but to that date it had been the largest collection of soldiers since the Great War. How pathetic it must seem compared to this!

Shin wished he could see General Thorne's face as he surveyed the great scene before them, and maybe ask his opinion about the first offensive compared to this one. More than once that night he took a walk trying to find the command tents, to see if he could maybe, finally, chance an introduction. But the guards kept thinking he was a panicky soldier trying to escape, and sent him back to his tent where his tentmate dozed. He couldn't imagine how anyone could be snoring when such a glorious morning awaited them.

So he had laid outside under the stars, imagining scenarios, fantasizing about conquests, and hoping to dispatch some hapless southerner right in front of General Thorne. He'd gotten up as early as he dared to inspect his sword one more time—

YOU REALLY DON'T KNOW WHAT'S COMING, YOUNG PERE.

Why do you keep saying that? You've been hounding me for days now. I've read Calla's book. I know all about battle. Just let it go, old man. Enjoy the experience.

Flight of the Wounded Falcon

LEAVE NOW, WHILE YOU STILL CAN. HEAD EAST TO THE CANAL SYSTEM. IT WILL BE DRY.

Why? Will I die if I stay?

NO. NOT NECESSARILY.

Then leave me alone! Let me do amazing things!

YOU REALLY DON'T KNOW WHAT'S COMING.

Would you stop that already? You ceased to be entertaining days ago! You're only tiresome now.

Corporal Shin got in line to get his breakfast and fingered the hilt of his sword. In his mind he envisioned himself whipping it out and slashing some southerner in one swift movement.

The ground rumbled gently under his feet, but he ignored it like everyone else. The first time he had felt a land tremor he nearly panicked. They were rare in Salem, but a frequent occurrence in the provinces. The soldiers around him had chuckled at his alarm.

"What, are you from between Flax and Waves? I heard they never had land tremors there!" He'd learned to dismiss the trembling underfoot, as well as the derogatory insult intended to suggest that he was "a Zenos," and took the tremors in stride like everyone else.

The tremor this morning seemed to last longer than the others, but his mind was elsewhere, marching into Idumea. He almost forgot to take the food as it was handed to him. He couldn't even remember what he ate because he wolfed it down so quickly.

Then the light of the morning seemed to dim slightly. Shin glanced behind him and saw cloud cover approaching from the north. Good. The darker the day, the better for their crossing at the border.

He picked up his mug to take a drink, but something floated in the water that looked like ash.

"Hey!" a voice called out near him. "What is this?"

"Snow?" someone suggested.

Shin looked up and saw unusual gray flakes falling around them.

"Snow in *Weeding Season*!?" someone else scoffed.

Shin twisted around and looked toward the north again. Strangely, the cloud was approaching, faster than any cloud he'd ever seen. And even stranger, it was warm.

"It's not snow," Shin said, panic growing in his belly. Hundreds of soldiers around him now stared in curious worry. "It's too warm," he pointed out.

Shouts of alarm from thousands of men rose up in a great roar as the cloud descended on them.

“Is this real?”

And the ground shook harder.

YOU HAVE NO IDEA WHAT’S COMING—

Be quiet or be helpful!

RUN BACK AND GET YOUR PACK AND BLANKET. YOU CAN USE THE BLANKET AS SHELTER. AND GRAB A FEW OF THOSE BISCUITS. YOU WON’T BE GETTING ANOTHER DECENT MEAL FOR QUITE A WHILE. GRAB MORE!

Jon Offra tore out of his new residence and spun around in the yard, completely perplexed and disoriented. He wore only his pajama bottoms, and hugged his bare upper body as if worried it’d be attacked.

Right on his heels was his new house companion, also wide-eyed and stunned, still holding a wooden spoon since he was making them scrambled eggs.

Jon spun to him. “Teman, is this real?”

Teman Sobat, a small man in his early sixties, in astonishment said, “Jon, I think it is!”

“The ground’s shaking, isn’t it?”

“Yes, Jon, I feel it too.”

“And what is that?!” Jon cried, pointing to the massive cloud building in the sky.

Teman staggered as he looked in the direction of Mount Deceit. “I don’t know, but I’m pretty sure it’s real.”

To Teman’s surprise, Jon said simply, “All right, then.” Shaking, he walked back into the house, but Teman didn’t follow, too flabbergasted by the rising cloud. Many of his neighbors now stood outside as well, their jaws hanging ludicrously.

Suddenly Jon came barreling out of the house again. “Teman! It’s still happening! It’s NOT all right, then!”

“I know, Jon,” said Teman breathlessly, unable to tear his eyes away from the scene. “It’s not.”

“Oh,” Jon said, bemused. He scratched his head. “Because, usually, when I walk back into a house, everything changes again. But it’s not changing. *It’s not changing, Teman!*”

Teman blinked away from the cloud and rushed over to Jon who was frantically swinging his arms as if ready to jump for distance. Teman tossed his wooden spoon aside to catch Jon’s arms. He said, in the most soothing voice he could muster, given the circumstances,

“That’s right, Jon. It’s *not* changing, and I don’t think it will for a while now. Well, if you want to keep swinging your arms, that’s fine too. We can handle this, Jon. We’ll be all right. Here in Salem, everyone will be *all right*.”

Jon stopped swinging long enough to point at him. “As long as I’m not the only one unstable here.”

Temam chuckled anxiously. “I think that today, *everything* and *everyone* in Salem is unstable. We’re all in excellent company.”

“All right, then.”

“Men, we’re looking at Mount Deceit, right now.”

Chapter 34--“Men, we’re looking at Mount Deceit, right now.”

Peto, Shem, Lek Zenos, Cambo Briter, and Relf Shin rode their nervous horses through Salem to the Idumean trail. The trembling had died down, and they surveyed the area as they galloped by houses and buildings.

There was no major damage that they could discern that had occurred in the twenty minutes since the initial loud noise and rumbling had awakened everyone in the valley. All towers were flying the alarm banners, signaling that Salemites should be on alert and check on their neighbors, especially those ill with the pox. Cephas Briter stayed at the tower by their home to relay messages and make sure anyone needing assistance received it.

The five men glanced at each other in apprehension as they felt the gloom in the air. While the sun rose to the left of them, an enormous gray-black cloud loomed to the right. A light breeze from the northeast seemed to gently push the cloud away from Salem, but it wasn’t strong enough to contain the entire mass of whatever it was that was growing. The air was far too heavy.

Shem kept shaking his head as he watched it. “Never seen a *cloud* quite like that before,” he said more than once.

“If that’s supposed to make me feel better, Uncle Shem,” Cambo said, “it’s not.”

“Shem, I don’t think we should take too long,” Peto said as they turned the horses onto the trail heading up the mountain.

“I wasn’t planning on it, Peto. Just long enough to see what’s happened. We should have a decent view from the first peak,” Shem assured him.

“It’s Mount Deceit, isn’t it, Shem?” Peto asked.

The four men looked at Shem, who was in the lead.

Shem turned in his saddle. "I really don't know yet."

Lek leaned over to his cousin Relf who rode next to him. "Where do you think Young Pere is?" he whispered.

Relf sighed. "Don't ask my father that question, please."

"Wasn't planning to."

A while later the five men and horses broke through the thick forest and reached the top of the peak.

"The cloud's too immense," Cambo said. "I can't even make out Mount Deceit, or any of the peaks around it."

Relf squinted. "Wouldn't it be around there?" he pointed to the base of the growing cloud.

"It would be," Shem said in a low voice, "if it were still there. Men, we're looking at Mount Deceit, right now. It's billowing above us."

"Papa, what do you mean?" Lek asked.

Shem sighed. "The Moorland offensive. I saw an explosion like this. Two large buildings were filled with a black powder that the Guarders were developing. I threw a torch through the window of one of them, and a moment later the building went up. The cloud it produced looked exactly like that, but on a smaller scale. I went back the next morning, but there was nothing left. The cloud *was* the building, the Guarders, the soldiers—" His voice dropped off and he glanced sidewise at Peto.

But Peto only stared at the mushroom cloud, rolling and churning. "It's headed toward the villages of the world, isn't it?" he mumbled. "Mount Deceit is right above Moorland. Remember, Shem? It smoked when we had the land tremor in Edge."

"Uncle Peto, what's south of Moorland?" Cambo asked.

"Mountseen and Quake are the closest. To the east, Rivers. To the west, Scrub and Sands. Further south is Midplain, Vines, Pools, then Idumea. Edge is slightly north and east."

"The cloud is moving directly south," Shem said somberly. "If it comes down, it'll do so over Quake, Rivers . . . maybe even Midplain. But it's still growing. At this rate, it may come even over Salem."

"Then I suppose we best get back, warn Salem to move all animals into any available shelter," Peto said, his voice pitching higher with agitation. "Gather in any crops we can. We may have only today to act. Dear Creator! And I thought everyone was coming out of Salem because of the pox! I thank Him none of you are still on the mountain, Relf."

“Men, we’re looking at Mount Deceit, right now.”

Relf nodded. “I thought of that too, Papa. Seems as if the guide was correct again.”

Shem closed his eyes briefly and swallowed.

“Today the Thornes were to have midday meal with Muggah,” Relf reminded them, apologetically.

Shem shook his head. “Not anymore. And until we know what this cloud means, they stay at the Second Resting Station. That’s their home for now. *Everyone* stays where they are!”

“I’ll go break the news to them,” Peto said. “And at the first tower I come to I’ll send up a message for everyone to gather in animals and crops. The rest of you get back to the Eztates and tell everyone to help Deck round up the cattle and harvest whatever’s ready from the garden and orchard. There’s nothing more for us to do here.” Peto whipped Clark 14 around and headed at a fast gallop down the mountain.

“Uncle Peto!” Lek called after him, but Shem caught his son’s arm. “Papa, I was going to suggest he go home and I go to the Thornes.”

Shem shook his head. “He’s not only going to the Second Resting Station, Lek. He’s going to look. Just one more time.”

There must have been sunlight by now, but it couldn’t penetrate the cloud that descended upon them. Corporal Shin kept his tightly woven blanket over his head like a tent and tried to figure out what direction he should go. It was impossible to see anything. Within minutes the cloud had overwhelmed them and continued to move south, like a hot, dirty blizzard.

He’d barely gotten his pack and the blanket over his head when the cloud reached them. By then it was obvious it wasn’t snow, but ash and dirt and even bits of rock raining down.

Hastily he pulled out his kerchief and wrapped it around his nose and mouth, tying it to filter out the dust, and trying to hold down his panic. He couldn’t see more than a few feet in front of him, and all that he did see was a rush of blue uniforms, turning gray, and running into each other in a frenzy.

MAKE FOR THE TREES.

Trees. No one would trample trees.

But where were the trees? Corporal Shin closed his eyes and tried

to orient himself, to discern from which way the cloud came, and which direction it seemed to be heading. He pivoted a quarter turn to keep his back to the direction of the warm breeze. Then he strode directly south to the cluster of trees he remembered seeing at breakfast.

He stumbled over bodies and was once knocked down by a skittish horse, but he kept walking, struggling to remain calm.

Soon he found himself bumping into thick trunks and he sighed in relief. He turned and peered into the thick dust to see if anyone else could be helped, but he could hardly make out anything in the filthy fog.

“Here!” Shin called out to whoever might be stumbling past. “Come into the trees! Hold on to a trunk! Follow my voice!” But there was too much noise drowning him out.

Whatever wasn’t the panicked shouts of soldiers, now being punctuated with coughs as dust filled their lungs, was the loud whinnying of hundreds of horses stampeding through the camp. And below all of that was a deep rumbling noise that didn’t die away but kept reverberating like thunder in the dirt.

In front of him, Shin could just make out people running. At one point, three men rushed past him, the middle one being supported. A horse bolted in front of them, slammed into a tree next to Shin, and stumbled off in terror into the thick dust. Shin looked down to the ground and could just make out the men in a heap.

One got up and pulled up the middle man, while the third shouted at him from the ground. “I’m fine. Get him to the colonel then return for me!”

The two men vanished into the dust, but the third remained on the ground trying feebly to stand.

“Here!” Shin shouted. “Come over here! To the trees!”

“I can’t,” the man called back, his voice tight and strained. “It’s my left shoulder . . . I think it’s dislocated.”

“Then crawl!” Shin ordered. He kept his foot against the base of the tree, lay down on the ground, and stretched for the man’s right arm. “Right here! Reach for my hand.”

But the man didn’t move as the sky grew nearly as dark as midnight. Shin, fearing he’d lose the man in the thickening cloud, lunged forward and grabbed his right arm. He dragged him into the safety of the trees just as the dust became so thick Shin could no longer see his foot at the trunk.

“Men, we’re looking at Mount Deceit, right now.”

“Good pull, soldier,” whispered the man with labored breathing, and he began to cough.

“Where’s your kerchief?” Shin asked him. “If you still have it, you can tie it around your nose and mouth. It helps keep the dust out.”

“It’s in my front jacket pocket. Get it. Do it.”

Shin nodded, but realized the soldier couldn’t see him. “Of course. Where’s your jacket opening? Hold on . . . I think I’ve found it. Hold still a moment while I tie this around your face.” Shin felt around in the dark dust for the man’s ears and, after an awkward moment, got the kerchief tied around him.

“Excellent,” said the man. “Now, you don’t by any chance know how to fix dislocated shoulders, do you?” he asked with pained skepticism.

“Actually,” Shin said, “I’ve had two myself, and I know exactly what to do. My cousin is a doctor and he taught me a few things.”

The man scoffed. “Are you serious? You think you know how to reset a shoulder?”

“It’s not that hard, really. Just need to pull and lift.”

“Soldier, I can’t believe I’m about to say this, but strange times calls for stranger actions. Soldier—what’s your rank?”

“Corporal.”

“Creet, I *really* didn’t need to know that. A major or a captain I could deal with, but not even an officer? I’m impressed you’re not panicking.”

Shin hadn’t asked the man’s rank, but it was obvious he wasn’t an enlisted man. He tried not to sound as insulted as he felt when he said, “It’s not my fault I’m not an officer, *sir*. And I’m all you have.”

“That’s unfortunately true. I can’t even begin to imagine where the surgeons are,” he said with growing agitation. “I suppose I need you to try. I can’t continue like this. Creet, I can’t believe I’m agreeing to this—”

“You won’t regret it. By the count of five, you’ll be doing much better. Ready?”

“No—”

“Too late. One, two—”

“Aaaaghh!”

“Better, right?”

“What happened to five?!” the man gasped.

“I said ‘five’ to make you anticipate feeling pain then, not before.

Something else I learned from my cousin. Here, let me feel that shoulder. Seems to be moving correctly.”

“I’m impressed again. I think you actually fixed it.”

“Now, you’re going to be sore for a while, but if you’re careful with it—don’t use it unnecessarily for a few days—it’ll heal fine—”

“Don’t use it unnecessarily?!” The officer tried to bellow behind the kerchief. “Boy, do you have *any idea* what’s going on around us?”

“Actually, I don’t, sir. I can’t even see my hand in front of my face.”

“Neither can I! So *not* using this arm is *not* an option, Corporal. We still have an offensive to begin—”

“We’re still attacking Idumea?”

“Absolutely! I’m beginning to believe in the spirits of the dead soldiers. Perhaps we have them to thank for this perfect cover, if we can make our way through it.”

“But . . . but there’s no way to—”

A shout came near them. “Sir? Sir?! Where are you? Sir!”

“Here!” the officer shouted back. “By the trees!”

“Sir, I didn’t mean to leave you, but—”

“But nothing. I’m fine. Follow my voice. Watch out for the trunks. Where’s the colonel?”

“Twenty-seven . . . twenty-eight . . . twenty-nine paces from here, sir. He’s got a chain of men that have found their way to the river.”

“Excellent. Take me to him. We need to get some order here before we begin the march. We can regroup at the river and follow it south. Corporal,” the man said, turning to Shin, his arm bumping into him clumsily. “Good work. May have to put you in for a medal. Become a fort surgeon and serve at Province 8.”

“Actually sir, I was hoping to—”

“Sir!” the voice beyond the trees interrupted urgently, “I found you! Right here—take my arm before I lose my direction.”

“Right,” the man said, leaving Shin. “No one’s going to start *my* greatest offensive without me . . .”

“General?!” Shin cried out. “*General Thorne?!!*”

The men were gone in the black dust.

“No!” Shin whimpered.

GOOD WORK. YOU MADE AN IMPRESSION ON HIM, TWICE. FIRST WITH INVENTORY AND NOW WITH SHOULDERS. TOO BAD HE STILL DOESN’T KNOW WHO YOU ARE.

“Men, we’re looking at Mount Deceit, right now.”

Peto rode hard for the Second Resting Station near the entrance of the canyon. He slid off of Clark 14 near the barn, grabbed a length of rope waiting there, tied one end to the ring attached next to the barn door, and ran the other end of the rope to the main door of the Resting Station. They usually only did this in the Snowing Season for when blizzards came, but his mind was impressed with a blinding image very similar to a blizzard, except darker and warmer.

The main door opened as he finished tying off the rope.

“Mrs. Thorne,” he said to her as he secured the knot. “Keep this rope here. If you can’t find your way to the barn, hold on to this and it will lead you directly to the door.”

“Rector Shin, what’s happening?” she asked in a panic. “I’ve never felt such a land tremor before.” She stepped out onto the front porch and looked at the enormous plume rising in the sky. “What is *that*?!”

Her daughters and son-in-law joined her on the porch, their mouths opened in awe.

“It’s Mount Deceit,” Peto told them soberly. “I just came from that first peak there overlooking it. Guide Zenos thinks it’s an explosion, like he witnessed in Moorland, but on a much larger scale.”

Mrs. Thorne covered her mouth. “We’ve been hiding in the cellar for the past hour. We came up when we heard the chimes from the tower. What does it mean?”

“It means we need to act as if we can’t get outdoors for a few days. I need each of you to gather as many berries as you can from the bushes along the side of the building. There should be some ripening vegetables in the garden as well—”

“I thought we were going to tour Salem today, and have midday meal with Mrs. Shin,” Priscill interrupted with a whine.

Peto fought the urge to raise his eyebrows at her. “You’re staying here for now. Look at that cloud. It’s already starting to collapse on the side and seems to be rushing down to the world. Where do you think the rest of it may go?”

The five of them stared.

“But you’ll be safe here. Keep the windows shut. You can access the barn now, so you’ll still have the cow and the chickens. The cellar, as I’m sure you saw, is stocked with enough food for a year.”

Delia began to breathe heavily. “But . . . but you said you were going to get us as far north as possible! Out of danger!”

Peto took a deep breath himself. “I assure you, *no one* is coming

up that canyon today. In fact, the suppliers we pulled out of Salem said it seemed as if the general was planning a big offensive to retake Idumea. He's on his way south, not north. *You are safe.*"

"Safe from *that*?!" Anoki exclaimed. "First you bring us to a valley plagued with pox, and now we've got a . . . a . . . I don't even know what to *call it* headed in our direction! How is that a rescue?"

Peto maintained his calm. "Where were you living one week ago?"

"Outside of what was called Midplain," Anoki snarled.

"Do you want to take a guess as to which direction that collapsed plume is headed right now?"

Versa had been watching it the entire time. "We *have* been rescued," she said in an even tone. "It's heading directly south. It must have covered Midplain by now. Maybe even Idumea. Maybe even into the southern half of the world. I'd much rather be here."

Peto nodded.

Priscill began to whimper.

"None of that!" Versa said sharply. "We've faced far, far worse than this! Right, Mother? If we have to stay here, then I'm happy with that. This building is immense. When did we *ever* live in a home with ten bedrooms, Priscill? Most of the time we shared the same bed! And when was the last time we had such a food reserve, or chickens, or even a cow? No, Rector Shin, we're living in luxury here. No sneaking back to rubbish heaps looking for a meal for us. I never understood much about a Creator, but I'm beginning to understand more. He moved us out of the greatest danger. Whatever danger He will *not* move us out of, He provides a way for us to endure it. And that's what I am going to do. Now, Rector, you mentioned something about berry bushes? I plan to have fresh berries and eggs for breakfast. *Anyone else?*"

Druses Thorne smiled proudly at her daughter who stood with her hands on her waist.

Delia and Priscill looked at each other, then sullenly went back into the building.

Versa's husband sighed and headed for the barn.

Peto winked at Versa. "You'll do very well in Salem."

A moment later the two younger daughters came out with buckets. Without looking at their oldest sister, they sulked down the stairs and headed to the side of the building.

Druses put her arm around her daughter. "Rector Shin, *she* should

“Men, we’re looking at Mount Deceit, right now.”

have been a general.”

Peto was soon back on his horse heading for the canyon entrance. The tower banners hadn’t changed to signal that anyone was spotted coming from the canyon, but maybe the watchmen were looking at the farms around them for any sign of trouble.

