

FOREST AT THE EDGE
~ Book Four ~

The
FALCON
in
the
BARN

TRISH MERCER

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Cover art and design by the daughter of Rudolf Strebel, who taught her to love clouds of all shapes and sizes, and placed in her (and her children now too) the obsession to take pictures of all clouds, even ones produced by raging forest fires in Yellowstone. She's grateful she found a place to publish two of the photos from 2013, and to carry on Rudy's hobby since Alzheimer's has taken away his ability to do so.

Clouds are sacred.

Contact author via website: forestededgebooks.com

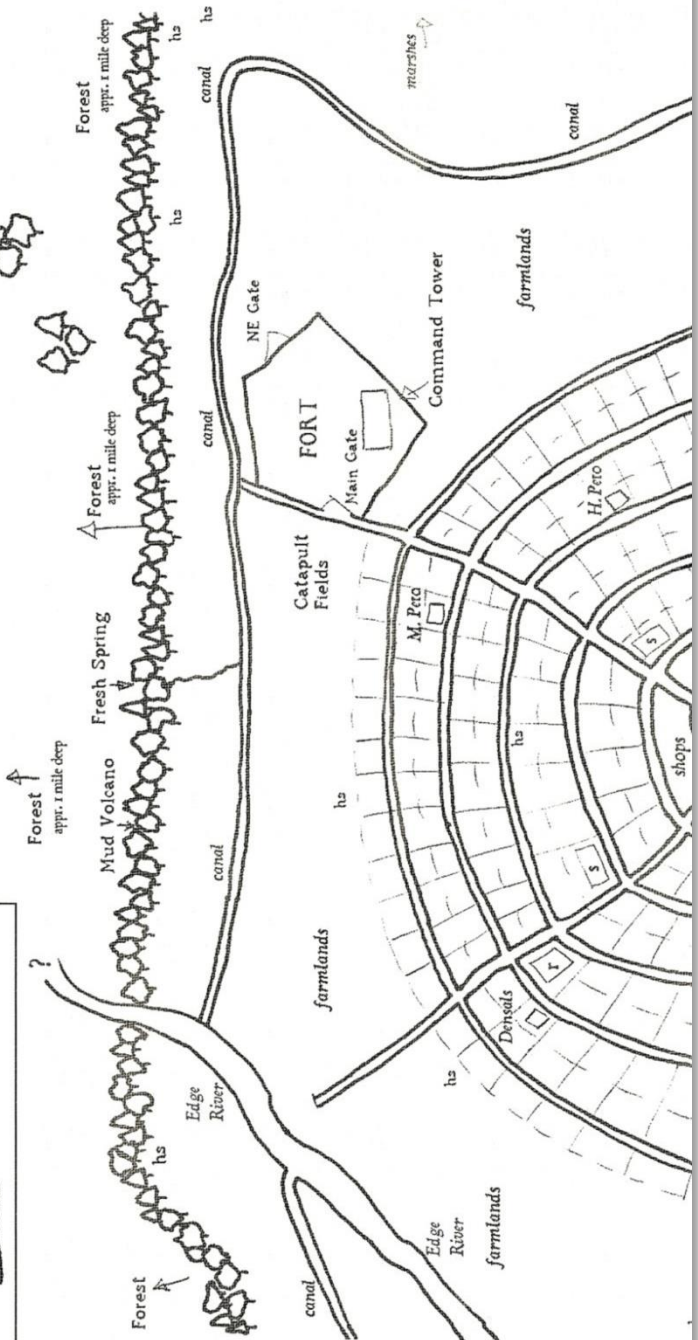
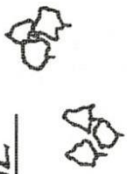
Because the more you know
about the ways of the world,
the more you want to get away from it.

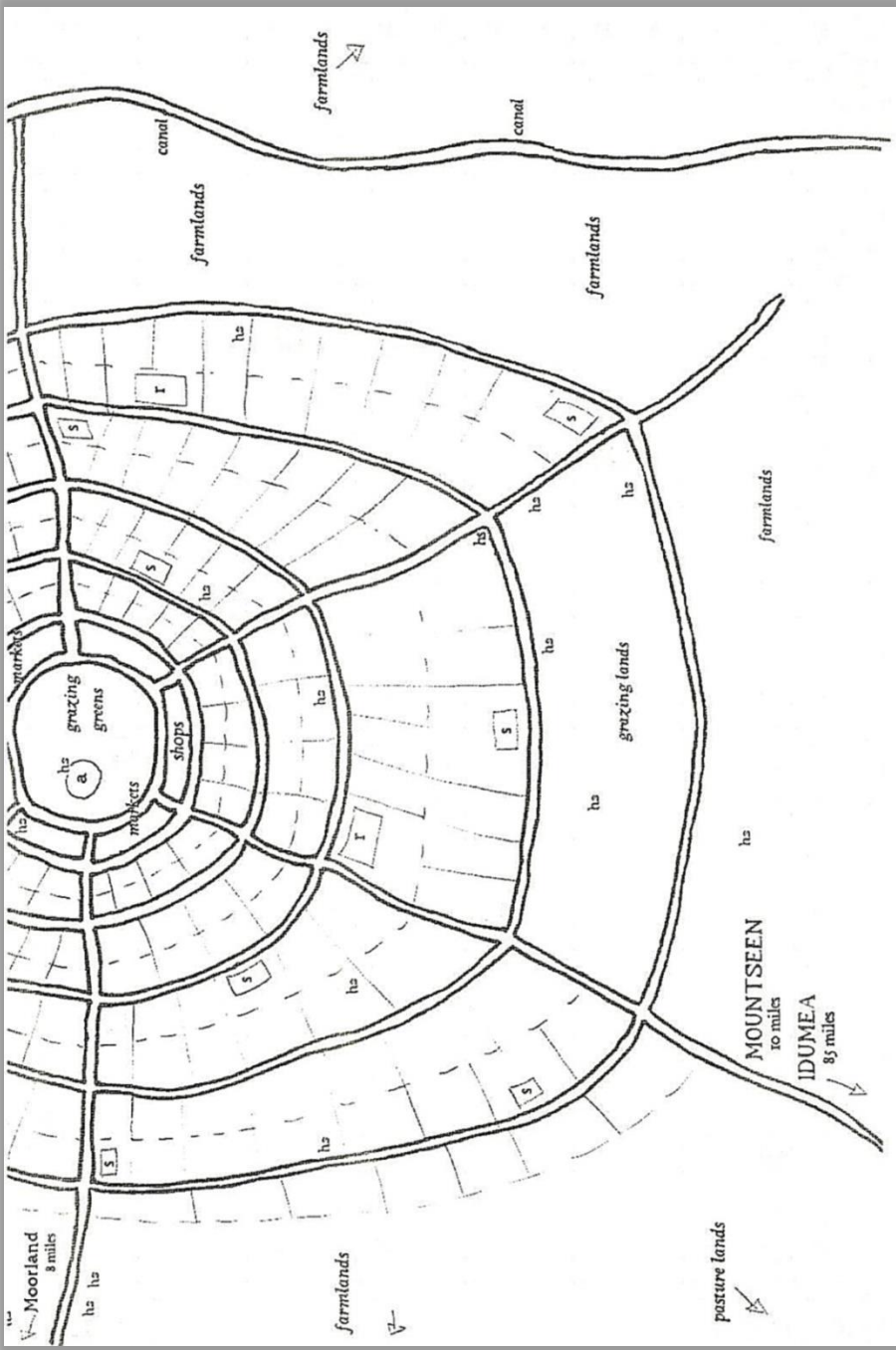
MAPS

MAP OF EDGE

SCALE
1/4 mile

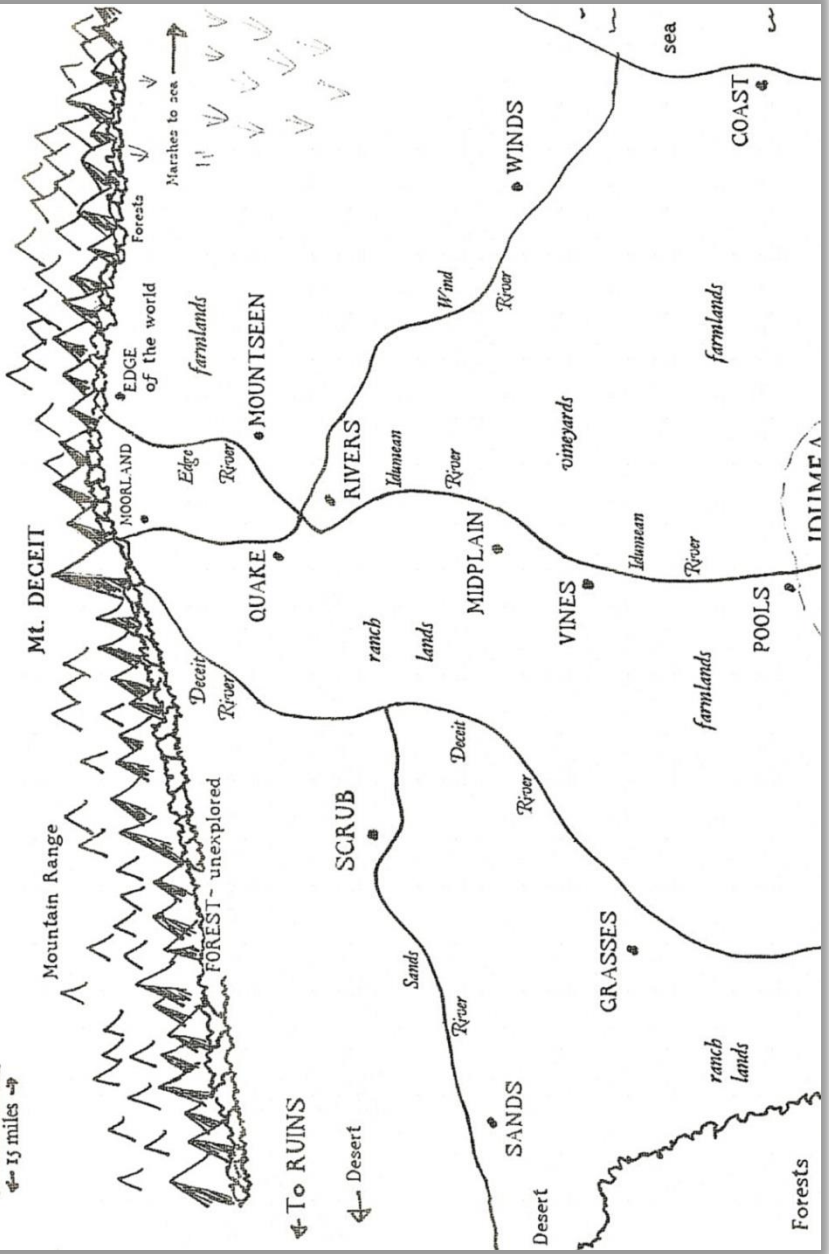
- hs: hot spring
- s: school
- r: rectory
- a: amphitheater
- - - alleys
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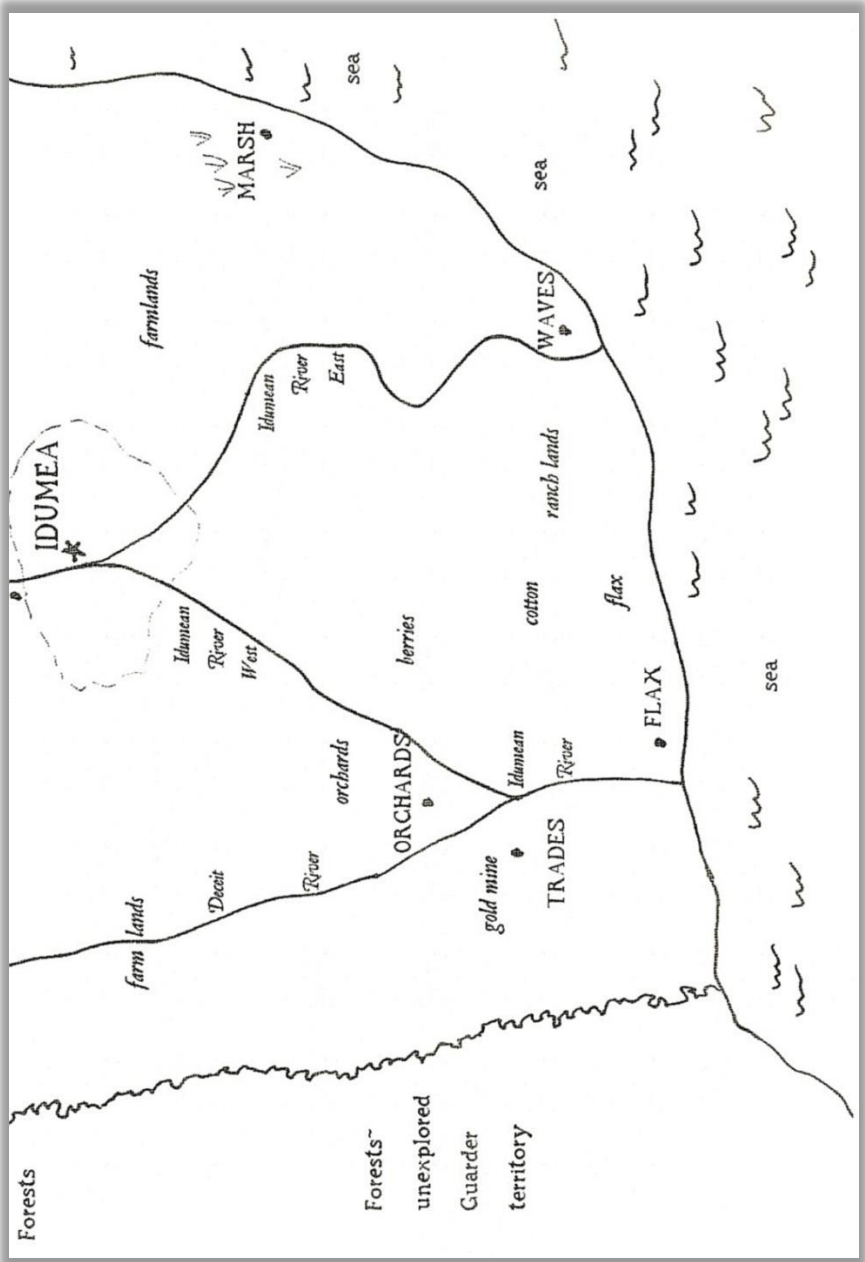




MAP OF THE WORLD

SCALE
← 15 miles →





Forests~

unexplored
Guarder
territory

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

Nicko Mal	NEE-koh MAL
Querul	KWER-el
Idumea	i-doo-ME-uh
Hogal Densal	HOE-gal DENS-al
Mahrree	MARR-ee
Peto	PAY-toh
Hycymum Peto	HIE-si-mum PAY-toh
Hierum	HIE-rum
Terryyp	TARE-up
Jaytsy	JAYT-see
Brisack	BRIZ-ak
Gizzada	gi-ZAH-duh
Qayin	KAY-in
Kuman	KOO-min
Fadh	FOD
Jothan	JOH-thun
Asrar	AZ-rar

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

Chapter 1 - "They've ruined him."

Eight weeks after the land tremor that shook the world, Jaytsy sat on her bed late at night with her knees pulled up to her chest. She rocked slowly, not daring to sleep. There was a chance tonight would be quiet, but she'd had her sleep disturbed too many times to believe that.

She knew it was self-centered to think so, but she suspected that the shaking she had wished for everyone else—just to “wake them up a little”—had been focused on her. While the world was returning slowly to normal, nothing in Jaytsy's world was the same.

Her grandparents were gone. And now, so was her father.

Perrin Shin's body came home from his enraged ride to Idumea, but not his mind. Where it was, no one really knew. As soon as he put General Relf Shin's sword into his sheath, everything changed.

It was the day after the crate had come from Idumea, the 55th Day of Planting, that he replaced his sword with his father's. That night he tried to use it.

Jaytsy had been sleeping when she heard the shouting. Panicked, she opened her door at the same time Peto opened his. They stared at each other across the dark gathering room until Perrin ran down the stairs with Relf's sword drawn.

“Upstairs! Now! My bedroom! The only place you'll be safe!”

Mahrree had padded after him. “Perrin, there's no danger—”

“Yes there is! It's everywhere!”

Jaytsy and Peto searched the darkness until Perrin's shout of “NOW!” made them jump.

“Just go,” their mother whispered, “I'll deal with him.”

They ran up the stairs and sat on the edge of their parents' bed, listening to their mother trying to reason with their father.

“What's wrong with him?” Peto whispered.

“I don't know,” Jaytsy whispered back, hugging her knees.

“Maybe he saw something?”

Peto crawled along the bed to look outside the new window, wide and clear. “It’s really quiet out there, the alley’s empty, and the tower isn’t lit. I don’t think there’s anything.”

He crawled back to sit next to his sister, but not too close. “I don’t hear him anymore.”

“Me neither.”

“What does that mean?” Peto whispered.

Jaytsy shrugged. “It’s really . . .” She couldn’t think of a word. She’d never seen her father like that before.

“Creepy,” Peto supplied, and wrapped his arms around himself.

A moment later their mother came into the dark bedroom. “Just a nightmare!” she said in an overly merry tone. “He’s asleep on the sofa, and was probably never fully awake. You can go to bed now.”

Jaytsy didn’t dare move.

Neither did Peto. “Does he still have the sword?”

A heavy clank came from their mother. “No, I took it after he fell on the sofa. We don’t need him mistaking any of us for someone we’re not, do we?” She laughed softly, but shakily.

In the morning when Jaytsy passed her waking father on the sofa, he looked baffled. “Why am I here? Did I have a fight with your mother that I slept through?”

“Uh,” Jaytsy was unsure of how to explain. He seemed completely normal, just a little tired. “Sort of?”

Jaytsy rushed to the washing room and shut the door behind her. She heard her mother come down the stairs and waited until their conversation ended with Perrin shouting, “I’d never do that!”

When she snuck out, her father was sitting at the table, holding his head. He smiled feebly, and so did she.

Peto just nodded at his father as he sat down to breakfast.

By dinner everyone was easier again, smiling and laughing as if nothing had happened, and they slept well that night. Jaytsy thought nothing more about her father’s unusual nighttime activity, especially since the night after was also calm and quiet.

But in the fourth night Jaytsy woke up, feeling a presence next to her bed. The light from the two moons coming through the window bounced off the sword held over her.

“They’re after you.”

Jaytsy froze, terrified, as her father loomed over her. A movement by the door caused her to yelp, and Perrin spun to see what startled her. He aimed the sword at the figure.

Peto trembled there, horrified.

A voice shouted from the gathering room, “Colonel Shin, put away your sword! That’s an order!” Mahrree pushed Peto out of the way and stood in the doorway with her hands on her hips.

Perrin lowered the sword and looked around blankly. Jaytsy slipped out of her bed and rushed over to Peto’s side. She didn’t know which of them was shaking more.

“That was close!” she whispered to her brother.

Peto could make only a strangled noise in response.

Their father staggered to the sofa, sat, and stared at the floor.

Mahrree tiptoed over to him and cautiously laid a hand on his shoulder. “Perrin? Are you all right?”

He looked up. “What am I doing down here?”

Peto and Jaytsy exhaled as he stared at the sword in his hand.

“You’ve been walking in your sleep,” Mahrree told him. “I think you had another nightmare.”

“Did I scare you?” he asked his children, almost timidly.

“Yes?” they squeaked.

“I’m sorry,” he breathed, got up, and trudged back upstairs.

Mahrree kissed each of them quickly. “Everything’s fine!” she said too happily. “Back to bed, now!” She followed their father up the stairs. “Perrin, give me the sword.”

Jaytsy had never before realized how brave her mother was.

The next morning she and Peto got their own breakfast and ate before their parents got up. Neither of them said it, but they both seemed to think it was just safer that way.

Two days later Jaytsy found her father asleep on the floor by the back kitchen door, curled into a ball, with General Shin’s sword by his side. She rushed upstairs to get her mother, then waited on their bed until the shouting downstairs stopped.

Everything was *not* fine, but no one was talking about it. Peto looked at her that morning with a mixture of understanding and dread. She returned it. At least, for once, they had something in common.

The next night he did it again—ran around the house shouting until he collapsed onto Peto’s bed. And again at breakfast, no one spoke. Mealtime had never been so silent before at the Shins.

Two nights later, Jaytsy sat terrified on her bed, too frightened to fall asleep. When her father wasn't rampaging around the house, she had nightmares that he was.

Quiet footsteps coming through the eating room made her tense in worry. Cautiously she crept to her door and peeked through the crack. Candle light illuminated enough gathering room for her to see her mother embracing Uncle Shem.

"Thank you for coming, Shem!" said Mahrree. "I've never seen him like this before. I don't think he's even fully awake."

"Does he wake up when you stop him?" Shem asked as he stepped out of her hug.

"Sometimes. I think he can't get over *how* his parents died. He's all right with their passing. We've all felt great comfort about it. In fact, all of Edge is benefiting; Karna sold Joriana's jewelry for so much in Rivers that everyone here will be well compensated—"

Jaytsy stopped hearing after that. She'd suspected that her parents had something to do with helping get payments to the villagers, but she'd thought that her parents "disposing" of Grandmother's jewelry was because they didn't need such finery in the house.

Just days ago Lieutenant Offra had come to the house, a stack of pages and sharpened charcoal in hand, and a nervous but eager smile on his face. Behind him, two assisting soldiers sniggered.

"Good afternoon, Miss!" Offra said brightly, if not a bit unsteadily. It's never easy being the newest soldier; it's even worse to be the newest young officer. "Is your mother or father at home?"

Jaytsy sent a withering glare to the soldiers behind him who let him walk up to the door without telling him whose it was.

"They're out right now."

"Could you tell them that Lieutenant Offra from the fort was by—" he squinted a little and cocked his head, as if something was vaguely familiar about the situation "—and that I'll come by again later? We've been given a generous donation to help in the rebuilding of Edge, and each household can claim a part—"

"We won't be needing any of that donation, Offra," Jaytsy said.

He blinked. "But . . . it's to help cover costs, losses—"

"We're fine, Lieutenant," she said firmly. "My mother and my father—*Colonel Shin*—both agree."

Offra's jaw dropped, then wobbled about. "I *thought* I knew this house . . . Sorry. New village, everything looks the same."

Jaytsy glared at the soldiers snickering behind him. She used to play along with the jokes on the new men. But in the past few weeks, she and Edge and even the whole world had changed.

Except for these inane soldiers who still thought it good fun to set up their greenest officer.

Jaytsy had no more patience for silliness. How could the soldiers still be so childish? Hadn't they discovered corpses? Seen women wail in distress? Children sob in fear? Mature men weep quietly behind their houses? Hadn't they lost their High General and his wife to the very Guarders they were to be defending the world against? And now even their own commander was—

Something in Jaytsy's throat swelled that day, squeezing away all lightness and joy. These ludicrous boys—the world was already a hard place; why make it harder?

"Thank you anyway, Lieutenant Offra," she had said. "You represent yourself, the fort, and the army honorably. My grandfather would be proud of *you*."

The soldiers behind Offra shuffled their boots and glared at each other to transfer blame.