He rode up past the entrance to the narrow canyon where he had been just days before, his stomach then in knots praying to see not only one son but two.

Again he stared at the empty canyon and squinted, hoping for something, that maybe he might have changed his mind, had a change of heart, and it wasn’t too late . . .

A new rumble to the west stopped his fantasies. He abruptly swung Clark 14 around and spurred him into a run back into Salem. He still had twelve other children to care for.

By the time he reached the western side of Salem, Clark 14 was foaming and flagging. He rode into a familiar barn and his son-in-law Con Cadby looked up at him in surprise.

“Papa Peto! What are you doing here?”

“Just checking on you all before I head back to the Eztatés. I was also wondering if you would consider trading me horses? Fourteen’s been all over the lower half of Salem and he can’t take anymore. We can swap again when . . .” He paused, not knowing when he might see them again.

“Of course, of course. I’ll saddle up the mare for you. She’s got GrayClark blood in her, too.”

“Finish what you’re doing first,” Peto said, looking down at the make-shift pen with several lambs in it that Con was securing.

“Sam and Papa are bringing in the rest,” Con told him. “We’re just getting the last of the ewes. But the rest of the sheep will have to stay outside, I’m afraid. There’s not enough room.”

Peto scratched the head of a lamb who looked up at him and bleated softly. “The Creator will compensate our losses if He sees it necessary.”

Con smiled. “I’m not worried, Papa. He always gives us more than we need. Were you planning to check on your daughters?”

Peto nodded. “Lilla will feel much better if I return with news about them. Unless you need help here?”

“No, we’ve got it under control.”

Peto headed out of the barn and to the two houses that sat side by side. No one was in the front garden, but if they were paying attention to the banners, they should be in the back pulling out whatever was close to being ripe. That’s where Peto found Jori, on her knees, picking green tomatoes.

“Jori, Jori . . . you’ll get stuck in that position.”

“Papa! What are you doing over here?”

“Making the rounds before *that* comes down,” he jerked a thumb behind him but didn’t bother to look.

“Do you think it’s the prophecy?” Jori asked in a low voice. “Mount Deceit awakening? Uncle Shem’s dream?”

Peto only sighed.

Jori gulped. “That’s what we thought this morning too when we watched it. Then we panicked, then Con and Sam ran to get their father to retrieve the lambs from the hillside.”

Peto squatted by her side and began to pick tomatoes. “It’ll be all right, Jori,” he said giving her a quick kiss on her forehead. “We’re ready. For anything.”

Jori caught her father’s hand. “We know, Papa. We’re not afraid. Well, maybe a little . . .”

Peto smiled. “Well, *I’m* afraid. About that,” he nodded to her swollen belly. “Jori, now really would *not* be a good time—”

“As if I control when it comes?” she giggled worriedly. “Don’t worry, Papa. I still have about seven weeks to go.”

Peto put his hand gently on her belly. “You heard that, right, Little One? Seven weeks. You can be late if you wish.”

“Papa?” another voice called out, coming from one of the houses. Lori waved her empty buckets at him as she came to the garden. “Why are you here?”

Peto nodded at her large belly. “Why do you think?” He stood up and gave his other twin daughter a quick kiss.

“I have about nine more weeks, Papa. Long after *that* passes,” she said soberly, glancing at the black cloud coming nearer. She kneeled next to her sister and started picking more tomatoes.

Peto helped. “Not if you keep doing this, girls,” he said. “I know how much you love to do *everything* together, but could you promise me, just this once—”

Jori cut him off. “We will not deliver together, Papa, I promise. And not for several more weeks.”

“Men, we’re looking at Mount Deceit, right now.”

Peto had to be satisfied with that. “Where are your children?”

“In my house, with Mama Weel,” Jori said.

“Let me carry these in,” he said, picking up the full buckets. He headed to Jori’s house, and Weel opened the door as he approached.

“Peto, certainly there are more important things for Rector Shin to be doing in an emergency than bringing in green tomatoes!”

“Good morning to you too, Weel,” he said to the plump woman with dark hair pulled into a bun as he placed the buckets on the table. He squatted and held out his arms for his four grandchildren who swarmed him. “My family is just as vulnerable as any other. That’s what General Shin always said. I just wanted to make sure my daughters weren’t—”

“Now don’t you worry, Peto,” Weel patted him on the shoulder while he kissed the little faces. “That’s why we’re here. We’ve got things under control. Looch even came up with a solution this morning.”

Peto winced. “Looch? Really?” He knew all too well what kinds of solutions Looch came up with.

Weel blushed. “We have all that cork in the barn for the jugs. He was thinking, maybe the boys could fashion a couple of corks for the girls to make sure . . .” She turned too red to finish.

Peto suppressed a grin. “Tell me, Weel, when he samples the old grape juice, just *how much* does he drink?”

Weel giggled and covered her face in embarrassment. “A little too much, I suppose. But that’s only a few times a season!”

Peto stood up, folded his arms and put on a stern face. “So he came up with this idea *to cork my daughters* while NOT under the influence?”

“He wasn’t being *serious*,” she squirmed. “Entirely.”

Peto snorted.

“Oh, *you!*” Weel slapped him on the arm as Peto broke into a grin.

“Good old Looch,” he chuckled. “I can always count on him—and you—for a laugh. And I certainly needed one today. But maybe when all of this is over he and I will have to have *another* little chat.” He looked out the window at his daughters. “Thank you for being here,” he said somberly. “Keep a close eye on everyone for me, will you?”

“Of course,” she said, just as gravely, joining him to watch Lori and Jori snatching peppers and pulling up thin carrots. “Peto, I mourned for years that the Creator gave us only two sons. But then

Flight of the Wounded Falcon

He made up for it with two wonderful daughters-in-law, and now with all these grandchildren and more on the way? I couldn't love and worry about them more than if they were my own."

Peto turned to her. "I know. So does Lilla. And we appreciate that. Lilla will feel better knowing nothing *else* is arriving today."

Lori and Jori hurried to the house, their half-filled buckets wobbling. The worry on their faces alarmed Peto.

"Something's starting to come down, Papa," Jori said breathlessly.

"Looks like ash or dirt," Lori said, holding up her hand and showing him small, gray bits. "You better get home before it gets worse."

Peto nodded and put a hand on each of his daughter's bellies. "Just . . . *stay*," was all he could say. His daughters each kissed him on his cheeks. He patted the four little heads below him, nodded once to Weel, then darted out the back door to the barn.

Soldiers ran in panicked circles, rushing in every direction as swirling gray covered them, choked them, terrified them.

Later, those who survived would remember stray thoughts as they hurried to nowhere. Thoughts that would tell them, *COVER YOUR NOSE AND MOUTH! USE YOUR BLANKET AS A SHELTER. DO NOT GO TO THE RIVER! FORGET YOUR SWORD; GRAB THAT BACON INSTEAD!*

It was as if a general slipped briefly into their minds, ordering them to run over there, duck under there, and do not, *do not* go to the river.

It was as if a man in white, just outside of their range of vision, stood calmly in the midst of confusion, completely unaffected, but directing traffic and issuing commands.

Later, those who survived wished they had followed those commands more closely.

Especially about taking the bacon.

Corporal Shin crouched in the scanty shelter of the trees, his blanket over his head. He had jabbed a thick stick through one side of the blanket to hold it up like a tent. His back was to the direction the cloud

“Men, we’re looking at Mount Deceit, right now.”

had come, and he felt heat building up on it as the warm ash piled against him.

The rumbling of the ground had subsided for now, and everything around him sounded muffled as it did during a heavy snowstorm. He heard only stray calls for help and occasional sobs of terror. It was frighteningly dark, despite being day.

When he slipped his hand outside of his tent and plunged it into the ash, it went up past his wrist before his fingertips reached the ground. More was falling and swirling around him, and it created an odd combination: he was sweating but shivered as if it were snow.

And he was completely alone.

A while ago the call came for the soldiers to grab each other’s arms and head for the river. Shin had stood up to go, but an urgent voice forced him back down.

NO! STAY RIGHT WHERE YOU ARE!

So Shin sat down and waited for some kind of end which didn’t seem to be coming.

More than once panic arose in his chest as if he was suffocating. That’s when he readjusted his kerchief and blanket shelter, to remind himself he had room to breathe, and that at some time the ash storm must stop. He tried desperately to think of things to occupy his mind, and to discern how long he’d been there. Maybe all day? Maybe just an hour? Where did all of this come from and why?

And why now? The offensive couldn’t be happening. Nothing could be happening.

Everything was too still.

After General Thorne left and the call came to head for the river, Shin had heard muffled shouts and panicked voices for maybe fifteen more minutes.

Then there was another rumbling noise that shook the ground again for at least a full minute . . .

Then everything around him grew strangely silent.

No one could have outrun the storm, he was sure. But where the thousands of soldiers and hundreds of horses disappeared to, he couldn’t imagine. All he knew was that he was alone in silence, and he didn’t like having only his thoughts for company.

He tried to conjure up someone else. Major Kroop. Captain Lick. Even *him*. No one would come. The only thoughts were his own.

What if I stop breathing?

Who will ever know?

What if I die here?

What would Mama think? Papa? Muggah? Everyone in Salem? They would never know what happened to me. I would just be buried by this ash. What if no one ever found me? What if there is no one to look?

I wanted that once. Just to be buried alive. The second day I was here. I don't want that anymore. This can't be the end. It's too early. There's too much to do. It can't happen.

You said you'd stay near me! Where are you? Why have you left me? Why did you die so easily?

I won't die easily! I refuse. I have too much to live for. I'm not really sure what right now, but . . . I just don't want to go yet.

I'm not ready.

For one moment he had a hopeful thought. He almost went through with it, but felt utterly unworthy. He wanted to ask for help. If there was any time in his life he needed help, it was now. But he hadn't spoken to Him since Puggah died. Why would He listen to him now?

I'm not ready. I'm not ready. I'm not ready.

YOU ARE! ALL YOU NEED IS DESIRE TO GET READY, AND YOU ARE. COME ON, YOUNG PERE! WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR? A SIGN? HOW ABOUT THIS?! YOUNG PERE, ARE YOU HEARING ME? YOUNG PERE!

Please, dear Creator—please find him, preserve him if it is Your will. Keep him safe. Let this pass over him somehow. Please . . .

Shem heard them as he rode his horse to the main storehouse in an ashy fall: dozens of family members praying for one boy who didn't dare do it himself, too afraid to petition the One he refused.

Young Pere was alive, terrified, lonely, and fearing what was coming next. Shem could see him clearly in his mind: huddled under an ash-covered blanket, surrounded by darkness. His hard heart was almost softening. Other emotions were finally rising up in him besides cynical arrogance. He was near panic.

Shem smiled faintly.

There was hope for him yet.

“Men, we’re looking at Mount Deceit, right now.”

Corporal Shin rocked slowly back and forth under his blanket, waiting, hoping, dreading.

Now what. Now what. Now what.

It had been hours. It had to be. He put his hand on the ground between his legs. It didn’t seem to be rumbling so much.

I can’t do it. I can’t do it. I can’t do it. I can’t face Him. I can’t face Him. I can’t face Him.

CAN YOU TALK TO ME?

Yes, Puggah! Help me!

ASK HIM FOR HELP. HE’S FAR MORE LOVING AND PATIENT THAN ME, YOUNG PERE. HE CAN DO FAR MORE THAN ME. I’M JUST HIS MESSENGER. HE HAS THE POWER. YOU WERE HIS LONG BEFORE YOU WERE MINE. HE’S WAITING. JUST ASK HIM. ASK HIM FOR HELP.

You do it.

I CAN’T WORK THIS OUT FOR YOU. YOU HAVE TO DO THIS YOURSELF. I’LL STAY BY YOUR SIDE, BUT I DON’T KNOW WHY YOU FEAR. HE’S NOT THE REFUSER. HE’S THE CREATOR. HE LOVES YOU—

Just be quiet. Just stop. Just stop. Just make this all stop.

IT WILL, IN TIME. BUT THIS COULD BE SO MUCH EASIER ON YOU. LET THE CREATOR LIFT THESE BURDENS.

You said I won’t die, right?

IF YOU LISTEN, YOU WON’T.

I’m not ready. I’m not ready.

READY FOR WHAT? FOR YOUR GUILT TO BE EASED? FOR YOUR PAIN TO BE WIPED AWAY? TO FEEL SOMETHING MORE THAN ANGER AND ARROGANCE? TO FEEL JOY AGAIN?

Please just stop. Just let it all stop. Please . . .

Corporal Shin pressed his hands to his ears and rocked harder.

Just let me get out . . . just let me get out . . . just let me get out . . . please, someone, help me . . .

By midafternoon, the sky over Salem was nearly as dark as night, with ash falling everywhere. Mahrree glanced outside instinctively to see the sun, but instead saw only gray, blanketing everything. It was several inches deep so far, and poor three-year-old Fennic snuck out earlier to try to make a snowman of it.

Now all of the Shin, Briter, and Zenos children and grandchildren were in the Briter house. Shem said it was safer to keep everyone

together for now, sharing the bedrooms, reading books, playing games, and trying to pretend nothing bizarre and terrifying was happening outside.

Every half hour Mahrree sent another teenager out to measure the depth of the ash and bring in samples for them to analyze. It was, after all, their first volcanic explosion—or so she assumed—so they should be studying it.

Mahrree guided the teenagers in trying to separate the samples into ash, small rock, and dirt, to see if the nature of the falling matter changed over time.

Jaytsy helped the younger children try to find ways to turn it into art projects. Adding a bit of water made the ash turn into a thick, mortar-like sludge, which excited the little boys, but made Jaytsy and Mahrree look at each other in fear and pray fervently that no rain would be coming anytime soon. At least the light gray small rock that floated in the water was a fascinating diversion.

Turning the explosion into a project made it seem less threatening in a small way. The surface academic approach, however, only masked the deeper sense of fear and growing panic everyone felt, but tried to dismiss.

Over at the Shin house, Lilla, Calla, and Salema were cooking an enormous meal, hoping that the leftovers might keep them from having to cook again for some time, just in case in the future they may need to . . .

And that was as far as anyone of them could guess. What would be in the future? How long might all of this continue for? A few hours? Weeks?

It'd been a strange day, no doubt. Mahrree had never experienced anything quite like it, and by late afternoon she was still trying to sort out her emotions.

When Shem and the boys had returned from seeing the mountain that morning, the adults had stood together discussing what to do next while the older children gathered in produce, chickens, goats, and calves. Deck had already set out to retrieve the cattle with Viddrow but came back too soon. Most of the cattle had stampeded in a panic up the mountainside, and Deck thought his efforts would be put to better use at home. He arrived shortly after Shem.

“So how long will this last?” Deck asked Shem as they stood on the back porch sorting into piles whatever ripe vegetables the children could find. There wasn't too much, though, only halfway through the

“Men, we’re looking at Mount Deceit, right now.”

growing season, and because they harvested every morning, they’d soon be finished.

“I have no idea. No answers,” Shem said, visibly worried as he stared at a handful of peppers, unsure of what family basket to put them in.

“That’s all right,” Calla said, setting a pepper into each basket. “We’re ready.”

Lilla sighed and gestured with skinny cucumbers in each hand. “Ready for . . . for what?! Shem, what does this mean?” Lilla’s eyes kept darting to look at the barn, waiting for Peto to return.

“Treat it like a blizzard?” he suggested. “Act as if we can’t get out for a few days, because we probably won’t be able to.”

“Then when it ends—” Jaytsy started.

“—*If* it ends,” Shem said darkly.

Jaytsy’s face blanched. “You don’t think it will end?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know . . . I’m not getting anything yet,” Shem apologized. “I think we should prepare for the worst of anything. Let’s keep everyone together for now, as much as possible. I think Peto was going to check on Lori and Jori after he saw the Thornes. And then we’ll just . . .”

Shem’s voice fading away had startled Mahrree ever since. She’d never seen him quite like that. He was still strong and confident, their ever-reliable guide, but even he seemed overwhelmed by the morning’s events.

But Mahrree still didn’t feel his depth of worry. Initially, she’d been startled by the land tremor and amazed at the growing cloud, of course. But she didn’t think it could be *too* bad. No scientists in the world had ever thought too much about the volcano. All they ever knew of them was what Terryp and others had brought back from the etchings they had seen. Tall mountain, smoke coming out from the top, followed later by bigger crops. No one in Salem knew much more, either.

When the first bits of not-snow began to fall before midday meal, she went outside, caught some, and looked at it closely. It was not lush soil. It was ash. She still didn’t feel any panic as Shem joined her.

“Dear Creator!” he whispered as he looked up into the gray sky. “This is it, isn’t it?” he said, and not to her.

“Shem?” Mahrree asked cautiously.

He looked at her soberly. There was no playful twinkle in his eye.

“Get inside, Mahrree. Perrin will never forgive me if I let something happen to you.”

“Shem, surely it can’t be *that* bad . . .”

He didn’t smile. He didn’t even blink. He just stared at her. Mahrree had never seen him so serious.

“Please get inside,” he said quietly. “And promise me you’ll not come back out again. I know you’re still as healthy and feisty as when you were thirty, but your lungs are seventy-three years old.”

“Oh, Shem! Come now, I—”

“*Mahrree.*” Something in his tone reminded Mahrree of when she was nine years old and teasing an older boy. Her father had used the same tone on her to send her to her room. Mahrree nodded slowly at Shem.

“All right . . .”

He gripped her arm and looked like he wanted to say something else, but instead turned her gently to the house.

So that’s where she had stayed for the last few hours, trying to entertain her grandchildren with makeshift experiments and writing down speculations with them as to what might come next. She couldn’t hide away from them. Maybe today was why she had remained—to help her grandchildren through the weirdest day Salem had ever experienced.

Peto had returned with news that Lori and Jori had promised not to deliver early, and that he’d told the Thornes they wouldn’t be traveling that day.

Mahrree was secretly relieved. The plan had been for them to stop by the Eztates, but meeting the wife and daughters of Lemuel Thorne wasn’t something she’d been eager for, although Relf had assured her they were merely traumatized women. Mahrree hadn’t been in the mood for yet another ‘reunion’ of sorts today.

As she looked out the window, it was obvious why the men weren’t supposed to be marking any trails this year. At first, everyone had assumed Shem had received that prompting after Young Pere took off because the pox had descended upon Salem. But it was also because Deceit did, as well.

She noticed Calla, Lilla, Salema, and Peto trudging through the falling ash to the Briter house, with blankets draped over them as they carried covered baskets of food.

And Mahrree felt the strangest spark of hope, again.

Those random sparks, which lit her up throughout the day, were

“Men, we’re looking at Mount Deceit, right now.”

why she hadn’t been feeling the same level of dread that Shem or anyone else had experienced. And she was beginning to feel guilty about it.

The first flicker of hope hit at the same time the land tremor did. For a few moments she thought she was back in Edge, and she was sure Perrin’s arms and body were wrapped protectively around her, but it was only the blanket. Yet the familiarity of the swaying bed had filled her with anticipation for something she couldn’t yet pinpoint.

The flash of hope hit her again as she first looked outside that morning and saw the cloud growing. It *was* Mount Deceit. She knew it the moment she saw it.

The third time she felt it was when she went back to her room on the pretext of changing out of her bed clothes, but instead pulled down her copy of *The Writings*. She hesitated before opening the pages, afraid that what she remembered may have changed since the last time she read the passage a couple of moons ago.

But there it was, exactly as she had remembered it, the words of the first Great Guide.

Before the Last Day will be a land tremor more powerful than any ever experienced. It will awaken the largest mountain and change all that we know in the world. Those changes will bring famine, death, and desperation to the world. And that desperation will cause the world’s army to seek to destroy the faithful of the Creator.

But she was fixated on the first line, about a land tremor more powerful than ever before. She felt such a surge of excitement that she could hardly contain herself. She knew she had to calm down before returning to the family, because they wouldn’t understand her response.

Because it was *The Last Day*. *It was coming*—it had to be! And the coming of *The Last Day* would also signal the coming of her husband.

How could she *not* be thrilled to see the mountain explode and the world come to an end?!

It was a terrible way to look at it, she knew. All kinds of destruction and problems would occur first, it was obvious. But as she sat in her bedroom and spied Perrin’s old colonel’s jacket hanging in the

wardrobe, she couldn't erase her grin. They'd be in each other's arms before she knew it!

However, she couldn't go out to her family in such a state of giddiness. She composed herself, knelt down and prayed for understanding, for help, and most importantly, for her grandson who was still down there. He needed to come home before it all ended, somehow.

Honri had hurried over to the house shortly after that, coming straight to Mahrree's wing, anxiety all over his face.

"Are you all right? Nervous? Worried?" he asked her.

Even when he was concerned, his dimples had a way of appearing in the most charming of ways. To his surprise, she had invited him in, shut the door behind him and smiled eagerly. "Honri, do you realize what's happening?"