Offra nodded to Jaytsy. "Thank you, Miss Shin. Sorry to have bothered you." And, to his great credit, he didn't even glance at the penitent soldiers behind him as he headed to the next house.

As Jaytsy stood at her bedroom door, listening in to her mother and Uncle Shem, she smiled dimly. The Shins were rebuilding Edge. *All* of the Shins. She knew her parents stored gold and silver in the cellar, and she suspected that behind the secret concealing panel was now nothing but an empty dirt dugout.

For a moment, her heart was lighter again—until she heard her mother sniffing and noticed Shem putting a hand on her shoulder.

"Shem, something's going on with Perrin. It's as if he blames himself for how Relf and Joriana passed."

"I know," Shem said. "Even Gadiman blamed him, in front of all the Administrators. That's when he lost his temper. Well, what was left of it. It's as if there's a part of him none of us can reach. He's exhausted and snapping at everyone in the fort. This afternoon he fell asleep at his desk. When I heard him snoring, I told Thorne and Offra to let him sleep. He woke up screaming a few minutes later, and I thought for sure our brave Captain Thorne was going to fall

down the stairs in fright,” he chuckled sadly.

“What are we going to do with him?” Mahrree sighed.

“I don’t know. But I think I had better stay hidden if he starts up again. He may not recognize me.”

That night was quiet. It took another hour for Jaytsy to fall asleep, but knowing Uncle Shem was on the sofa made her feel safer. It reminded her of the time he stayed by her bedside when she was little and her father was gone for weeks training other fort commanders. A terrible thunderstorm was raging outside one night, but Uncle Shem was strong enough to keep the thunder from “getting” to her.

She never thought that someday the thunder would be her own father.

The next night, the thunder awoke. Shortly after Jaytsy heard Shem sneak into the house again, Colonel Shin went on a rampage.

“They’re everywhere!” he yelled upstairs in the bedroom. “They’re coming to get us!”

Jaytsy flung open her door to see Shem standing at the foot of the stairs, waiting for his friend to come running down.

But instead they heard him scream, “MAHRREE!”

Jaytsy froze. She had *never* heard him scream before. Now Peto’s door flew open.

“No, no, NO! I’m too late! Dear Creator, she’s *dead!* Mahrree!”

Jaytsy and Peto rushed up the steps behind Shem, who was already taking them three at a time. When he threw open the bedroom door, they saw Perrin standing and staring at the floor, sobbing at nothing.

Their mother was kneeling on the bed trying to turn him to face her. “I’m here! Perrin! I’m *right here*. Look at me!”

“I’m going to *kill them!*” he wailed and pulled at his hair. “I have to kill them *all!*”

Jaytsy grabbed Peto, needing someone to hold on to. She’d never seen her father so agitated before, and certainly had never seen him cry. She didn’t know he was even capable of it.

Peto quivered under her grip and awkwardly put a scrawny but protective arm around her.

Shem stepped up to Perrin, spun his friend to face him, and took him by both shoulders. “Perrin! Wake up! It’s not real!”

Perrin paused, focused on who was holding him, and

bellowed, “YOU!”

Jaytsy and Peto cowered in the corner as their father started to go for Shem’s throat.

Fortunately Shem was faster. He hit Perrin squarely in the jaw, knocking him to the floor. When he didn’t immediately get up, Mahrree scrambled off the bed to sit next to him. He slowly sat up as Shem lit a candle and shook out his throbbing hand.

Perrin rubbed his jaw. “What was *that* all about?” He stopped when he saw his master sergeant towering over him. “Shem, what are you doing in my bedroom? Jaytsy? Peto?”

They just quivered in the corner.

“Tell me what you remember,” Shem demanded, standing over him with the candle. “Right now. What were you doing?”

Perrin still seemed stunned as he leaned against the bed. “Uh, I was in a house. A big house. Lots of noise. Then it became very quiet and I saw someone running through it.” His breathing grew heavier. “Dressed in black. Darkened face.” Tears trickled down his cheeks as he shook his head, trying to lose the image. “Then there was a body . . .” His eyes closed. “No . . . no . . . no! Mahrree!”

“I’m right here!” Mahrree yelled. “Perrin, open your eyes and *look at me!*” She straddled his legs and held his face.

Jaytsy gripped Peto tighter, but he didn’t seem to mind.

Their father opened his eyes, saw their mother hazily, and sobbed. “How’d you survive? Are you all right? Oh, my darling wife!” He wrapped his arms around her. “Not again, not again . . .”

Jaytsy silently began to weep. By the way Peto was sniffing, she could tell he was too.

That wasn’t the way their father was supposed to act. Perrin Shin, Colonel of the fort of Edge, son of the High General of Idumea, sitting on the floor sobbing into his wife’s shoulder. That man was a complete stranger.

Jaytsy had never felt so lonely or so vulnerable.

Shem set down the candle and put his hands on her and Peto’s shoulders. “Go back downstairs,” he whispered. “We’ll take care of him. I think your father is dealing with more than any of us realized. The berry has finally broken the bear,” he murmured.

Jaytsy wrinkled her nose at that odd remark, but Peto whispered, “Uncle Shem, is he going to be all right?”

Both of them watched their mother as she stroked their father’s weeping head. “Perrin, it’s all right! We’re all here. You’ve kept us

safe. Perrin, it's all right." With tears slipping down her own face, she nodded over at her children, but she didn't seem too sure.

"I hope so," Shem said, sounding deeply worried as well.

The two of them walked down the stairs, close together, and Peto followed Jaytsy into her room.

"Want to sleep on my floor?" she offered, not wanting to be alone, even if it did mean her company was her brother.

He nodded, retrieved his pillow and blanket, and lay down next to her bed.

"They've ruined him," Peto whispered to the dark.

Jaytsy closed her eyes, afraid he might be right. Peto didn't specify who "they" were, but Jaytsy felt as if the whole world was out to get them. Her parents—her father especially—had done so much for the world, and this was how it was repaying them?

And what had they ruined him for? Peto likely meant for being a general, but Jaytsy was fine with that. She'd be happy to never see Idumea again, the city that let her grandparents be murdered by a dressmaker.

When they awoke the next morning it was to find their parents and Shem sitting around the table, talking quietly. Judging by their stooped postures and bleary eyes, it didn't seem as if any of them had slept. But of the three, their father looked the worst. His eyes were bloodshot, and he had a bruise on his jaw where Shem had hit him. He tried to give them a smile, but half of his face wouldn't move. Instead, he beckoned them to come to the table.

They hesitated before sitting down.

"I'm sorry about last night, or rather, about the past few nights, so I'm told. I'm a little . . . bothered right now. But I'm working on it. I just need you to be patient with me, all right?"

Jaytsy and Peto both nodded to him, but he still seemed so unfamiliar.

Their mother gave them a look that said she expected something more. Peto caught on and went to his father, giving him a hug from behind.

Jaytsy quickly joined him and kissed her father on the cheek. "You'll be all right, I know it."

But he wasn't. Even Jaytsy knew it would take a lot longer than talking throughout the night to bring him all the way back from Idumea.

Shem stayed almost every night for the next several weeks,

physically restraining Perrin when he became aggressive in his sleep. One night the two of them got into such a violent fight—Perrin sure that Shem was a Guarder—that it took the family an hour to put everything back in place the next day. It was early that morning when Jaytsy heard her exhausted mother talking to Shem after her father stormed off for the fort.

“We can’t go on like this, Shem. None of us. He refuses to give up the sword, insisting that isn’t the problem. The less sleep he gets, the more irrational he becomes. He’s so angry, but I’m not sure at whom. I’ve thought about writing Doctor Brisack for help. Surely he or the garrison surgeons must’ve seen something like this?”

Shem, holding his side where Perrin had hit him with a chair, nodded sadly. “Mahrree, just don’t tell Brisack *everything*. Only that he’s having a hard time sleeping. If you tell them about his nightmares and paranoia, the garrison may insist on doing something drastic. The last thing he needs is to be sedated.”

Jaytsy’s eyebrows went up.

Her father had told them about the sedation that was forced upon him after he confronted the Administrators over his parents’ deaths. The garrison surgeon and Doctor Brisack had felt it was the only way to calm him down, especially after he tried to kill Gadiman. And when he had described to them the effects of sedation, his clenched fists made it was obvious he hadn’t been too happy about it.

“Are you sure?” Mahrree’s question stunned Jaytsy. “Shem, it might be just what he needs. Even when he isn’t looking for a fight, he thrashes all night long. At this point, *I* could use some sedation.”

Shem sighed. “Maybe you’re right. I don’t know how much longer you or he can keep this up. Just send a message. Use the Administrators’ service, but say only that he needs help sleeping.”

Three nights later, on the 2nd Day of Weeding, Mahrree stayed up late waiting for Shem to come to the back door.

Jaytsy had been waiting too, to confront them.

“What are you going to do to him?” Jaytsy asked pointedly when she saw the brown bottle Shem held.

“I’m not doing anything,” Shem said bitterly. “Your mother is.”

Jaytsy had never seen her Uncle Shem’s eyes so hard. Usually he looked warmly at Mahrree, but not tonight as he thrust the bottle and a small paper of instructions at her.

“It will just help him sleep,” defended Mahrree, taking the bottle

and reading the note from Idumea. “He won’t even know he’s breathed it in. Brisack thinks it will take only a few doses for a few weeks until he’s better. His body just doesn’t remember how to function. This will get him back in a regular schedule again. And I’m sure once he sleeps better, he’ll think better.” She didn’t look at either of them before marching up the stairs.

Shem sat down with an angry huff on the sofa in the dark.

Jaytsy joined him. “What’s really wrong with him?” she asked. “I’m old enough to know why my mother wants to sedate him.”

“So am I,” said Peto from his door. He walked over to the sofa and sat down on the other side of Shem.

Shem sighed deeply. “He’s traumatized. I had to look it up in one of the old texts from the time of the kings. The surgeon doesn’t know why I wanted to see his library. It seems this was a big problem during the Great War. Soldiers would suddenly collapse during a bloody and prolonged fight. A few even went inexplicably blind after seeing so much death. Many of them had been fighting for years and simply couldn’t take any more. Some of the great leaders made it through the war, then went somewhere peaceful and took their own lives. Or, in the case of one general, just vanished.”

“A general just vanished?” Peto asked.

“Yes,” Shem said softly. “Left one afternoon, and was never seen again. His wife and son never found out what happened to him. Perhaps he was like so many others; they just saw too much death to make life worth living anymore.”

Jaytsy was grateful it was dark so that no one could see the tears streaking down her face. But the darkness couldn’t mask her sobs.

Shem groaned quietly when he heard her. “Shh, Jaytsy—don’t fret yet. I don’t think your father is at that point. I’m sure we can still bring him back.” He put an arm around each of the teens and pulled them close to him.

“Why isn’t he dreaming of the caravan fight?” Peto asked, his voice quivering. “He took down sixteen men. I know lots of them died. Why isn’t he reliving that?”

“I guess because he was successful there,” Shem suggested. “But he wasn’t in saving his parents. All of his dreams are about people coming into his home and killing his family.”

“So what do we do?” Jaytsy whimpered.

“I’ve been reading about that, too. Sit with him. Talk with him.

Help him distinguish what's real and what isn't. The book says we need to be patient. Don't give him anything else to worry about, and realize that maybe, *maybe* he just might not come back all the way," Shem's voice cracked. "You need to ask yourselves, can you live with that? Can you accept your father the way he is?"

"Of course they can!" Mahrree snapped as she came down the stairs. "Because he'll be fine! Already he's sleeping as deeply as Peto, and I didn't hold it in front of his nose as long as Brisack recommended. So don't go sentencing him yet, Shem!"

"Mahrree," Shem said, standing up, "I didn't mean it that way. They just need to know. From what I read, things like this can take a long time to come back from. And some—Mahrree, you *have* to know—some never come back."

"But can't we pray?" Peto asked quietly. "Can't the Creator heal him? Help him still reach . . . his destiny?"

"Destiny?" Jaytsy wondered.

Peto sighed. "You know what I mean. Whatever he's supposed to still be. We can always pray, can't we?"

Mahrree wrapped her arms around him. "I have been, every night, every morning. And Shem, I know you're right. I just can't give up on him already."

"And you may be right, Mahrree, about the sedation. Maybe sleeping *will* help." Shem hesitated. "I want to see him."

Mahrree tilted her head. "Something wrong?"

Shem's shoulder twitched. "I merely . . . want to make sure he's all right before I go. The assistants at the garrison frequently checked his pulse."

Suddenly worried, Mahrree gestured to the stairs.

Jaytsy and Peto took that as a group invitation. They followed Shem and their mother up to the bedroom where a candle was burning. Their father was flopped on the bed, very still.

Shem picked up his wrist and felt his pulse.

"I gave him only half of what they recommended," Mahrree began, mild panic growing in her voice. "He should be—"

"He's fine," Shem said flatly. He dropped his wrist and lifted open one of Perrin's eyelids to peer into his unresponsive eye. "The Last Day could come and go, and he'd never know it. Pulse is slow but steady. Well done, Mrs. Shin," his tone turned cold. "Your husband's fully sedated."

Mahrree folded her arms. "That's the idea!"

Shem held his hands up in surrender. “I know. I’m sorry. I just hate seeing him like this. Again.”

Jaytsy didn’t think he looked so bad—like a sleeping baby, albeit a large and gruff sleeping baby.

Peto craned his neck. “He looks rather peaceful to me.”

“And me too,” said Mahrree, unfolding her arms. She turned to her children. “You can go to bed now.” She hugged each of them and whispered, “Enjoy the silence.”

They smiled at her, but Shem kept watching their father.

As Jaytsy and Peto started out the door, Shem said, “Nothing more for me to do here. I’ll be heading back to the fort—”

Jaytsy was at the top of the stairs when she heard her mother earnestly whisper, “Do you have to go?”

Jaytsy paused, thinking the same thing. While her father looked peaceful, he also looked defenseless.

Which meant all of them were.

She turned to watch Shem and her mother through the open bedroom door.

Shem exhaled, expelling a great deal of frustration and concern, but her mother put her arms around him.

He didn’t hug her back.

“I’m sorry Shem, about all of this. About doing what you think is a betrayal to him.”

“That’s not what I—”

“Yes, it *is* what you think,” said Mahrree firmly, pulling away to look at his face, but still keeping her arms around him. “We’re betraying him.”

Shem didn’t budge.

“It’s obvious you’re angry with me, and I don’t blame you. But Shem—is there any other option? Any other way to heal him?”

Shem’s jaw muscles clenched a few times before his shoulders sagged. “No other option I’ve found yet,” he conceded quietly. “But you don’t need me here, not tonight.”

“Please stay, though?”

Jaytsy was quietly pleading the same thing.

For some reason Shem looked extremely uncomfortable. He stepped back out of Mahrree’s embrace and nodded once. “Just to make sure he’s all right during the night. Your sofa and I are well acquainted. Good night, Mahrree.” He nearly ran over Jaytsy in his haste to get down the stairs.

That was only part of the reason why Jaytsy sat up late at night, hugging her knees and dreading to go to sleep. She was exceptionally preoccupied, more so than the average fifteen-year-old. Maybe her father needed only one or two nights to get back to normal again. Maybe all of his anger and odd behaviors would blow over quickly, then she could tell them her *other* concern.

She had planned to do so in the morning, until she heard Uncle Shem say, “Don’t give him anything else to worry about.”

She couldn’t even confide in her mother, she realized, until things got better with her father. Nor was her grandmother a possibility. Hycymum Peto wasn’t exactly the most discreet woman in the village.

Jaytsy would have to take care of this herself.

Not even Uncle Shem, who was now flopped wearily on the sofa, should be troubled by her news that Captain Lemuel Thorne, seven years older, was trying to court her.

The odd ritual began some weeks ago. School had resumed on the 56th Day of Planting, the day after Perrin’s first bad night. By the end of that worrying week, Jaytsy struggled to stay awake in class. That is, until Captain Thorne appeared in the room.

“Please, do forgive the interruption,” he said genially to the teacher as he took off his cap. He ran his hand unnecessarily through this short-cropped blonde hair to smooth it. Every girl in the room stopped whatever unimportant thing she was doing and stared.

But Jaytsy closed her eyes briefly and held her breath.

“I’m Captain Thorne, new to Edge and second in command. You see, ma’am, girls—” he nodded to the class and flashed a grin.

There was audible sighing. But not from Jaytsy.

“—there’s concern about the stability of the building. I’m here to do one last check to make sure the reinforcements are holding.”

It took their teacher long enough to blink herself back into comprehension of what the captain was saying to be embarrassing. “Oh. Oh! But I thought the major cleared it a couple of weeks ago?”

“Oh, he did,” Thorne assured her, but turned his gaze intently to Jaytsy.

Somehow it made her skin crawl, and not in a good way.

“But now that there’s weight on every level, we just wanted to make one last inspection.”

Jaytsy was sure no one at the fort had ordered that. The next thing Captain Thorne said to the teacher solidified her suspicions.

“If you or any of the other teachers see anything worrisome, notify Miss Jaytsy. She knows where she can find me.” He shifted his gaze back to Jaytsy. “I’m *always* available.” He bowed briefly to her as he had done at The Dinner, then bowed at the teacher before he left.

Jaytsy barely had time to exhale before one of her classmates giggled. “Ooh, I’d *love* to know where to find the captain, and always *available!*”

The entire class laughed as Jaytsy blushed. She noticed that even her teacher’s gaze lingered at the door where the captain had stood.

For the rest of the morning she thought about him, since everyone else was. But something about the way he looked at her had left Jaytsy uneasy. Perhaps it was because she was preoccupied by other concerns, but something about Captain Thorne sent a shiver up her spine. While she’d spent a couple of hours with Thorne at the dance after The Dinner, she didn’t know much more about him except that he loved horses.

He certainly had seemed intelligent when they spoke, but it wasn’t his intelligence that the girls in her class nattered about at midday meal. They gossiped about his sandy-colored hair, his blue eyes, his muscular build, and anything else they could imagine from the brief minute he was in their classroom. Jaytsy had to admit he was handsome, but—and it was silly, she knew—Captain Thorne just didn’t *look* like the man she pictured she’d spend her life with. She could see herself with a soldier, but marrying Thorne would most likely mean a life away from Edge.

As Jaytsy listened to the girls in the class at midday meal speculating on the supposed merits of Captain Thorne, she became more unsettled and shuddered to find herself thinking so far in the future about men and marriage—until she remembered it wasn’t *that* far. Two of her older friends had already become engaged and would be married at age seventeen.

By the end of the midday meal break the conversation had mercifully shifted away from the captain, and Jaytsy was sure that was the last she would hear about him.

Until it was time to go home, because he was waiting for her.

A girl sitting next to a window let out a small squeal. “Guess who’s outside!”

Before the teacher could remind them that they still had five minutes, the mass of females rushed the window to ogle the

young officer leaning against the split-rail fence that encircled the school grounds. Everyone, that is, except for Jaytsy. Even the teacher had to check out the view just in case it might be “trouble.”

“I think the only one who might have any trouble would be ‘Miss Jaytsy,’” one of her friends snickered. “And if you don’t want the ‘trouble,’ would you hand him along to me?”

Jaytsy sat stewing in mortification. “Maybe something’s come up and he needs to relay some information,” she said lamely.

“Ah,” said another girl, “a captain that’s a messenger. I thought that was reserved for hunky enlisted men like Zenos.”

When their teacher dismissed them, too distracted to work anymore, the girls hurried out of the building so that they could slowly file past Captain Thorne.

Jaytsy watched from the window as she leisurely put away her slate and books. The girls paced their passing in front of him so that he had to tip his hat to each one. He seemed entertained by the parade of young women. Jaytsy glanced at her teacher and saw the older woman send a satisfied sigh to the window.

When Jaytsy finally made her way outside, the captain promptly left his post and headed straight for her.

Dreading his answer, she asked, “Is something wrong, Captain?”

“There’s always something wrong—that’s why I’m here: to make sure no trouble comes to you.” He held out his arm for her.

Before she could formulate a reason why she shouldn’t, she politely slipped her hand into the crook of his arm. “Some would say trouble has already come to me.”

Captain Thorne frowned as he tried to puzzle out her response.

“And we are going . . .?”

“To your home,” the captain informed her. “Considering these troubled times, I thought it best to see you there safely.”

Jaytsy was aware of her schoolmates watching them, and she worried that the captain could hear their tittering.

“I’m sure there’s nothing to fret about now. The towers are quiet, and so are the roads,” she said. “I can make it home myself. I usually go to meet my mother and brother at their school anyway,” and she released his arm.

He took her hand back. “Miss Jaytsy,” he said with a gentleness that sounded more rehearsed than sincere, “I’m concerned about *your father*. He still seems greatly affected by what happened in Idumea.”

Jaytsy cringed. So the fort knew something was wrong, too.

“I happened to be near the hospital when my father and grandfather brought him to see his parents. Miss Jaytsy, I don’t think he’s quite over that experience. His eyes were nearly dead that day, and in many ways they still are. It’ll take him some time to recover, so I’m here to watch out for your family.” His tone was so smooth and slick that it made Jaytsy think of snakes. “In case he’s unable to help you, know that I will. So, if you want to go to your mother’s school, then I’ll walk you there instead.”

Jaytsy tried not to groan too loudly as she squirmed in annoyance. She didn’t want to discuss her father. She didn’t want this kind of attention. And she most certainly didn’t want to be courted.

Well, maybe she did. Just not by Lemuel Thorne.

She had to do something with the captain who seemed intent on possessing her hand, requiring the rest of her to follow. “On second thought, I guess we can go to my home.”

Thorne patted her hand. “We can talk there until your mother arrives.”

It hadn’t occurred to her that no one would be at her house, and being there with him alone wasn’t appropriate. But she couldn’t suggest now going to the boys’ school again. Not that she cared at all about his opinion of her, she didn’t want to seem that flighty. “Talk about what?”

“Goals, ambitions, the future.”

Jaytsy scoffed a laugh. “Oh, is *that* all! I thought maybe hobbies, what you like to read, what’s the dullest thing in Edge compared to Idumea. Something less commonplace than ‘ambitions.’”

She glanced sideways and saw confusion on Thorne’s face as he pondered her sarcasm. “Funny,” he decided.

Jaytsy sighed. If one had to analyze if something is ‘funny,’ then one usually had a weak grasp of what ‘funny’ is.

They walked in silence to her house, fortunately not far away. All the way there Jaytsy tried to think of ways to abandon Thorne on the front porch to avoid ‘talking.’ When they reached the steps, Jaytsy released his arm, shook his hand formally, and said, “Thank you for the escort, Captain. I have a great deal of school work to do. Perhaps we can talk another time.”

The captain, a bit surprised, nodded. “Only if you’ll call me Lemuel when we’re alone.”

“Oh, I can’t do *that*,” Jaytsy said with feigned brightness. “I’m not sixteen yet. Can’t break the expectations of society, now, can we?” She turned abruptly, ran up the stairs into the house, shut the door, and bolted it while the captain still stood at the steps with his mouth open trying to form a response.

He was determined, she had to give him that. He was there every afternoon the next week to walk her home again. They rarely talked about anything but army life or horses. Actually, *he* did all the talking, about his paternal grandfather’s stables and how he’d produced a breed of horse that was not only strong but fast. Jaytsy heard every dull, agonizing detail.