"Not exactly, but I have an idea—"

"Honri, *it's Deceit!* It has to be!"

He bobbed his head. "Well, that was the possibility I was—"

"No, do you *really realize what this means?*"

Tipping his head, he evaluated her critically. "Mahrree, what's wrong?"

"Nothing! That's just it! Honri," she whispered conspiratorially, "*This is the end!*"

It was her squealing in delight that startled him.

With his eyes bulging in alarm, he said, enunciating every word, "Stay . . . right . . . here. I'm . . . going . . . to get . . . Boskos—"

"No, no, no, Honri! *I'm fine*, and I didn't hit my head or anything. Don't you get it? Honri, *they'll* be on their way back to us, very soon!"

Still watching her guardedly, he said, "*They* who?"

"Nan and Perrin!"

Everything about him drooped. "Oh, Mahrree, Mahrree . . . This isn't what you think—"

She threw her hands up in the air. Of everyone, she expected him to see it as fast as she had. "It's in The Writings. You know it as well as I do. This is the beginning of the end!"

He took her by the arms, the look in his eyes suggesting he was still thinking of retrieving a doctor to take a look at her. "Mahrree, we have stored enough food for four years. Why have we stored so much, except that we might need that much to get us through this crisis? The Last Day—that's what you think this signals? It might *not*. My dear Mahrree, I don't think it's going to happen as quickly as you think it

“Men, we’re looking at Mount Deceit, right now.”

will. Is this . . . is *this* why you wouldn’t let me propose to you a few weeks ago? Wait. It doesn’t add up. Why did you think *then* that The Last Day is around the corner now?”

“Because it is!” she beamed.

His countenance fell even more. “Oh, Mahrree, my *dear* Mahrree . . .”

Annoyed with his pessimism and misplaced sympathy, she assured her one-time hopeful that she was fine and that he could go back to his own family. But Honri was insightful and clever, and soon—very soon—he’d realize, too, that The Last Day and their deceased spouses were just right around the corner, and he wouldn’t have to keep coming by each day with that pitiful hope in his eyes.

For the next many hours, Mahrree tried to quell her enthusiasm so as to not alarm anyone else, but inside her joy bubbled with more heat than any old hotpot in Edge ever had.

She even took to talking to the grandchildren again, partly because she had to help keep them occupied during this strange day, and partly because she realized something: this close to the end, what lasting harm could she possibly do to any of them?

Shem returned from the storehouse late that afternoon just as everyone was settling down to eat at the table, on the floor, in the gathering room, or wherever there was space. He came in the back door and smiled at the sight of all the bodies. The three combined families created a small roar of their own as they helped themselves to the food on the side table and stepped over each other to find a place to sit. There was much more laughter than Shem expected to hear, and it put a grin on his face. Maybe he wouldn’t need to get little Plump Perrin, or the newborn baby girls of Barnos and Ivy, or Relf or Mattilin, to snuggle with him today after all.

Calla came to his side as he stood against the wall. “Everyone taken care of?” she asked.

He gave her a quick kiss and put his arm around her. “Yes, my love. No one else seems to be in need. They’re just riding it out now. How’s everyone here?”

“Mostly fine. Mahrree and Jaytsy have kept the children occupied with projects. They’ve done a good job keeping cheerful about it all. It almost feels like a celebration day, and Mahrree almost seems back

to her normal self again.”

Shem looked at her in surprise. “Really? I thought she might be in a panic.”

Calla shrugged. “So did I, but she’s not. Honestly, she’s been a little odd all day, but grief does strange things to people. She’s actually talking and interacting with everyone, for once. Maybe because she had no choice; she’s stuck here at the Briters like everyone else. But,” she whispered, “Peto and Lilla? They’re not doing well at all. They’ve put on brave smiles, but I’ve never known either of them to be so quiet. The only ones talking in their kitchen while we cooked earlier were Salema and me. They’re still in Jaysy’s kitchen, alone. Said they don’t feel like eating yet. Shemmy, do you know anything that might help them?”

“Young Pere’s still alive,” he whispered back. “In a terrible position, but it’s survivable.”

Calla sighed in relief. “Go. Tell them. I’ll get you a plate of food ready in the meantime, just in case you’re called away again. I don’t want you to be hungry.”

Shem caught her in a hug. “I’m not planning on leaving you again today. Twice is enough. I need to take care of my family too. The last tower message was for everyone to stay inside with the windows and doors sealed. I don’t want anyone outside breathing this. I even ordered the tower messengers to take cover until it stops. I’m staying here and taking care of you.”

Calla kissed him. “I don’t mind sharing you with Salem. But if you can stay, I can deal with that too!”

Shem squeezed her tightly. “Do you know what an amazing wife you are? You never complain.”

Calla smiled. “It’s easy to be an amazing wife when I have an amazing husband—”

“And it’d be *amazing* to eat without all this *syrup* pouring around me,” Zaddick complained as he sat down on the floor in front of his parents and dug into his meal. “Please Papa, Mama—get something to eat so you stop talking.”

Shem gave him a playful kick. “No wonder you’re not courting anyone. Twenty-one years old and you still don’t understand anything about women and love.”

“I understand I prefer a little vinegar in a female instead of all this sugar,” he said, shoving a bite of spicy squash into his mouth. “Salem just breeds them too sweet.”

“Men, we’re looking at Mount Deceit, right now.”

Calla chuckled. “Go to the kitchen, Shem. I’ll wait to eat with you.”

Shem stepped carefully through the mass of children and adults, weaving his way to the kitchen. He stopped briefly to take Mahrree by the arm.

“Have you been a good girl?” he demanded playfully.

“I haven’t been outside, Mr. Zenos!” and she winked at him.

Calla was right—Mahrree was smiling easily, a *real* smile, not The Dinner smile she’d been wearing for almost a year, as she helped a great-grandchild fill her plate. He wondered briefly about her happy nature before he slipped through the door of the kitchen.

He stopped abruptly when he found Peto and Lilla in an embrace. They quickly pulled apart when they saw him, and Lilla wiped her eyes with a cloth.

“I’m sorry,” Shem said, continuing over to them. “I didn’t mean to interrupt.”

They tried to give him brave smiles, but their faces were etched with worry. A memory came back to him and he knew exactly what he was supposed to do with it.

“This wasn’t like many years ago,” he said, “when a certain set of parents were far away at Terryp’s ruins for their twentieth anniversary, and a certain young woman who was *supposed* to be at my house helping her sister with her first newborn was rarely there . . .”

Their faces immediately softened. Lilla blushed and Peto grinned as he looked down at the floor.

“As I recall,” Shem continued, putting a hand on each of their shoulders, “the instructions left for Jaytsy, Deck, Calla, and me were to watch you two like *hawks*, because Mahrree suspected something might be going on between you two *mice*, but the problem was we could never find you. Peto? Lilla? Always gone, and at the *same time*.”

In spite of herself, Lilla began to giggle and covered her mouth with her hand.

“Until one afternoon when I came by the house to get a map from Perrin’s office and heard a strange noise coming from the kitchen—”

Peto was now chuckling and Lilla was bright red.

“So I walked into the kitchen, not sure what I’d find in Perrin and Mahrree’s absence, but certainly not expecting to see *my sister-in-law* and *my nephew* locked in a most passionate embrace by the sink.

That wasn't the pipes making slurping noises."

Lilla covered her face with her hands as she snorted, and Peto shook his head. "All right, Shem. Enough now—"

"Oh, no, not yet," Shem grinned, never one to not finish a story, "because just the *very night before* I'd had a conversation with said nephew telling him that if he was interested in courting Miss Trovato, I could give him some advice. And what was the response? Ah, hold on . . . let me remember . . ."

"Shem—"

"No, no, Peto, it's coming to me . . . it was . . . *that's right*: 'Shem, I'm just not interested in girls right now. Maybe someday, but right now I just want to keep all my options open.'"

Lilla was fully giggling into her hands.

Peto grinned. "Well, I wasn't interested in girls. I was interested in one *woman*." He reached out and pulled Lilla into him.

"Well it was still quite a surprise for me to walk into the kitchen and realize that both of you were more *interested*, as you put it, than any of us had suspected!"

Peto chuckled as Lilla shook in silent laughter against his chest.

"Shem, I was so embarrassed that you caught us!" Lilla finally managed to say. "And then I thought, He's going to go home and tell my sister! That put me into a panic. I was afraid you would send me back to Norden. But Shem, the look on your face? I'd never seen anything so funny!"

"It was a look of absolute shock, wasn't it?" Peto asked his wife thoughtfully.

"That was because I stood there watching you two for about fifteen seconds, too stunned to move or make a sound, before you even noticed I was there!" Shem grinned. "I kept thinking, This is not *Peto*, is it? With *Lilla*? *Kissing* in the Shins' *kitchen*? And look, here you are again, now alone in the Briters'. What is it with you two and kitchens? Go back to your own. You can have some privacy!"

Peto and Lilla laughed as Shem grinned at them. "By the way Lilla, I *was* ready to send you back to Norden until Perrin and Mahrree returned. I wasn't sure how much I could trust young Peto here without his father breathing down his neck. But Calla said she'd take care of things."

Peto smirked painfully. "She did. We had a little talk that evening, just her and me. For such a calm and soft-spoken woman, Calla can be very *direct*. I've used some of her phrases on our own children."

“Men, we’re looking at Mount Deceit, right now.”

Shem grinned. “Speaking of Calla, she’s worried about you again. Both of you.”

The three of them stood in the kitchen for a moment, their smiles fading.

Shem broke the silence. “So how are you two?”

“I just can’t stop thinking about—” Lilla began, then looked out at the ash storm and sighed, resting her head against Peto.

“I know,” Shem said quietly. “But I can tell both of you this—I know he’s still alive.”

“Really?” Peto said, almost not daring to hope.

“I was given a glimpse of him. He’s in the middle of it, but he can get out. And he’s not alone. He *is* listening to Perrin.”

Lilla burst into tears as Peto hugged her again.

“Thank you,” Peto whispered to Shem.

Shem nodded. “So the two of you should end your fasting and get something to eat. We’re going to need all our strength once this stops coming down. There’ll be a tremendous amount of clean-up to do.”

“How did you know we were fasting?” Peto asked quietly.

“That’s what I’d be doing if my son were trapped in the world.”

Chapter 35--“Where are the other soldiers?”

It had been hours. Corporal Shin was sure of it. Hours and hours of rocking and fearing and feeling the ash falling around him. At one point he thought he fell asleep for a time, but it was a most uneasy sleep, filled with images of baked mud and bodies trapped in it.

When he startled awake, he realized the nightmare was better than his reality. His mind had been reeling with terrified thoughts, and his hours filled with panic attacks and conversations with people who no longer existed. He just wanted it to stop, to let him do something else besides sitting and sobbing.

Eventually he realized the air had become still. He peered out from his blanket that was heavy with the weight of several inches of ash, and didn't see anything else falling. In fact, there seemed to be more light than he'd seen all day.

He cautiously pushed the blanket off of him, trying to direct the ash fall away from him, and looked around.

The air was clear, but nothing, *nothing*, looked as it had before. He couldn't think as he slowly stood up, turned, and tried to discern anything in the landscape.

There was no landscape left. Even the trees which sheltered him were caked in gray. Many of the branches had broken from the weight of the ash pushing on the leaves, and whatever leaves were left had withered. As far as Shin could see was a blanket of gray. His mind vaguely recalled the writings of one of the Salem astronomers who had fashioned different thicknesses of glass to look closely at The Great Moon as well as the Little Sister. His descriptions of what he saw were exactly what Shin saw before him. It no longer looked like the world he remembered.

He slowly worked his way from the trees, pushing against the ash

“Where are the other soldiers?”

that came up to his knees, and stopped as he exited the stand and stared again to the north. His visibility was limited to less than a mile, but for that entire distance all around him was nothing but gray.

He was all alone. Completely, totally. Nothing else, for as far as he could see, was moving.

Shin felt an odd sensation in his belly, and what had happened began to make itself clear in his mind.

He alone had been protected. He alone had been spared. There was no denying the fact. His heart surged with emotion, because he had beat it, all alone, only himself. He didn't even ask for help. It was all nature's will.

He was invincible.

YOU'RE WHAT?

“Be quiet, old man,” he dared to say aloud. No one was around to hear. “I don't need you anymore. Look what I've survived!”

YOU THINK YOU DID THIS?

“Who else?”

THE COMBINED PRAYERS OF YOUR FAMILY, THE FASTING OF YOUR PARENTS, THE CREATOR TELLING ME WHAT TO TELL YOU—

“My family doesn't even know what's going on here,” he said contemptuously. “No one does. But I do. I didn't ask for help, and I made it anyway.”

WEREN'T YOU READY TO FOLLOW EVERYONE TO THE RIVER? LEAVE THE TREES? HOW DID YOU KNOW TO GET YOUR BLANKET?

“The river!” he exclaimed. “That's right. I need to check the river.”

He stepped boldly out into what was an enormous field a few hours ago covered with tents, and tried to evaluate the situation. No tents, no horses, no men. He turned to the west and started to wade through the ash toward the river that was about one hundred thirty paces away. Except that he couldn't actually step in paces, but in shuffling. He'd find it easily enough anyway.

He stumbled in his progress and nearly fell because something had tripped him up. He stooped and felt around in the ash. Cloth. Something firm underneath. Cold. He quickly withdrew his hand and stepped away. It was a body, under the ash, not far from where he'd been hiding.

His stomach churned. There'd be many more cold bodies.

Maybe . . . *maybe* being the only survivor wasn't going to be such a good thing. Suddenly he didn't feel like talking anymore, and he

noticed the silence, profound and eerie.

His previous bravado gone, now replaced with increasing anxiousness, he tightened his kerchief around his nose and mouth, and faced west. The sun was hanging in the sky, showing dimly through the haze, about three hours from sundown. He'd been hiding in his makeshift tent for most of the day.

Realizing how thirsty he was, he remembered that he had to get to the river. He trudged through the debris, trying not to think about what his leg brushed by, or his boot caught on, or how many bodies he had to skirt around. After about sixty paces he started to look in earnest for the river, but he didn't hear it or see it.

Instead he saw evidence of, well, a disaster of enormous proportions. First the ash he waded through turned to mud. Then the mud had a few trees in it. Then, as he progressed, the mud increased and was thickly strewn with trees, boulders, rocks, and, once Corporal Shin got a closer look, cloth.

Animals. Bodies. All motionless, all stuck. It was his nightmare, but there was no waking up from it.

He refused to feel panic, even though the bile was rising and burning in his throat. Instead he stared straight ahead, picking his way through the thick debris pretending that each item that tripped him was nothing more than a twig.

The river. He had to find the river. It had to be here! Finally he heard a trickle of water, and made his way to it, only to suddenly realize he was on top of it: a narrow channel of water slowly cutting its way through the sludge between his feet.

It was the river, or what was left of it, narrow enough for him to block with his boot. Yesterday he would have had to wade in it up to his waist for thirty paces.

Nauseated, and with growing dismay, he understood. He must have been walking through what used to be the river bed for the last twenty paces. He squatted, took as many sips of the murky water that he could force himself to swallow, and focused on what he was standing on.

Mud. Rock. Branches. Ripped cloth. Glints of broken steel. Torn leather. This was Thorne's army.

"No!" Shin called out. His frail, terrified voice didn't travel far. Downstream revealed only more trees, debris, steel, shapes of horses, blue and gray shapes—

Wait—blue shapes, and not completely covered.

“Where are the other soldiers?”

Shin started to jog clumsily downstream, trying to jump from log to log to avoiding getting trapped in the mud. Not every body was covered. He stumbled to a cluster of blue and muddy cloth, and the first body he came to was still, but the body next to it stirred.

Shin pulled down his kerchief and grabbed the soldier’s muddy face, also partially covered by a kerchief.

“Hey! Hey! Are you all right?”

The man’s eyes slowly opened. “Thank the spirits!” he mumbled. “Someone else is alive. Help me out, please!”

“Of course, Sergeant,” Shin said, evaluating the mud that encased him and feeling immense relief that he wasn’t the last man alive after all. First he removed a log, then broke off a branch and used it to start digging around the man’s legs which were completely submerged in the mud. “Does anything feel broken?” he asked as he worked.

“I don’t think so,” the sergeant said, already sounding more alert. “My head’s pounding, though. I think I got hit by something. I woke up not too long ago and couldn’t move my legs. I can feel them, but I don’t have enough strength to pull them out.”

“Tell me what you remember,” Shin said as he dug.

“It’s so hazy,” the sergeant sighed, and Shin wasn’t sure if he was referring to his memories or the air around them. “I received the call to follow the river, so we were coming here. Then suddenly there was a tremendous noise. It was all of this, this mud, trees . . . Some kind of mudslide? I can’t imagine where it came from.”

Shin glance at one of the tree trunks near him and recognized the species. “This tree here, the Slow Growth Oak, grows only in the forests beyond Province 8 and the ruins of Moorland, or Province 0, I guess they call it. I haven’t seen it anywhere else. I’d guess the slide came from the mountains.”

“The mountains?!” the man exclaimed, coming to even more. “That’s over fifty miles from here! That can’t be right.”

“More than sixty miles, actually,” Shin told him. “If a slide were to start up in the mountains, what is there to stop it before it reaches here?” Shin freed one of the man’s legs.

“I really don’t know,” the sergeant said, wincing as he pulled it out of the mud. “I supposed nothing would stop it. The river bed is pretty wide. Or it was. I suppose it would just channel the slide all the way to . . . Creet!”

“What?” Shin asked, stopping his digging. “Where does the river end?”

“It empties in the south sea, just beyond Province . . . what number is that? Doesn’t matter—just beyond Flax. The mudslide may have gone all the way through the world!”

“That’s over a hundred twenty miles, from forests to the sea,” Shin reminded him.

The sergeant struggled to sit up, fully alert and fully astonished. “How wide would you estimate this patch of mud and muck is?”

Shin shrugged. “I don’t know. At least thirty paces to the east, but I hadn’t looked to the west yet. From here I’d guess at least another fifty to sixty paces.”

“And it was gathering more debris as it goes? And more speed?” the sergeant suggested.

“Or slowing down as it gathers trees and rock?” Shin pointed out.

The sergeant helped claw at the mud packed around the other leg Shin was digging out. “Do you know what this means, Corporal?”

“Not really.”

“It means Idumea may be wiped out! General Sargon will be crippled! The river flows right through the city and near the garrison. And the villages below, they’re ready to be invaded!”

“Sir,” Shin said, “who’s going to invade? You and me?”

The sergeant looked around him. “Where are the other soldiers?”

“I was hoping you could tell me,” Shin said, pulling on his other leg until it was free. “Feel all right?”

“Yes,” the sergeant said. “Amazingly, yes! Nothing broken. Still a huge headache, though.” He flinched at his own voice.

“Here,” Shin said. “Let me take a look. Where does it hurt?”

“Around here,” the sergeant waved his hand over the side of his head.

“Yes, I see it. Large contusion, just behind your ear, about two inches in diameter. No blood loss though. That’s good. Let me see your eyes. No current dilation. You probably have a concussion, but nothing more serious.”

“Are you a surgeon’s assistant?”

Shin smiled vaguely. “Just a frequent accident victim. You should be all right, just take it easy.”

“Sure. *Take it easy*. Soldier, we have an army to find!”

Shin sighed. “Where do you suggest we begin?”

“Downstream, of course!” He struggled to his feet. “Staff Sergeant Quod, Province 10,” and he extended his hand.

Shin took it. “Corporal Shin. Province 8.”

“Where are the other soldiers?”

The sergeant smirked. “*Shin?* Province 8? Gutsy, boy. Really gutsy.”

Shin shrugged. “Fogged, sir. Really fogged.”

Quod chuckled. “Come on, let’s start finding more lucky men.” The sergeant slipped, then caught himself and stood up again shakily. He smiled staunchly at the corporal. “Right there, a group of soldiers. Check for pulses.”

The two of them stepped gingerly to a group of men lying in the mud. None of the seven soldiers were still alive. Same with the next group of soldiers they encountered. But Shin noticed a slight movement to the east, near the edge of the slide, and heard a faint voice.

“Sergeant!” Shin said, “Over there!”

Quod stood up from a still body he was checking and picked his way through the debris over to Shin. Together they made their way to another cluster of muddy bodies.

One of them was calling feebly, “Anyone there?”

“We’re coming!” Quod called. “Hold on!”

They reached the soldier whose arm was obviously broken, and most of him was buried in mud.

“Soldier, you’re going to be all right,” Quod assured him as he looked around for a branch to use to start digging.

“Here’s another one!” Shin called. “Still breathing!” he said, taking the pulse of a man almost entirely gray. Shin removed the dirt that was caking the kerchief around his nose and mouth, and the soldier began to breathe more easily.