She soon realized that if she let Thorne ramble, she could think of other things as they walked, while giving him an occasional, “Uh-huh,” or “Is that so?” to keep him going. He never noticed that she wasn’t listening. And when they reached her front doorstep, she ran up the stairs before he could say or do anything else.

She’d never been so happy to see the Late Planting Season Break come a couple of weeks later. Life was tenser at home with her father’s bad nights—even with Shem helping to mollify him—and Jaytsy had already decided she’d spend as much time away as she could during the break by volunteering to help plant the neighboring farms. Every last piece of vacant land was to be turned into a garden to replace the reserves Edge took from Idumea—except for the Shins’ gardens which no one thought would produce anything but rock—and every available body was needed to work.

Jaytsy could be gone before breakfast, when her father would do nothing but stare at his plate and drum his fingers, and not return until after dinner, when he’d speak only in stilted sentences.

Before the break, Captain Thorne patted her hand. “Just because school is out for a week doesn’t mean I can’t continue seeing you. Let’s think of a time—”

She interrupted him with a sigh of sadness that she thought sounded quite authentic. “I’ve volunteered to help with the late planting this year. I’ll be in different fields every day, so I don’t know how you could *ever* find me.”

Captain Thorne smiled. “Sounds like a challenge, Miss Jaytsy. Besides, the fort will be receiving some new horses from the Stables at Pools, and even though they’re not of my grandfather’s herds, I look forward to telling you about each one of them . . .”

He *had* tried to find her. Jaytsy had seen him searching the fields

each day as he rode by. She'd repurposed one of her grandmother's floppy hats she inherited to not only shade her but disguise her as well. Her mother thought it odd that Jaytsy wanted to work in the fields, but believed her excuse that she felt it was the family's duty that someone finally learn something about farming.

By the time school began again on the 2nd Day of Weeding, Jaytsy had hoped that Captain Thorne had found someone else more interesting. Many girls had flirted with him as he stopped by the fields inquiring after her. They pretended to not know where or who she was, so that they could keep the captain all to themselves.

But on that first day back to school, there was Captain Thorne waiting as usual against the fence.

Jaytsy made sure she was the last one out of the building, hoping that the captain was there to escort someone else. No such luck.

As she walked out of the school, Thorne put on a thick, sweet smile that would have excited bees. "You look well, Miss Jaytsy! None too damaged by laboring in the fields, I see."

"Actually, I rather enjoyed it. But don't tell my mother or she might disown me," she said, obligingly taking his offered arm.

Thorne frowned at her comment, but said, "Well I certainly hope you're done with all that. Your mother likely feels as I do, that on your hands and knees in the dirt isn't your proper place. Now, I'm sure you're eager to hear about my new horse. He'll arrive soon, and I've already decided to call him Streak. You see, he's—"

Jaytsy decided it was enough. It wasn't fair to him and, she decided, this drudgery really wasn't fair to her.

"Captain Thorne," she interrupted him. "*Lemuel*," she said more kindly, noticing out of the corner of her eye that he smiled when she said his name. "I appreciate your trying to take care of me, but I think you'd find your time better spent doing . . . something else."

After a silent moment he said, "What do you mean?"

Jaytsy closed her eyes, wishing she'd planned this conversation further than to the first thing which popped into her mind. "It's just that, um, everything's fine and . . . I'm not ready for this. I'm not interested in 'walking and talking' for a few more years still."

The captain's pace slowed a little.

She glanced at his jaw and saw it tense. "But, Captain, many girls here are. You may not realize it, but you have quite a following at the school. Say the word and you'll have a line of girls, older, prettier, and more *ready* than me waiting for a chance with you!"

She felt his arm flex under her hand. "You don't understand, Miss Jaytsy," he said in a low, cool voice. "You don't breed the prized stallion with just any filly. Not even casually."

She knew her mouth was hanging open ludicrously, but she couldn't make it close. Her stomach lurched with disgust as she realized she was nothing more than . . . than breeding stock?

"No, Miss Jaytsy," he said decisively, "I'll just wait for you to be ready. In time you'll see that this joining will be the most advantageous, to produce the best heir of our grandfathers. There's no one else worthy of the blood of Thornes than the blood of Shins."

Breeding stock for another general of the Army of Idumea!

Jaytsy wished for something sharp and cutting to come out of her mouth, but all she could do was will herself to get home so she could kick something.

He didn't love her. He wasn't even *interested* in her. Just her bloodlines.

Captain Thorne patted her arm a little too forcefully. "Yes. Fine. We have time," he said vaguely.

Shocked and repulsed, Jaytsy couldn't imagine how to respond and barely endured holding his arm.

When they reached her house, he grudgingly released her. She started in a quick dash for the stairs, but didn't make it. Lemuel lunged, caught her arm, and pulled her back.

"Just so you know what you can look forward to." He gripped both of her arms, pulled her close to his body, and kissed her firmly. Jaytsy's mind went blank, and she desperately tried to recall any of the techniques her father taught her many weeks ago. All she could do was flail, but it was enough that he let her go.

He touched the satisfied smile on his mouth, then had the nerve to bow to her. "Until you're ready for more, Miss Jaytsy." And he tipped his cap and promptly left.

Jaytsy ran into the house and washed out her mouth with the hottest water she could get from the warm water pump.

Throughout dinner Jaytsy had watched her parents, wondering if she should tell them what had happened with the captain. But her

father stared at his plate, stabbing aggressively at his pork chop, and her mother watched him, barely picking at her dumplings. Her brother wolfed down his dinner in record time then headed back outside with his old kickball. Jaytsy sighed and considered that maybe tomorrow would be a better day to talk.

Then Shem and the bottle of sedation from Idumea arrived late that evening, and Shem said they shouldn't bother her father with anything else—

So well into the night Jaytsy sat on her bed with her knees pulled up to her chest, wondering how, or if *ever*, she should tell her family that Captain Thorne was waiting for his filly to be ready.

Chapter 2 ~ “I know *everything* that goes on here in Edge.”

Perrin stared out the northeast window of his private office in the tower and came to some conclusions.

The problem with Shem, Mahrree, Jaytsy, Peto, the fort—with everybody, really—was that they couldn’t *see*.

But Perrin could.

He could see them in the shadows, staring from the trees, going for cover behind a door, under a desk, into a shop, through a barn. . .

Shem said his mind was confusing him.

Mahrree said it was nightmares.

His children said nothing.

But he knew the truth: he was surrounded by Guardians, masquerading as cats.

Not *literal* cats—it wasn’t as if he was insane—but citizens looked at him, then looked again. Some were new who claimed they were from the ruined village of Moorland. Others said they were visiting relatives to help with rebuilding, or on their way to somewhere else, although Edge wasn’t on the way to anywhere “else.”

He’d spin around, and there they’d go—ducking behind a building or tree, and when he chased after them, they were already gone.

He changed his routines, patrolling different roads in patterns he never used before. And he stared into the eyes of those cats—those collaborators who Qayin Thorne had mentioned to Shem when he thought Perrin was dazed and presumably deaf from grief in the carriage—sent to the barn at Edge to keep an eye on the trapped and wounded falcon named Perrin Shin.

And someday, his family would believe him about the cats, if they weren’t already dead.

Colonel Perrin Shin was the only one who knew the whole truth. How could a man sleep with that knowledge?

Today out of the command office window and he observed another pair of cats setting up across the road from his fort taking over the old catapult fields. The abandoned farmhouse was being cleaned up, having been claimed by a couple around his age who waved pleasantly as he stalked by that morning.

He pulled over his spyglass and focused on the woman hauling crates into the house. Then he pivoted the shaft to get a closer look at the man tying a cow to a tree next to the barn that looked as if it could come down at any moment. Perrin didn't feel even the smallest bit of guilt for watching the man scratch himself in a less-than-suitable place, sure that no one could see him. The spyglass was, after all, meant to spy on Guardsers.

After an hour Perrin took a quick walk over to the run-down house, the dusty windows already wiped clean, and the sounds of scrubbing coming from the kitchen. He noticed that at the old barn the man was hammering a board against a leaning door frame.

Perrin straightened his jacket and marched over to him. Moments before Perrin reached him, the farmer turned around. He blinked rapidly to see Perrin continue his stride and stop only about a foot in front of him.

"You're the colonel, aren't you?" the man said, taking a short step backward and almost into his barn.

"I am," Perrin said coldly. "And why are you here?"

The man blinked at him again, nervously. He was of average height, average weight, brown hair going gray at the temples, and light brown eyes. Nothing remarkable, nothing distinguishable. *Exceptionally* average, so as to not to be memorable in any way.

Exactly the kind of man Perrin would have chosen for the task.

"I, I, I, I . . ." the man stammered, "I . . . and my wife, of course, we're from Moorland. Lost our home and my mother in the land tremor, and heard there were possibilities here. Cambozola Briter, sir," and he held out his hand to shake Perrin's.

Perrin slowly raised his hand and took Briter's, squeezing it until he heard something pop. The man gasped slightly and Perrin released his hand.

"Bit of a mouthful, the first name there, isn't it?" Briter said, trying to sound light-hearted but a trembling undertone gave him away. He shoved his hand into the safety of his trousers' pocket. "I was named after four different ancestors," he gabbled. "You can

shorten it, though. You can call me Cambo, or Zola, or Bozola, and even in school I was called Bozo. So sir, you may call me—”

Perrin focused his glare. “Mr. Briter will suffice.”

Cambozola Briter swallowed hard. “I, I, I spoke to your master sergeant some days ago. Said soldiers planted this field, but it needed to be taken care of,” he rushed. “My wife is an excellent gardener, sir, I’m a fair cheese maker, we’ve got chickens and plans to buy more cows. The master sergeant said we could provide food to the fort in lieu of payment for the land. We’ve got some builders lined up to shore up the barn. He, I mean that sergeant, had us a sign a paper and everything.”

Perrin just nodded once. “Yes,” he said tonelessly. “Sergeant Zenos told me. I will personally review the document. How long did you live in Moorland?”

Briter was beginning to sweat, and not, Perrin was sure, because it was hot Weeding Day. No matter how well-trained the spy, it was a rare man that could withstand a prolonged Shin glare. “Most of my life, sir. My family came from Sands, but I’ve always preferred small villages, away from all the bustle. Would never want to be in Idumea, sir! And may I say, sir, sorry about your parents?”

Perrin nodded again, but doubted this *cat* was anything but sorry; only surprised that Perrin was already on to him.

He looked over at the house. “Is that your wife cleaning in there?”

Briter nodded and cleared his throat. “Yes. Sewzi. And we have a son, but he’s in Mountseen at the university.”

“I want to meet your wife.”

“Of course, of course!” Briter said, massaging his hand and rushing ahead of the colonel to his house. “Sewzi! Visitor *from the fort*, Sewzi!” he called in warning as he ran up the back steps, Perrin stalking after him.

The back door opened and a pleasant enough looking woman opened the door. She glanced at Perrin and stopped. “Oh, my . . .”

You better be afraid, Perrin thought, because I don’t fear you.

“Mrs. Briter,” he said shortly. He shook her hand firmly but decided not to crush any of her knuckles.

She seemed so innocent, so average. Maybe a little younger than Mahrree, with rough, dry hands. She might actually be a gardener, and wouldn’t that be the ideal place for her to spend all day watching the fort across the road, in the acres of her new farm. Her blue eyes looked as terrified as a rabbit’s.

“Just so both of you know, I’m watching this land. Perfect view from my tower. I know *everything* that goes on here in Edge because nothing escapes my attention. Do you understand?”

The Briters nodded vigorously.

“Of course, sir. Of course!” Mr. Briter said too quickly. “And, and, and we appreciate that!”

Perrin squinted at them. “I don’t know why you would. But I *will* find out.”

He spun and headed back to the road, leaving the Briters with their mouths hanging open.

Maybe this was why his marks in diplomacy in Command School were always his lowest. He didn’t see a need to coddle the truth, but to expose it and pierce it, writhing, to the ground.

“How long did you say this has been going on?” Rector Yung asked Shem, who leaned against his mantelpiece watching the fire.

“A few weeks,” Shem confessed. “I didn’t want to say anything until I was sure it was trauma. I thought it was just a temporary disturbance, but . . . I suppose it’s the berry that broke the bear.”

Yung nodded sadly and watched the flames as well. “We suspected and feared something like this could happen—”

Shem shook his head. “But he’s so strong. I don’t understand.”

Rector Yung put a hand on Shem’s arm. “It has nothing to do with strength. It’s happened before, with others. Sometimes a man just gets pushed too far. And when you look at his history, it’s rather inevitable. That Perrin’s lasted so long is remarkable.”

Shem turned to him. “Wait a minute . . . that’s why they sent *you*, isn’t it? I thought it seemed odd you were willing to come back into service, but you *knew* this would happen, didn’t you?”

Yung shrugged. “Suspected, but *not knew*. With the others—”

But Shem, furious that he’d been left in the dark, didn’t care about any others. *He* was supposed to be the one shedding light for everyone else. “So why didn’t you warn me?”

“Shem,” Yung said patiently, “what else could we have done?”

There was no answer for that. Bitterly, Shem turned back to the fire. “So what do we do now?”

“We’re going to need help. I don’t work alone, nor is this a quick fix. Jothan just returned to the forest. We should tell him.”

Shem closed his eyes and massaged his forehead. “Do we have to let *them* know?”

“While I’ve seen this before, I’d feel much more comfortable with some assistance. Jothan’s the perfect man.” Yung paused. “Shem, why don’t want them to know?”

It took him a minute to find the words. “I’m worried of what they’ll think of him.”

“What they’ll think of him? They’ll think he needs help.”

“Are you sure?” Shem’s voice was so tight, so tense, that Yung turned the brawny soldier to face him.

“What’s this really about, Shem?”

His chin trembled as he stammered, “What if . . . what if they decide he’s . . . not the one? What if they . . . change their mind or something?”

“Why would they do that?”

“I don’t know!” Shem nearly wailed, sitting down in Rector Yung’s only chair, a stuffed piece that was likely twice as big when it was first made decades ago, but now was so worn that it was flat and barely big enough to contain the master sergeant. He held his face in his hands, tears leaking between his fingers.

Astonished, Yung squatted in front of him and waited.

“He can do it, Rector. He can do it all. Or rather, he *could* have. But now? It’s all been too much, I feel it. If Jothan tells them—”

“But Shem, nothing’s changed. Perrin’s still the one. Hifadhi believed it, and Gleace does too. And *I’m* more sure of it now than ever before. He’s going through this for a reason, Shem. There’s a purpose to the pain. There always is. Sometimes it takes us a lifetime to understand it, but eventually we’ll see and even be grateful.”

Shem couldn’t look at him. “I can’t see that right now. I just don’t get it.”

“You’re not required to ‘get it.’ You’re required to stand at his side; nothing more, nothing less,” the rector assured.

The men sat in silence for a few minutes, listening only to the crackling of the fire.

Yung watched the flames while waiting for Shem to come out of his brooding. Eventually he said, “How do they make steel for swords?”

“I’m sorry, Yung, but I’m really not in the mood to give you a step-by-step description.”

“They do it with fire, right?” Yung said. “Smelting iron, then

heating it for a long time, and processing it in some way, right?”

Shem sighed. “That’s the over-simplified version, but yes.”

“Why? Why so much heat and time?”

Shem sighed louder, as if to emphasize that he *really* didn’t want to discuss this. “Because iron is brittle and useless as a weapon. But through sloughing off the impurities, getting rid of the slag, and heating it correctly, it becomes a strong, stable piece of steel.”

“It does,” Yung agreed. “And only by such a grueling refining process does it become something as fine as what you wear on your hip—a true piece of art and function, able to defend like nothing else in the world can.”

Shem was crying again, but now for a different reason.

Yung smiled that he ‘got it.’ Even as a boy, Shem had been so quick to understand. That was why he was chosen.

“He’s going to make it, isn’t he?” Shem sniffled.

“Oh, I believe he is. And when—not if, but *when*—he comes out of all this—”

“He’ll be even more remarkable, won’t he?” Shem wiped his nose on his sleeve. “He’ll be everything we anticipated?”

“He will, Shem. Now please tell Jothan. Get some more minds working on this besides just yours and mine. This is going to take some time, and we’ll need reinforcements. In the meantime, you can update me about his behavior and we can make some plans.”

Shem exhaled. “Do you have any idea how many people I meet, and at different times, and in different places?”

Yung chuckled. “No, actually I don’t. And I don’t envy your schedule. When, exactly, do you sleep?”

“I’m not even sure myself,” he admitted. “But I’ll be here, as often as possible. Tell me one more time, please.” He gripped the old man’s shoulder. “He’s going to be great, isn’t he?”

“He is, Shem. He is.”

Grinning through his tears, Shem darted out of Yung’s back door and into the night.

The rector watched him slip into the shadows and smiled. “He’s going to be just as great as you, Shem Zenos.”

The next morning Shem took the long way back to the fort. Exceptionally long, considering that he was heading south to the market

before he went north to the fort. He slipped into the front doors of the Inn at Edge, nodded politely to a couple of patrons up for an early breakfast, and made his way to the kitchen door.

He pushed it open and smiled dimly at Mrs. Peto.

Mrs. Peto looked up from the dough she was kneading and sent back a similarly dismal smile. “Good morning, Master Sergeant. Or maybe it isn’t?”

Shem shook his head slightly. “Just wanted to let you know.” That was all he needed to say to convey that Mahrree would likely be by later.

She nodded and said, without silly preambles, “Stay. I just pulled out some hot rolls. Have some before you go on duty.”

“Didn’t bring any silver with me today, but thank you.”

“No silver needed,” she said. “My treat.”

Shem knew what society expected next. They should banter back and forth about how that was *Too kind, but no*, and *Oh, but I insist*, and *Oh, but I couldn’t*—

But he didn’t have anything left for society’s games, and neither did she. Mrs. Peto was weary, trying with Shem to support a family they didn’t know how to help. But Mrs. Peto had grown sharper in the past few moons, and was so focused she hadn’t got Shem’s ranking wrong in weeks.

“Thanks,” he said simply and took the plate she offered him, with four rolls still steaming.

He was grateful the eating room was mostly empty, and that the sun’s light hadn’t reached it yet. The muted silence was restful as he bit into warm roll, honey glaze sliding down his fingers—

“Well, hello my old friend!”

Shem stopped chewing and looked up at the creature that emitted the crooning noise which destroyed his peace.

“Sareen. What a surprise.” He tried to sound pleasant, but it was as useless as being happy about discovering a hole in your tooth. “So you made it back to Edge after all, I see.”

Again he knew what society expected, but he was depleted of energy and even good manners. The best he could manage was to gesture to the chair across from him at the table.

Sareen either wasn’t too discerning, or she was simply that desperate that she cheerfully accepted his halfhearted invitation and sat down with a variety of tinkling noises. The multiple chains on her arm clanked together like an accident at the blacksmith’s. She leaned

forward adoringly, chin resting on her hands in an odd manner which she likely thought was alluring, and fluttered her eyelashes as if something was stuck on them.

Shem struggled with a yawn. It was too early in the morning.

Sareen sat up, insulted. “I was going to say you’re looking quite well, but you’re a bit baggy under the eyes. Maybe even have a black eye forming . . . have an eventful night?” Something crisp in her tone confused Shem. There were likely a multitude of meanings to her question, but he didn’t bother to work them out.

“A bit,” he said as he shoved the last of his roll into his mouth. “Always something going on around here,” he garbled.

“Well, you still look quite . . .” she tilted her head in evaluation, “extraordinary. Always were a fine example of manhood and soldiering.” She raised her eyebrows suggestively, but Shem didn’t know what she was suggesting, especially at this hour.

Sareen hadn’t changed much over the years. She was the first and only girl he’d ever kissed—not by his choice, but as a requirement of the first Strongest Soldier Race. Yet he was fairly confident he wasn’t the only male she’d ever kissed. Women like her didn’t realize that stories got around about *women like her*. Sareen was as attractive to Shem now as she had been a dozen years ago, which meant a mud puddle was more enticing, and likely cleaner.

She was waiting for his compliment, but all he noticed was that she’d put on some weight over the years, making her rounder and softer, but he didn’t know how to politely say, “And you’ve become fat, but it works for you.” Then again, it did make her abundant cleavage rather unappetizing. Her dark hair was a mass of something on her head, probably intended to look sultry, but was sloppy, and her eyes were clouded.

All he could come up with was, “And you look well too.”

Realizing that was all she was going to get, she said, “I’m surprised the village looks so good. I wasn’t going to come back until I heard the reports that Edge was rebuilding quite nicely.”

“Soldiers are doing most of the work,” Shem said dismissively. He picked up his second roll.

“They’re also rebuilding some of the shops,” Sareen mentioned. “I was thinking of buying a small one to sell books in.”

Shem shrugged and chewed. “Already have a bookseller. One of the few shops that survived.”

Sareen rolled her eyes dramatically as if she were seventeen again. “But what he sells is so dull. There are new books, you

know. Exciting ones. All about women and men and . . . relationships.”

Shem noticed something happening around his leg, as if a cat was marking him on the outside of his boot.

He glanced down to notice Sareen’s bare foot rubbing his leg. Since that was the oddest thing he’d ever experienced, he crossed his legs, removing his calf from her easy access.

Sareen smiled in what she likely thought was a coy manner and repositioned herself on her chair.

Maybe she had an itchy foot, Shem considered, that she felt the need to scratch it now on his thigh.

“What makes you think people will be interested in these relationship books?” Shem asked, only to be polite.

“Oh, they’re interesting, all right,” Sareen said with a lusty chuckle. That’s when Shem noticed her perpetual giggle was gone, replaced by something deeper and creepier. “So what’s new in Edge? Besides, everything, I mean.”

“Uh,” Shem tried to think of something, “Rigoff and Karna were transferred to Rivers—”

“I know all of that,” she said, suddenly bored. She slid her foot from his thigh. “I visited Teeria after they moved. Rivers’ captain lives in something grander than Edge’s colonel. And as for Karna’s intended? Miss Robbing is far too serious, but I guess if he likes her,” she curled her lip. “Wedding’s supposed to be next week sometime. They’re keeping it small.”

“I know,” Shem said, playing with some crumbs. “Brillen wrote to all of us. Marriage will be good for him.”

“Be good for you, too,” Sareen murmured. When Shem only looked at the table again, she continued. “Teeria said there have been *stories*,” she whispered the last word.

“About what?” Shem tore apart a roll.

“About Colonel Shin,” Sareen leaned forward, her cleavage nearly crushing Shem’s remaining rolls.

He slid them to safety.

“Has he really lost his mind?”

Every muscle in Shem clenched. “No! Who’s saying such things?”

She sat back and folded her arms in something like tinkling triumph. “Shem, people talk. When there’s no entertainment, people go looking for it. The rumors have traveled all the way down into Rivers. Quake’s probably heard a few stories about the sad and terrifying—

or should I say terrified?—commander of Edge.”

Shem’s left hand bunched up as if a long knife were in it. “Well people are wrong!” he hissed. “He’s been dealing with more than anyone can imagine. Can’t he grieve in privacy? Can’t he live his life without everyone peeking through the windows to gawk? That he continues is astonishing. What his family endures is commendable. How Mahrree copes is nothing short of miraculous! Tell people *that*, if they want something to talk about!”

An odd smile formed on Sareen’s face. “Well, then. I will. So tell me, Shem Zenos—what’s going on with you? When I wrote to Miss Mahrree last season she said you were still devoted to soldiering. Still looking for the right woman to be devoted to?”

Shem sighed, relieved for the change of topic, even an uncomfortable one. “I don’t know. Just not the right time, yet.”

She scoffed. “You’re in your thirties, Shem! So am I. So when will the ‘right time’ be?”

He shoved the rest of the second roll into his mouth and wrapped the remaining two in his handkerchief. “I need to be going to the fort, Sareen. I wish you well with your bookshop.”

He made to leave, but Sareen grabbed his arm. “Can I see you again?”

He shrugged, gently pulling out of her grip as he stood. “I’m on double duty frequently, what with the rebuilding and everything—”

“So if I come by the fort?”

“I really can’t say, Sareen. Hard to find me sometimes—”

He headed for the door but heard, “What if I go to the Shins? I’ll still find you there, won’t I?” Her tone turned icy. “People talk, Zenos, and they’re wondering if the death of his parents is the *only* thing filling Perrin Shin with anxiety.”

It was the insinuation that stopped him in his tracks and made the back of his neck tingle, as if her glare were singeing him.

So *that* was the kind of relationship books she was reading—the kind that led her to assume everyone else lives as poorly as in the stories.

He refused to acknowledge her accusation, but to the kitchen he called out, “Thank you for the rolls, Mrs. Peto,” as he left.

Mahrree set out for her regular walk through Edge to the Cottages where her mother lived. To make things easier, she kept her head down as she tromped along the cobblestones. She didn't want to meet anyone's face, nor did she want them to have to abide seeing hers.

Besides, now when she really could have used a bit more friendliness in her life, everyone in Edge pulled back to a safe distance. From the corners of her eyes she could see the villagers' feet scuffling away to give her plenty of room as she passed.

Blessedly there were a couple of people she could always count on. One was Rector Yung, who frequently stopped by and attempted to talk to Perrin who always suddenly had something else to do. The other was her mother.

Two minutes later she sat on Hycymum Peto's pink sofa painted with purple flowers and woven with garish threads of gold and green. All Mahrree noticed, though, was that her mother had slipped a thick cloth onto her shoulder today, in anticipation.

Hycymum patted her on the back as if she were a messy infant as Mahrree sobbed on her shoulder.

"Mahrree, I mean it; you and the children stay here for a few days. Let him do . . . *whatever* he's doing, but you get a rest. Just when it looks like things are getting better, they get worse again."

Mahrree sniffled. "I can't leave him, Mother. He needs us. Someday he may actually be glad—" She couldn't finish because she didn't know if her husband ever *would* be glad for anything, ever again.

Not that long ago she had cried and chuckled about how blessed how her life was, how many miracles had struck them in such a short amount of time. She didn't realize that the outpouring then was to make up for the drought now.

"At least I know where my husband went. But yours?" Hycymum patted her daughter again. "Who knows where his mind is sometimes. I heard he confronted some weaver yesterday until Shem led him away."

Mahrree sighed. "I'll add him to the list of those I need to visit and apologize to. What do people think about him, Mother? What do they say?"

Hycymum sighed back. "People think that the colonel's been issued orders to interrogate people in Edge, because the Administrators suspect that Guarders are still after him and his family."

"Hmm," Mahrree pondered that. "I suppose it works. I wonder

where that came from.”

“I think it was Rector Yung. I heard him say that a few weeks ago to the new couple living over by the fort. You know, for a rector he’s a pretty decent gossip.”

Mahrree smiled miserably. “He must have been talking to the Briters. I’d already paid them an apology visit. Perrin was sure they were spies, but they’re the gentlest, kindest, and now most terrified couple I’ve ever met. They like *me*, at least.”

“So what happened last night?” Hycymum asked her daughter as she smoothed her hair. “At least you visit me more often.” She tried to say that lightheartedly, but even silly Hycymum Peto had lost a great deal of her inanity since Relf and Joriana Shin were killed by Guardians as they slept. Some level of her intellect, usually absorbed by cloth and cooking and decorating, had realized that if her son-in-law’s parents were intended targets, she might be too.

Mahrree sniffed. “Sometimes he does so well. Three nights, no incidents. He almost smiles then . . . it’s all back again. I make him tell me what he sees. Shem said that’s what the book said to do; make him speak it and realize it’s not real.”

Hycymum shifted nervously. “What does he see?”

Mahrree could tell she really didn’t want to know it all, but it helped her to say it out loud. “Variations on the same theme: dirtied men in black. Daggers and knives. Sometimes swords. His family, lying still in pools of blood. He arriving moments too late.”

Hycymum shuddered. “How often do you give him that stuff?”

“That’s the problem; I quit after he’s had a few good nights. He’s fine on his own for a night or so, but then it starts again.”

“So just keep snuffing him.”

“*Sedating* him,” Mahrree clarified.

“Whatever. Just a little each night.”

“We don’t know how it might affect him, taking it for so long,” Mahrree fretted. “No one knows, not even Dr. Brisack. I’m supposed to report to him each week about Perrin’s reactions.”

“Lovely,” Hycymum said with uncharacteristic sarcasm. “Using Perrin as a test squirrel! If Chairman Mal knew that his citizens were being tested on—”

“He likely would ask for a copy of the results for himself,” Mahrree told her mother. “I haven’t sent back any reports, though. I don’t want them to know what’s going on here. I just keep praying.”

“I know,” Hycymum said. “I talked to Rector Yung the other day. He told me he sees you quite frequently.”

Mahrree nodded. “He’s a sweet man. I feel he says to me exactly what Hogal would have advised. He’s trying to get Perrin to talk to him, but on mornings like this?”

She sighed and wiped away another tear.

“Mother, last night we sat on the sofa together talking about the day, the new lieutenants, the obnoxious captain. About how he and Shem need to come up with new facial codes for Lemuel Thorne so he won’t know they’re talking about him. He even smiled last night. I felt safe snuggling up to him the way I always did. Then, only a few hours later, he was screaming through the house, swinging that sword—”

Hycymum patted her daughter again. “Someday, he just might hit something or *someone*. And then there will be a tragedy.”

Half an hour later Mahrree left her mother’s, a bit dehydrated but feeling lighter for the good cry. She skirted the marketplace and took a longer way home, by the old rectory that used to belong to Hogal and Tabbitt Densal but was now cared for by a tiny old man who worked in his front garden. Morning, noon, and night Yung was outside pulling the weeds from his manicured beds of vegetables or pruning fruit trees that still had a few late blossoms. The fruit, Mahrree knew, would be shared with whomever passed and wanted an apple or a pear.

And then there were his herbs. Mahrree stopped a couple of houses away to watch the narrow man trimming his basil and parsley, already green and bushy, into tiny trees. The leaves which he clipped off he carefully gathered. Something in Mahrree’s chest burned, then crumbled, as she watched him.

She’d always had dreams—glorious, baffling dreams—about a large house of faded gray wood. There were fuzzy elements that remained whenever she woke, and she desperately tried to hold on to them, yet the details faded away as she grew more alert. But there were a few constants: always the house, and mountains, and children—more than two—and window boxes filled with herbs.

That was most puzzling thing about the dream—the herbs. She never tried to grow any herself because there wasn’t any aspect of gardening that ever struck her as enjoyable.

But in her dreams she sat in a garden and weeded, *happily*. She decided some time ago that the dream was symbolic, although she

could never grasp what the symbols meant.

Once, briefly a few years ago, she entertained the notion that maybe the house was a peek at some future life, a distant reality, if only she could perform well and long enough.

But it was impossible. There were no more children in her future. Even if she didn't have to take The Drink that cramped her womb into a barren nothingness, she and Perrin were in their mid-forties now, too old to be new parents again.

So she shoved the dream back into a section of her mind she called, "Mysterious and frustrating. Maybe symbolic. Definitely perplexing." She hoped recategorizing it might make the brutal fantasy go away. But still she dreamed, every year, a dozen times. She'd wake up smiling, see the faint outline of the house, then wretchedly watch it dissolve like sugar in water.

There was simply nowhere to go with it, so she tried to ignore it, as she tried to ignore the small dog yapping at her right now through a fence. And, just like the dog, there's only so long you can pretend that you don't notice it. It's only your mind that's not accepting the harsh reality—

Mahrree, in pure frustration, kicked the fence with all her might. The mangy beast yelped as if she'd actually hit it and ran for the house while Mahrree began walking as if she hadn't the faintest idea why the animal was now barking at her from the safety of the porch.

She slowed her gait in front of Rector Yung's house, and he automatically looked up. His narrow eyes turned into slits as his gentle and wide smile took over most of his face.

"Mrs. Shin! How lovely to see you. May I interest you in some fresh basil? It's just growing wild on me this year. Or parsley?"

Earlier something in Mahrree's chest had burned, then crumbled. Now the fragments tried to smolder pitifully again as she stared at the herbs the rector offered her.

"Thank you." She arranged them in her hand and their pungency filled her nose. For some reason the scent reminded her of that night years ago when she ran into the forest to question Guardsers, surprised herself by finding a female one, then ran back out again because the woman knew her name. She'd sat sobbing under a pine tree so fragrant that, whenever she passed a similar species, the scent brought back the memory with embarrassing intensity.

The combination of basil and parsley was only slightly similar to a pine, but still she could see that night so clearly before her,

and the woman, hooded in a black cloak, who chided her—

She looked back at the sweetness of Rector Yung as an escape from that recollection, but still it remained, somehow blurring him into the picture where he didn't belong.

"Mrs. Shin," he said gently, reading all sorts of mixed emotions on her face, "how are you?"

It wasn't a pleasantry; it was a deeply concerned question. All she could do in response was shrug. Rector Yung put a fatherly arm around her waist—even as short as Mahrree was, so was Rector Yung so that he could never put an arm around anyone's shoulders—and he gave her a little squeeze that conveyed far more warmth and love than she'd felt from the entire village.

"May I drop by later? When he's home?"

Mahrree sighed heavily. "He was very bad last night."

Yung nodded once. "I know. Shem told me. I have some ideas that might help."

Mahrree stared at the herbs scenting her hands. "You can try, but I don't know how he'll respond."

Yung squeezed her again. "If you're worried that I'll be offended by his reactions, don't be. Nothing offends me." Then, as if he just thought of it, he continued with, "Have you ever fed a puppy that was abandoned by its mother?"

Mahrree looked blankly at him. "Uh, no? Is this another Flax-Waves saying?"

Yung smiled. "Well, sort of. When a puppy is abandoned, others need to step in and feed it. But often the puppy doesn't want the milk that can sustain it. Maybe it's too hurt from its loss, or it doesn't recognize the milk source, or it's just too weak or sad. But still you try, hour after hour. Because if you don't, that poor creature suffering through no fault of its own *will die*," he whispered the last words, and Mahrree closed her eyes.

He nudged her gently to open her them again. "But we don't quit, Mrs. Shin. Hour after hour, day after day, until some of the milk gets into that mouth. We keep trying until something opens up and accepts what all of us are trying to give him."

Tears trickled down her cheeks, even though she was sure she was on empty. "Thank you," she whispered. "I agree. We never give up. I'd invite you for dinner, but those are angry affairs now." Her chin trembled violently until she regained control of it again.

To his credit, Rector Yung pretended he didn't notice. "I have

other plans for dinner anyway. But I'll be by later, just to see if our puppy's interested yet. If not, I'll try again, and again, and again."

Mahrree leaned her head against his shoulder, thinking that her father Cephas would have done the same for her.

As she left to go home a few minutes later, she turned back to wave at Rector Yung, but he had already gone into his house.

Mahrree sniffed the herbs and wondered if the only reason the man's garden was so immaculate was because he worked out there all day, waiting for her.

Chapter 3 ~ “May I have five minutes—”

Shem stepped out of Perrin’s office and quietly closed the door. In a way he was a bit jealous of Perrin, napping on a stack of paper on his desk. Shem needed a nap, too, but—

He paused when he saw that the only person in the forward command office was Lemuel Thorne. The captain wore a thin smile that suggested he’d planned for them to be alone.

“Is he *resting* again?” Thorne’s tone had an edge to it.

Shem ignored it. “He is. Make sure he’s not disturbed.” Shem made for the stairs, but Captain Thorne blocked his way.

“I will, and Master Sergeant? I want to help.”

It was the twinkle in his eye that so annoyed Shem. “I don’t need your help, and neither does the colonel.”

“Ah, but you do,” Thorne simpered. “I’m supposed to be *learning* from you. I believe this may be something I’m to learn?”

Shem was too drained for this train-the-new-Guarder-who-doesn’t-know-he’s-a-Guarder nonsense. The Quiet Man had thought initially that he could make a game of this, but that idea soured quickly.

However, the eager expression in Thorne’s eyes suggested he was willing and ready to do anything, even take over the fort if necessary. In fact, he seemed to hope just that.

“Look, Captain, this isn’t the time, nor is this anything—”

“But I’m supposed to be learning!”

“No!” Shem snarled in a loud whisper. “This isn’t about you, or your training, or anything else. You’re here to help this fort, and that’s all I have for you. What’d you spend all those years in Command School for, huh? Use *that* training.”

“But—”

“Leave the colonel alone! You need to understand something: Shin is like a brother to me, and I *alone* will take care of him.”

As he barreled down the stairs he heard Thorne call after him, “How’s that supposed to help me? Zenos! Get back here!”

Thorne scowled after Zenos, who hadn’t bothered to show the respect the captain deserved.

A crashing noise behind him spun Thorne around, and he realized it came from behind the colonel’s closed door. It sounded as if a tin lunch bucket had been knocked off the desk, and now there was the commotion of someone getting up abruptly from the desk.

“Stupid Zenos,” Thorne murmured. He braced for impact, waiting for the door to be jerked open and to face the bleary-eyed colonel who would again look past him and mumble incoherently—

Maybe . . . maybe that’s what Zenos was doing: something to the colonel to keep him confused, tired, angry. But why?

Wait—wasn’t that what brothers did to each other? Antagonize and demoralize? Not having one, he didn’t know. But he was sure that’s how it should be.

Thorne held his breath, watching the door, but instead all he heard was awkward lumbering in the office, then the sound of the colonel dropping heavily into his big chair again.

Thorne exhaled and sat in his own chair, much smaller and less comfortable than what the colonel occupied.

Zenos had said Lemuel should use his Command School training to help, so what do second-in-commands do when the commander is incapacitated?

They command.

Thorne’s lips parted in a growing smile. He liked that big chair, and Zenos was essentially saying it was his, in a way.

Of course it was. Lemuel Thorne was born to do this.

Shem was headed to the mess hall when the private caught his arm. “Excuse me, sir, but the surgeon’s been looking for you.”

Shem sighed. He’d been dreading this, and he had a feeling the surgeon had been, too. A few minutes later he entered the surgery

wing, hoping that he was there to discipline a wounded recruit, but the area was quiet.

Except for the surgeon, whose last name—appropriately or inappropriately, depending upon whom you asked—was Stitch. His heavy white eyebrows appeared even more foreboding as he looked up from his desk.

“Master sergeant?” Dr. Stitch said, seeming so apprehensive that his pale eyes nearly disappeared in the bushiness of his brow. “Do you have a few minutes to talk?”

Shem exhaled and shut the door behind him.

“Bolt it, please, Master Sergeant. I don’t wish us to be disturbed.”

The bolt caught a bit, and Shem realized it likely had never been locked in all the years the fort had been there. Still, he worked it just a bit longer than necessary, trying to stall the inevitable.

“What can I do for you, sir?”

Dr. Stitch gestured to a chair near him. “Perhaps I should be asking that of you: what can I do for you and . . . the colonel?”

Shem offered his most charming smile as he sat. “Whatever do you mean, sir?”

The older man waved that off. “You’re a terrible actor, Zenos. You couldn’t tell a convincing lie if your life depended upon it. The colonel is . . .” He paused to find the right word, because when a man’s career is on the line, one had to get it right. “Troubled?”

Shem nodded. “A fair assumption. And quite understandable, you must admit. His parents were recently murdered, you know.”

“Zenos,” the surgeon said quietly, “it’s been rumored that there’s something more going on. Now, out of respect for the man and the years I’ve served here, I’ve tried to ignore those rumors. But to be honest, it’s growing out of hand.”

“Rumors,” Shem said, a bit coldly. “You’ve been here about ten years, right? Tell me, Stitch—what have you learned about soldiers and rumors in those years?”

A corner of the surgeon’s mouth lifted. “That soldiers are bigger gossips than their grandmothers, truth be told.”

“They are. And rumors grow to become ugly, terrible things, don’t they, Stitch?”

“Zenos, tell me honestly. He’s traumatized, isn’t he?”

Shem stiffened. “And what happens to traumatized officers?”

Shifting a bit in his chair, Stitch began with, “Well, the army does what we can for them. Some talking, you see, and—”

“You put them out to pasture, surgeon!” Shem snapped. “As if they’re an old horse no one can bear to see anymore. This happens, more frequently than anyone cares to admit, and the faster they’re swept away, the easier they are to forget. And then what happens?”

The surgeon’s mouth worked up and down, unsure of which words to let come out of it.

“I know what happens, sir. They die,” Shem said bluntly. “Check your volumes of diseases over there,” he gestured to the books on a shelf. “There’s no entry for ‘Trauma,’ is there? It’s the ignored ailment, because the army hates to think that they broke someone who they used, and have to throw him away. Well, that’s not going to happen here. No label of ‘trauma’ will be placed upon Perrin Shin, because he’s only losing a bit of sleep, correct? Which causes him to be a bit testy, right? And maybe results in his taking naps during the day, isn’t that so? All of which is normal behavior for a *slightly depressed* man who is *grieving*, wouldn’t you agree?”

Stitch didn’t know what else to say but, “Of course, Zenos.”

Shem grinned without feeling any joy. He clapped his hands on his knees and stood up. “I’m glad we had this little chat, Dr. Stitch. After all, an army that believes Beneff is still a capable soldier certainly can’t find any reason to put Perrin Shin out of it, right?”

The surgeon pointlessly moved around files on his desk. “No, absolutely not. Nor did I want to *put the colonel out to pasture*, I assure you. I have a job to do, you see, and Captain Thorne—”

“What’d he say?” barked Zenos.

Stitch’s head snapped up, startled at Shem’s venom. “He’s said nothing, Zenos. All I was *going* to say was, ‘Captain Thorne seems capable enough of carrying some extra duties, along with you and the new lieutenants, so I don’t need to make any kind of report at all to the garrison, do I now?’”

“Sorry, sir. I should have realized that . . . what I mean is—”

Stitch held up his hand to stop Shem’s apology. “Understood. It’s just that I received this,” and he held up a message. “From Administrator Brisack, asking about our colonel’s health.”

Shem pursed his lips as he read the message. Doctor Brisack knew. Mahrree had asked for the sedation, and Brisack could readily put two and three together, the prying old man.

He handed the message back to the surgeon. “Naturally Brisack is worried about the colonel. He helped treat him when we arrived in Idumea, and the colonel was feeling a bit unwell. This is merely a follow-up, and I don’t see that you need to waste anymore ink

than to write, ‘Colonel Shin is doing as expected, and the fort is well under control.’”

Stitch smiled slyly. “I believe that’s exactly what I was going to write. Since the colonel hasn’t come to me for anything, he obviously isn’t in need of any treatment . . . yes, the fort and our colonel are *just fine*. Thank you, Zenos. That will be all.”

“Ah, *Lieutenant Offra*.”

Something in Captain Thorne’s voice reminded Offra of a teacher he had when he was thirteen: a wiry man who would have enjoyed teaching much more if he didn’t have to deal with actual children, and made sure all of his students knew what a bother they were to him. But there he was, stuck with all of them, so let’s just get this over with, shall we?

“You’re just who I needed to see.”

Offra was used to keeping his responses internalized, as he’d learned at his last posting where everything he suggested was summarily dismissed. He looked up from the large forward command desk. “Yes, Captain?” He tried to make sure his disdain for the ‘superior’ officer, three years younger than him, wasn’t obvious.

Thorne picked up a form from the desk. “I see we’re still having a little trouble with the new system I implemented.”

Offra choked back his initial response, and instead came up with, “Master Sergeant Zenos is in charge of scheduling, and I see no reason to change his system. *Sir*,” he added carefully.

“But what I’ve created is far more efficient,” said Thorne. “Since Zenos told me I’m to use my training to improve the fort, increasing efficiency is exactly the kind of progressive measures my *father* and *grandfather* wish to see.”

Offra was feeling exceptionally brave that morning. “Exactly how is it effective for 200 men to stand in front of the small schedule trying to decipher the confusing charts you’ve created to detail their shifts for the next four weeks, *sir*? With Zeno’s plan, a quick glance tells them all they need to know!”

Thorne’s glare turned condescending. “You see, Offra, that’s why I’m the captain, and you’re not. After they’ve learned my system, they’ll need to see the charts only every *four* weeks.”

Offra clenched his fist under the desk. “But it’s not necessary.”

Thorne tilted his head. "I doubt you would really know what's necessary and what isn't, Offra. I read your former commander's review of you. He called you a merely 'adequate officer.'"

Offra's clenched fist lost some of its ferocity.

Thorne sniffed. "Even an 'insubordinate' officer is more interesting. This is probably why you were sent to the smallest fort as far away as possible where you couldn't do any real damage."

Only about six hours later did Offra realize that an excellent comeback would have been, "And that's why they sent you here as well?" But Thorne's words had stung him into silence. He didn't realize his former commander would actually attach his disregard to Offra's permanent file.

Thorne took Offra's non-response as submission. "A short initial adjustment period is all that's needed for the men, and then they'll have a far more progressive procedure." The captain leaned toward him. "If you want, we can always ask the colonel for his opinion."

Offra swallowed.

The command office door swung open, and Colonel Shin strode into the forward office looking around aimlessly.

The two young officers froze in their positions, bracing for whatever might come next.

"Dumbest thing ever," Shin mumbled as he picked up a few papers from the desk and dropped them again. "Three copies of everything. Who else wants them but Cush? Just looking for reasons to keep himself in *that* chair, behind *that* desk . . ."

Thorne and Offra watched him, but he didn't acknowledge their presence. Shin sidled over to a large bookshelf and pulled out a few blank pages, murmuring.

"Not as if anyone will do anything with the copies. Just shove them in a crate, shove that crate in a room, then forget all about them. I've got a better system: one form, small page, two boxes. First box says, 'No problems.' Second box says, 'Problems—send help.' Check off the first box? Don't even bother sending it. *That's* progressive. Waste of trees. No one gets it. We need to *keep* the trees. But we cut down that forest to make more paper so I can write reports in triplicate to send to Idumea that no one will ever read. Ever look at your patches?"

The young officers, not sure if he was really addressing them, obligingly regarded the various patches on their uniforms.

Shin continued to ramble, not glancing at either of them. "The

one issued by Idumea, with a pine tree and a sword on top of it? What's that supposed to mean, anyway? That we defend the trees? Chop them down with our swords? No! We're supposed to be *in* those trees, holding those swords, fighting alongside *with* the trees. But no one would ever see it that way . . ."