“I’ve got this one,” Quod called. “You work on that one there.”

“Yes, sir,” Shin called back. “Soldier!” he said loudly to the mud-caked man. “Can you hear me? I’m going to try to get you out.”

The man grunted softly.

“Anything broken? Anything hurting?”

The man didn’t respond.

Shin removed a few branches that lay across his chest, then started to dig him free. “You’re going to be all right,” he said as he worked. “Everything’s fine. You’re going to be all right.” He repeated the words more for himself than for anyone else. Constant movement kept him from panicking about the numerous dead bodies around him.

“Got another one here, Shin!” Sergeant Quod called to him as he pulled out the soldier with the broken arm. “How’s it going over there?”

“This might take some time, but I’ll get him out.”

The man with the broken arm cradled it as he managed an awkward crawl over to another body. “Another one here! Soldier, can you hear me? Wiggle those fingers.”

Shin kept digging, feeling an urgency to retrieve as many men as possible. Idumea was ripe for an invasion. He could still feel it and taste it. He just needed an army.

“Another one here!” Quod called. “We’ll get you out, son! Just hang on.”

A voice in the distance called to them. “Hey! Help! Get this log off of me, and I can help you dig.”

“All right!” Quod called enthusiastically. “Going to take a lot more than a little mudslide to slow down *this* army!”

“There’s only one man I know who would see this mudslide as a mere inconvenience,” the voice called back. “You’re just a blob of gray, but Quod, that’s got to be you!”

“Choolet? Choolet! The spirits are with you, aren’t they! I’m coming for you,” Quod said, rushing over to his friend.

Shin smiled as he freed the man’s left arm. Every moment they were finding more men alive. The offensive was merely postponed. Idumea *had* to be in worse shape.

The soldier he was working on slowly moved his arm.

“Can you hear me?” Shin asked the gray man. “How’s the arm?”

“All right,” came a faint whisper.

“Good. Working on your legs now. Not really too bad. Just hang on, all right?”

“What’s your rank?”

That seemed to be a petty thing to be worried about right now, Shin thought, as he looked at the man’s mud-caked face. “If it’s not high enough, will you want me to stop working?” he asked cheekily.

“No,” the gray man whispered.

Shin kept digging and soon pulled free the man’s right leg, then eventually his left. “Can you stand?”

“Not sure,” the man mumbled, wincing as he tried to sit up. “Pain. Middle.”

“All right,” Shin said. “Let me take a look.”

“Surgeon?”

“By now, practically,” Shin muttered. The man’s eyes remained closed as Shin peeled off sections of cracking mud from the front of the uniform and undid the buttons. He opened the jacket.

“Where are the other soldiers?”

“I don’t see any blood, so no open wounds. Maybe an internal injury, though. I’m going to pull up your shirt to look for bruising and feel around, all right?”

“Yes,” came the weak whisper.

Shin pulled up the man’s shirt, and the first thing that caught his eye was a long scar along the side of his body. “Quite a wound you sustained a while ago.”

“Yes,” was the whisper again.

“Tell me where it hurts as I press. Here? Here? Here? How about here?”

“Yes!” he gasped.

“May be the kidney,” Shin decided, trying to remember his few weeks of anatomy courses he took almost a year ago. “Nothing’s protruding or swollen, however, so let’s hope you only suffered a nasty punch from a branch. How about your ribs?”

“All right, I think” the soldier whispered. “Help me up.”

“How about I just drag you over to the river bank?”

“No. Help me walk.”

“Are you sure you can?”

“I’m not the type to be dragged, soldier!” the man said with renewed energy.

Shin almost smiled. “Do you want your jacket buttoned again?”

“Yes.”

Shin started to pull down the shirt and glanced at the scar again. “Good work on those stitches. How long ago did you get that wound?”

“Years ago. As a young man.”

Shin looked up at his face. The man didn’t seem that old. Then again, there were no definable features under the mud. “How many stitches?” he asked.

“Thirty.”

Shin started to fasten up his jacket. “Whew. That’s a lot. How’d it happen—”

Immediately he regretted asking, because a conversation from one year ago came to him. He knew what the answer would be and he felt the strength leave his arms as he began to understand who lay in the mud beneath him.

“Sword. Guarder.”

Something caught in Shin’s throat as he stared at the man’s right

arm. He hadn't moved it at all the entire time he worked. Shin swallowed hard, but the lump nearly choking him didn't move.

This was General Lemuel Thorne, again.

"Ready to get up, *sir*?" Shin struggled to find his voice.

"Yes," the man whispered. "My left shoulder was injured earlier, and my right arm's no good. But just pull up on the right."

"Of course," Shin said, taking Thorne's shriveled right arm and pulling. Thorne's torso was still encased in the mud and he cringed in pain as he struggled to get out.

"Sure it was just the kidney?" he asked as he opened his eyes for the first time.

Shin's eyes locked with Thorne's, and the corporal held his breath in anticipation as he stared down at the general. He'd been waiting for moons for this moment—

But Thorne didn't give him a second look. He glanced at his uniform and said, "What a mess. Up, soldier. Now."

Obediently, Shin pulled up General Thorne. He hastily put a supporting arm under the general, helped him over a log, and they slowly headed to where the bank of the river may have been.

"Need to establish a command center," Thorne said, surveying his options. "Over there," he indicated with a tip of his head. "That cluster of logs. Plenty of places to sit. We may be able to fashion a shelter out of it. We'll need to also erect a banner to tell other survivors where we are, and establish a camp."

"Sir, I think I should go back and try to find more survivors," Shin said, picking his way through the debris and helping the general around still and buried bodies. Shin thought it interesting that Thorne didn't seem to be bothered by stepping on his dead soldiers. Maybe he didn't notice.

"Yes, yes, of course. Send anyone you find over to me. You're not an officer anyway, are you?"

"No, sir," Shin sighed. "Just a corporal."

"A corporal? There seem to be a lot of you in the army today."

"Is that so?" Shin said. He felt his chest tighten and wondered why he didn't identify himself. Now was his chance to tell him his name, tell him of his willingness to serve—

"Guess it's not your fault you're nothing more than a corporal," Thorne said glibly. "Still, *aiding* me should qualify you for a medal. I should put you in for one when all of this is over."

"Yes, sir." Shin waited for the general to ask his name as they

came to the log jam, in order to put in for that medal.

Instead, all Thorne said was, “Find me an officer, Corporal,” as Shin lowered him to sit on a log.

“Yes, sir,” Shin answered, and it happened again: Thorne looked up into Shin’s face, and this time his muddied eyebrows furrowed as their eyes connected.

Shin held his breath, waiting for the moment that Thorne recognized his eyes, his nose, his mouth, his height, and he wondered what he would say if the general was too direct. Thorne was definitely studying him, confusion in his expression.

“Soldier,” Thorne finally said, “why is it your nose and mouth are clear, but your eyes and face are gray?”

Shin stared back at him, disappointed that was all he noticed. “Uh . . . oh. My kerchief.” He pulled it back up over his nose.

Thorne nodded. “Of course. Wished more men did that. I thought of it as well, and it probably saved my lungs. But it gives you an odd-looking face,” Thorne smiled partway, then he nodded dismissively. “An officer? Go get me one?”

Shin pulled the kerchief down again. “Yes, sir. Any particular rank?” He wasn’t sure why he suddenly felt so bold. Maybe because Thorne suggested the kerchief idea was his as well, even if there was no way he could have tied one on himself without help. Maybe that’s just what officers did, taking credit for other people’s ideas.

Thorne narrowed his eyes, as if trying to figure out if the corporal was being impertinent or just inquisitive. “As high as you can find them, Corporal.” He dismissed the corporal with a weakened left-handed salute.

Shin returned it and jogged back to the river.

TAKING CREDIT FOR OTHER’S IDEAS IS NOT WHAT ALL OFFICERS DO.

Shin ignored the voice and stopped by the soldier with a broken arm. He glanced at the dust-caked insignia on his shoulder. Just another corporal. “Who else was breathing?” he asked him.

“Right there,” the man gestured feebly. “But this one might be easier to free—”

Shouts in the distance interrupted him, and they looked up to the east. About a dozen filthy men were making their way to them.

“Over here!” Shin cried out, standing up and waving.

The men cheered and started jogging.

Quod waved them over. “Dig here! Plenty of survivors, and we don’t have much daylight left.”

“Any of you officers?” Shin called.

One man raised his hand. “Colonel Ferrim here!”

“General Thorne will be wanting to see you, sir. Over at that log jam.”

“Thorne’s alive?” Ferrim called back. “I swear, nothing can kill that man.” Shin couldn’t tell if he was pleased or disappointed by that as the officer broke away from the group and headed toward Shin. “Not Guardsers, not lightning, not even an exploding mountain or a mudslide!” he said as he jogged closer.

“Exploding mountain?” Shin asked as the officer neared.

“Mount Deceit has awakened. I mean, it seems to have *exploded*. This is it, right here, soldier.” He spread his hands out in front of him.

“The volcano?” Shin gulped. This couldn’t be *it*, could it?

“And well-named, too. See any thick, black dirt around us?” the colonel motioned to the terrain. “Deceitful. Not a bit of dirt came from that blasted mountain. Just . . . Creet, I don’t even know what to call this. But it’s a slagging mess! Where’s the general again?”

Shin pointed to the pile of logs.

Ferrim took off in a jog, hurdling obstacles in his way. “General! How’d you get through all of this?”

Shin didn’t hear the answer. He had a feeling he didn’t want to know what Thorne would say. Perhaps another story was in the making.

Instead, Shin found a digging stick and started to stab in frustration at the mud that encased another moaning soldier.

Peto took a deep breath and opened his wardrobe. He reached in under the sweaters and pulled out a thick parchment envelope. He already knew by heart the words on the document inside, but he wanted to read them one more time.

Ever since Relf told him a few days ago that Young Pere had joined the army, albeit only as a corporal, Peto had a sinking feeling inside.

Everyone else was still at the Briters, but Peto made an excuse to come back to the quiet house. He opened the envelope, pulled out the parchment, ran his hand over the signature of his grandfather, then raised his eyes to the line he dreaded to read.

“Where are the other soldiers?”

.. he had a dream, many times. He saw that his son, Perrin Shin, would become the greatest general Idumea . . .

Peto closed his eyes and sat down on the bed. “No . . . no . . . no . . .” he whispered. “That can’t be.” He opened his eyes and looked at it again. He wondered why he didn’t ask his grandfather more details about what he saw. Why did he just accept it that it referred to his *father*?

“Maybe it didn’t,” he whispered. “So many times I’ve wondered why we named him Perrin Shin the Younger. It never made sense to me, but now?” He looked up to the ceiling. “Grandfather, what if in your dreams you didn’t see your son, but your *great-grandson*? He looks nearly identical, and his name *is* Perrin Shin—”

But he hated that thought, with every inch of his soul. Peto dropped the parchment on the bed and held his head. “No . . . no . . . not my son. *He’s* not supposed to become the greatest general in Idumea, is he?”

He knew he had to say the words out loud to see how they felt, and they felt horrible. This *couldn’t* be right. How could someone so flippant and self-centered and reckless become the greatest general—

Except that *was* the very definition of every worldly general—
No. That was all there was to it. *Not Young Pere.*

Peto picked up the document and folded it almost forcefully. He shoved it into the envelope and slapped it back in his wardrobe under the sweaters.

Not Young Pere. He wasn’t meant to fulfill the Papa Pere Prophecy.

Peto sat again on the bed and folded his arms.
But what if he was?

By sundown, the army of survivors had grown to several hundred. Men, scattered everywhere by the mudslide, made their way to what used to be the river and found the torn blanket banner waving over a large bonfire, with a much-improved General Thorne standing nearby shouting orders and welcoming all the soldiers who wearily joined the camp.

Shin never left the river, or what was left of it, finding survivor after survivor, and digging out man after man. The more men he retrieved, the greater their army. The greater their army, the better chance they had to take Idumea.

And the better Shin might look when all of this was done.

Besides, how could he leave men in the mud all night long? He'd lost track of how many soldiers he found alive, but he didn't lose track of how often he went back to the makeshift camp and called for more volunteers to help him. It seemed many of the soldiers dug out a man or two, then felt too tired to continue and meandered back to Thorne's log jam.

By Shin's fourth visit back, he was losing his temper. There were only a few dozen men digging, but hundreds lounging around the logs. He couldn't understand it, nor did he want to. Such self-centered laziness would never have occurred in Salem.

"What's going on here?" he shouted as he strode out of the dark over to a group of men sitting around one of the many fires. "Scared of a little hard work in the dark? Then bring a torch! We've got survivors still waiting to be rescued, and you men feel no guilt about sitting here and *relaxing*?"

One of the soldiers defiantly stood up, apparently thinking he was bigger than the corporal. Marching over to him made him realize he wasn't. Still, he wasn't about to back down.

"I've been caked in mud all day. I'm exhausted—"

"Wait," Shin stopped him with a firm hand on his chest. "So you confess to *lying around* all day in the mud? How can you be exhausted *now*?"

Several of the men snickered.

"I haven't eaten since breakfast!" the soldier defended.

"Neither have I, and neither have the men still suffering out there!"

"Let others dig them out. I already dug out three men."

"You really think that's enough?" Shin yelled. "Because I don't!"

The argument was enough to draw the attention of a group of officers several dozen paces away, talking with Thorne.

Thorne signaled for some of the officers to see what the commotion was about, and three of them went over to the arguing soldiers.

But Shin didn't bother with them. He was too worked up, bellowing at the crowd, "No one should be resting here until every last breathing man has had his time by the fire! If you can walk, you're

able-bodied. If you can crawl, you can help identify the breathing. Now I want some of you to grab burning logs for light, and all of you to get back out there!”

Conversations around other fires died away and many men stood up to watch the shouting match.

The colonel sent by Thorne raised his hands in a calming gesture. “Soldier, soldier. Do we have a problem here?”

Shin nearly rolled his eyes at his inanity. “*Your* army’s out there waiting for a rescue! Get out there and dig them up!”

“Watch yourself, boy!” the colonel shouted back. “Just who do you think you are, issuing orders?”

“I’m nobody. I know that. But I also know that at least two dozen of these men wouldn’t be here if I didn’t personally dig them out. Now they *each* need to do the same for another dozen more, or so help me, I will take each of them and stick them *back* in the mud!”

The colonel’s mouth dropped open in surprise, but the two other officers with him smiled in appreciation.

“Son, you’re absolutely correct,” said a major.

“But we’re tired!” cried out a voice.

“And I haven’t eaten!” whined another. Dozens of others chorused in agreement.

Shin’s chest heaved. “I don’t believe what I’m hearing!” he roared. “The greatest army the world has ever produced, whining like little children? What’s wrong with you, men? So your *tummies* are grumbling. So your *eyes* are sleepy. Next you’re going to ask for a bedtime story and a kiss goodnight? I thought I was serving with *men*! I thought this was going to be the day of our greatest triumph! I fully expected to be sleeping in Idumea tonight with nicks on my sword and other men’s blood on my jacket. Instead, I’ll be doing something greater. I’ll be digging out my fellow soldiers with my bare hands and saving lives, not taking them. I still plan to march into Idumea, with my sword ready. But when I go it will be with arms stronger from digging. I still plan to be triumphant.” He drew his sword and held it up, gesturing as if he could puncture holes in the dark sky. “And I also plan to bloody this. Does anyone here want to be the first to break in my sword?! Because I’m more than ready to use it tonight! Or are you going to join me out there to dig up our army?”

The three officers stared, stunned by Shin’s brazenness.

But another soldier stood up. “Tell me where to go, sir, and I’ll go.” Several other men stood up as well.

The colonel was starting to open his mouth, but Shin shouted again. “Who else wants glory? Who else wants to claim he helped take over the world? Who else is with me?!”

Dozens of men jumped to their feet, raising their swords. Dozens more followed, cheering, until every soldier who could stand was on his feet with his sword raised, shouting.

“Now get out there, two by two, spread out, and find the rest of our army! We still have Idumea to take!” Shin shouted.

Hundreds of men cheered and rushed out to the mud, many of them grabbing flaming logs from the bonfire for light.

Shin sheathed his sword with a furious motion, spun on his heel, and marched back to the darkness.

AND THAT IS HOW YOU RUN AN ARMY—BY TAKING CARE OF THE MEN!

And THAT, he thought to himself, is how you run an army: by taking care of the men.



The colonel stared at the major. “He’s only a corporal. I could make out the patch under the mud.”

The major immediately understood. They couldn’t have anyone appear to be undermining the general. He jogged after the tall corporal and caught him by the arm.

“Whoa, whoa, son—” But the ferocity in the young soldier’s eyes caught him by surprise.

He released his arm, because he wanted to keep in working order. “Just wanted to congratulate you, soldier. Good work. Didn’t catch your name, though.”

He stared right through him. “Doesn’t matter. I’m nothing more than a *corporal*, after all.” He turned and jogged away.

“Oh, boy,” the major murmured. Nervously, he turned around and noticed that General Thorne had joined the waiting colonel and lieutenant colonel. The colonels’ expressions were stiff with apprehension as the major returned.

“That was quite a show, wasn’t it?” Thorne said with a nasty edge to his tone. “I believe I ordered each of the able-bodied men to dig out five soldiers. What has *he ordered*?”

“A dozen per man,” the colonel said hesitantly. “And he seems to have a different definition of able-bodied.”

Thorne’s face went taut. “What was his name?”

“Not sure, sir,” answered the colonel.

“Where are the other soldiers?”

“Rank?”

“Corporal,” the major told him.

“A corporal . . .” Thorne mumbled. “He was tall, right?”

“Yes, sir. Very.”

“Dark hair?”

“Unsure. Everyone looks gray tonight.”

“Belong to any of you?”

The officers shook their heads.

“Did he . . . did he strike any of you as *familiar*?”

“No sir,” said the colonel, and the other men frowned.

Thorne stared off into the distance, rotated his left shoulder, then pulled down on his jacket. “Go find him. Keep an eye on him.”

“Any suggestions on how to find him now, sir?” asked the colonel almost timidly.

General Thorne glared at him before turning to his fire.

Corporal Shin awoke on the 58th Day of Weeding to see a hazy sun rising in the east. He lifted his head wearily and realized the side of his face was stiff and itchy with mud. Eventually he sat up and looked around. He was in the middle of the mudslide, west of the trickling river. How and when he fell asleep he still wasn't sure.

There were no bodies around him, but holes were men had been. Patches of what happened came back to him. It was very late. He'd found three men still conscious but in too deep to pull themselves out. He'd dug out one, then together they excavated the other two. He remembered watching them crawl to the far riverbank, making their way upstream to the bonfires. That must have been when he fell asleep.

He looked up to the log jam and saw the smoke of several fires still going. It was too much to hope that someone had figured out breakfast.

Noticing he was alone, he took off his pack and found in it the four biscuits he'd snatched at breakfast the day before. He wished he had listened when his conscience told him to grab a dozen more. He pulled out two biscuits and quickly ate them, hoping it would be enough to calm the growling in his stomach. Then he replaced the pack, stood up, noticing every muscle aching, and trudged back to the camp.

As he neared he realized more men had arrived. Two thousand had come from the eastern forts, having lost one third of their soldiers to the blowing ash. Those soldiers had emergency rations with them which were promptly cut up and divided up among the survivors.

The camp now held nearly four thousand soldiers, most of them still hungry.

Shin got there just in time to receive a chunk of hard bread and a slice of dried pork. He chewed on them as he listened to the soldiers around him telling their stories to those who had just arrived from the coast.

“It just came out of nowhere! Huge cloud, then the wall of mud.”

“Some are saying now it was Mount Deceit. The general’s sent scouts north to see what happened and to try to find supplies. The supply barns in the south were only a few hundred paces away from the river, so no one’s sure if the food reserves survived. Thorne’s battle captain is supposed to be there in charge. We’re hoping someone comes with good news by midday meal time.”

“Honestly, I’ll be amazed if any of us survive,” said a sullen voice. “We may wish we were with those dead in the mud.”

“Now, don’t talk like that! We’ve got the greatest general leading us! If Thorne can survive, so can all of us!”

“Did you hear about that?”

“No, what happened?”

“Well, first the cloud came and one of Thorne’s officers was bucked off his horse. He hit his head or something. So Thorne single-handedly carried him to some colonel’s camp, then went back to a clump of trees and rescued a soldier who was lost over there.”

Shin stopped chewing and tried to think when that might have happened.

“Then Thorne and a lieutenant realized a chain of men were trying to make their way to the river, but before he could stop them, the mudslide came through. Thorne was even caught in it and was knocked unconscious, but came to and was able to dig his way out. He found other survivors and got everyone digging out the rest of the army.”