He was now sitting back at his desk in his office and writing on the pages he retrieved, rambling incoherently.

Smugly, Thorne turned to Offra. "Door's open," he whispered. "Go ahead. Ask him his opinion about the scheduling charts."

Offra had yet to have a completely rational discussion with the colonel. Shin always looked past Offra as if he were a patch of fog, and probably didn't even know the difference between him and Radan. And Thorne knew that, too.

"Take it up with the master sergeant," Offra whispered back. "This is Zenos's duty. He's been at it for a dozen years now, and also believes that he has a good system. Consider his years of service, his experience—"

"Zenos? *Zenos*," Thorne scoffed. "Don't think too much of Zenos. I'm second in command here, Offra. Don't forget that."

Thorne stood up, straightened his jacket, and marched confidently into the command office. He knocked lightly on the door, five times, to get the colonel's attention. "Sir?"

Offra leaned to the side to watch the colonel's response.

Shin grunted as he copied the report he had already written. "Problem?" he said absently.

"Sir, I would check the box that said, 'No problems.'"

Shin looked up at him, perplexed.

"I was just referring to the idea you had . . . two boxes? One form? Rather clever, sir."

Shin's confused expression shifted into a glare.

Offra smirked. Maybe Colonel Shin didn't see him, but he definitely saw Thorne, and he didn't like what he saw. There was still justice in the world.

Thorne cleared his throat, unperturbed. "Sir, the measures to improve the efficiency of the fort are continuing at a commendable pace. I have no doubt the High General is most pleased with our, and *your*, efforts here."

"And?" Shin barked impatiently.

Offra dared to grin. But only for a moment, in case someone happened to see him for once.

“I was just wondering if there was anything else you wanted evaluated, sir,” Thorne said, his voice losing just a little bit of its overconfident quality. “Granted, the changes we’re experimenting with now are quite minor and inconsequential . . . really not even requiring your time to glance at them. Perhaps as second in command here I should just look at them for you, allow you to continue taking care of the pressing needs of the fort, while the more mundane items fall to someone like me—”

Offra rolled his eyes. At this rate, Thorne could minimize the entire fort’s defection to the Guarders.

“Is there a point to this endless conversation, Captain?”

Offra rubbed his hands together. Someday, Shin might be worth getting to know.

Thorne faltered under the black stare of the colonel. “Uh, sir, just that . . . if you need anything evaluated, I can do it, sir.”

“Then do it!”

Thorne nodded once and turned to leave the office, neglecting to close the colonel’s door behind him.

Lieutenant Offra stared down at the desk to hide his snigger as Thorne picked up the duty schedules.

“There,” Thorne said as if he had just single-handedly won the Great War, seemingly oblivious that the commander seemed ready to take him out himself. “I told you. *I’ll* take care of these duty schedules. If Zenos has a problem, he can see me about it.” Thorne trotted purposefully down the stairs.

Offra didn’t exhale until Thorne was at the bottom of the stairs. He glanced over again at the colonel writing furiously at his desk, ink flicking from his quill and speckling the papers on the desk. The man’s quill was as deadly as his sword.

Offra went back to work.

Perrin knew what was going on. In the village. At home. In the fort. In his tower. Among his men.

He just had no power to prevent any of it. Like the land tremor that struck, he could do nothing to stop it. All he could do was clench every muscle and wait to ride it out.

Because he had no power.

He was helpless.

He barely was.

The next morning a messenger arrived at the tower, and Thorne took the folded parchment from him.

“The colonel is indisposed,” he informed the small man in red. “As second in command, I can take care of this. I see it’s in Chairman Mal’s handwriting. *You* may not have realized that. But I know his writing, since I’ve have dinner with him many times—”

“It *also* bears the official stamp of the Administrators and Chairman Mal on it.” The messenger tapped a finger on the oval stamp and sneered at the captain before he headed down the tower stairs.

“Well of course every document has the official mark of the Administrators,” Thorne murmured as he broke open the wax seal. He scowled as he read the message, realizing that this wasn’t a problem that he caused, but one that he was required to help fix.

Lieutenant Radan, who increasingly popped up when the captain least expected it, came up the stairs. “Sirr—”

Thorne had noticed how Radan dragged out that word longer than necessary, as if trying to prove just how much devotion he had. Instead he sounded like a slurring snake. Nevertheless, Lemuel had been hoping for someone just like him.

“—I noticed the Administrators’ messenger leave. Did he bring us anything interesting?”

Lemuel didn’t like Radan, whose elongated nose and dark brown spiky hair resembled a gawking rat, but the man was more eager to make a name for himself than any of the other soldiers.

Lemuel waved the parchment. “Announcements are coming tomorrow, and the fort is to present them at the amphitheater in the evening. The Administrator of Taxation has decreed what Edge has to repay for all of the food they took. Or rather, that Shin took,” he added in slight annoyance.

“How bad is it?” Radan folded his arms.

“The amounts seem high. Payment ‘with interest’ he’s calling it. Need to send back more than was received.” He sighed. “I suppose it’s up to us to present this in a way that Edgers won’t be upset.”

Radan puffed up his average chest, likely trying to appear as defined as Lemuel. “Well sirrr, that sounds exactly like a job for someone as capable as you.”

Lemuel recognized sniveling talk-ups when he met them. Radan

was slightly subordinate, likely hoping to leapfrog over his superiors into a higher position. Lemuel would use Radan as well as the lieutenant intended to use the captain.

“Thank you, Radan,” Thorne said with a slim smile. “I appreciate your support. We can use this opportunity to demonstrate to the village what quality of new officers have come to Edge.”

“What will we say, sirrr?”

Thorne noticed how Radan had slipped himself into that spot on the platform, to be by the captain’s side in full view of the village. It was the posturing game, learned at Command School. There were no official courses taught in it, but the only way to get somewhere was to force yourself there, shoving others out of the way.

Sure, Lemuel thought. Let him. Should things go wrong, I’ll need someone to take the blame.

“We need to run this by the colonel, first,” Thorne reminded.

“Of course, sirrr,” Radan back-stepped. “Naturally, we need the commander’s opinion on everything—”

But Thorne was already gently knocking on the colonel’s door. He heard a grunting sound, and something shuffling on a desk before a muddled, “Come in?” reached his ears.

Asleep again, Lemuel thought with irritation. How can he command when he’s always napping? Good thing I’m here . . .

He opened the door. “Colonel, we’ve received word from Idumea about the repayment structure.”

Shin, bleary-eyed, said, “What are you going on about?”

Thorne took a step closer to the desk, holding out the parchment.

Shin didn’t take it, but continued to rub his cheeks which had the effect of pulling down his eyelids and making his eyes appear even more bloodshot.

Thorne cleared his throat, hoping that might help wake up the colonel. “Administrator Iris has sent a list of what Edge needs to return in Harvest to make up for the amounts you brought back with your caravan.”

“Grain, right?”

“Sir, Iris is willing to accept a number of goods—he’s sending a list—in proportion to the weight of what you took. Grain, but also fruits, vegetables, even beef, pork, and mutton on the hoof.”

Shin now rubbed his temples, and Thorne noticed the commander was in need of a haircut. “All right. What’s to be done?”

Lemuel smiled internally. “We present the list tomorrow night,

then create a plan for the village to fulfill the amounts. Iris was under the impression that last season you already had a plan?”

Shin merely grunted. “Maybe. Have to check.” He gestured lazily to a messy stack of notes on a shelf.

No plan would be forthcoming, Thorne noted. But it was an excellent opportunity for an up-and-coming captain. He leaned carefully on to the desk. “Sir, I’d appreciate the opportunity to demonstrate my abilities and knowledge by appropriating this duty—”

“Captain,” Shin interrupted, waving his hand as if coming off a bad batch of mead, “less garrison-speak, more making-sense-speak. We’re miles away from Idumea. Quit talking like them.”

Lemuel stood up, a bit put out. They taught an entire class in how to speak army, and he’d scored higher than anyone else.

“Sir, let me be in charge of the taxation amounts,” he got straight to the point. “Gathering it, sending it—”

“With Zenos,” Shin said, leaning back in his chair and hazily focusing on some distant point. “He knows things. Ask his advice.”

Lemuel was about to say he didn’t need Zenos’s advice, but sensing the colonel didn’t want to talk anymore, he merely nodded. “Thank you, sir,” and shut the door behind him.

Radan’s nose was twitching in anticipation. “So it’s all ours?”

Thorne nodded once. “Yes, it’s all *mine*. You may *assist*.” If anything went wrong, he’d need a lackey.

Radan was practically salivating. “I thought I heard Shin mention something about Zenos?”

Thorne shook his head. “Amphitheater work is for officers. The enlisted men are for cleaning up after us.”

After dinner Perrin sat dully on the sofa, staring at nothing. But in his head floated bits and pieces of something that exploded, and occasionally he tried to puzzle them back together, unsuccessfully.

Because there were the nights where sleep came so deep and heavy that Perrin felt a glimmer of hope again. The gory images would be interrupted by a recurring dream of a young face looking up at him, leaning against his knee, while many others sat behind him, listening. He’s telling Perrin a story that makes him laugh.

That was the only time he ever laughed now. Those were the mornings he could talk to his family, and almost see clearly enough to

realize that the captain was subtly undermining, that the soldiers were wary of both the captain and the colonel, and that old Beneff was about as useful as a third earlobe.

And then there were *other* nights, when the dreams would come too intensely for that little face to stop it all. Instead, he'd wake up to see the terrified expressions of his wife and children, and Shem.

It was always the day after those nights that Rector Yung stood at his front door, holding his battered hat in his hands, and smiling with tentative confidence that this time Perrin would let him in.

Like tonight.

There was knocking at the door, and Perrin knew the pattern: slightly hesitant yet completely optimistic.

Reluctantly, he stood up and opened the door for the tiny man. He knew the rector wanted to come in, but wouldn't let him in. He couldn't.

Something about Yung frightened him, as if the Creator himself stood at the door, wanting a reason for Perrin's erratic behavior, wanting to know why he had no faith in Him.

Or maybe, Perrin was worried that Rector Yung was his last resort to dig out of the pit, but he wouldn't have a solution. And if the rector couldn't help, then there truly was no more hope—

“Colonel Shin! So good to see you again. May I have five minutes—”

It may have seemed illogical to slam the door in Yung's face, but in the churning rationality of Perrin's mind, it was the only reasonable thing to do.

He ignored Mahrree's questioning look as she came out of the kitchen to see who was at the door. Instead he plopped down again on the sofa and stared into a corner.

He was trapped in that barn in Edge, without wings or a prayer.

The sergeant in charge of stables stopped abruptly on his way to the barns after midday meal. It wasn't every day that each of his one hundred horses were outside the stables, instead of *in* them.

“What's going on out here?” he demanded of the lines of sheepish privates holding multiple reins of horses.

“Rearrangements,” Captain Thorne's voice startled him. “These creatures were placed in there willy-nilly—”

“Based on temperament!” the sergeant snapped.

“Now it’s based on color, size, and gender.”

“Why?!”

“Because it’s better.”

“But Karna—”

“Karna’s no longer here, Staff Sergeant. Oh, and I changed our feed supplier.”

The staff sergeant spluttered until he could spit out, “But sir, Karna and Shin worked out something with that old widower. He supplies us to help take care of his ill daughter.”

“Has anyone *seen* this ill daughter? That’s what I thought. We do things my way now. And I’m not Karna.”

As the captain strode away, the sergeant mumbled, “I see that.”

“Ah, Cook,” Captain Thorne said as he peered into the big pot. “Stew, is it? And I see I’m here in just in time.”

The cook eyed him warily, not used to seeing an officer in his kitchen. “Actually, it won’t be ready for several more hours—”

“Yes, I know. I mean that I’m here in time to order you to add mushrooms.”

“Mushrooms! That’s completely wrong—”

“Mushrooms are necessary, Cook. They spring from the ground, sturdy and pliant, and eating them will ensure the soldiers are too.”

“Actually, sir, mushrooms are rather delicate—Hey! You can’t put those in there—”

“I just did, Cook. I want to see mushrooms at every dinner.”

“Colonel Shin hates mushrooms!”

“And how often does he eat dinner here? That’s what I thought.”

Every afternoon Perrin sat at the command desk dully going through needless paperwork. He didn’t know how long he’d been staring at the pages when he heard a knock at the door. “Come in.”

The door quietly creaked open.

“Master Sergeant. What can I do for you?”

Shem held up a dark blue bag. “Mail. You look a bit rested after your nap, so . . . ready to go through it?”

Perrin sighed and sat back in his chair. “Will you take the Idumean rubbish today?”

Shem smiled. “Of course. Let’s see what’s been sent our way.” He set down the bag and pulled out a large bound set of papers. “Smells like manure, so it must be from Idumea. What have you got?” he asked as Perrin pull out several folded parchments.

Perrin frowned. “I don’t know. Seems to be . . . six of them, addressed to me.”

“Open one.”

Perrin swallowed and hesitated.

“Perrin,” Shem said quietly. He rarely used his first name in the tower, except for times like this. “I feel confident they are safe. If you want, I’ll open them first—”

“No,” the colonel cut him off with a rigid laugh. “Little bits of paper can’t do anything. Well now,” he said, breaking the plain seal, “what have we here?” He read quietly, aware that his friend was watching him.

“What is it?”

Perrin’s mouth went dry. “I’m not sure how to categorize it.”

“Read it to me.”

“It says, *‘Colonel Shin. You probably don’t remember me, but my father owns the Stables at Pools. I was very sorry to hear about the High General and Mrs. Shin. Your father came here frequently to choose horses, and was always very kind to me. He told me that he expected great things of me, and I’ve always taken that to heart. I was so sad to hear about their passing, and I feel really bad for you. I just wanted you to know that. I will miss them, and I hope you’ll be all right. Signed, Roak.’*”

Shem smiled. “It’s a letter, Perrin. And a sweet one, at that. How old is he?”

Perrin shrugged. “Maybe late teens? I met him twice myself, a few years ago when my father sent me to Pools for training. Best horses in the world. Shem, what do I do with this?”

“You appreciate the sentiment. You accept the fact that someone else in the world feels for you. And, when you feel up to it, maybe send him a message back thanking him for his note.”

Perrin nodded at it. “I guess I could do that.”

“Open another one,” Shem urged.

Perrin did so. “It’s from a seamstress in Vines. Said she saw my

mother once, and that she looked so beautiful. She's sorry they're gone. She just felt the need to tell me that." He refolded the message. "I can't . . . I can't deal with this right now," he whispered.

Shem took up another letter and smiled. "Perrin, look at the writing on this one. Gizzada! It has to be!"

Perrin took it out of his hands. "Gizzada?" He smiled faintly to see the large looping writing of his former master sergeant-turned-restaurant owner in Pools.

"You have to read that one. The man bought you a white fur coat with butterflies stitched on it, remember? Oh, how I wished I could've seen you in that."

Perrin almost chuckled at the memory. Taking a slash to his back cut three of the poor innocent butterflies in half and soaked them in blood. His scar itched faintly as he opened the message. A moment later he closed his eyes and put it down.

"What does he say?" Shem asked gently.

Perrin handed over the note.

Shem read out loud. "*Dear Colonel, for weeks I've been searching for the best words, but everything I write doesn't convey how horribly I feel about what's happened to your family, and now what they've done to you at the fort for your valiant effort to save Edge. This is wrong! You know that we sit and talk in the back room of my restaurant, and every enlisted man in Pools and Idumea feels the same way. That's several hundred soldiers, sir, who don't think you deserve to be confined to Edge like a disobedient child. I thought you'd like to know that my back restaurant menu has changed. Men now proudly order the Shin Sandwich: General for a large, Colonel for the half, although I'm thinking maybe I should reverse that.*"

Shem smiled. "Leave it to Gizzada to express his feelings in food. Oh look, he goes on to describe a dessert called The Peto—"

Perrin shook his head. "They've hurt other people, Shem. Not just me and my family. Three more people in the world feel pain because of what the Guardians did to my parents."

"Perrin," Shem said steadily, "that's not a reason for revenge, remember? Pain is part of the test of this life. How people handle it helps them grow. Look at these three—they're handling their pain by wanting to take some of yours. They've likely been prompted to send you these messages. Gifts. Accept that, and be grateful."

Perrin gestured to the other messages. "Probably the same things," he sighed.

Shem gathered them up. “You’re going to hold on to these, my friend. Someday you’ll be ready to respond to them. I’ll bring them to Mahrree until then.”

Perrin pulled another message out of the pile that also had familiar writing on it. “Looks like this is from Brillen.”

Shem began to grin. “Open it.”

“Why?” Perrin asked, suspicious.

“Just open it!”

Perrin did so, and groaned a minute later. “He’s got the route for the next Strongest Soldier Race already plotted out?”

“Well, with his wedding next week, he was worried he’d be a bit distracted for a time, and he didn’t want to neglect it. Brillen wrote me a while ago asking if he could still come up to judge it.”

Perrin rubbed his forehead. “I don’t think that’s a good idea—”

“No, it’s a great idea! Just what we need. *Everyone*. I have a feeling I’m going to beat you again this year, Colonel,” the master sergeant goaded, a bit early this year.

“How long have you two been planning this?”

“We do it every year, Colonel. Just because Karna is in Rivers doesn’t mean we can’t still run the Strongest Soldier Race. If you turn me down, I just may have to challenge *mushroom pudding*.” Shem winced slightly, their new code for Lemuel Thorne.

Perrin smiled ever so slightly. It *was* a great look. The wince expressed pain, disgust, and plotting all in one brief expression. “He’s actually earned that title of mushroom pudding, I hear. Would you make my apologies to the cook?”

“Already have,” Shem winked. “And I also told him that mushrooms every day would likely cause him to go over budget.”

“Mushroom pudding would likely find a supplier all on his own,” Perrin sighed.

“Maybe. And I really don’t want to race Mr. Pudding, Perrin,” Shem whispered earnestly. “The race has always been you against me. I think this will help. It won’t help, however, that you’ll likely *lose* to me again, but . . .”

Hearing the teasing challenge in his voice, Perrin actually smiled. “I may be getting older, but I’m still very quick.”

Shem leaned forward on the desk with that familiar spark in his eyes. “Not as quick as you like to think you are, grandpy.”

“Oh, don’t you *dare* start that again,” Perrin almost chuckled.

Shem waggled his eyebrows. “Come on, grandpy—ready to take me on again?”

For a tiny pause of time, everything was perfect again and Perrin was more than ready to begin another brag session with his favorite sparring partner.

But then the moment was gone. It seemed ridiculous to even worry about a race of egos when the world—at least Perrin’s world—was falling apart. It was a brief glimpse of joy, of what his life used to be. And the glimpse was agonizing. But duty was duty.

“I’ll do it,” he said listlessly. “The village looks forward to it. Hycymum makes all that cake. Who am I to break with tradition?” He tossed the message on the desk. “Answer him for me, will you? Tell him best wishes on the wedding. Wished we could be there.”

Shem gathered up the messages. The spark was fading in his eyes, too, and for once, Perrin noticed.

“Sure, Colonel. I’ll let Karna know,” Zenos said, his voice equally dull. “You know what? I’ll just take care of the rest of the bag today. If you need me, I’ll be out at the desk in the forward office.” He flashed Perrin a fake smile, picked up the bag, and left.

Alone, Perrin sat back in his chair and held his head in his hands. “I’m so sorry,” he whispered.

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

“Anything new?” Mal asked.

Brisack shook his head. “Still nothing from Mrs. Shin. Every week, I told her: I need a report. And what does she send me?”

“You really expected she’d let you in on their intimate details?” Mal chuckled. “My dear doctor, your naiveté amazes me.”

Brisack sighed. “I thought we’d established an understanding at The Dinner. And when she wrote to me about helping Perrin, you could see the desperation in her words—”

“I remember,” Mal cut him off before Brisack could wax worried again about another man’s wife. “You showed me the letter, several times. Next item—how’s Captain Thorne’s training coming?”

Brisack bristled at the abrupt change, but only for a moment. “I’m not entirely sure. He seems to have taken on a great deal of responsibility while the colonel is ailing, but as for our Quiet Man nudging him in the right directions?”

Mal pondered that. “The entire situation isn’t quite what we expected, but workable. I saw in Thorne’s last biweekly report that

Zenos spends an inordinate amount of time at the Shins. Even all night, it seems.” He raised his eyebrows.

Brisack frowned. “Meaning what?”

Mal held up his hands. “Meaning . . . you’re the one who knows all things about family life. Figure it out.”

The good doctor folded his arms. “If anything, it means Zenos is aggravating the situation for us. Prolonging it. Maybe that’s why Mrs. Shin has been reluctant to write?” He scratched his chin. “Maybe she’s overwhelmed and even suspicious, but doesn’t know how to express any of that to me? Oh, so much that I could—”

“That you could what, Doctor?” Mal chuckled mirthlessly. “Listen to you, worried that your favorite woman might be suffering.”

“I was *going* to say,” it was Brisack’s turn to interrupt, “that there’s so much I could be learning *from Perrin’s trauma*. It’s been years that we’ve had such a vivid example of it. At least one that we can record. Other afflicted men leave the army right after the nightmares begin and eventually end up suicidal . . .” His voice diminished to nothing.

Mal leaned forward in his stuffed chair to see his companion more clearly in the dim light. “Yes, I do believe you’re concerned about that. Now, the researcher in me would suspect that you’re concerned because his ending may not be one that we planned for him. But the man in me thinks that you’re anxious about his widow, and maybe wondering if she’d be interested in a balding man in his late sixties, and if so, how you’d dispose of your own flitting wife.”

Brisack’s eyes flared. “After all these years you still know so little about me, Nicko.”

Mal sat back and chuckled. “No, what you’re worried about is that after all these years I know you *too well*.”

“Another question,” Brisack said confidently, knowing he would soon shift Mal off topic in a most uncomfortable way, “Thorne mentioned the two lieutenants and Beneff. Who, exactly, is Beneff?”

Mal rolled his eyes. “I wondered where he’d ended up. Initially we were going to send Shin those three lieutenants, if you recall. The obsequious one, the inconsequential one, and the belligerent one. I believe that last one came down with a fever just before he was to leave. The garrison put in a substitute—old Beneff.”

“Thorne mentioned in his latest report that Beneff is the most doddering, useless soldier in the army,” Brisack said. “And considering some that we have in the army, that’s quite an accomplishment. Shouldn’t someone that old have been retired by now?”

Mal frowned. “Probably . . . I wonder who put him in, then?”

“I have a good idea,” Brisack offered.

“Who?”

“Gadiman.”

Mal went motionless, and Brisack smiled to himself. Oh, very uncomfortable indeed.

“So, Nicko, has anyone tried looking for Gadiman lately?”

“Well,” Mal said, uncharacteristically hesitant, “after the initial investigation . . . uh, no.”

“Not that anyone among the Administrators seem to care,” Brisack said, sounding almost amused, “but his assistants have been wondering what they should do now. Genev, Gadiman’s top man, has been bringing me the reports Thorne’s been sending to their office. I find it interesting that in all this time, you haven’t once inquired *how* I’ve been getting Thorne’s loyalty reports.”

Mal worked his shoulders into the cushion behind him.

So Brisack continued. “I asked Genev to look up Beneff in Gadiman’s *other* files. Genev was surprised to discover those crates even existed under the floorboards of Gadiman’s desk, and seemed a bit reluctant to hand over such a find. However, all of Gadiman’s notes appear to be there, and as for Beneff, it seems he was one of the first, a long time ago. Even before Wiles, if you can believe that. He’s never been very effective, mind you, in anything except for maybe causing a bit of mischief here or there, mostly accidental.”

Still Mal said nothing.

“Gadiman had additional plans, before he vanished. Apparently *he* assigned Beneff even before we made our arrangements. And now, Gadiman has been missing for quite some time.”

Mal remained silent.

“When I spoke to Genev yesterday,” Brisack went on, enjoying not being interrupted, “I told him to continue as normal. Those three men did most of Gadiman’s sniffing around anyway, and they can just continue recording worrying instances of disloyalty in the world, although it seems now that *no one cares*.”

Mal picked up on his accusatory tone. “I care,” he insisted, finally speaking up. “It’s just that . . . we already have plenty to study right now—”

“No, I think it’s just that you refuse to acknowledge that something’s happened to Gadiman!”

They’d been avoiding this point for several weeks. At least Nicko Mal had been avoiding it. Not that he had any affection for the

weasel-like man, but the fact that Gadiman up and vanished, after his brilliant success, seemed to Mal a . . . well, a *betrayal*. Where was he, anyway? Starting his own group of Guardians somewhere? Planning his own little projects? With Beneff, of all idiotic people?

No . . . no he was too eager and skittish to organize something like that, even though he *did* put together the attack on the caravan, and then the murder of the Shins with shocking speed—

No . . . no, he couldn't possibly pull off something like that *again*, and on his own. Gadiman depended too much on Nicko Mal, like an old school friend who didn't realize they hadn't been in school together for decades, and it was fine for him to go off on his own—

No . . . no, he'd never come to that kind of realization and suddenly leave Idumea and the Administrators.

He likely was only . . .

Well, Mal couldn't imagine where.

"You think you know *me* so well," Brisack broke into his thoughts. "But I also know *you* very well. And I know what you're afraid to think: something happened to Gadiman, and he's dead."

"No . . . no, I don't think that—"

"You're *afraid* to think that," Brisack said more forcefully as Mal slouched further in his chair, "because if it's true, then it proves that none of us are untouchable. You like to claim that you're in charge of the world, but it's as if the world hasn't noticed and it does whatever it pleases in spite of you. You claim the sky is blue, but almost on a daily basis it betrays you. Face it, Nicko—Gadiman's gone, and we'll likely never know why. Consider that maybe someone murdered him for us. He was certainly not without enemies. We can replace him with someone better. Genev seems to be a decent enough snitch and desperate to prove himself. Name him as an Administrator and let him supply us with some new subjects."

Nicko stared off into the darkness for so long that Dr. Brisack was about to get out of his chair and check his companion's pulse.

"Give it more time," Mal eventually said. "Let's see if anything turns up. Just . . . more time—"

"For what, Nicko? For what?"

Nicko didn't know how to answer him, but the idea that the world had yet to recognize his superiority struck him with the sudden emptiness that others in the world much less worthy than himself likely experienced every day.

All he could do was get out of his chair, make his way through the dark library, stagger to his state room, and crawl into bed.

Chapter 4 ~ “This is the worst Raining Season ever.”

Days went by, as did weeks, and moons, and even a season and a half. By the middle of Raining Season, Edgers were like an old house dog: fattening, happy, and settling in comfortably for the snows. The village was rebuilt, cellars were filled, the taxation had been paid in full, and there was no evidence of the land tremor anywhere.

All of which struck Jaytsy as wholly unfair.

Because nothing was better at the Shins.

There had been signs of improvement, for three or four days at a time, when Perrin would sleep relatively soundly, smile on the second day, maybe even chuckle on the third, then go rampaging again on the fourth. By the beginning of Harvest Season, Jaytsy was giving up hope that the pattern would ever improve permanently, until the taxation came.

For a couple of weeks Colonel Shin became a constant presence in the village, riding a horse to every farm and ranch and large garden pretending to supervise the collection for Iris’s demands, and spending a great deal of time in the sunshine. He rarely left his horse of the day, however, allowing that distance between him and Edgers to keep them from interacting, while Shem was the soldier to cheerfully thank the villagers, slap them on the back, praise their efforts, and gently remind them of deadlines.

Still, when Shem decided to schedule the Strongest Soldier Race for the same weekend as the taxation—probably because he hadn’t seen Perrin in such a good mood for so long—Jaytsy began to believe the nightmares were maybe finally over. Even though

Perrin lost the race by several minutes—likely because he hadn't been running for such a long time, except to chase down an unsuspecting villager—he was grinning when he plodded in to the village green.

And then the next week came the rains. Dark and cold and evil.

And all progress, Jaytsy bitterly recalled, that her father and family had made was washed away like a child's mud mountain.

Now in the middle of Raining Season the world was perpetually gray, with bland snow and washed out skies and dirty farms.

Feeling as dreary as the world outside, Jaytsy stared at the pages in her book—one that she had read half a dozen times already, about girls who were too easily offended and cried out, 'Oh, the impertinence!' far too often. She brooded like her father, never before realizing how long Raining Season could last.

All around her was noise and even some laughter, but she didn't notice. It was Game Day again, and Mr. Hegek had encouraged several families to join him and his wife and son in the training arena of the fort. Perrin used to head up these activities, and since the weather turned colder and the need arose again for families to gather inside, Mr. Hegek had been directing these weekly evenings of *fun* and *frivolity* with the soldiers.

Such meaningless words.

Colonel Shin stood in a corner, arms folded, stance ready, eyes casing everyone and everything.

As Jaytsy stared beyond the pages of her book, she sighed in misery. She felt as disconnected from the world as her father. She had nothing in common with the girls at school, and her mother was so preoccupied with her husband's moodiness that Jaytsy didn't see any reason to bother her. Besides, Jaytsy had nothing to say to her. Or to her brother. But he was usually gone at kickball practice. Even when there wasn't a practice, he still went to "practice," and she wasn't about to give away his secret.

It was only on evenings like this that the whole family was together again, "together" being a relative term.

Jaytsy peeked over the edge of her book and noticed Peto wrestling another unwitting soldier while others laughed at their companion's failure.

One happened to catch Jaytsy's eye. She lowered the book and smiled experimentally at the private, but she knew what would happen. His eyes grew larger and he started to smile . . . until a sergeant leaned over and whispered something into his ear, and the private's

brown skin blanched.

Jaytsy sighed. What those whispered messages were, she wasn't sure, but she had a suspicion. And it wasn't completely her father's fault.

It was Captain Thorne's. He hadn't just kept trying to find her during Planting and Weeding Season while she weeded; he kept tracking her down *everywhere*. In the marketplace, in the village, and most especially at the fort when she happened to bring her father a meal, or on evenings like this. A pair of eyes watched her closely, always where she least expected them, and suddenly there he'd be: Captain Lemuel Thorne.

It happened already that evening. Her father took up his post as other families came in, her mother sat down to talk with Mrs. Hegek, Peto went in search of gullible soldiers leaving the mess hall, and Jaytsy headed to the guest washing room.

He was standing outside the door when she came out.

"Miss Jaytsy," Captain Thorne nodded to her, taking a step closer. He had the unnerving habit of standing just a little too near.

Jaytsy always felt slightly off balance when he was around. She had tried to give him the benefit of the doubt. Maybe she felt off because she actually was attracted to his clear blue eyes, his perfectly chiseled face, his muscular chest, his straw-colored hair . . .

Nope. Not one bit.

Men should be rugged and only a little bit handsome. Her father was almost too handsome. So was Uncle Shem. But Thorne? Men should never be *beautiful*. She always found herself taking a step backward, trying to get away from his scent. It was just too pleasant. Men should smell of dirt and sweat and if there was anything pleasant, it should be slightly sweet, as if they just snuck some cake and bits of crumbs remained on their chins. Men should smell like her father: earthy-sweet.

That evening Thorne smelled as if he had rolled around in pine sap and violets. Likely something he brought with him from Idumea to splash on his face after he shaved each morning. It was all wrong.

"Captain," she said formally and tried to make her way past him.

"Whoa, whoa," he said with an unnatural chuckle as he caught her arm. "Quite a lively filly you are tonight. Game night again?"

"Yes. My father's expecting me," she said, hoping that might alarm him.

“He won’t miss you for a few minutes,” he said confidently. “I haven’t had the chance to speak with you lately. You look well.”

“Thank you. I really should go—”

He firmed his grip on her arm. “I’d like to come talk to you some time. Some evening after dinner? Perhaps take a walk?”

“In the cold and snow?”

“We wouldn’t have to go far. I could find someplace for us to warm up.”

It was his eyes, Jaytsy decided. They were clear and blue and beautiful and told lies left and right.

“I’m not interested,” and she made another lunge to leave.

Still he held on to her, taking yet another step closer. “You will be,” he said in a low voice he probably thought sounded seductive. It just made her break out in goose bumps—the bad kind. “You will be, very soon. I’m watching for that moment. It’ll be worth the wait, I’m sure.”

“I have a book waiting for me, Captain,” she informed him.

Half of his face smiled. “Studying for your End of Year exams already are you?”

She latched on to that. “Yes, as a matter of fact I am.”

“Why? You know those tests are really only for the men. They let the girls take them just to make them feel part of something important. But you, Miss Jaytsy, as the wife of an officer, need only worry about looking pretty and producing a son or two.”

Jaytsy clenched her teeth. She didn’t even know where to start stabbing with so many targets presented. She zeroed in on the most annoying one. “Captain, I’m not sure I *will* marry an officer. My tastes tend to—”

“There’s no one else you could marry, Miss Jaytsy. And no other female worthy of a man like me.”

He glanced quickly to either side—as did Jaytsy—and seeing no one around, he began to lean into her face.

She ducked abruptly and pulled out of his grip. As he was about to kiss the wall, she was already running down the hall to the training arena.

That’s where she ran smack into the back of her father.

“Jaytsy!” he bellowed in surprise as he spun around. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing!” she said in a nervous laugh. “Just . . . racing myself to get here. Didn’t realize you’d be standing in the doorway.” She

backed away from his inquisitive glare. "I'll just go . . . sit down now. Over there." She retreated to her usual bench with her usual book, and looked up at the door.

Her father had walked away to talk to a soldier, and there stood Thorne again, his gaze intent on her. A moment later he sidled over to a group of soldiers.

Jaytsy glanced at her mother, hoping maybe she noticed, but she didn't. Neither did her father. But Thorne had stepped over to a sergeant who came to watch Peto's wrestling matches, whispered something into his ear, then left. The sergeant glanced at Jaytsy, then began to watch the soldiers in the room.

That's why the soldier who smiled at her fifteen minutes later received a few words from the sergeant, then never looked her way again.

"This is the worst Raining Season ever," she told the book. It was a bad time to be nearly sixteen years old with vague dreams of meeting a young man with gentle eyes. He wouldn't even be able to get within ten paces of Jaytsy before a falcon or a mountain lion would attack him.

Struck with an idea, she slapped the book shut and edged over to her father.

His brooding eyes evaluated her. "Something wrong?"

"No, no, it's just that I was, uh, the Briters. Do you mind if I go visit them? I had some ideas for . . . broccoli planting, and I wanted to get Mrs. Briter's opinion. There's something on the End of Year exams about farming, and I—" She wasn't very good at lying, but fortunately her father hadn't been very good at listening, either.

He shrugged. "I'll have the sergeant walk you over there."

Jaytsy knew better than to argue that she didn't need a guard. Besides, it was rather dark and cold outside, and she didn't want Captain Thorne suddenly deciding she needed *warming up*.

Five minutes later she nodded goodbye to the sergeant and knocked on the Briters' kitchen door. A moment later it opened and Mrs. Briter exclaimed, "Jaytsy! Oh, it's been weeks—come in!"

"Thank you," she said as she stepped into the bright and warm kitchen. She sighed as the tension of the evening melted away like the snow on her boots.

Mr. Briter was already pulling out a chair for her. "Miss Jaytsy, why are you out on such a night like this? Won't your parents be worried?"

“My father knows I’m here,” she told them as she unbuttoned her cloak. “I was at the fort for Game Night, but I told him I had an idea about broccoli plants and wanted to check it with you.”

Mrs. Briter placed a mug of hot broth before her as she sat. “Interesting. And what’s your question, dear?”

Jaytsy squirmed in her chair. “Uh, I really didn’t have a question about broccoli, except to wonder why people eat it.”

To her relief, both Briters laughed. She joined in a moment later, not used to the sound.

Sewzi Briter squeezed her hand. “Well, you come on over and chat about any vegetable you want, at any time. Ah, how I miss the garden on nights like this!”

“I know,” Jaytsy said wistfully. “I never realized how fun it is to dig through the dirt finding potatoes, and realizing that just as you thought you were done, there’s another one hiding from you. Or pulling the corn from the stalks and banging them against my knee to see how many bugs fall out. Or the taste of a green bean, straight off the vine! I can’t believe I spent almost sixteen years of my life never knowing the wonders of plants—” She stopped, suddenly realizing she’d been rambling, and blushed at the Briters.

But they just beamed back at her. “Oh, how I understand you, Miss Jaytsy,” Sewzi said. “You truly have brown fingers!”

Jaytsy refrained from examining her stubby nails as she had several moons ago the first time Mrs. Briter told her that. She was now a proficient enough gardener to know that “brown fingers” was a compliment.

Cambozola Briter elbowed his wife. “Now why didn’t we have a child like her?”

Sewzi playfully slapped her husband.

“I mean it,” Cambozola exclaimed. “But at least our son gets to be with *his love* all year long.”

“His love?” Jaytsy asked.

Cambozola leaned over. “Cattle. The boy’s obsessed with them. Oddest young man you’d ever meet.”

Jaytsy giggled and Sewzi swatted her husband again. “Don’t listen to him, Jaytsy. He thinks our Deckett is a little crazy just because he appreciates cattle.”

“Oh Sewzi, *I appreciate* cattle,” Cambozola said, his face becoming vibrant, and Jaytsy knew it would be another one of his overly energetic and lively discussions.

No wonder he made Perrin Shin nervous.

“But our Deckett? Sewzi, if he just *appreciated* cattle, that would be one thing. But what Deckett does . . .” and he made his eyes as big as the moons and fluttered his eyelashes.

Jaytsy covered her laugh with her hand and Sewzi smacked him yet again, this time a bit harder. “Cambo, now, stop! Jaytsy, our son is a very smart, thoughtful young man. This is just what they do,” she glared at her husband. “In Mountseen they *study* cattle to improve production. Or something. That’s what a university is for, Cambo.” To Jaytsy she whispered, “They never would have let Mr. Briter in. They have *standards*, you know.”

He scoffed over Jaytsy’s giggles. “I already know cows! But what those professors have those boys doing . . . Miss Jaytsy, they do talking and treats and music and massages—it’s only a matter of time before those cows agree to marry those boys.”

Jaytsy laughed, easily and lightly, as Sewzi scooped her chair away from her husband.

“Oh, honestly, Cambo. It’s nothing like that, Jaytsy. Deckett’s always had a very good sense for cattle, that’s all. Someday he’ll come visit us,” she promised, “and I’ll introduce you to him.” Her eyes lit up with too much planning.

Jaytsy blushed. “Yes, well, we’ll see,” she said, worried that Deckett may be as loud and engaging as Cambozola. She liked the man, but in small doses. To keep from saying anything else, she sipped the marvelous vegetable broth and felt a warm Weeding Day slide down to her belly.

Over her mug, Jaytsy noticed Mrs. Briter watching her closely. “Bad day?”

Jaytsy shrugged. “Avoiding a certain captain.”

“Ah,” Sewzi said. “The same one who frequently scoured our fields in Weeding Season looking for you? Rides a gray horse?”

“The same,” Jaytsy sighed. “Was I relieved when the tomatoes grew tall enough to hide me.”

Cambozola smiled mischievously. “So . . . not too interested in soldiers, then?”

“I don’t know who I’ll be interested in,” Jaytsy said honestly and sipped more broth as Sewzi smacked her husband once more.

“Hush, you! Don’t you go scaring off my best weeder.”

Jaytsy grinned. “Would take a lot more than that to scare me off. This place . . . it’s like Paradise.”

Sewzi squeezed her arm. “It’s Paradise when you come to visit

us. I hope your father doesn't mind?"

"I convinced him moons ago that you aren't really Guarders in disguise," she assured them.

"How'd you do that?" Cambozola wanted to know.

Jaytsy squirmed. "Actually, he came to that conclusion himself. He said that *you* were—" she hesitated as she looked into the hopeful eyes of Mr. Briter, "—too loud and obvious to be a Guarder. Sorry."

His wife burst out laughing as Cambozola's face twisted in dismay. "Too loud?! Obvious? Me!"

Jaytsy shrugged in apology. "You make him nervous. You could take that as a compliment?"

Cambozola's dismay dissolved into despair as he watched his wife laughing.

"I make *him* nervous?!"

Sewzi wiped away a tear. "See? It wasn't just people in Moorland! Ah, Jaytsy," she said, "you come here whenever you want, on the pretense of sorting seeds—"

"But we already did that," Jaytsy reminded her.

Sewzi blinked meaningfully. "My husband makes me nervous, and I drop the baskets. Frequently."

"Hey!" he protested, but Jaytsy grinned in understanding.

"What about your brother? Does he have a place to go?" Sewzi asked.

"To hide, you mean?" Jaytsy said with a sad scoff. "Yes, he does. I never thought my mother would agree to let him play kickball, but when my father handed him the slips of silver, there wasn't much she could say."

"Kickball?" Cambozola frowned. "Still? In the snow?"

"My parents don't know the season ended several weeks ago. Peto kept leaving each afternoon anyway, and I followed him once. Turns out he was helping Rector Yung with the peach harvest, and he still sneaks over there almost every day."

Cambozola sat back and smiled. "So that's why Yung said he didn't need help with his woodpile when I offered. Said he had reliable assistance."

Sewzi sighed. "You children are remarkable. Someday, your parents will notice again."

Jaytsy blushed. "Thank you, but I don't know . . ."

"Don't talk like that!" Sewzi squeezed her again. "I saw your father at the taxation collection. He was actually smiling."

“And laughing,” Cambozola added. “I’m sure that was him, sounding like deep bells?”

Jaytsy nodded and stared at her mug. “He was so close to being better, back in Harvest,” she murmured. “This stupid season, these stupid snows, the stupid gray sky.” She sniffed.

Cambozola cleared his throat. “So they always run that Strongest Soldier Race, he and Zenos?”

Jaytsy knew why he brought that up: to make her smile. She obliged him. “Usually they hold it later in the season, but Shem thought it’d be a good idea to hold it with the taxation gathering. Everyone had to bring their donations to the village green that day anyway—”

“—So why not turn it into a village party?” he chuckled. “Your grandmother makes excellent cake, and I’ve never seen so many different kinds of cookies. And that Hegek— Did you see the sign he put on the basket of apples he donated from the old school orchards? ‘Iris, accept these apples as a token from the schools of Edge. And those little black things in the middle? Seeds. Try planting some and see what happens.’” Cambozola laughed, and Jaytsy and Sewzi chuckled with him.

“Yeah, that race,” he continued, grinning, “Karna sure looked sheepish when they finally finished it. He ran those poor men fifteen miles through the village, and still your father had a smile on his face when he lumbered in a minute behind Zenos.”

“He *was* smiling,” Jaytsy remembered wistfully. “And then he kissed my mother, in front of everyone. Grandmother Peto started bawling,” she murmured. “I started to as well. To see him again running and laughing and—”

Next to her, Sewzi sniffed and dabbed at her eyes. “He seems like a very good man when he’s not . . . troubled.”

“A few more moons. That’s all he needed. But then the sky became dark again, and . . .” Jaytsy rubbed the handle of her mug.

Cambozola, uncomfortable that the two females seated with him were sniffing, said, “So Karna was responsible for all those soldiers as well?”

“The fifty he brought as additional guards for the caravan? Yes, he didn’t want any threat to the twenty-five wagons. And after they left the village green, Captain Rigoff took over command.”

Cambozola chuckled darkly. “I’m sure Captain Thorne wasn’t too pleased by that.”

Jaytsy smiled genuinely. “From the reports we got back later,

he was furious! Here he'd made that droning speech all about service and duty—"

"The only reason people cheered him," Cambozola told her, "was that he had finally shut up and was leaving!"

Jaytsy grinned. "I hadn't realized that so many in Edge don't like him much either. Nothing was better than knowing I wouldn't have to avoid him for two weeks while he was taking the caravan to Idumea. But then Rigoff insisted he was in command, since he'd lived in Edge at the time we used the surplus, and he did outrank Thorne, so Thorne was relegated to the end of the line to watch for lame horses."

"Edgers hate him," Cambozola confided. "Thorne tried a few times to 'motivate' villagers to meet the donation quotas, but couldn't understand why no one responded to his name-dropping and threats. Edgers did, however, react whenever Zenos and Yung came around with their little cheer parties. Those two were so enthusiastic and convincing that even I donated one of my better milkers, and I didn't even eat any of the food from Idumea!"

Sewzi shook her head. "You never liked that cow, and you know it. She hated you too, and sending her to Idumea was the best thing for everyone involved."

Jaytsy giggled.

"It's good to hear you laugh, Miss Jaytsy. You need to have some fun," Cambozola decided. "What about those dances they hold down in the south side of—"

The frantic head shaking of his wife shut him up, for once.

Jaytsy sighed. "Mr. Briter, my parents won't let me attend. From what I hear they're nothing like the dances in Idumea. There's just loud drums with teenagers and soldiers bouncing into each other."

Cambozola scowled. "No, not like the dances I knew in Sands."

"Besides," his wife said quietly, "Jaytsy told me her dance instructor in Idumea was a Guarder who later came back and . . ."

Her husband caught on. "That's right. Heard about that. Sorry. Nothing good at the amphitheater either, anymore. Not unless you like strange contests, or plays where everyone ends up either dead or mating or both—"

"Cambo!" Sewzi exclaimed.

Jaytsy smiled dimly. "It's all right. My parents feel the same way."

"So Game Day not that exciting either?" he probed.

Jaytsy rolled her eyes at him. "Mr. Hegek started it up again, and

playing with eleven-year-old girls obsessed with puppies isn't exactly my idea of an interesting evening."

The Briters nodded in grim agreement.

"But visiting us is? My, Miss Jaytsy—I wished I had something more interesting. Wait," he brightened up. "Did you know I played the harmonica?"

"Cambo, please—no!" his wife pleaded.

Jaytsy grinned. "Really, *this* is wonderful."

"Poor girl," he sighed. "Don't know what you're missing."

She spent the next hour with the Briters talking about nothing and everything. When she left she felt as if she'd been bathed in sunshine. The Briters walked her home, and she impulsively hugged them both before she went into the house.

"Thank you," she whispered, hoping they understood that she was grateful for more than just the escort home.

Mr. Briter only cleared his throat, but Mrs. Briter squeezed her back. "Anytime, Jaytsy. You know that. Anytime."