Shin didn’t blink, didn’t breathe, and didn’t swallow. He just sat there, silently fuming like an angry volcano. No one noticed.

“Last night—who was that officer who got everyone out to the river to dig again?”

“Not sure. Heard he was related to Thorne somehow, like a long-

“Where are the other soldiers?”

lost nephew or something. Thorne was trying to give him a chance at leading the men.”

“He got me up and moving, that’s all I know. I wouldn’t want to meet up with him in a dark alley. The man was huge!”

Shin’s jaw shifted as he pondered just how deftly the stories had grown—or maybe they were deliberately planted—to place Thorne in the best possible light.

But a small smile developed. After all, it wasn’t the story’s veracity, it was its effect. And the effect, he realized, was to get the soldiers to do great things.

He’d noticed how each of the dozens of faces around him reflected hope when they heard how Thorne had “escaped” the mudslide. If a one-armed man could persevere, so could they.

For a moment Shin considered exposing Thorne’s lies and revealing himself as the soldier from last night, but it occurred to him that he, too, was now a part of the stories, as Thorne’s “relative” or something, as someone “huge,” and therefore, as someone with power.

He let the stories go, and pondered how he could keep himself as a main character.

Chapter 36--“Third problem is the identity of *that corporal.*”

“Several problems, men,” Thorne said in a low voice as he addressed the collected officers around him. The sun was trying to burn through the thick haze that still left everything in gray around them. There were nearly thirty officers and higher ranked enlisted men seated on logs pulled from the debris. The rest of the army that was healthy enough were fanned out looking for more survivors. A few hundred men lay on the drying mud, too weak to move. Midday meal, which should happen in a few short hours, was nowhere to be found.

“First, the supply barns on the border are mostly intact, but two have been cleaned out by panicking residents. Our soldiers stationed there have secured the others, but they had to kill many civilians to do so. That may cause a future relations problem until the details are clarified.”

The officers nodded, because each of them knew what “details are clarified” meant: the official story would be released when the best story could be devised.

“Second, there’s no available means to get the remaining supplies here. The lieutenant who arrived with the news came on the only horse he could find. Most succumbed to the ash. We’ll have to march the soldiers four miles south just to get them a meal.”

The officers groaned.

“Sir, so many of them are injured. How do we transport them?”

“The men are too weak. Most will never make it.”

“Can’t a few of the soldiers there be spared to bring us enough supplies to feed us for one meal? Then some more *might* be able to make it down there.”

“I already thought through those scenarios,” Thorne said tiredly, as if they were wasting his time. “Captain Lick didn’t think they could

“Third problem is the identity of *that corporal*.”

spare any men. Soldiers are digging out the survivors from the mudslide, and our fifty strongest are guarding the remaining food reserves from aggressive citizens.”

“What happened to the rest of the army?” another man dared to ask.

“Still looking for them,” the general admitted. “Just before the border, the mudslide expanded even more. They have the same problem we have, but with fewer soldiers to dig. It’s imperative we get down there as soon as possible to help.”

The officers shared the same look.

“General,” a colonel began bravely, “half these men can barely crawl. We’re running rapidly out of water. They’ll be dead by dinner, and you expect us to be at the Pools fort by then?”

“*Province 2 fort*,” Thorne corrected. “And they’ll make it with the proper motivation,” he said evenly. “Surviving is proper motivation.”

“That officer last night,” a major remembered, “the one who got everyone digging again. Where is he?” He looked around expectantly. “He knows how to motivate!”

A few of the men shifted uncomfortably and watched Thorne.

The general stared at the major. “He was no officer,” he said between clenched teeth.

“What? Really?”

“Really,” said Thorne heavily. “We have word that he’s nothing more than a corporal.”

The major prodded the officer next to him. “That was some corporal. Even *I* drew my sword—”

The officer he addressed widened his eyes in a warning, and the major’s enthusiasm faded as he realized Thorne was glaring at him.

“Third problem,” he said coolly, “is the identity of *that corporal*. I asked last night that he be tracked down, but none of you seem to be able to find him now. Certainly our sword-drawing soldier hasn’t vanished like a *spirit* now, has he?”

A staff sergeant cleared his throat. “Sir? I may have an idea as to who it is.”

Thorne looked at him hungrily.

“Sir,” he cleared his throat nervously again, “was he the one who, uh, who *helped locate* you?”

Thorne’s eyes pierced the man who was trying desperately not to revise the general’s now oft-repeated story. But more pressing was the need to identify the young man who hundreds of weary and injured

men willingly followed into the dark.

“Perhaps,” said Thorne, aware that the officers were watching him intently. “He may be the one who *aided* in getting me to the bank.”

The sergeant grew pale.

“Quod,” one of the officers said. “What’s wrong? Do you know him?”

Sergeant Quod nodded slowly. “He, uh, he *aided* me as well. General, sir—he’s from *your* fort.”

“*My* fort?! Are you sure?”

Quod nodded again, and looked like he didn’t want to. “He said his name was . . . Corporal *Shin*.” He held his breath in anticipation.

The response from the officers was mixed. Several laughed at the name. A few others rolled their eyes, but many of them panicked.

Someone murmured, “Colonel Offra! Remember what Colonel Offra said? They were coming back!”

Thorne rose to his feet. “He’s just a corporal!” he barked. “There’s nothing to this . . . *this rumor!* Now, stop this! If I wanted terrified girls around me, I would have brought Major Kroop along!”

A few officers chortled, the rest fell silent.

Quod nodded vigorously. “Of course, of course. He did tell me he was fogged when he took the name. But then there was . . .” He stopped.

Thorne took a step toward him. “What? What else did he say? How long did the two of you talk?”

“Just for a few minutes, sir, while he was digging me out and examining my head. He, uh, he . . . said something odd.”

“Well? What?”

“Slow Growth Oak.”

“*What?*”

Quod looked anxiously around before continuing. “We were speculating about the mudslide, and Shin said he recognized one of the trees as a Slow Growth Oak, and that they grow only . . . in the forests.”

Now even some of the officers who had rolled their eyes stared at Sergeant Quod, along with everyone else.

Someone whispered, “Guarders! The Shins became Guarders!”

“It’s the only explanation—”

“STOP IT! NOW!” Thorne bellowed to the circle. “There are no Guarders! Haven’t been for years! They’re extinct! He knows the forest because we take our soldiers on drills there! Slow Growth Oak?”

“Third problem is the identity of *that corporal.*”

What makes you think he didn't make up the name? Yes, there are scrubby little oak trees *on the edge* of the forests where all soldiers can see them. What an uncreative name, made up by a *boy* who was recruited out of a *fog* and didn't know any better than to take the name of *Shin*. He probably has a name for everything. Shiny Long Sword. Smelly Right Sock. Snotty Little Nose. It means nothing, men. I saw him last night as well. Agitated. Hungry. Ready for a fight. Exactly how I want my soldiers to be. Ready to run into the dark to find anything that moves. Ready to destroy anything that stands in his way. I assure you, his name is NOT Perrin Shin! Perrin Shin is DEAD! What you saw last night was nothing more than a boy who is a motivated, well-trained soldier *from my fort* eager for battle! *Is that clear?*”

“Yes, sir!” thirty voices rang out automatically.

Thorne turned slowly, meeting the eyes of each man. They each returned his solid gaze.

“Now,” the general said in a calmer tone. “First, let's try to find some horses. There are farms around here. I want groups heading in all directions. Let's commandeer whatever kind of transportation we can. Wagons, mules—anything that can help carry the wounded. Second, let's do one final check of the river for survivors. If there are no more, order the men to rest until the transportation arrives. Third, inform the soldiers that a big meal is waiting for them at dinner time. All they have to do is walk to it. Four miles isn't that far. Remind them they are building muscle. And fourth . . . each of you, and I mean *each of you*, watch for a tall man named Shin, perhaps still wearing a kerchief around his neck. I want him by my side. I will prove to you he is nothing more than a corporal.”

THEY'RE COMING TO LOOK FOR VOLUNTEERS. BE ONE OF THEM.

I don't need your help, old man. I'm fine on my own.

THEY'RE NOT AFRAID OF YOU. THEY'RE AFRAID OF ME. YOU REALLY THINK THAT WAS YOU LAST NIGHT, ROUSING THE ARMY? WHERE DID ALL THOSE WORDS YOU SHOUTED COME FROM, CORPORAL?

Be quiet, old man.

Corporal Shin was digging, again, trying to pull out the boot of another soldier he'd just rescued. He had stripped off his jacket and undershirt that had dried stiffly, the heat of the day already making him sweat. The man he pulled out was crawling slowly to the camp,

south of Shin's location.

Shin looked up to check on his progress when he saw a young officer approaching. The dozen men digging in that area looked up as well.

"Soldiers!" called the officer. "Are any of you interested in doing something else? General Thorne is looking for volunteers to locate wagons and horses. We're attempting to move everyone down to the fort at Province 2 where there's plenty of food and water, but we need transportation for the wounded."

"Where are we supposed to look?" Shin called back.

VOLUNTEER. VOLUNTEER.

"Farms," announced the lieutenant. "We need a group from here to head to the northeast. We need to gather as many animals as possible."

Go. Go. Go.

Shin threw down his stick and sighed at the voice in his ear. "I'll go," he said, trying to get up. But for some reason, his leg stiffened and he struggled to get up.

"Are you sure you're strong enough, soldier?" the lieutenant eyed him.

Shin looked up as the officer walked over. "Don't I *look* strong enough?"

The lieutenant winced as he assessed Shin's muscular and bare upper body. "Of course, of course." He wasn't ready to take on a challenge, even if the challenger was stuck, sitting in mud.

Shin extended his leg to rub it. "Just a cramp. Are we going as a body, or individually?"

"As a group," the lieutenant said. "You're meeting over there by that lone pine tree. A captain will lead you."

"I'll go too," said another soldier. His companion nodded as well.

"Good, good!" smiled the lieutenant as the two other soldiers stood up. He glanced back down at Shin who was reaching for his undershirt and jacket.

Shin glared up at him. "Anything else you have to say, *sir*?" he said as he slid on his dirty undershirt.

"No, not at all. What's your rank, by the way?"

"Are all officers obsessed by that question?" Shin sneered. "Corporal, *sir*!"

The lieutenant licked his lips nervously. "Are you, uh, by any chance from . . . Province 8?"

“Third problem is the identity of *that corporal*.”

“No!”

The lieutenant immediately relaxed. “Good luck to you, men. You’ll be leaving in a few minutes. Look for sources of water as well. What’s left of the river is nearly gone, as you can plainly see.”

Corporal Shin stood by the lone pine tree. Half of it was dried and dead, the other half looked like it would match it soon. Two dozen men stood with him, watching as a captain jogged over to them, dodging debris.

“Good, excellent,” he said with a firm nod of his head. “Keep your swords ready. Very few citizens understand the need of surrendering their animals and wagons to the greater good of the army. It’s up to us to help them understand that,” he said, resting his hand on his hilt. His soil-dark skin and hair had dried mud caking it, making him appear a much older man than he was. He was likely only in his late twenties, but was aged gray by the ash.

Shin folded his arms. “Exactly *how* do you expect us to help them understand, *sir*?”

“By whatever means necessary, soldier. Where’s your uniform?”

“Right here.” He held up his pack where he had stuffed his jacket. “It’s heavy with mud. I work better without it.”

“Where are you from, soldier?”

“Mountseen.” He’d decided earlier that answer would require less explanation. “Province 4.”

The captain smiled coldly. “You will get farther with the villagers if they see the uniform. People respect the uniform.”

“They also fear it, sir.”

“All the more reason to wear it when we near the farms, soldier.”

“Is fear the best way to proceed, sir?”

The captain blinked in surprise at the insubordinate behavior. “Soldier?”

“Aren’t these people frightened enough?” Shin pointed out. “Do we really need to come in and terrorize them for their last possessions?”

Now the captain folded his arms. “And what do you suggest? Walking up to their doors, knocking, and asking, ‘May I *please* borrow your lame mule? I have a few thousand men to move?’”

The other soldiers sniggered.

Shin was unmoved. “Why not?”

The captain scoffed. “*Why not?* I’ll tell you why not! Because they won’t agree!”

“How do you know?”

“Boy, what’s your rank?”

Shin sighed heavily at the useless question and glared at the captain. “Just a corporal. *Sir.*”

The captain raised an eyebrow at his defiant tone.

Shin matched his look. “All I’m suggesting, *sir*, is that we approach the farmers, explain the situation, then tell them that we’re taking their wagons and animals. If they want them back, they can come down to Province 2 in a few days and retrieve them. Saves us the bother.”

“You thought we were going to *return* their animals?” the captain scoffed again.

Shin shifted his stance. “No,” he lied, and repeated the words which came easily to his mind. “But consider this—right now we need the support of the villagers, don’t we? If we’re to invade Idumea successfully, wouldn’t it be smart to have local support? If we anger those living here, and if the offensive doesn’t go well, this will be our site of retreat. Wouldn’t it serve us better if the villagers see us as defenders of their homes instead of as aggressors on their farms? What if they’re led to believe we’re their last line of defense before the southern forces? Wouldn’t they eagerly hand over their wagons to keep the peace?”

The captain stared at him for several seconds, his jaw working.

Shin could tell the captain knew he was right. The words had flowed so effortlessly into his mind, there simply was no reasonable way to argue them.

“Corporal . . . what did you say your name was?”

“Briter. Corporal Lek Briter.” For once he remembered the name, and his jacket with the wrong name patch was securely in his pack.

“Good,” he said quietly, seemingly relieved. “Briter, I’ll consider your suggestion. In fact, I’ll let you be the first one to try it out. If you succeed, we’ll continue with your plan. If you fail, all of us get to get in some sword practice.”

The soldiers laughed and fell into line behind the captain who started in a quick march northeast.

Shin stepped in at the end to follow the path made by the soldiers ahead of him trudging through the thick gray ash that was now drifting

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in the breeze like snow in the middle of Raining Season.

WELL DONE, YOUNG PERE! YOU LISTENED TO ME PRECISELY. THAT'S WHAT MAKES AN EXCELLENT SOLDIER: OBEDIENCE. NOW, RECOMMEND TURNING NORTH AT THOSE TREES. WELL, WHATEVER'S LEFT OF THEM.

Shin was too tired to dismiss the insistent voice in his head. It was just easier to let it babble, and repeat it. It seemed to know what it was talking about.

TELL THEM YOU SAW HORSES IN THE AREA ON THE WAY DOWN.

We didn't come down that way.

THE CAPTAIN JOINED FROM THE WEST AND ISN'T GOING TO KNOW THAT NOW, IS HE?

Shin shrugged as they neared the clump of trunks that used to be tall maples. He broke ranks and jogged up to the captain.

“Sir? I recommend we head north here. I remember seeing a large herd of horses up some ways. When we were coming in,” he added awkwardly.

The captain looked around. “I'm not familiar with the area, so north we'll try.”

Shin turned back to fall into line.

“Briter—wait. Walk with me, Corporal.”

Shin cringed but obediently took the spot next to the captain.

“What's your strategy going to be, Briter, should we find animals there?”

“My strategy?” Shin thought quickly as he trudged through the grayness. “Walk up, tell them the need, and tell them how to get the animals back.”

The captain laughed shortly. “Just that easy, eh, boy?”

“May I borrow your jacket, sir? It may have more authority coming from a captain than a muddy corporal.”

The captain gave him a sidelong glance. “You're rather larger than I am, Briter. Not sure the jacket would fit.”

“Do you think they'd really notice? Two dozen filthy soldiers standing at their front door? Their minds might be occupied by something more besides trying to find me a tailor.”

The captain laughed. “I like you, Briter. Quick mind! Not enough of your kind in the army. Honestly, I think you're going to fail, and fail big, and I'm looking forward to your humiliation. But I always appreciate imaginative thinking. You can borrow my jacket for the first door. Let's see just how well you do. In fact, how about we make a little wager?”

“I’m not much of a betting man, sir.”

“Oh, even better. Tell you what, Briter. For every horse you get from this first house, I will compose a verse of song in your honor.”

Shin glanced sideways at him. That was the oddest offer he’d ever heard. “Sir?”

One of the men behind him laughed. “Take it, Briter. Captain Nelt’s songs are the pride of the army!”

Another man called up, “Sir, did you write the one that begins, ‘There once was a brunette from Grasses?’”

The captain turned and lazily saluted the men trudging behind him. “I actually knew her, and every word is true, boys!”

The men sniggered.

Shin fought the blush. Every soldier knew that anatomically impossible song. The first time he heard it there were a few phrases that needed to be explained to him, and he regretted asking as soon as he learned their meanings.

The captain grinned at the men’s appreciation of his work. “Nice to hear that my lyrics have gotten around. And, Briter, if you fail, you’ll walk back to camp in your underwear, bottom only. Then I *still* get to make up a song. And it will begin, ‘There once was a snock named Briter, who didn’t know how to delight her. . .’”

The men behind them laughed. “Take it, Briter! I want to see and hear this!”

But Shin was intensely uncomfortable. “Sir, I’m not so sure—”

“That the song won’t be true, or that you’ll succeed? Neither am I.” He lowered his voice and put a friendly arm around him as they walked. “Now, Corporal, don’t you think we could use a little morale boost right now? A little distraction to keep our minds off of starving to death? Is that really too much to ask?” The captain jostled him significantly.

Shin gulped. “I’ll take the bet, sir,” he announced loudly.

The men behind them cheered.

“Sir,” called another soldier, “did you ever know the Slashing Sow? Ever make up a song about her?”

The captain shivered and released Shin to turn around. He walked backward as he spoke, nearly stumbling a few times in the ash. “If I did meet her, all of my songs would be pitched a lot higher. Ever since she started making the fort rounds, I vowed never to be alone with a beautiful blond woman. That’s good advice for all of you.”

Shin turned pink as he listened to the graphic descriptions of how

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one young woman with a saucy smile and an army-issued long knife demonstrated her hatred of the soldiers in the forts she visited. He tried to ignore the conversations as he scanned the horizon looking for anything that might promise a horse or two.

Ahead of them, the hazy gray air began to clear enough to reveal several long, low buildings. There seemed to be no movement outside, but a large house was off to the right of the buildings.

The captain guided the soldiers over to it, and Shin thought he heard a muffled whinny from the direction of the buildings covered in ash.

When they were about one hundred paces away, Nelt took off his jacket and handed it to the corporal.

“I suppose this is what they call a field promotion,” he smirked as Shin struggled to get the jacket on.

The sleeves were too short, as was the jacket length, but it buttoned up well enough. The other soldiers laughed at his arms poking out.

Shin raised an eyebrow at the captain who stood in his dirty white undershirt. “You’re out of uniform, soldier,” he said gravely.

Nelt pointed at him. “Don’t get too comfortable, Briter. You’ll be wearing far less when we walk back. I can hardly wait.”

Sending Nelt a smile far cockier and confident than he felt, Shin marched up to the front door of the house. The other soldiers followed in formation and waited on the stairs while Shin stood on the front porch. He knocked loudly and a moment later the door hesitantly opened.

“No . . . No!” shouted a man, trying to force the door shut on him. But Shin had already lunged into the opening, keeping the door open with his body, and caught the man by the shirt.

“No one’s here to hurt you! I give you my word as an officer of the army. Please just listen to me. Look, my sword is in my sheath. I’m empty-handed. Just listen for two minutes. That’s all I ask.”

Someone else seemed to be standing behind the door, and the man exchanged an inquiring look with whomever it is. He turned back at Shin, saw the futility of trying to shut the door, and nodded nervously.

“Do you realize what’s happened?” Shin asked the man. “Do you understand that Mount Deceit has awakened? Has exploded?” he quickly amended.

The man nodded. “We suspected something like that, but weren’t sure.”

“Do you realize that you live only a few miles away from the border of Sargon?”

“Yes, obviously!”

“Do you have any idea what the condition of Idumea is in right now?”

“No. No one does.”

“Well, I do. We’ve received a report. An enormous mudslide, which took away our horses, has also taken away a great deal of their food stores. The people in Idumea are panicking. Many have already lost their lives rushing across the border to steal food from the fort at Province 2. Where do you think they will come next?”

The man gasped. “We don’t have any food! Not more than to get us by for a couple of days, then—”

A timid woman appeared behind him. “We don’t have enough for you, either!” she whimpered.

“I understand, ma’am. I’m not here for your food. We’re here to protect.”

The man scoffed. “Since when are Thorne’s men here to protect?”

Shin raised an admonishing eyebrow at him.

The man cowered. “I didn’t mean that, Captain. Dear Creator, please believe me! I—I—”

Shin held up his hand. “You’re feeling great anxiety and worry about this tremendously difficult situation. I understand completely. I’m not here to punish you, I’m here to help. We’re attempting to re-fortify the border. We have plenty of food, but it’s miles away. All I need is transportation. Horses. Wagons. Mules. Anything you have. The faster we can get there, the sooner we can ensure that no one from the south will be coming to break down your door.”