Peto snipped the leaves with the tiny scissors and looked up to see if he'd done it right.

Rector Yung beamed at him. "Perfect, Peto!"

Peto shrugged. "But it looks like a miniature tree."

The old man chuckled. "Well, that's the point now, isn't it?" He slid a box over to him.

Peto took out a dried piece of peach and examined the shriveled but tasty fruit. "Still can't believe we got only twenty peaches from that entire orchard."

Yung smiled. "Actually, I was quite impressed we got an entire twenty peaches from that orchard."

"Yeah, but all that work!"

"You say that as if we did more than just an hour of tree trimming each day for a week." Yung nibbled on a peach ring.

Peto bobbed his head back and forth. "Well, true . . . but I still hoped for a better harvest."

"The orchard had been neglected for a decade, Peto. A harvest of even just one peach is better than nothing at all."

Not really knowing much about reviving orchards before the past year when he spent more time in Yung's orchard than he did

playing kickball, Peto shrugged as he chewed on another leathery piece.

Yung regarded him for a moment. "How's that taste?"

"Like a dried up peach."

"Remember the ones we pulled off the trees fresh?"

Peto grinned. "Juiciest things. I was sticky all day."

Yung matched his grin. "What would have happened to those peaches had we not given them a chance?"

Peto shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe . . . not get juicy?"

"Not enough sun, not enough water, and they would not have matured. But if they did, they would have been dry and small."

"There's another Holy Day talk in here, isn't there?"

Yung chuckled. "There is. Now you tell me what it is."

Peto sighed. "I swear you're trying to turn me into a rector. All right. Peaches deserve to live and . . . sometimes others have to help them have their best shot at living, even if not a whole lot of them respond, or even if there's not even a lot to harvest."

Yung cocked his head. "Inarticulate, but you're on the right path."

"So you would have gone through all this work even if there was only one peach this year?"

"Peto, I would have been out there every day trimming branches and pulling weeds and watering roots all season even if there were *no* peaches this year, just to let the trees know I was there and willing to help, so that next year they'd have a bit more faith to put out a few more fruits."

Peto stared at the little tree in front of him which he'd been trimming. "You say that as if the trees actually know you're there."

"Peto," Yung whispered, "that's because they do. Everything's alive. We have a stewardship from the Creator to care for all living things. And yes, I believe they do know I care," Yung said, a bit bashfully. "They just need to know they're not alone. The harvest will come, but we can't force it. All we can do is encourage the trees until they're ready to dare."

Peto examined his tiny tree, turned from a gnarled bush into a small piece of living art. "When will my father finally dare, Rector?" he whispered.

Yung sighed. "I don't know. But Peto, he's lasted much longer than many others like him. Without so much faith, he wouldn't have made it this far. That gives me hope. Should give you some as well. Never give up. The Creator never does, so neither should we. I still

have a few tricks up my sleeve.”

Peto frowned. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Yung smiled and slid the box of peach rings over to Peto. “For your father, from me.”



Perrin sat on the sofa before dawn, waiting for the morning to come. He wasn’t going back into that bed. Not after what he dreamed happened there.

On the side table was a small box of dried peach rings that Peto had brought home, from Rector Yung who Peto saw on his way home from kickball.

Feeling guilty for his neglect of the old man the past year, Perrin picked up a ring and nibbled dutifully on it, even though peaches weren’t his favorite fruit—that would be bacon—and felt a twinge of guilt that others gave him things, but he never reciprocated.

Perrin looked at the books lining the shelves. Useless as distractions, since he’d read most of them already. There were The Writings, but he had neglected them too, along with his daily discussions with the Creator.

That’s when he saw them. Reluctantly he got up, retrieved the stack of messages the fort had been receiving for several moons now, and sat down. He pulled out the message from the boy at the Stable of Pools and reread it. Roak was likely fulfilling some dreary school assignment to write a letter to someone. Perrin was the recipient, now doomed to return the favor—

No. Roak had been sincere. He didn’t know the depth of Perrin’s pain, but he had thought of the Shin family.

Perrin opened another message and read it. Gizzada was worried about him. Another message. Another citizen. And again.

And then another that sank his heart.

Sergeant Major Grandpy Neeks had sent a long letter full of reminiscing about Relf Shin that twice made Perrin smile, and at the bottom of it was a note from now Corporal Qualipoe Hili, stating how sorry he was, and that he hadn’t caused any new trouble.

“Thank you,” he whispered to the messages, thirty-two of them. But that wasn’t good enough, and he knew it. He went to the study and returned with pieces of parchment, ink, and quills.

He stared at the messages before he started to write.

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 my pain . . .

Later that morning in the command tower, Perrin heard the knock on the office door, a familiar and welcome rhythm.

"Come in, Zenos," he called.

"Perrin?" he said softly.

Perrin only glanced up from the dull reports on his desk. "What?"

Shem tried to smile as he approached the desk cluttered with piles. He managed to find a corner to sit on and casually propped himself there. "I have something I want you to try that might help with your nightmares." He whispered the last words, even though no one in the outer office could hear them over the conversation going on out there.

Perrin sat back in his chair. "Is this really the best time—" He stopped when he saw Shem holding up a length of wool, knitted into a dense, thin chain. "Knitting? I should take up knitting?"

Shem grinned—a rare sight these days—and shook his head. "No, this is for your wrist. You wear it, like a bracelet." He held it out by both ends, but Perrin didn't move. "On your sword hand?" Shem shook the soft chain, but still Perrin didn't offer his arm.

"A bracelet? To stop nightmares? This is sounding desperate—"

Shem sighed and dropped his hands to his lap. "You wear this, all the time. It's your connection to reality. The idea is, if you see this on your wrist, especially when you hold a weapon, you'll understand that at that moment you're in reality. But if you hold a weapon, look at your wrist, and see nothing, then you can be assured it's a dream. Then maybe you can start getting control of it."

"But what if I dream that I'm wearing the woolen chain?"

"You won't."

"How do you know?"

"I don't know," Shem admitted. "It's just a tool. Worth a try, isn't it?" He held up the length again, a pale cream color almost the same as Perrin's skin. "Just for you to see. To . . . to *ground* you."

"And who's idea was this to tie me up?"

“The surgeon’s,” Shem said.

“Then why isn’t Stitch here himself?” Perrin asked.

“Because I knew you’d have this attitude, and I thought I might be the best choice for getting you to try it.”

“So who knitted it?”

Shem groaned. “I don’t know! Does it matter? Please, Perrin?” He whispered earnestly. “You’ve . . . you’ve gone darker. It’s due to the weather. The fewer hours of sunshine, the bleak skies . . . we’re losing you.”

“I know. But it won’t work,” Perrin whispered back. “Nothing works.”

“Please, just try it? For a few weeks? Think of it, look at it.”

Reluctantly, Perrin raised his right arm to allow Shem to tie the length of knotted yarn to his wrist. For good measure, Shem slid it up to hide it under his jacket. “Consider it a trick up your sleeve.”

“Zenos,” Perrin said, dropping his arm, “the only length of yarn that helped a man in my situation was tied into a noose.”

Shem’s eyes flared. “Don’t even joke like that, Perrin! Don’t even joke.”

“Who said I was—” Perrin stopped, realizing he was adding even more pain to his brother’s already anguished eyes. “Thank you, Shem,” he said instead. “For trying.”

Late that night Zenos trudged deep into the forest to the hot steam vent and sat on the log next to the man waiting for him.

“Well? How did it go?”

Shem sighed. “Took a bit of convincing, but I finally tied it on to him. I guess I should have explained it better, but—” He shook his head, closed his eyes, and went silent.

The man squeezed his shoulder. “You’re doing well.”

Shem scoffed. “If this stupid season would just be over! We almost had him back, and then—” He clapped his hands loudly and winced, forgetting the need to keep silent in the woods. “Shin asked where it came from. Said I didn’t know. So Jothan, who knitted it?”

“It came from Gleace himself.”

Shem smiled. “That should carry something, shouldn’t it?”

“It may, but will he recognize it? That’s the question, Shem.”

Chapter 5 ~ “What did I almost do?”

It was desperation that was driving Mahrree right now. Desperation that her husband was nearly gone, but she wasn't about to give up.

She stood on her bed in the middle of the night, grasping his wrist and holding it above her head in the dark. In that hand was his long knife, trembling to find a target.

“Who are you?!” he shouted at her.

“Your wife!” she yelled back.

“No, you're not! You killed her!”

“Perrin, just open your eyes! Look at me. Look at your wrist.”

“It's a trick!” he shouted, panicked.

Mahrree noticed a movement at her bedroom door, but didn't take her focus off of her husband. It was too much to hope that it was Shem. He'd been suffering from a cold and decided his coughing all night would disturb Perrin, so he stayed at the fort.

Well it didn't disturb Perrin, she realized as she tensed her measly muscles to keep her husband's strong arm in the air and his long knife away from her neck. He was disturbed all on his own.

“Perrin Shin,” she said as calmly as she could, “I order you to put down this knife and command you to look at your wrist.”

“There's nothing there!” he wailed.

“That's right. Nothing's there, so you're in a dream.”

“Mother?” said a whimper at the door. It was Peto, and he was lighting a candle. “Will this help?”

Without glancing his way, she nodded. “Perrin, look for the candle. Open your eyes and come out of this now, soldier!”

In the growing light Mahrree could tell his eyes were still closed, but they cracked open a bit, squinting at the flame.

Mahrree firmed her grip on his arm, making sure the knitted chain was visible between her clenched fingers.

“Eyes open wider, Colonel. Good. Now, look at your wrist. What do you see there?”

Perrin, blinking in confusion, scowled as he looked at his arm. “The chain?” he whispered.

“Good,” Mahrree said, impressed with her ability to remain so composed. “Now look a little higher and see what’s in your hand.”

His gaze crept up to his hand, and when he saw what he was about to do, he gasped, dropping the long knife.

Mahrree ducked out of the way, but the blade tip jabbed into her shoulder before it tumbled onto the bed.

“Mother!” Peto cried, but didn’t dare come into the room.

“I’m fine, I’m fine,” she said, crawling off the bed while her husband collapsed onto it. “Just a minor nick, I’m sure. No real pain.” She slipped her bed dress off of her shoulder to inspect the now bleeding cut. “Doesn’t even need resin. Peto, get me a clean rag, please. And leave the candle. And don’t wake your sister.”

Peto obediently handed her the candle and darted down the stairs. Mahrree set the candle on the dresser, retrieved the long knife from the side of the bed, and slipped it into her stocking drawer where she knew her husband wouldn’t find it.

He remained curled up on the bed, shaking.

She was surprised she’d reached this point. The terror was gone, replaced by numbed acceptance. She wasn’t even trembling as much as she expected for having been nearly murdered.

Sitting down by her husband, she put a hand experimentally on his shuddering shoulder. “Perrin?”

She didn’t expect him to suddenly sit up and grab her, clumsily pulling her body next to his, clawing at her almost with animal-like intensity as he tried to envelop her. “Sorry . . . so sorry! What did I nearly do?!”

It was difficult to embrace him back, because he was squeezing her too firmly for her to wriggle her arms free. Instead she stroked his arm with one of her free fingers. “It’s all right, it’s over now. Did you notice that looking at your wrist worked? I think it helped wake you up.”

But he didn’t hear her over his mumbling of, “What did I almost do? What did I almost do?”

Peto stood at the door again, a damp cloth in his hands and an

anxious expression on his face.

“It’s all right, Peto,” Mahrree told him from somewhere in her husband’s body. “Come on in.”

“What did I almost do?” Perrin continued. “What did—What is this, blood? Mahrree?”

He released her to see the red spot expanding on her bed dress.

Peto gingerly handed his mother the cloth, then stepped back to the relative safety of the doorway.

Mahrree patted Perrin’s hand and sat up out of his grip. Putting the cloth on her shoulder, she said, “Just a nick.”

He stared at her shoulder in growing horror. “Hide it. My long knife. Where I can’t find it.”

“Already have,” she said as brightly as possible.

“Let me help you,” he said as he made to take the damp cloth off of her shoulder.

Not too sure of how gentle he was at the moment, she said, “Really, Perrin, it’s fine—”

“*Please* let me do this,” he said with such yearning that Mahrree let her hand drop and allowed him to remove the damp cloth. He grimaced when he saw the perfect puncture point. Tenderly, he wiped the remaining blood off with the damp cloth while Mahrree tensed in worry.

“No, it’s not too bad,” he agreed. “But it’s still horrible.”

“It’s fine,” she assured him again.

To her surprise, he bent and kissed her wound as if she were three years old.

Peto, in the doorway, turned away.

Mahrree noticed. “Thank you, son. Go back to bed now.”

He nodded before trotting down the stairs.

Perrin gingerly put the damp cloth on her shoulder again. “Bleeding’s already slowing.”

They sat in silence for a few minutes, Mahrree too exhausted to think anything else but a prayer of gratitude that nothing worse transpired. What Perrin thought as he repeatedly pressed the cloth on her shoulder, she could only imagine.

Eventually he said, “It’s never got this far before, has it?”

“Besides you and Shem bloodying each other’s noses, no,” she said softly. “And it was just an accident.”

“What if you hadn’t been stopping me, though?”

She shrugged, and regretted it as her shoulder twinged.

Again her husband kissed it, as if somehow that would make

the wound vanish.

“Nothing *did* happen, Perrin.”

“I can’t go on like this anymore,” he said so softly she almost didn’t hear him.

Sickened by what he may have meant by that, she hugged him fiercely. “Well, I can!” she told him. “For as long as you need to.”

He hugged her back, but something felt different about him, some terrible notion of . . . giving up.

That morning Peto left for school earlier than normal so he could run first to the rectory and pound on the door.

Rector Yung flung it open. “Peto? Come in, come in.”

“Last night,” he said, gulping in the warm air of Yung’s small fire. “It was bad. Shem’s been sick, so he wasn’t there, but this time . . . this time there was bloodshed.”

Yung’s eyebrows flew upwards. “Whose? Are you all right?”

Peto nodded. “Yes, everyone’s fine. Not that bad, but . . . it was my mother. Father was holding his long knife above her, sure that she had killed herself or something. I brought up a candle and he saw the light and dropped the knife on Mother,” he said in a rush. “Just a nick, but,” he paused to collect himself, “it worried me.”

Rector Yung pulled him into a gentle hug. “Of course. And your sister?”

“She doesn’t know. Slept through it. Father was really upset. But the bracelet thing? It helped wake him up, or something.”

Yung nodded. “Good, but now this is going too far. We need to confront this bear.”

“I don’t know how that will help,” Peto said in resignation.

“On Holy Day, I’ll talk to him,” Rector Yung promised.

Perrin didn’t go to the fort that morning.

By the time dawn had arrived, he was still so out of sorts that he’d put his uniform on before shaving. Halfway through his breakfast he remembered, and went to the washroom. It was while he was slicing off the stubble from his throat with the single-edge blade that he

caught his reflection in the mirror. Or rather, he caught the reflection of the army patch, the one with the sword imposed on top of a pine tree. The sword tip seemed to be aimed right at his head, and—

The army will kill you.

Abruptly he dropped his razor into the washing basin and darted out of the washing room. He didn't know where those words came from—his imagination or somewhere else—but they terrified him nonetheless.

Panting, he jerked open the back door and ran on to the back porch, breathing in the cool morning air. Unable to control the trembling of his hands, he shoved them in his pockets.

Two soldiers coming off of patrols for the night passed along the back alley, and Perrin whistled to them.

“Tell Thorne I'll be in for the afternoon shift. Got some . . . got some things to do around here.”

The soldiers nodded to him uncertainly, then saluted—forcing Perrin to remove his jittery right hand from his pocket to salute back—and jogged off to the fort.

Perrin sighed and, feeling something itchy on his throat, rubbed it. His hand came away with a mixture of gray soap and red blood. He'd cut himself, likely when he dropped his razor. No wonder his soldiers regarded him with such trepidation.

Back in the washing room he smiled dismally at himself in the mirror. He was a bit of a mess, he thought as he reluctantly picked up the razor again.

But he couldn't finish the shaving job. He couldn't bear to hold another blade again. Not just yet.

Instead he took a rag and wiped his face, partly shaved, partly stubble, and dabbed at the nick. Right next to that blood vessel, the one they teach the soldiers about.

Want to hit your enemy right there, to make him bleed to death.

Want to make sure you never get hit there, or—

If only he'd been just a finger width's closer, then—

He shuffled to the gathering room and plopped on the sofa. Mahrree tilted her head at him as she readied her bag for school.

“Going to work later today?” she asked, far too cheerily.

He only nodded.

“Want me to stay with you until then?”

He heard the hint of hesitancy in her tone. While half of him wanted to say yes, the other half didn't want to be reminded of

what he nearly did to her. “No, go ahead. I’m just going to . . . rest.”

She kissed him on the forehead. “All right, then!” She produced a smile so exceptionally merry that Perrin wouldn’t have been in the least bit surprised that if, once she reached the back garden, songbirds flocked to her and butterflies accompanied her to the school.

Alone in the house, he headed to his study and slumped into a chair. In his dream he was only moments away from plunging his knife into the neck of a Guarder.

Into the neck of her.

Last week he had slept better, and it was after he wrote a few responses to letters. With growing anxiety, he snatched the rest of the letters waiting on the shelf and started answering them. Hogal used to say that the best way to get over feeling sorry for yourself was to forget yourself and do something for someone else.

It was a feeble effort, but he needed to begin to absolve himself of nearly committing an unforgiveable crime, although it was like draining the river with a mug.

Half an hour later he realized, as he started into the fourth letter, that it was providing him with a sense of completion, of tying up loose ends. Of finishing a nagging task.

Of ending.

Two days later on Holy Day Mahrree hugged her mother outside the rectory.

“I can stay to help,” Hycymum offered again, but the tone of her voice suggested she’d rather go start dinner for them all instead.

Mahrree shook her head. “It’s all right. I’m not sure what you could do, anyway.”

Hycymum sighed sadly. “Is your shoulder feeling better?”

“Scabbed over nicely, yes. Just go home, Mother. We’ll be by later to eat.”

Hycymum squeezed her daughter’s arm and looked over at Shem who stood nearby.

“I’ll bring them over myself early, in case he gets worse,” Shem promised.

“I’ll make fresh rolls,” she promised back. With a kiss on her daughter’s cheek, and a wave to her grandchildren, Hycymum picked her way through the snow after the congregation meeting.

“Why do they call it the Raining Season?” Mahrree grumbled as she kicked a clump of slush with her boot. “It’s always snowing here.”

Shem, standing next to her in the frigid air, tried to chuckle, but it turned into a fit of hacking. Mahrree patted his back uselessly until he stopped coughing. “This Raining Season is brought to you by the same minds in Idumea that declared the sky to be blue.” Shem looked up into the gray washed expanse of it.

Mahrree scoffed. “I don’t even know why I bother checking its color anymore.”

They stood outside the congregation hall near a tree, waiting for Perrin. Jaytsy and Peto were a little ways away making snowballs and halfheartedly taking aim at a nearby trunk.

“Shem,” Mahrree whispered, “look at Jaytsy and Peto, alone. There are no more teenagers here on Holy Day. They’re either at the dances or entertainments or the games. They’ve got no one.”

“So what do you want them to do?” Shem said softly back. “Let them go after midday meal? Send them off dancing or to the amphitheater?”

Mahrree twisted to look at him. “Of course not! Why would I allow it today when I don’t allow it during the week? Besides, Holy Day is *all* day, not just until the service is over.”

Calmly he said, “Then what other option is there? Mahrree, sometimes doing the right thing means a life of solitude.”

That’s when she noticed the depth of gloom in his eyes. Since he was twenty she’d been taken in by his big, happy blue eyes. But she didn’t realize until then how his eyes had changed. They were duller, sadder. There was still a faint twinkle when he looked at her, but his eyes were colder and definitely older. And lonely.

“Oh, Shem,” she whispered, touching his arm. “Here I am complaining, and there you are still single. I’m just not thinking.”

He smiled at her, a tiny bit of a twinkle trying to rise up in expanse of heavy blue. “Nothing to apologize for, Mahrree. I’m just stating a fact. But you’re right—look around. Which of these women could I marry? The only single ones left are widows with children my age.”

Mahrree chuckled sadly. “Message received. And I’ll stop nagging you about finding a wife. And I also won’t bring up that Sareen was asking after you again. I finally broke down and visited her little book shop, thinking I might find something diverting in there.”

“And?”

“Oh, I was diverted, all right. Don’t you *ever* go in there! Not that I’m one to advocate more laws, but the books she’s selling? There ought to be several laws against those.”

Shem smiled grimly. “I assumed as much. She’s not what I’d consider marriageable either.”

“Agreed. I’m so sorry that being devoted to us for so many years has meant that . . . you have *only* us.”

“It’s all right, Mahrree. Truly,” he said. “I’ve made peace with that idea that I may never be married. It’s better than being with someone who may persuade me away from my belief in the Creator, and it’s far better than behaving in a less-than-honorable manner. The next fifty, sixty years will seem *temporary* compared to the one thousand years’ reward to live with the Creator. Each year slips by so quickly, so it really doesn’t matter.”

He never ceased to amaze her. “I wished I had your insight, Shem. You should have been a rector, you know that?”

Again his sad smile appeared. “Not the first time I’ve heard that, but this is my calling. I’m sure of it.” He followed that up with a pathetic chuckle which dissolved into coughing.

It used to be that he and Perrin would laugh every time they got together. Mahrree noticed years ago that their laughs had both changed to mimic each other. They had the same pitch, rhythm, and length, as if the two men were truly brothers. She couldn’t remember the last time she heard either of them laugh.

Shem and Mahrree watched the front door. Rector Yung was saying goodbye to his attendees, which didn’t take long since there were less than fifty who still went on Holy Day.

Holiday to the rest of the world.

The Briters came out of the hall, waved at Mahrree and Shem, then headed for Jaytsy. She rushed over to give Mrs. Briter a hug.

“See Mahrree? Jaytsy’s got a friend,” Shem elbowed her. “So what if she’s nearly the same age as her mother? That’s a woman you can trust, right?”

Mahrree chuckled miserably. “Yes. Jaytsy could do far worse. Mrs. Briter is a very lovely, but *odd*, woman. Anyone who willingly plunges their hands into dirt is odd.”

Shem grinned. “Well I like them. They’re improving the diet of the soldiers, and we’ve never had such a consistent supply of butter until the Briters came with their cows.”

Mahrree smiled in agreement, but wasn't about to let it go, especially since she saw a bit of brightness return to his eyes. "I've got opinions about men who willingly touch those *things* to get milk. That's not just odd—it's downright indecent!"

It worked. Shem laughed out loud and Mahrree sighed in pleasure. Until Shem's laugh transferred into another fit of coughing.

The Briters, not knowing the source of the amusement, waved again to say farewell to Mahrree and Shem, who recovered quickly.

"There they are, waving those hands," Mahrree murmured under her breath as she waved back. "I'll never shake those hands, mark my words."

Shem laughed again in his hacking, precisely as Mahrree hoped he would. She'd apologize to the Briters someday for using them for a light moment, and she uselessly patted Shem's back again.