The man looked back at his wife.

She shrugged.

“We will relieve you of your animals only temporarily,” Shin told them. “We need them to get to the fort at Province 2. You’re free to come down in a couple of days and retrieve them.”

“You’re not keeping them?”

“Just borrowing, sir. So that we can fortify our border and keep you safe. Can I count on your help to keep you and your wife . . . and your daughter safe?”

The man looked behind him.

A teenage girl was standing at the bottom of a staircase, trembling at the captain whose large body held open the door.

“Third problem is the identity of *that corporal*.”

The man turned back. “How many horses do you need?” he asked quietly.

Shin fought a smile. “How many do you have?”

The man squinted. “Don’t you know where you are?”

“Not exactly. It’s been a disorienting couple of days,” he said with a faint smile.

The man smiled hesitantly back and opened the door a little more. “Actually, it’ll be easier on us if you do take them. Our hired hands didn’t come yesterday or today, and the three of us just can’t move that much feed. They’re already hungry again, but you could certainly take care of them. Come with me, Captain,” the man said, stepping out the front door. He hesitated when he saw the rest of the soldiers, but Shin put a reassuring hand on his shoulder. The man looked back at him, nodded, and headed for one of the long, low buildings.

“Not sure you have enough hands with you here,” he said to Shin as they waded across what may have been a field, the real captain following closely behind.

The man walked up to the doors. Shin glanced up and saw the words of a sign faintly under the ash that caked it, and he began to smile. The man threw open the doors.

“*Ah, Creet!*” Captain Nelt gasped.

Shin grinned.

The Stables of Pools were filled to capacity. Two hundred horses pawed the ground, anxious to get out.

WELCOME TO THE REST OF CLARK’S FAMILY. THIS IS WHERE MY FATHER ALWAYS CAME FOR HIS HORSES. TRY TO FIND ANOTHER LARGE BLACK HORSE, CAPTAIN.

The man sighed in resignation. “Take good care of them, will you? And the one hundred in the stable to the east? They’ll starve here anyway in the next few days. Please try to find them feed in Idumea. Now, Captain, my cousin down the road is a wainwright, or did you not know that he has a dozen wagons in his barns either?”

Shin patted the man on the back. “Excellent!” He turned to Captain Nelt and leered. “And just how many words rhyme with Briter, anyway?”

The rest of the soldiers guffawed as the captain shook his head in awe, gesturing helplessly. “I . . . I . . . Maybe there *are* spirits of the dead soldiers, boy, and they are with you. That’s all I can say.”

JUST THE SPIRIT OF ONE. AND YOU’RE WELCOME, BY THE WAY.

An hour and a half later Shin stood, still in the ill-fitting captain’s

jacket, directing the last of the wagons and the riders for the last fifty horses from the distant barn. When the first four riders had returned to camp, each leading two additional horses and requesting two hundred men to come help, Thorne had initially scoffed, not believing in their good fortune.

But when he saw the eagerness of the men and the quality of horses they rode, and learned that Captain Nelt and the soldiers with him were trying to move feed for two hundred ninety more horses, he ordered five more officers and the ablest soldiers to head northeast.

One of the officers who accompanied the two hundred men took a close look at Shin when he arrived at the Stables of Pools, turned as gray as his uniform, and quickly walked away.

Shin recognized him as well—the colonel from the night before, the man he told to get out and get digging.

Captain Nelt directed the last soldiers who arrived in retrieving the horses and hitching up the wagons, so that Shin could return to the man and his wife watching from their front porch. Their daughter peered out from a nearby window, where her parents had made sure no soldiers would see her.

As he walked up the steps, Shin extended his hand to shake the stable owner's hand.

"I appreciate your sacrifice and your trust in me," Shin said. "You're doing a great thing for the army today, and for Province 2."

The man smiled faintly and took his hand. "Sure your name's Nelt?" he nodded at the filthy label. "Sure it isn't something else? Something else . . . pre-fog?" He pointed to Shin's still-ragged tops of his ears.

"What do you mean?" Shin narrowed his eyes.

His wife nudged him and nodded.

"Nothing really," said the man. "It's just that you remind me of someone. Captain, do you know the real reason why I decided to give you the horses?"

Shin shook his head.

"It's what you said, when you first came to the door. You said, Mount Deceit *awakened*."

The corporal-captain didn't know what to do with that.

"Don't worry, Captain. I won't give away your secret. I know men in the army aren't supposed to put much stock in The Writings, but only a man familiar with them would say the mountain 'awakened'. The first guide's prophecy?"

“Third problem is the identity of *that corporal*.”

“Who do I remind you of?” The words came out of Shin’s mouth before he even realized it. He held his breath in anticipation.

The man’s wife slipped him an old piece of parchment. He looked down, fingered it fondly, and looked back up. “Years ago,” he said in a whisper, “there was another officer who knew The Writings. He was the last great man in the army. You remind me so much of him. Even your face. When I was a boy, he came to our family stables a few times. His father was High General and came here frequently to select horses.

“A few years before the officer was lost to the forest, the High General and his wife were killed in a most brutal manner. I was devastated by it. There was no family I respected more than theirs. I wrote the officer a letter, telling him how sorry I was about his parents. I was only nineteen years old. A season later he wrote me back. Can you imagine? A colonel in the army, writing back to a nobody boy like me. This is his note. I don’t know why I want you to see it, but I do. Here. Read it.”

Reluctantly, Shin took the old parchment. He opened it, trying to steady the shaking in his hands. His chest burned as he looked at the all-too familiar handwriting.

Roak, I'm sorry this note is coming to you so late. I haven't been well, but I wanted you to know that I was grateful for your letter. At this difficult time in my life it means a great deal to me that people throughout the world share in my pain and are concerned about my family's welfare.

You must be ready to take over the stables soon. You're a bright young man with great potential. Always remember who you really are, and you'll always succeed. I'll be sure to recommend you to everyone I know looking for a horse. May the Creator remember you as you remember the Creator.

Perrin Shin

Shin wasn’t sure what he was supposed to get from the note. When he first opened it he half expected to read something significant and profound. Seeing words from Puggah written long before he was born was at first jarring, but as he reached the end it was just anticlimactic.

He folded the note again and handed it back to the man with a nod.

“Did you see how he signed it? Not *Colonel* Shin, but *Perrin* Shin. He didn’t care about the rank. I wasn’t the only one to get a note, either. Hundreds of people wrote him, and the story was everyone heard back from him. Some even heard from his son and daughter. Captain Nelt, *this* is the kind of officer you have the potential to become.”

Shin narrowed his eyes. “The kind who writes notes?” he said evenly.

“No, the kind who actually cares about his people! The kind who remembers people’s names and goals, and serves to make a world a place where it’s still possible to reach those goals. That’s what a truly great leader is. Not someone who takes over the world, but one who makes his corner of it better for his people. I feel that potential in you, Captain. I see it in your eyes.” His voice was barely a whisper. “You could become someone like Colonel Shin. We desperately need a man like him again. Thorne leads only because no one else dares to do it better.”

Shin’s jaw worked as if to hold back words and he took a formal stance. “Thank you again, sir. I wish you well in retrieving the horses.”

The man sighed, sure that the young officer didn’t understand his message. He slipped the note into his shirt pocket. “I always wanted to thank him somehow for all the business he sent my way. We doubled the size of the stables because of him. It’s a little late, but I hope I’ve repaid the debt today.”

The captain nodded, turned without another word, and jogged down the stairs to a large black horse. He mounted it easily, despite it not having a saddle, and waved again to the man and his wife on the porch before he kicked it into a trot.

YOU’VE REPAID THE DEBT, ROAK, IN MORE WAYS THAN YOU CAN IMAGINE. THAT’S MY GRANDSON. THAT’S WHAT YOU SEE IN HIS EYES. I’M SURE YOU’LL KEEP THAT IN CONFIDENCE. HE’S LOST RIGHT NOW, AND KEEPS FORGETTING WHO HE REALLY IS. THANK YOU FOR REMINDING HIM. YOU’RE ONE OF THE FEW PEOPLE LEFT IN THE WORLD WHO COULD. BEAUTIFUL STALLION, BY THE WAY. SHOULD HAVE NAMED HIM CLARK.

The stable owner and his wife stood on the porch in profound silence for a full minute, watching as the last of their three hundred horses left into the gray bleak nothingness ahead.

Roak’s wife glanced around to make sure they were completely alone before making a little noise in her throat.

“Roak, have you ever thought of naming that horse . . . Clark?”

“Third problem is the identity of *that corporal*.”

she whispered.

He smiled softly. “Easier to call than Bucephalus, isn’t it? Shin looked good on him, didn’t he? There just might be hope for us yet, dearest.”

“Unbelievable!” Thorne said, his left hand on his waist, as he watched the procession of horses and wagons ride into the dusty camp.

A cheer rose up from the soldiers, and many of the wounded tried to sit up to see the sight.

Captain Nelt, still without his jacket, rode directly to Thorne and gave him a cheerful salute. “What do you think, General? Better than what we came with, wouldn’t you say?”

Thorne shook his head in amazement. “Nelt, you’re going to get a medal for this. We should be able to get all the wounded in to the fort at Province 2 within the hour! How did you do it?”

Nelt slid off the horse. “As much as I’d love to take credit for this, I can’t. It’s been all Briter’s doing.”

Thorne stopped watching the wagons coming in and turned sharply to the captain. “Briter? Briter who?”

“A corporal from Mountseen. Province 4,” he corrected himself. “He came along with us and made a little wager with me about being able to get a horse without swords. Well, he got three hundred, and now I have to make up a three-hundred-verse song! Composed the first four verses on the way back. Unfortunately, there aren’t a lot of good rhymes for Briter. Fighter, writer, biter—”

“Where’s your jacket, Nelt?” asked another officer.

“Funny thing, that,” Nelt said, nervously rubbing the curly black stubble on his chin. “If Briter lost, he was going to have to walk back here in only his bottom underwear—”

“Yep, that’s a Nelt bet all right.”

“But instead *I’m* the one coming back half undressed. He’s still wearing my jacket. Clever boy.”

Thorne stepped closer to the captain. “You let an *enlisted* man wear your uniform?”

Nelt folded his arms and boldly glared at the general. “To get into the house of the owner of the Stables at Pools, yes!”

Thorne narrowed his eyes. “Where’s this Briter?”

Nelt looked around. “Not sure, sir. He should be here soon. He

was the last to leave, just behind me some ways.”

“Captain, *Captain*,” Thorne simpered, “you let an enlisted man take your uniform, he now has a horse, and you wonder where he’s gone? I can think of a few places!”

Captain Nelt wasn’t convinced. “Where’s he going to go, sir? To a tavern for mead?”

Several other officers stepped away from him. It was never a good idea to challenge General Thorne or question his judgment.

“There’s nothing out there!” Nelt continued recklessly. “Everything is *dead*, sir! He’ll be here. Now sir, do you wish me to begin moving the wounded?”

But half an hour later, when the most severely injured were loaded into the wagons, even Captain Nelt began to get nervous. Briter was nowhere to be seen.

Nelt began to feel uncomfortable without his jacket, and wished briefly he had taken Briter’s out of his pack to wear instead of letting the corporal carry it. Thorne glaring at him didn’t help much, either. If Briter *did* find mead, Nelt thought, he better be bringing some back to his captain.

The scouts that Thorne sent down the river returned with news of a route they found to get to the fort, but it was going to take much longer than they anticipated to pick through the debris that seemed to extend forever to the east and west.

Thorne called together the officers again before sending on the wounded.

“Word is, they’ll be able to get down the more severely wounded there in about three to four hours, in time for dinner. But there’s not enough room to carry everyone. The soldiers who are too weak to walk will have to wait until morning.”

The officers groaned.

“General, they won’t be able to make it,” one of them said. “The river’s gone dry, we haven’t eaten at all today—morning may be too late for some of them.”

“We’ll eat,” Thorne assured them. “The wagons will come back tonight with supplies. It’ll be enough to get those who remain through the night.”

“But what about the horses?” asked another officer. “In this dusty ash, they’re going to need something to drink as well, or we’re going to have more corpses in the morning . . .” He drifted off when he noticed Thorne clenching and unclenching his fist, and the bulging vein

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in his forehead.

“Yes, *thank you*, Major,” the general began again in his sappy tone. “None of us have realized that, I’m sure. Do you have any *other* good news to point out for us? That perhaps all the villages north of us are devastated? That perhaps people and animals are starving and dying of thirst all over the world? Is there *anything else*?”

The major wasn’t in any condition to match the general’s sarcasm. He shook his head contritely and examined his boots instead.

“Now,” the general began again, “first priority is to get the wagons moving. Next is to locate water. It seems the springs around here are dry. We should use every last soldier and—hey! *Hey!*”

The officers turned to see what Thorne was yelling at. Down the line of wagons, wounded soldiers were being removed from a wagon, and two empty ones were being driven east in a trot, disappearing in clouds of ash.

Thorne jogged to the emptying wagon, his officers on his heels. “What’s going on here?”

“Water, sir!” said a soldier, holding the reins to a team. “We just received word that there’s a fresh spring, so we’re taking the wagons to fill them up. Look how tight the workmanship is on these beds. *Watertight!* Permission to retrieve water, sir?”

“Who gave the command to the other wagons?”

“A captain, sir. On a black horse. You can see him riding off in the distance there. Nelt, I believe, sir.”

Thorne spun around to face the real Captain Nelt who was trying to make out his imposter in the hazy distance.

“That’s right,” Nelt smiled uneasily. “We *did* tell them to look for sources of fresh water. In the excitement of getting the horses, I forget the other order. But Briter didn’t. Guess I’ll have to add another verse. I was looking for an excuse to use the word ‘blighter’ anyway.”

Thorne ran his hand roughly through his hair.

The soldier holding the reins nodded hopefully in the direction of the spring.

“Permission granted to go get water!” Thorne barked.

The soldier slapped the horses and followed in pursuit.

“Nelt!” Thorne yelled, even though the captain was only two feet away. “Follow them, get back your jacket, and bring me that *corporal!*”

Nelt saluted and took the reins of a horse offered by a colonel.

A thought occurred to him as details of the day’s events presented

themselves in his mind. Before he mounted, he stepped over to Thorne who was watching the wagons head off in the dusty distance.

“Sir,” Nelt said in a low voice, “I hadn’t heard yet, but have we located Corporal Shin?”

Thorne didn’t need to say anything. His furious eyes were answer enough.

Nelt gulped, mounted, and spurred the horse into a run east.



“I know it doesn’t sound very palatable, but our boots are the only means of transporting the water to the wagons. First, wash them thoroughly in the runoff here. We need to keep the spring pure. Think of it as inspection day, and if you don’t get those boots sparkling, inside and out, you’re demoted back down to private,” said the barefoot captain who slid off the black horse.

The soldiers jumped off the wagons and obediently took off their boots, submerged them in the runoff of the large blue pool sheltered by a series of large and precisely stacked rocks, and began to scrub the leather with their hands. The captain already had his boots cleaned and was filling them with water from another runoff point, then pouring the water into the wagon.

“As clean as this, men!” he held up his spot-free boots.

“Sir, wouldn’t it be easier to bring the horses and men here?”

“The horses will muddy it. It’d be contaminated before the first horse finished drinking. And I fear some of the soldiers will be so eager they’ll not restrain themselves. This will initially take longer, I agree, but at least everyone will be filled.” He submerged his boots again into the runoff of the spring.

He looked up to see a third wagon arrive, and a jacketless rider on a horse next to it. The captain stood up, dumped the water into the wagon bed, and put his boots carefully on the edge. He began to take off his ill-fitting jacket as the rider slid off his horse and jogged over to him.

“Sorry about the jacket sir, but I—”

Nelt ran past Shin, searching the area. He found what he wanted on a large rock that had been brushed clean of ash, and snatched up the corporal’s pack.

Anxiously, Shin walked over to him. “Captain, what are you looking for?”

“Third problem is the identity of *that corporal*.”

Nelt opened the pack and yanked out the muddy jacket. He dropped the pack in the ash and unfurled the jacket to find the name patch, caked in gray, but readable.

SHIN.

Nelt gripped the jacket. “Come with me, boy!”

“But sir, we need to keep the spring clear—”

“Lieutenant!” Nelt shouted at a young officer cleaning his boots. “You are now in charge of this spring. Keep it pure and supervise the filling of the wagons. This *soldier* and I need to discuss a few things!”

Nelt grabbed Shin by the arm and dug his fingers into his muscle.

“This way, *Shin*,” he whispered fiercely, directing him to a pile of large rocks and dying shrubs about fifty paces from the spring.

“Captain Nelt, I’m sorry but—”

“Shut up until we’re clear of the men,” Nelt hissed.

He marched Shin as quickly as he could to the rocks, never releasing his grip. Only after they were on the other side of the outcropping and out of view did he let Shin go before slamming him into a boulder.

“Just who are you? The honest truth now!”

“I was coming out of a fog when I was recruited,” Shin tried not to stammer. “I gave my name as Pere Shin.”

“Why?”

Shin shrugged helplessly. “I don’t know why I did a lot of things that week, sir. Ever taken the vials?”

“I’m not on trial here, boy! You are, or *will be*!” He shoved him against the rock again as if worried he’d make a run for it. “What’s your real name? Your family?”

“Lek Briter, sir. From Mountseen.” He recited the story he’d made up many moons ago. “Distantly related to the Briter who married into the Shin family. If I had a needle and thread, I’d change the Shin name on my uniform this instant, sir, to Briter.”

Captain Nelt snatched his jacket out of Shin’s hands and gave him back his own jacket. “Put it on. Now. NOW!”

Shin jumped and slipped on his jacket.

Nelt shook his head as he put on his own. “I don’t know what to do with you, I really don’t. You’re the one last night who ordered everyone to dig, right?”

Shin nodded, bashfully.

“Did you also pull Thorne from the mud?”

He nodded again.

“He didn’t dig himself out, now, did he?”

Shin hesitated, then shook his head.

“Of course he didn’t. And now, you’ve found us three hundred horses, thirty wagons, and a fresh spring. Creet, boy . . . how much more upstaging of General Thorne do you think he’ll take?”

Trembling, Shin finished the last button his jacket. “I’m sorry, sir? I don’t understand—”

“*You’re saving the army, boy!*” Nelt threw his hands in the air.

ACTUALLY, I’M SAVING THE ARMY . . .

“You’re doing the general’s job better than he is!”

ANYONE COULD DO HIS JOB BETTER THAN HE IS . . .

“Tell me, boy, how long have you been serving?”

“A little more than three seasons, sir,” he confessed meekly.

“Three seasons? You’re not even supposed to be *out* here!”

“I snuck in, sir.”

Nelt rolled his eyes. “How old are you, Briter-Shin?”

“Eighteen, sir. I’ll be nineteen near the beginning of Harvest.”

Nelt covered his face with his hands. “*Eighteen*. Creet and all that’s in Creation . . . I thought you were *at least* five years older.” He dropped his hands. “Do you have *any* idea what kinds of problems you’ve made for yourself?! I like you, boy, I really do. You have great potential, and truthfully, I don’t know if I could’ve gotten those horses. No one else has found any springs still with water—how did you do that, anyway?”

Shin licked his lips nervously. “My father. Kind of a *survivalist*. Has a way of finding anything, and he taught me a few things.”

LIKE HOW TO LISTEN TO YOUR GRANDFATHER WHEN HE TELLS YOU TO HEAD SOUTHWEST TO FIND ONE OF THE HUNDREDS OF REASONS WHY THIS PLACE WAS NAMED ‘POOLS’ IN THE FIRST PLACE . . .

Nelt studied him. “What are we going to do with you? Thorne wants you at his side immediately, and it’s not to congratulate you. Half of the officers think you’re *him*, and I should’ve identified you before I took you away from the camp, but you lied to me!”

Shin was confused. “Him? What do you mean, *him*?”

Nelt sighed. “Some of the officers, those who knew Colonel Offra, sometimes listened too much to him. He used to say Colonel Perrin Shin was going to return to get his revenge.”

THIS LOOKS LIKE REVENGE?

Shin nodded slowly. “I’ve heard a little of that. No one will tell me the full story, though.”

Nelt scoffed. “Because they’re too afraid of it, and because that’s

“Third problem is the identity of *that corporal*.”

all there is to the story. What fort are you assigned to? Truthfully?”

“Province 8, sir,” he whispered. “Edge.”

“Of course,” Nelt groaned. “Tell me, how much do you know of Major Kroop?”

“Only that he’s bad with numbers and a little skittish.”

Nelt laughed mirthlessly. “Looking at you, I can imagine! Look, Corporal, you may not realize this, but from what I’ve heard you bear a remarkable resemblance to the dead colonel. I never met him. Well, supposedly I did, but I don’t count it. He was at some fancy dinner my parents attended when I was a baby. He put me to sleep while my parents danced the night away. Favorite family story for years,” he waved it off.

HE WAS A CUTE LITTLE BOY. GUMMED UP MY MEDALS. HAS MORE HAIR NOW. . .

“But Kroop knew him, all too well. Rumor was he was in quite a state of anxiety for several weeks after meeting someone who he thought was the colonel come back from the dead. *Must* have been you. I don’t buy into the stories of the spirits, but many of the officers do. They’re beginning to think Kroop was right this time. Colonel Shin had a way of taking care of his men and citizens that Thorne only wishes he could do—”

YOU’RE WELCOME.

“—And now here *you* show up, this mere corporal, with *that name* stitched on your jacket, doing everything that Colonel Shin would’ve done, and Thorne is left looking like a lost private who’s half a day late to his first duty shift!”

Shin sighed in anguish. “But . . . but that’s not been my intention, Captain! I only want to help! I want to be the youngest sergeant major in the army, and I want to serve under General Thorne. I’m trying to *help* him. I can’t figure out why he doesn’t do the obvious. I just want to impress him—”

“Oh, you’ve *impressed* him all right!” Nelt scoffed.

“Captain, I just want to go to Idumea, and I want to fight in a battle! Thorne won’t act fast enough, so I do. I just want to fight! That’s all I care about!”

Something in Nelt’s expression softened. “I believe you, Briter. But no matter how noble your intentions, Thorne’s only going to see you as a threat, and he doesn’t deal kindly with threats.”

Shin ran his hands worriedly through his dusty hair, almost ready to pull it out in chunks. “Captain, what am I going to do?!”

Flight of the Wounded Falcon

YOU HAVE A SOURCE OF WATER. GO GET A VERY LONG DRINK. YOU HAVE A HORSE. RIDE HARD TO ROAK, AND HE WILL GIVE YOU SUPPLIES. THE CANAL SYSTEM TO THE EAST IS DRIED OUT BECAUSE OF THE ERUPTION. FOLLOW IT TO EDGE, THEN GO HOME, YOUNG PERE. THIS IS YOUR LAST OPPORTUNITY.

Nelt sighed and leaned against the boulder. “I really don’t know what to do, Corporal. I don’t want to hand you over. This army needs you, but Thorne will never see it that way.”

WHY DO YOU THINK I GOT YOU A HORSE? SHOWED YOU WHERE THE WATER IS? EVERYTHING I’VE DONE TO HELP THORNE’S ARMY IS TO HELP YOU ESCAPE FROM HIM!

“But, Captain, wouldn’t the men be angry if Thorne did something to me? I mean, if you really do think I’m, *I’m* saving the army,” he stumbled on the words because of the incessant nagging that General Shin was saving the army, “wouldn’t others see it that way as well? Wouldn’t others defend me?”

YOU HAVE NO IDEA WHO YOU’RE DEALING WITH. TELL HIM, NELT.

“Obviously you have no idea who you’re dealing with, Corporal Lek Briter Shin,” said Nelt. “When Thorne doesn’t like the way things are going, he forces a change. That means ‘clarifying the facts’ and eliminating people. He knows what he wants, and he won’t let anyone get in his way.”

Shin suddenly felt like a very large target. “So what do I do?”

GO HOME, YOUNG PERE. THE MOUNTAIN PASS IS ASHY, BUT YOU COULD MAKE IT.

Nelt rubbed his chin so ferociously he wouldn’t have needed a razor when he found one. “I’m now in this as deep as you are, Corporal. Thorne expects me to bring you back to him immediately. Already I’ve hesitated far too long.”

JUST GET ON THE HORSE AND RIDE!

“Then we . . . change things to work for us,” Shin said desperately. He remembered his conversation with Amory last year at the glacial fort. “Transform the truth. Change the water to steam—”

Nelt stopped rubbing. “What are you *talking* about?”

“You said Thorne changes things to how he wants them. Can’t we do something the same? Create our own story about . . . *all of this?*” Shin gestured wildly.

Nelt narrowed his eyes. “Corporal, I don’t think well when I’m hungry and thirsty, and right now I’m so light-headed you almost sound reasonable. Any ideas?”

“Third problem is the identity of *that corporal*.”

*BETTER NOT BE ANY OTHER IDEAS THAN RUNNING AWAY, RIGHT NOW!
YOUNG PERE, TIME'S RUNNING OUT. THORNE'S ON HIS WAY TO FIND THE
SPRING. GO!*

Shin gripped the sides of his head. “Just be quiet for once!” he roared to the incessant voice in his head.

Captain Nelt took a surprised step backwards. “*What did you just say to me, Corporal?*”

Shin stared at the captain in horror. He didn't realize he'd said the words out loud that his mind kept repeating.

“No, sir . . . not you! I'm sorry! I'm a little weary myself, sir. Lack of sleep, no water—I think I'm hearing voices sometimes. I just need a drink—”

Nelt slapped him hard on the back. “Lek—Shin—Briter, whatever the slag is your name, Corporal, *that's it!*”

“What?”

“*Our story, boy! Our story! Look, half those officers believe in spirits of the dead soldiers, so let's use that!*”

Shin began to smile. “Yes . . . of course! So . . . what are the stories, anyway?”

Nelt grinned. “Whatever we want them to be! Personally, I think they are flashbacks affecting those who've been fogged too much—and you've been fogged before, right? I can see it on your ears. Perfect! Apparently men see ghosts in front of them telling them what to do. Usually it's stupid things like getting branded or propositioning some sow hanging out at the back entrance, but sometimes soldiers think they hear and see things that actually help them. Well, Corporal Shin, that's what's happened to you! You've been influenced by . . . who's been influencing you?”

Shin gave him half a smile. “Guess we shouldn't say Colonel Per-rin Shin, should we?”

*IF EVER YOU WANTED THE DEFINITION OF IRONY, YOUNG PERE, THAT
WOULDN'T BE IT.*

Nelt barked a short laugh. “No! Definitely a bad choice. But . . . someone who used to be here in this area and knows how to find things . . . someone who'd appeal to Thorne . . . someone who—”

Nelt burst into a huge grin.

“Remember this description: average height, heavy-set . . . oh, who am I kidding, he was *fat*. Dark hair, balding on top, thin beard and mustache, pale skin. Repeat it back to me.”

“Average height, fat, dark hair what there is of it, facial hair, pale.”

“Excellent. That’s your inspiration: High General Cush.”

WHAT?!

“Who?”

“Thorne’s maternal grandfather and aid for many years to High General Relf Shin,” Nelt explained. “Cush served only a year or two as High General before he died, because some speculated his son-in-law Qayin Thorne did him in. That was Lemuel’s father. Cush would eat anything, no matter how off it tasted. Thorne could have easily poisoned him. Yes . . . Briter, this could work! He’d want revenge as well. He’s the one who’s been leading you. Led you to find his grandson Lemuel trapped in the mud. Led you to find horses and led you to find the spring. And now he’s going to lead you and his grandson Lemuel Thorne to reclaim Idumea!”

I WILL NOT LEAD YOU IN THE NAME OF CUSH! GO HOME NOW, YOUNG PERE! I WILL NOT HELP YOU BEYOND WHAT THE CREATOR WILL ALLOW ME TO DO.

Shin smiled in relief. “You know, you know . . . this could work? If I go to Thorne acting, I don’t know, emotional? Say I didn’t know who it was that was helping me until you told me? How did you know what Cush looks like?”

Nelt waved his hand. “Painting of him hanging up in the command school at Province 4. Thorne took it from Idumea, along with other things, when he was in possession of the city a few years ago. Emotional is good. Can you also fake a re-fog? You know, fall on the ground weeping or something? Pretend to be talking to a toad?”

Shin grinned. “I think I can pull that off. Five of my men gave me plenty of experience. I can fake it.”

“Good, good,” Nelt rubbed his hands together in planning. “You haven’t been able to remember your name too well, either. You don’t remember your rank or your place. Trauma from the mudslide, or something like that—it triggered the re-fog. You’ve been acting erratically for the past two days, but no one’s been around you long enough to notice it. Except for me. I saw it earlier, but didn’t say anything to the soldiers who went with us because I didn’t want to alarm them.”

Shin pointed at him. “That’s why you had me walk with you to the stables and never left my side. To keep an eye on me.”

“Yes!” Nelt grabbed him by the arms and shook him. “That’s it! You were mumbling to someone . . . talking to someone. I was trying to figure out who. It wasn’t until we came to these rocks that you finally described to me who you see in the hazy mist, who’s been talking

“Third problem is the identity of *that corporal*.”

to you since the explosion. Slag, I’m not sure what Cush sounded like . . .”

“Just ideas. He just gives me ideas in my head. That should be good enough. Along with the physical description.”

“Ah, Briter, we make a great team!” Nelt leaned around the large rock and shrubs, and looked to the spring. “Slag, we’ve got a mob growing.”

Shin took a quick look as well. “Thorne’s with them, I’m sure.”

Nelt took a deep breath and looked at Shin. “Are you ready, boy? Ready to give the performance of your life? Because if you don’t pull this off, it *will* be your life,” he said severely. “And maybe mine.”

Shin’s chin began to quiver and his shoulders shook. “I’m so glad you found me, Captain. I’ve been so scared here alone! I can’t find him anymore. The big man? He’s gone! Captain, can you help me find him? Please?”

“Shin,” Nelt whispered, “I’ve never said this to another man, but *I love you*. I’m going to have to add another verse. Now let’s go fix this mess.”

He stepped around the rock to face the men gathering at the spring. “Is Thorne there?” he yelled. “I have someone he’s going to want to meet.”

Chapter 37--“I think I know who he is.”

Sitting on the rock outcropping near the spring, Thorne analyzed the soldier crumpled in the ash. He was weeping uncontrollably as Captain Nelt cradled him.

“And then . . . and then . . . he was *gone*, sir. Just gone. If he doesn’t come back, I don’t know if I’ll make it home!”

“It’s all right, Corporal, it’s all right,” Nelt said comfortingly, rocking him. “When was the last time you ate?”

“I don’t know. Doesn’t matter. I don’t need food,” he whimpered. “Not until every last man reaches the fort and eats first. I won’t drink either. Not until every man has had his fill. That’s my duty. I know it is. What if the water here runs out? I won’t be the one who wasted it. *He* said I need to make sure every man is ready. He wants Idumea back, for his grandson.” He sobbed into the captain’s shoulder.

Thorne stared without blinking.

“That’s what we’re going to do, Corporal,” Nelt said, patting his head. “We’re doing it right now. And his grandson wants you to drink. You have to, or you won’t make it to the fort. Do you understand? You can drink! His grandson wants you to.”

Rigidly, Thorne continued to stare at the soldier who trembled and waved away the boot of water offered to him. Several other officers stood nearby, watching the drama of the young man.

“Tragic, just tragic,” one of them mumbled. “He seemed so strong, too. Let’s force the water down him, Nelt.”

Nelt held up a hand. “He’ll gag on it. Just let him calm down some more. He’s doing much better than he was when I found him fifteen minutes ago. I think he’ll be fully out of it soon.”

Another officer bobbed his head. “Usually the re-fogs wear off in about half an hour. But I’ve never seen one where the soldier was half starved and dehydrated. That might be making it worse. Such vivid hallucinations.”

“I think I know who he is.”

“Yes,” General Thorne finally spoke, and his voice was remarkably steady. “Very vivid. Soldier,” he said in a calming tone, “where have you been serving?”

The corporal didn’t look up but kept his head buried in Nelt’s shoulder. “Only Province 8, sir. Only place I ever want to serve. To bring glory to General Thorne.”

Thorne nodded slowly as the other officers exchanged glances. “I understand. Soldier, did *he* ever tell you his name?”

“No, sir. Just wore a dark blue jacket, with golden buttons.”

One of the officers looked at Thorne. “*Golden* buttons?”

For the first time, Thorne showed some emotion, and it was to pale slightly. “The uniforms in my grandfather’s time had brass buttons. Only for those ranked colonel or higher. They *would* appear golden.” His voice quavered ever so slightly.

Several of the officers looked at each other in alarm.

Nelt breathed into Shin’s ear, “*Nice touch. You’ve got him.*”

Shin gasped and shuddered. “I hope he’s not displeased with me. I’ve done all I can.”

Nelt glanced at Thorne for his answer.

Taken aback, the general only shook his head.

“He’s not displeased. You’ve done very well, Corporal Shin,” Nelt told him, as if talking to a small child. “Excellent work. You’ve rescued dozens of men, saved hundreds more, found us the horses, the water, and now the injured are on their way to the fort. You did well to listen to the big general. His grandson is pleased with you. You know what would make him even happier? If you drank some water. Come on, right here. Drink. And then we’ll get you some sleep, all right? Do you want him to be pleased? Drink. That’s right—good job, Corporal,” he soothed as water dribbled down Shin’s chin. “Now come on, stand up. Up, up,” Nelt said, getting to his feet and pulling up the weakened corporal.

A few officers rushed over to help, but the corporal got up on his own. In his hunched and cowering condition, he didn’t look as large as Thorne or the other officers remembered him.

Nelt put his arm around him. “Over here, Shin. We’ve got a couple of blankets you can lay down on. Get some rest.”

Colonel Ferrim stepped over to support Shin on the other side, and the two men led the weak and heavy corporal several paces out of the way.

Soldiers, now hundreds of them, were waiting in line to drink and

help fill the wagons. Up until that point, every man was intent on finding water, food, and horses to survive. But now all of them were far more preoccupied with wondering just who the corporal was, what he saw, and what Thorne was going to do about, with, or *to* him.

Thorne didn't notice the soldiers now gossiping like grandmothers, but remained on his rock, watching hawkishly as they laid the large young man down.

The other officers remained quiet and motionless, not yet daring to share their theories with each other until they knew what Thorne's official story might be.

Colonel Ferrim returned, but Nelt stayed by the corporal's side, sitting on the ground next to him. Ferrim exhaled as he reached the cluster of officers. "Don't know when I've seen such a bad case. Of course, he's had quite a few shocks in the past two days."

A lieutenant colonel nodded. "Two of my men had an incident last night. They tried to eat their packs thinking they were pork chops. I'm a bit surprised we haven't had more problems."

"Nelt said Shin's been serving only three seasons," Ferrim said. "He sneaked into the troops coming from Province 8, wanting to follow the general."

The lieutenant colonel winced. "*Three* seasons? That explains it. The fogged ones need at least one year of being clean to avoid these problems in combat. Didn't he know that? My two soldiers last night barely completed their first year of service."

Uncharacteristically, Thorne remained silent on his rock, staring as Nelt patted the corporal who laid on his side.

Every soldier in the vicinity watched either the resting corporal or the staring general, their eyes darting between the two, waiting for something to happen.

"Well," Thorne finally broke his silence, his tone strained yet cautiously optimistic. "it seems all our problems I outlined this morning have been solved."

There was no official story. Not yet, at least. Even Thorne had been astonished enough to not know what to think next.

"Gentlemen," he continued, suddenly very easy, "I'll be taking one of the horses down to Province 2, and see to it myself that the wagons are loaded with enough food for those who are remaining here tonight. Colonel Ferrim, I want you to be in charge here until I return. Have Captain Nelt stay with the corporal. He seems to have bonded with the captain. We don't need to cause him any more trauma, now,

“I think I know who he is.”

do we?”

“Yes, sir,” said the colonel, startled that the general showed concern for the corporal. The other officers glanced at each other, expressing the same thought.

Thorne stood, still eyeing Nelt and Shin.

Nelt glanced up and indicated that Shin was asleep.

Thorne nodded back once, then, without another word, started back to camp.

THERE ARE TIMES I'M GRATEFUL FOR MY FORM, YOUNG PERE, BECAUSE IF THINGS WERE OTHERWISE, I'D BE SICK TO MY STOMACH RIGHT NOW. I'VE NEVER SEEN A PERFORMANCE SO CONVINCING OR SO NAUSEATING. YOU SHOULD BE AT THE AMPHITHEATER.

“The last of the soldiers are heading back to the camp, Shin,” Nelt mumbled in undertones to the still body lying next to him.

“Good,” Shin whispered back. “Did Thorne leave?”

“A while ago. I heard someone say he was going down to the fort to make sure the wagons were loaded properly for the return trip. He needs to show some authority right now, and I suspect we'll be getting the best meal possible, as proof of his leadership. It should be safe for us to return to the camp now. Remember what you're going to do next?”

“Be as quiet and timid and humble as possible.”

“That's right, Shin. A tall order for such a big man, but I'm sure you can pull it off.”

“I've had some practice with my family over the years. Do you think Thorne will come back tonight?”

“If he does,” Nelt said, “you *will* grovel at his feet.”

Shin sighed. “Never done that before. I can hardly wait. Let's get going.”

It was just after dark when the thirty wagons were first spotted returning to the camp. A frail cheer rose up from the almost five hundred weak men still resting around fires.

A horse and rider in the lead raised his left arm to accept the gratitude. Thorne smiled broadly as he called, "I'm here for you men! You'll be as strong as oxen by morning, I promise!"

From his prone position by one of the smaller fires, Shin smiled faintly at the spectacle riding in to camp.

"I figured he'd be back. He needs to be seen as the hero right now, correct?" Captain Nelt said, pointing a warning finger at Shin.

"Don't worry," Shin assured him. "Whoever is the hero at the end, is the hero of the whole day. Thorne wins today."

"You just remember that, along with everything else."

"You'll be impressed, Nelt—I promise."

"Enough with the impressing, Shin," Nelt grumbled. "That's how we got into this mess in the first place."

A little while later the drivers of the wagon teams brought baskets and bags of food to groups of soldiers: breads, dried meats, dried fruits, and even small sweet cakes. When the basket was brought to Shin and Nelt, the soldier paused as he read Nelt's label.

"Sir, you and the corporal are to come with me. General Thorne wants to check on the corporal's recovery himself."

"I'm sure he does." Nelt smiled stiffly, and made a show of helping Shin get up. The corporal didn't need any aid, but leaned on the captain for good measure.

The three men made their way over to the largest fire where General Thorne stood waiting with a small smile on his face.

Nelt pinched Shin lightly where he supported him, and Shin grunted quietly back. He was ready to perform.

As they neared Thorne, Corporal Shin began to quake. "Sir! I knew you'd come back to us!" he cried, stumbling to the ground and landing on all fours. "The others said you'd sleep in the fort tonight, but I said, 'Not General Thorne! He'll be back to tough it out with his men tonight!' And you came back! Thank you, sir!"

Nelt bit his tongue to control his facial twitching. Verses began to form in his mind, using the words 'adulation,' 'manipulation' and 'constipation.' There had to be over three hundred words that rhymed with Shin.

Thorne crouched in front of the exhausted soldier and offered a rare smile. "I wouldn't want to miss spending a *single minute* with you, Corporal Shin. There's much I hope to learn from you, soldier. The first is, which do you prefer: steak or pork chops?"

In the end Corporal Shin had both, wolfing down the food as

“I think I know who he is.”

Thorne sat back on a log and watched him intently.

“I’m surprised at the fresh meat, General,” Nelt said as he bit into his steak.

“Several animals had to be slaughtered,” Thorne said, not eating but keeping his focus on the corporal. “There’s not enough feed available for them.”

Shin glanced up. “Will there be enough for the horses, sir?” He made sure his tone was sufficiently meek.

Thorne nodded. “There’s a barn of hay that survived. We need to keep the horses strong for the offensive on Idumea.”

Shin looked worriedly over at Nelt. That wasn’t what he told the Stable at Pools. He’d only said they needed the horses to get to the fort. Nelt raised his eyebrows in warning but, never one to take warnings to heart, Shin said, “General, sir? I thought the horses would be left at the fort for the owners to retrieve.”

“Is that what you told them?” Thorne seemed amused. “And tell me, *my dear corporal*, how are they going to bring back all those horses and wagons? I heard there were only the three of them at the house.”

“I . . . I hadn’t considered that, sir,” Shin confessed.

“That’s why *I’m* the general,” Thorne said, leaning back against his log in a gesture of smugness. “If it makes you feel better, I’ll send a messenger to the stables explaining the situation, and we’ll do our best to return the animals when the offensive is over.” Seeing the corporal’s relief, Thorne’s gaze and tone sharpened slightly. “But we’ll be giving those animals a much better life than abandoning them to fend for themselves. Trust me—there are no grasses anywhere, from here to the border before Idumea. No crops, no fruit, nothing. People and animals will be dying everywhere, but these beautiful horses will be taken care of by the army.”

“I’m very glad to hear that, sir,” Shin swallowed, now worried about how bleak the situation seemed to be. No grasses or crops anywhere? But Thorne didn’t seem overly concerned, likely because he was prepared for such a disaster. “Of course you’d take care of the horses, sir,” Shin said, realizing it was time to do a little groveling. “I heard you were a great horseman.”

Thorne smiled genuinely, thoughtfully. “I had a beautiful gray named Streak when I first went to Province 8. Amazing horse. He was a gift from my father for my twenty-third birthday. Tell me, Corporal Shin—how old are you?”

“Nearly nineteen, sir.”

Thorne raised his eyebrows. “Nineteen? Really? You seem much older than that.”

“It’s just because I’m big, sir. Always have been.”

Thorne narrowed his eyes. “Larger than your father?”

Shin frowned at the strangely specific question. “Yes, sir. I surpassed him when I was twelve. My father was just average.”

Thorne leaned forward earnestly, as if studying an interesting dog he’d been told could do tricks. “I understand you spent some time in the fog. A grassena boy?”

“Yes, sir, I’m sorry to admit that I was.”

Thorne tried to smile kindly. “That’s all right, Corporal. You seem to be doing much better now. It’s been my experience that men in the fog forget large chunks of their lives. Some are there for years and think it was only weeks. Perhaps you only *think* you’re almost nineteen. Perhaps you’re really . . . *twenty-six*?”

Nelt coughed.

Shin didn’t blink, wondering where Thorne had pulled that also oddly specific number from. Not sure what Thorne was playing at, he came up with the vague, “There’s much I don’t remember sir.”

Thorne seemed satisfied by that response. “Tell me more about your father. Now, honestly, your name isn’t Shin, is it?”

The corporal shook his head, staring at the general.

Thorne nodded slowly. “I’ve been told it’s actually *Briter*. Is that correct?”

Shin nodded, growing nervous about the direction of the dinner conversation. He still wondered why he didn’t say his real name was Trovato. That would have simplified everything. Then again, probably not.

“Your father . . . what does he do?”

“I’m not sure right now. I haven’t been in touch with him for quite some time,” Shin answered honestly. “He was . . . always doing something different.” He took another bite, unsure of what else to say to not compromise himself or Nelt.

“Understood,” Thorne said, with a faint smile on his face. “Not very reliable, it sounds. I imagine you might’ve been disappointed in a man like that. Someone like you deserves a much stronger father figure. Tell me then about your mother. I believe her name was Jaysy?”

Shin couldn’t help but choke on the piece of pork chop he was

“I think I know who he is.”

chewing. Only after Nelt leaped to his feet and beat him on his back did Shin cough down the meat and come up with an answer.

“Excuse me, sir,” he gasped for air, his mind reeling, inventing wildly. “You shouldn’t tell jokes when someone is eating. What kind of name is Jacksy for a woman?”

Thorne remained unmoved. “I didn’t say ‘Jacksy.’ I said ‘Jaytsy.’” He watched closely for a response.

Shin met his steady gaze. Honesty seemed like the best strategy again. “General, I assure you my mother’s name is not Jaytsy.”

Thorne sat back and tipped his head. “I see that my informant was incorrect. Tell me, then—what’s your mother’s name?”

“Lilla, sir.” It came out automatically, and Shin hoped there’d be no complications with that.

“I see,” the general said as he watched the corporal drink. “And your father’s name?”

“Atlee, sir.” Shin knew that was definitely a worldly name. It was the name of Uncle Deck’s cousin. Deck’s uncle’s name had been Holling, and his wife was . . .

Uh-oh.

The reason Deck hadn’t named any of his daughters after his aunt Lilla was because there already was a Lilla in the Shin-Briter family. And Deck’s aunt was married to Holling, not Atlee. Shin felt his mind buckling and tripping at his mistake. Mrs. Yordin had coached him to use familiar names so he wouldn’t stumble on them, but maybe he chose *too* familiar of names . . .

He barely registered that Thorne was speaking to him.

“Atlee Briter? Hmm,” the general said with an odd smile.

But it shouldn’t be a problem, Shin thought frantically. All of the Briters had died some years back, he recalled with grim relief. Deck’s uncle Holling because of an accident, his aunt Lilla after a long illness, and his cousin Atlee was kicked by a wild horse. The scouts Guide Gleace and Shem had sent to bring Deck’s family to Salem never had any luck speaking with them, then found their headstones probably more than ten years ago, now. There was no one left to verify or refute Shin’s story, and he smiled in miserable relief . . .

Unless Thorne’s men find the headstones themselves, and realized that the numbers and names he supplied didn’t add up . . .

He was still fogging. That was the excuse he could use, later, should he need one . . .

Shin noticed that Thorne had been analyzing him all that time with

a probing gaze, and he was aware, too late, that the relief and worry and relief again that he'd been experiencing were likely manifested on his face. In his genuine exhaustion, he'd forgotten to keep his guard up.

But Thorne merely said, "Well, Corporal Shin Briter, who also took the name Sword Master Thorne, what do we call you now?"

Instinctively, Shin looked down at his label.

Captain Nelt cleared his throat. "General, I find it's best to let the formerly fogged men keep the name that's on their jackets to reduce their confusion. It's only a name, after all—a random designation that means nothing when you really think about it. Besides, I can think of a lot more verses to rhyme with 'Shin' than I can with 'Briter'."

Thorne offered Nelt a half smile. He was very generous that night. "You have a point. Our young man here can do well under any name. Shin. Briter, Thorne. Anything he chooses to take. Right, Corporal?"

"Whatever you wish for me to do, sir. All I want to do is please you."

Thorne leaned forward earnestly again. "Then you can please me by telling me one more thing. The spirit that's been *guiding you*, as you say. Can you see him now? Where is he?"

Corporal Shin shook his head. "I usually felt him more than anything. Only saw him occasionally. But, sir, since I found the water and had time to rest, I haven't felt him. He seems to have left. Perhaps . . . perhaps there's nothing more he can do to help us. His work may be finished."

Thorne's gaze remained fixed, and Shin felt as if the general could see right through him. "I'd imagine being harassed by something like that would be distressing. But you seem almost sad about his leaving."

Corporal Shin looked down at his food and pushed it around aimlessly. He hadn't heard a word from Puggah.

"Just a little surprised, I suppose," he said. "I was under the impression he was never going to leave my side."

"Not to worry, son," General Thorne said kindly. "You don't need him anymore. Now you've got *me* by your side."

NOW WHAT, HOGAL?

If he chooses not to listen to that quiet voice in his ear, well, that's his choice, my boy. He's moving himself away from you.

“I think I know who he is.”

BUT HE WAS SO CLOSE! HOGAL, WE WERE SO CLOSE!

Not as close as you hoped, my dear boy. What he wants got in the way of what he knows. There's nothing more he'll let us do for now.

Late that night General Thorne watched the corporal sleeping by the fire and examined his face from across the flames.

Colonel Ferrim noticed and came down to sit by the general. “So, Lemuel,” he whispered. “Is there *anything*?”

“I’m only telling you this, Yurgis,” Thorne whispered back, “because you’ll be my number two man when we take over Idumea, and should be aware. Earlier today at the spring, I wasn’t so sure. But tonight, he was better, and as I talked to him I watched him. Yurgis, I think I know who he is.”

Ferrim shifted nervously. “And?”

Thorne rubbed his jaw. “The day after the Shins and Briters were killed, Deckett Briter’s uncle, aunt, and cousin arrived at his house, just as the soldiers were searching it,” he said in a low voice. “Apparently they’d come to help with the baby they assumed would be born soon. The Briter family didn’t take the news of the loss very well. Briter’s uncle, a man named Holling if I remember correctly, headed straight for the forest to look for himself, while his aunt and cousin were seen at the edge of the trees later that day, trying to find him. A few times Genev sent soldiers to question them—I’m not sure what he was thinking he’d get from them, but then suddenly they were gone, back to Mountseen.”

“Probably had enough of Genev tailing them,” Ferrim said. “I remember he was quite persistent.”

“Or maybe they found what they were looking for.”

“What would that be?”

“The baby.”

“What?!” Ferrim exclaimed in a shocked whisper.

“Jaytsy was due to deliver at any time,” Thorne told him. “She nearly had the baby two days earlier. I’d sent a midwife to help her, but she sent her away. Yurgis, what if she delivered in the forest?”

Ferrim let out a low whistle. “What did she look like when she was taken by the Guarders?”

“I was already injured at that time, and didn’t catch more than

glimpses of her in the dark,” he related easily. “But what if she delivered and hid the baby? Or someone took it from her?”

Ferrim stared at the sleeping corporal. “You think that could be him?”

“How old does he look to you, Yurgis?”

The colonel shrugged. “Maybe mid-twenties.”

“He thinks he’s only nineteen.”

Ferrim twisted to give Thorne an incredulous look.

Thorne scoffed in agreement. “He told me he reached that height when he was twelve, and said he’s always been big. You have a boy, right? Do they grow that big that young?”

“At twelve? Not *my* twelve-year-old!”

“That’s what I thought. Maybe they told him he was younger than he is to hide him. Perhaps the uncle and aunt hid him for a time before giving him to their own son to raise. I know for a fact that son’s name was Atlee Briter—I remember because we had the Briters watched for a while after we lost the Shins—and that’s what the corporal told me his father’s name is. Sergeant Onus questioned the boy a season or two ago for me. He said that his *grandmother* told him he was distantly related to the Briters in Edge. That ‘grandmother’ would have been Deckett Briter’s aunt. Her name was Lilla, but he seems to believe that’s his mother’s name too.” Thorne scoffed. “As he was telling me his background, I could see the confusion in his eyes. He was pulling familiar names out of the air and slapping them anywhere, frowning and smiling at the same time. He’s definitely had a close relationship with the vials, and likely for a very long time. Combine that with the lies the Briters told him, and it’s no surprise that he doesn’t know what is real.”

“So you think he doesn’t know his real age or parentage?”

Thorne continued to stare at Shin. “He looked me directly in the eyes and said his mother’s name was not Jaytsy. Yurgis, I’ve seen enough men lie to me before to know when they’re concealing something. He was completely truthful, as far as he knows. He really believes his mother’s name is Lilla.”

The two officers watched the corporal for another moment.

“Yurgis,” Thorne finally whispered, “I want someone to go to Province 4 and find those Briters. Have them questioned using one of our more *skilled* interrogators. You don’t need to tell me we’re short on men; this is important. We should find out what’s happening north of us anyway. Now that we have horses we can get someone there

“I think I know who he is.”

faster. We need to make sure the supply lines stay open all the way through to Idumea.”

Colonel Ferrim nodded. “Agreed.” He regarded the corporal thoughtfully. “That would be amazing, Lemuel, if he’s who you believe he is. I saw the colonel only once when he came by the university looking for you, that time they were in Idumea for The Dinner. Now I wish I’d looked at him more closely.”

Thorne tipped his head at the corporal. “Trust me, you’re looking at him now. There’s something else—another reason I was so anxious for Jaytsy to deliver safely.” He raised his eyebrows suggestively at Ferrim.

The colonel rocked back in astonishment. “Really?! Are you sure?”

Thorne shrugged, but his leer was growing. “Perhaps, perhaps. Time will show. It’d only make sense, you know.” He leaned back again and grew thoughtful. “I don’t put much belief in The Writings or stories of the dead soldiers. But maybe, if they exist, my grandfather Cush is finally trying to do something right. What better cover for the offensive could we have wanted than this explosion? Why suddenly are we given so much help in the form of this untrained, ignorant but *unbelievably* lucky boy, practically dropped on my doorstep?”

He nodded at the corporal.

“My grandfather Cush is trying to give me back what a simpleton farmer named Briter stole. At least this way I don’t have to bother with raising him. Well, better now than never was, as they say.”

Thorne smiled at the sleeping young man.

“Yurgis, I’ve finally found my son.”

Shin-Briter-Zenos Family Trees (Year 363)

Jaytsy and Deckett Briter Family (and ages)

Salema(25)

married to Lek Zenos:

--Briter (5)

--Fennic (3)

--(expecting third)

Cambozola [Cambo] (23)

married to Tessina:

--Decker (3)

Pere [Bubba] (22)

married to Alixan:

--Raishel and Reikel (twins) (2)

Holling (20)

married to Eraliz:

--Jaysie (infant)

Viddrow (18)

Cephas (17)

Suzi (15)

Tabbit (14)

Banu (12)

Atlee (10)

Yenali (8)

Young Shem (7)

Peto and Lilla (sister to Calla) Shin family

Lorixania [Lori] (twin) (23)

married to Sam Cadby:

--Ensio (3)

--Annly (2)

Joriana [Jori] (twin) (23)

married to Con Cadby:

--Cori (3)

--Gersh (2)

Relf (21)

married to Mattilin:

--Grunick (1)

Barnos (19)

married to Ivy

Hycymum [Hycy] (18)

engaged to Wes Hifadhi

Young Perrin [Young Pere] (17)

Kanthi (twin) (15)

Nool (twin) (15)

Kew (13)

Hogal (12)

Sakal (11)

Centia (9)

Morah (7)

Shem and Calla (sister to Lilla) Zenos family

Lek (24)

married to Salema Briter:

--Briter (5)

--Fennic (3)

--expecting third

Boskos (22)

married to Noria:

--Utolian [Toli] (2)

--Calia (infant)

Zaddick (20)

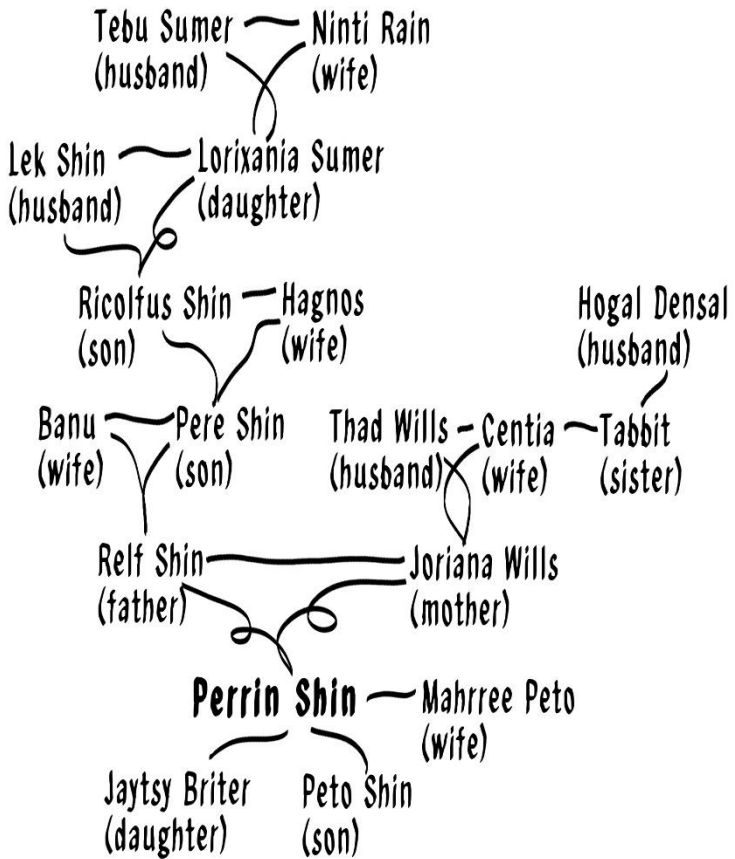
Meiki (18)

Ester (16)

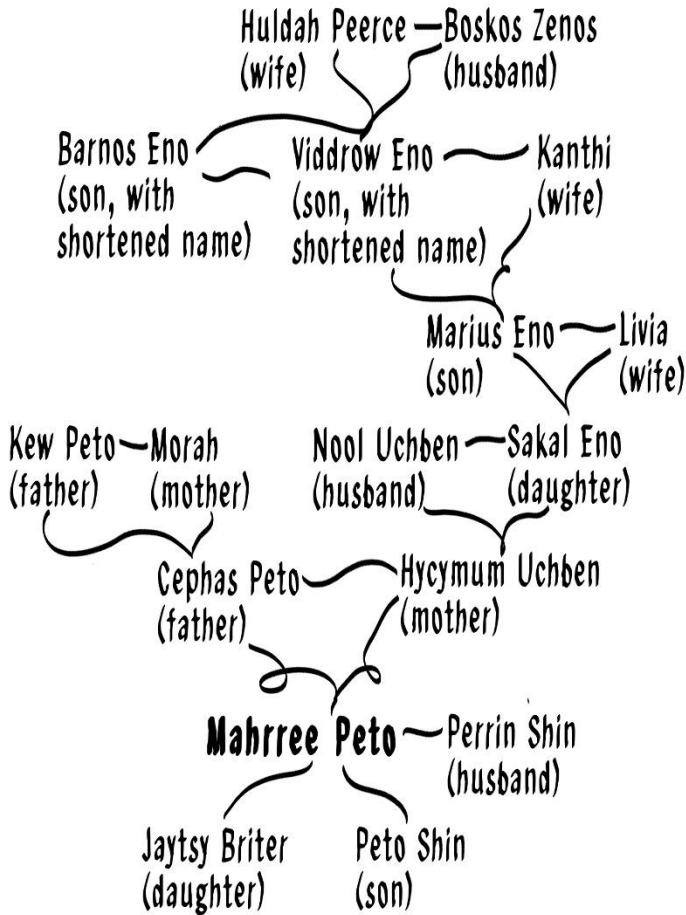
Huldah (14)

Mahrree's Family Lines (vines) charts

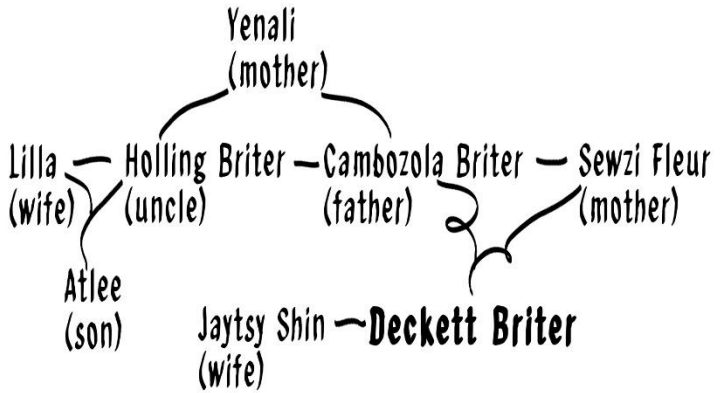
Perrin Shin's Family Lines (Vines)



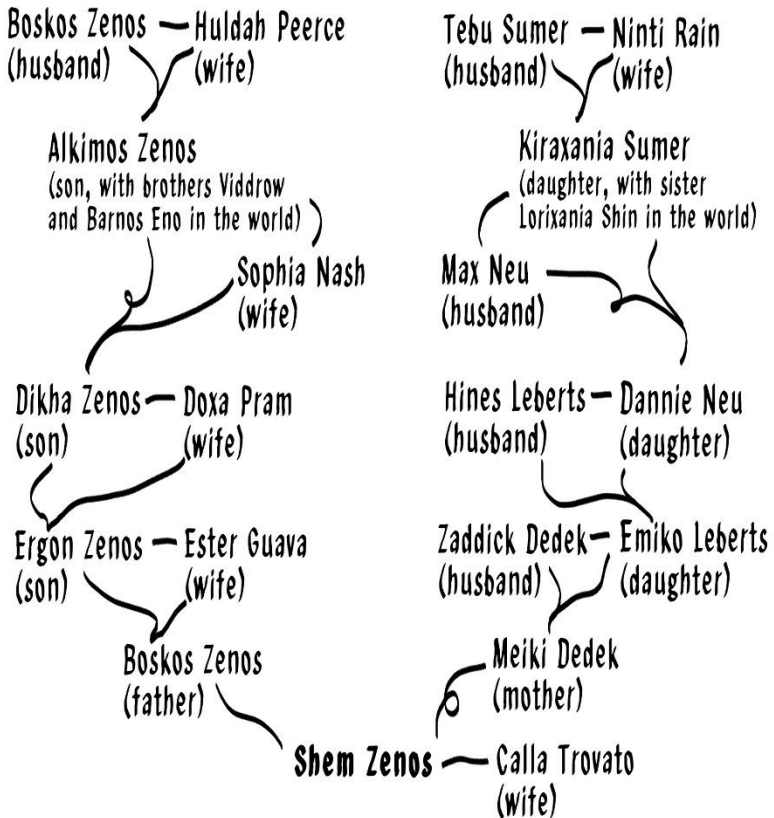
Mahrree Peto Shin's Family Lines (Vines)



Deckett Briter's Family Lines (Vines)



Shem Zenos's Family Lines~Partial, showing connections to Petos and Shins



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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. They used to live in the rural west and dreamed of the day they would be old enough to be campground managers in Yellowstone National Park. Now they live along the rural northeast coast and pretend they already are.



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