A shadow at the rectory doors drew Mahrree and Shem's attention, for behind a shriveled old woman shaking Rector Yung's hand stood Perrin, his arms folded and looking like an irritated bear with an appetite. Yung had asked Perrin to stay for a few minutes after everyone had left, and Shem and Mahrree knew why.

After the old woman, Rector Yung glanced over to Shem and Mahrree and subtly winked. They nodded back once.

Perrin now took his place at the door, looking quite put out. "What did you need, Rector Yung?"

The rector patted him genially, which Mahrree thought was exceptionally brave. "Just wanted to talk, Colonel. It's been quite a while and I miss our conversations. Just for ten minutes?"

Perrin gripped his uniform's cap in his hands none too gently. "I really don't have time to chat—"

"Five minutes then, Colonel."

"Rector—"

"Colonel, you're getting worse," Yung cut straight to the point. "I see it in your eyes. And it's the weather. The darker days, less sunlight—all of it makes your condition deteriorate. I know a little bit about this. But if you can just hold on until Planting—"

Perrin's menacing eyebrow arched. "*I have no condition, Rector!*" and he stepped in front of the small man.

Mahrree held her breath and gripped Shem's arm in warning when she saw what Rector Yung did next.

He jumped in front of Perrin and put his wrinkled finger on Perrin's chest. Amazingly, he stopped the colonel, even though he

barely came up to Perrin's third brass button.

"You do, Perrin Shin, and it'll destroy you if you don't fight it! The Refuser has focused all of his attention on you. He knows that if he destroys you, he destroys a great many other plans as well—"

"Rector, enough—"

"Face the nightmares, Colonel, and order them gone! You haven't asked for help yet, not from me—"

"Rector, you have no idea what you're talking about—"

"Oh, I do. And that's what worries you. You haven't even asked the Creator for His help—"

"Shut up, Yung!"

"Where's your faith, Colonel? Find it! Use it! We need you, healthy and solid. Order the darkness gone, and then hold on until the snows melt and the sun returns. That's when you'll return."

"Look, *old man*—"

"Perrin, your darkest days are ahead of you. You cannot give up. Not now. Promise me!"

Mahrree, transfixed for the past minute at the sheer bravery of the rector, feared her husband's very thin patience was about to snap. She pulled on Shem's arm to get him to do something.

But Shem just shook his head. "Yung's got this. Watch."

"Rector Yung," said Perrin, irritated, "you have no idea what you're talking about."

"I know far more than you ever will, Perrin Shin!" Yung declared. "Now fight. Focus on that woolen chain on your wrist," he grasped Perrin's arm, forcing the chain to slip. "Remember what's real, and—"

"Your five minutes are up. *Remove your hand.*"

"Fight, Perrin!"

Perrin's movement was so swift that Mahrree didn't even see his hand flash upwards to grab the rector's arm. He took a step closer and hovered over Rector Yung, gripping him tightly. "I fight every minute of every day and night, Yung!" he growled. "If you don't believe me, come by some night and see for yourself!"

He jerked the rector out of his way with such force that Mahrree gasped. She sent a look of apology at the rector as he stumbled in the snow to regain his footing.

He just looked back at Mahrree with his usual sweet smile. "Until next week, Shin family. Shem Zenos," he called over to them as if he hadn't just nearly had his arm pulled off.

Perrin was already striding past Mahrree and Shem, barking orders to his children that it was time to go home. Jaytsy yelped and fell in line, while Peto sent a worried look to Rector Yung.

Mahrree glanced back as well and mouthed, *I'm so sorry*.

Shem seemed to be doing the same thing.

The rector nodded and waved goodbye.

"He's fine," Shem whispered to Mahrree as they followed the fury-in-uniform. "Yung looks small and fragile, but he's a tough old horse. I've seen him deal with worse."

Mahrree sighed. "At least he said something to him. Oh Shem, are you sure he wasn't injured or insulted or anything?"

Shem shook his head. "No one's ever successfully insulted him, because he refuses to be insulted. People do their best, but Yung won't even acknowledge the attempt of an affront."

Before Mahrree could comprehend how one did that, Shem continued with, "Besides, he's tamed many people over the years. His wife, to begin with. When they first married, apparently she was quite the hothead. He taught her to channel that ferocity. By the time she was middle-aged, she was adept at turning it off and on when needed."

"I can't imagine him married to someone like that," Mahrree said. "I guess I've always pictured a rector's wife to be like Tabbith Densal. Tender, concerned, loving—"

"Oh, Mrs. Yung was all those things, Mahrree. Not everyone who worries about someone's future will tell them so in a loving manner. They may humble and even intimidate the one they care about. Mrs. Yung was quite skilled at that. A perfect match for her ever-gentle husband. She knew precisely what to say to get someone where they needed to be. Forceful love, I suppose."

"I guess I just can't picture a woman like that."

Shem looked at her askance. "You really can't? Never in your life met a woman like that? Ever?"

Mahrree shook her head.

"Interesting," was all he said.

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

"I must admit, Genev is proving to be meaner and sharper than Gadiman," Mal said. "Then again, cotton's sharper than Gadiman."

Still, Genev's holding that department together quite well."

Brisack knew better than to ask if there were any updates on Gadiman's whereabouts. There weren't, and even though Brisack followed up on every report about discovered corpses, none matched Gadiman's description. The weasel was gone.

Just . . . don't mention that to Nicko Mal.

"And with so much going on in the south," Mal continued brightly, "and our men's success in raiding the mines, I've nearly forgotten to ask: what about the latest update on our colonel?"

"Still terrifying everyone in Edge, Nicko," smiled Brisack. "She even asked for another bottle. Perrin's still on his knees in the pit, and clawing uselessly at the walls, according to Thorne."

Mal smiled in smug satisfaction. "And she still hasn't asked for any more advice?"

"No," Brisack said, his previous pleasure turning to consternation. "Maybe she's found her own ways to deal with him."

Mal scoffed. "Not likely. Thorne's reports are filled with his erratic behavior. Just how long can he keep this up, Doctor?"

Brisack shrugged. "It's truly remarkable. While he's at the bottom of that pit, he's still alive after eight moons."

"I have to admit," Mal said, clasping his hands, "I really thought he would have broken by now. I suppose our Quiet Man Zenos is keeping the fort together. So," he said with a tone of expectancy, "what if Shin pulls through this? Is your latest plan satisfactory?"

"Satisfactory?" the doctor hooted. "That would be the understatement of my life. The results are nothing short of spectacular! Now if he'll just give me a reason to employ it, I'll be a contented man and my scientific career unparalleled."

Mal sat back. "My, my. Are we *still* irked about the caravan to Edge?"

Brisack shook his head. "I'm not petty, Nicko. You can drop that condescending tone. I'm just fascinated. No matter what's thrown at him, he comes back up. It's like trying to drown a frog."

"I know what will destroy him," Mal said. "Just give me one of those children—the boy. The captain has already claimed the girl, so we can't touch her. At least not yet. But the boy doesn't even want to join the army, from what I've heard."

Brisack shook his head. "Trust me, Nicko—this new project will be far more devastating to the colonel than merely losing half of his children. Just think: what would happen to him if he lost half his

village? In a season or two, you'll be amazed at the results. If he makes it out of his trauma, he just may think he's invincible. And we certainly couldn't have him thinking like that."

"No, no we could not," Nicko Mal agreed. "With thinking like that, he might begin to think he's our equal."

Chapter 6 ~ “I’m an object of *pity*.”

Shem Zenos wrapped the thick overcoat around him and wished it actually rained in Raining Season. He reached the vent and sat down on a log.

A moment later a large man joined him, sat on the log, and pulled off his thick gloves.

“Vent seems to be hotter tonight,” he said to Shem.

“Yes, and I’m grateful for that. The hike always feels further in the snow.” Shem broke out into another coughing fit.

His companion pulled a flask from his hip. “Got what you need. Can’t have you giving away our position to soldiers on patrol.”

“Thanks.” Shem pulled the cork from the flask and swallowed down the liquid. He paused only to say, “Still warm, too. Perfect.”

“Works best that way. Too bad you can take the recipe down with you and sell it in the world. You’d be the richest man in the world simply because you have a cure for the cold.”

“Well, we both know none of this has ever been about gold and silver,” Shem said, and he finished off the flask and handed it back.

“I know you’re here for more than just a remedy. So how is he?”

“Bad, Jothan. He even turned on Yung.”

Jothan sighed. “The setbacks were to be expected. This season is always the worst, even for those not traumatized.”

“I just hate seeing him like this,” Shem whispered. “I feel like my best friend has died.”

Jothan nodded. “I hate to tell you what I must, then.”

“Oh no,” Shem whispered. “What is it?”

“They’re moving north. The activity is coming back here.”

Shem moaned. “He can’t take it. He’ll crack.”

“They’re taking over the abandoned houses in Moorland.”

“Smart move,” Shem had to agree. “I wondered that they didn’t do it earlier. Snow must have driven them to it.”

“Been waiting for reinforcements. Now that they’ve arrived, it’s time to strike again.”

“It’s too soon, isn’t it?” Shem asked, with pleading in his voice. “We can’t end it for him yet, can we?”

“No, I’m sorry,” said Jothan. “Keeping your route free is more important now than ever, now that we’ve lost Moorland. First group of the season’s coming in two weeks.”

“Shouldn’t be a problem,” Shem sighed, “since I schedule everyone at the fort—still, despite Thorne’s meddling. It’s easy enough to keep the way clear.”

“Good, and . . .” Jothan paused, “how are your *other* concerns?”

“Well, Beneff is still as effective as a toothless dog, thankfully. But as for the *other* one? He’s still the most sniveling, insincere, beast of a boy I have ever met!”

The large man chuckled. “Shem Zenos, I have *never* known you to dislike *anyone*. You actually loathe Captain Thorne.”

“I do, may the Creator forgive me! Something about his smarmy ways just gets under my skin and . . .” He stopped when he realized his hands were outstretched in front of him, as if choking someone.

Jothan smiled cautiously.

“Why can’t I eliminate him?!” Shem exhaled. “Just bring him to the fresh spring? I haven’t had the pleasure of doing that for years.”

Jothan eyed him. “*You’re* the one who received that answer.”

Shem growled. “And the answer was, No. I don’t get it. I just don’t get it.”

“Sure you do. What would happen if the grandson of the High General suddenly vanished? Besides, you said yourself he’s not one of *them*. At least, not yet.”

“And why is that?” Shem stared at the steam vent. “There are tests, but apparently he hasn’t passed them to know everything?”

“There’s another reason you haven’t brought him out here yet.”

“I know,” Shem grouched, “but I have a hard time believing it.”

The large man leaned back. “Truly, I’ve never seen anyone exasperate you so much as Lemuel Thorne. You really can’t believe that there’s hope for him?”

Shem sighed. “You know, just a year ago the fort felt like a family. But now? Thorne undermines whatever I do.” He scoffed.

“He simpers around Perrin, then adjusts everything from how the papers are stacked on the desk to how the armory is arranged, then glares at me as if to say, ‘Your days are over!’”

Jothan blinked. “Are you . . . are you *jealous*? That’s not the Shem Zenos I know.”

Shem growled. “I don’t know myself! He’s always saying things like, ‘Are you sure that’s the *best* strategy? When *I* was at *Command School* . . .” Shem cracked his neck to ease the tension.

“Perhaps if Thorne’s incompetent,” Jothan said, “then maybe—”

“That’s the worst part!” Shem nearly wailed. “That little . . .” he searched for an appropriate word until he finally settled on, “—*thing* isn’t that bad of an officer! The men listen to him, even though many of them are older and seem almost afraid of him. I’m too distracted myself to know why.”

Jothan put a brotherly hand on his shoulder.

Shem sighed. “It’s going to destroy Perrin, you know. Their return? He can’t do it alone, Jothan. I know our rules, but we have to help him! I’m refuse to lose him!”

“We know,” Jothan squeezed his shoulder with so much reassurance that he accidentally left a bruise. “We don’t want to lose him either. We’ve already decided to help.”

Shem sat up, ignoring the pain in his shoulder. “Really?”

“We have a slew of volunteers ready to man the forest and present obstacles. No one wants to lose them either, Shem.”

Shem exhaled in relief. “Thank you! You know, if we could just end it for him earlier—”

“No, Shem. A few more years, still.”

Shem sagged again. “He won’t survive it—”

“He will,” his companion said firmly. “It’s known he will. We need the colonel—and you—now more than ever before.”

“I know, I know,” Shem confessed. “I just need to hear it one more time: he’s going to make it, isn’t he?”

“They will *all* get there, Shem. Because of you. Hey, you’re not coughing anymore.”

Shem smiled. “No, I’m not.”

“Then get back to work, soldier.”

When Perrin came to himself he was standing in the middle of the

gathering room, his father's sword in hand.

"Oh, not again," he whispered.

It was the middle of the night and he was alone.

"Well, that's a first. I must either be getting quieter, or they're sleeping through it." He stared at the sword in the faint light from the slivers of the moons. He also noticed the thin soft chain which wasn't there a few minutes ago. Its absence had forced him to shove the dream aside and slog to find reality.

The silly thing had worked again.

He trembled as he clutched the ornate hilt, unable to remember what sent him hurrying down the stairs.

"I'm sick of this," he whispered to the room. "Three seasons. How much more am I expected to put up with? Why me?" he demanded of the darkness. "Why ME?"

He didn't expect to get an answer, yet one came, heavy and thick, as if it were created by the night itself, blanketing him with cold terror.

WHY NOT YOU?

Suffocating in the dark, he pondering the words. In case he hadn't heard it before, it came again, sending a fresh chill down his back.

WHY NOT YOU? BECAUSE YOU'RE SPECIAL? THE SON OF THE HIGH GENERAL? A COLONEL?

"No," he whispered. "I know I'm not special—"

OH, BUT YOU DO. NOTHING SHOULD TOUCH YOU. BUT YOU COULD HAVE BEEN A BEGGAR IN IDUMEA IF IT WEREN'T FOR YOUR PRIVILEGED BIRTH. YOU DESERVE NOTHING. YOU'RE NO BETTER THAN YOUR LOWEST SOLDIER. AND YOU'RE NOT BEYOND MY TOUCH, SHIN.

He gripped the sword tighter, as if that would give him power against the smothering sensation that was filling the room.

WHY BOTHER? YOU CAN'T TOUCH ME. WHY DON'T YOU JUST GIVE UP? THREE SEASONS, REMEMBER? WHAT IF IT LASTS FOR THREE YEARS? THREE DECADES? DO YOU REALLY WANT TO ENDURE THIS FOR THE REST OF YOUR LIFE?

"It won't be decades," he declared with every bit of bravery he could borrow from his past. "I'll conquer it. I'll conquer you. I never quit—"

OF COURSE YOU DO. YOU QUIT ALL THE TIME. IT'S NOT A SIGN OF WEAKNESS; IT'S A SIGN OF REASON. YOU'VE STOPPED DOING THINGS BEFORE. AND IT TURNED OUT TO BE THE RIGHT THING TO DO.

"That's different!" he insisted to the words that poured into his

mind. They weren't jumbled and confused as in a dream, but came from a deliberate consciousness, with distinct power. What kept that force from overwhelming him, he didn't know. But his heart beat rapidly and he feared it was only a matter of time before the force pounced on him like a bored cat on a wounded creature.

"There *are* times to quit," he admitted, "but then there are times to *fight* to your very last breath!"

SO THAT'S WHAT YOU THINK YOU'RE DOING? YOU'RE NOT FIGHTING, YOU PATHETIC SON OF RELF. YOU'RE BARELY EXISTING. EVERYONE HAS TO DO EVERYTHING FOR YOU. OVERSEE THE FORT. TALK YOU INTO BED. FORCE YOU BACK IN IT AGAIN. WAKE YOU UP. FEED YOU. NEXT THEY'LL DRESS YOU, TOO, AND TAKE YOU TO THE WASHING ROOM. YOU'VE BECOME A BURDEN. AND WHAT DO YOU GIVE THEM BACK? NOTHING. HOW DO YOU LIVE WITH YOURSELF? OH WAIT, YOU DON'T. YOU LIVE IN YOUR DREAMS.

Perrin's breathing quickened as the darkness filled every corner, every crack. It wasn't his imagination, nor even hiding Guardians. It was something far more powerful, dark . . . and old.

"Be quiet!" he tremulously ordered.

OH, SO BRAVE, COLONEL. AND WITH CLOSE TO YOUR LAST BREATH. YOU CAN'T KEEP THIS UP. YOU EVEN SAID SO. THEY DESERVE BETTER, AND YOU KNOW IT. THEY DESERVE A HUSBAND AND FATHER WHO ACTUALLY THINKS ABOUT THEM. THE FORT DESERVES A LEADER, NOT A BROODING SHADOW BEHIND A DESK. THE WORLD'S DONE WITH TOLERATING YOU, PERRIN SHIN. DO IT A FAVOR. END IT FOR THEM, NOW.

Perrin found himself staring at the eating table. Or, more precisely, the secret drawer in the table. Without entirely wanting to, he walked over to it and pulled open the drawer.

The long knife.

He'd hidden it there before he and Mahrree were married, to give her access to a weapon. She never touched it, but Hogal Densal had once. Perrin had never used it either. The blade was perfectly sharp, and never initiated.

He should've remembered to tell Mahrree to hide this one, too.

DON'T DISGRACE RELF'S SWORD, SHIN. USE THE LONG KNIFE INSTEAD. SHE MAY REMEMBER YOU BETTER IF YOU LEAVE HER LESS OF A MESS TO CLEAN UP.

He didn't really want to, yet he placed the sword on the table. He had hoped some of the heaviness surrounding him would leave with the blade, but it didn't. Panting, he took up the long knife. His hand no longer trembled but clutched the knife solidly.

It would solve so many things. He *was* a burden, a weak, pathetic man who couldn't defend even a mouse. They kept him out of pity.

He closed his eyes. "An object of *pity*. How'd I sink so low?"

GIVE THEM BACK THEIR LIVES. GIVE THEM A FUTURE. REMOVE YOURSELF FROM THEIR WORLD. THEY'LL GET OVER IT IN A FEW DAYS, THEN SEE THE LIGHT AGAIN AND SLEEP BETTER, TOO. YOU KNOW WHAT TO DO WITH THAT KNIFE, SHIN. ACT LIKE A MAN AND DO IT.

He stared at the blade, shifting his grip on the handle to change the angle of entry. For once he felt clear and focused. It could be over in just a flash, and then everything for everyone else would go back to normal and—

Something in the back corner of his brain tried to reach him. He froze in his position, his arm raised as it was a few nights ago—

The something came to him, like an old memory, accompanying a face he had seen only once, but never forgot. And there were words, repeating softly, again, and again. Even the cold around him seemed to be straining to hear it. By the fifth time he heard it distinctly.

May the Creator always bless and preserve this family.

Instantly Perrin remembered. Jaytsy was only a toddler, Peto an infant, and he and Mahrree had taken the children to the village green. An old man, as dark as the richest soils but faded with time, had caught Jaytsy as she ran off, and then he patted Peto until he fell asleep. Before he shuffled away, the old man put one hand on Perrin's shoulder, the other on Mahrree's, and said—

May the Creator always bless and preserve this family.

Perrin shook his head at the oddness of the unexpected memory. "What's that supposed to mean?" he whispered.

NOTHING. JUST DO IT. BEFORE THEY WAKE UP. GO OUT AS A MAN, WITH RESPECT AND HONOR AND DIGNITY. YOU KNOW HOW. JUST PLUNGE IT IN YOUR HEART!

The darkness seemed now almost panicked, but Perrin couldn't pause to consider why, because his knife hand began to tremble. Whether it was fighting him or trying to make him comply, he couldn't tell.

The last hand that gripped the knife so nervously was Hogal Densal's. He'd come to see Perrin in the surgery at the fort, after Perrin had chased down fourteen Guarders intent on reaching his baby and expecting wife. A slash in his back had just been stitched up by the surgeon when Hogal arrived. He sat down next to Perrin

and pulled out that knife that he had tucked into his waistband ‘just in case.’

“*Can’t seem to put it down,*” he’d said, and Karna had taken it gently from him—

“Hogal!” Perrin now pleaded. “Dear Creator, help me!”

HE IS. THIS IS HIS SOLUTION. DO IT!

But a thought came to Perrin’s mind, placed there carefully, clearly, as one candle set in the middle of the night.

THIS ISN’T THE WAY THE CREATOR WORKS.

His gaze slid down the blade to see the woolen bracelet tied around his wrist, just above the sleeve of his night shirt. But the knotted wool was something more. It had power, power to remind him of something—or someone—he didn’t yet know. And in a way he felt it connecting him, binding him even, at the very moment he feared that his soul about to be ripped into two—

“Hogal!” Perrin gasped. “What do I do?”

Another memory came clearly to his mind, a conversation he and Hogal had days before Perrin was slashed along his back.

“I remember one evening when I was eighteen we were discussing the Refuser,” Perrin had told him.

Hogal had nodded slowly. “I remember that quite well, too. What did I say to you then?”

“That he was a son of the Creator, that he refused to take this test we are all in, and that many of the Creator’s children followed him into exile. They’re exiled here, in this world. While the Creator gave us this world, the Refuser stole it for himself and has sought to control and destroy those of us willing to take the test. He’s here now, with those who followed him, making this existence as miserable as possible.”

“Very good,” Hogal said. “But that wasn’t all I told you, was it, my boy?”

Perrin shook his head. “No. You said something else, something I’ve chosen to forget over the years, but keeps coming back at the most unexpected moments.”

“What did I tell you, Perrin?”

“That the Refuser knows me intimately. That while he hates all of us, he feels that hatred even more keenly for me. There are a few he

most ardently seeks to destroy, and I am near the top of that list. The world really is out to get me. Why me, Hogal?"

"I really don't know, Perrin." Hogal had told him. "You must have a great future ahead of you. Enormous power, influence, abilities . . . the Refuser targets and attacks those who can do the most damage to him and his plans. You could take it as a great compliment that he hates you so much . . ."

"The Refuser," Perrin murmured as he stared at the blade.

The darkness had a name.

JUST DO IT! DO IT! It screamed at him, demanding his compliance.

"Hogal!" Perrin whispered frantically. "Ask the Creator what I should do to get rid of the Refuser. I can't bear this—"

THIS IS HOW YOU MAKE THINGS RIGHT. QUIETLY, DISCREETLY, GENEROUSLY. GO OUT IN A NOBLE WAY. DO IT, SHIN!

Perrin stared at his own end, and didn't want to be there—

PERRIN.

The word came brightly to his mind, as if lump of hot sun had dropped out of the sky. The cold blanket smothering him skirted away, retreating to the edges of the room.

PERRIN.
FIGHT!

He immediately dropped the knife on the table as heat surged around the room. Somehow it became brighter, and he could see every detail of the room with acute clarity.

"Get away from me!" he ordered the darkness. "Leave me alone! I will not quit! I'll beat you! I'm *not* nothing. I am a son of the Creator, and I do not obey you!"

He took a deliberate step away from the table where the weapons lay. "Did you hear me? I refuse *YOU!* I refuse your intimidation, and I refuse your control of me. It stops *NOW!*" he bellowed to the edges of the room. "You're nothing but a cowardly bully, preying upon a man in his dreams. But I know you now, and by the power of the Creator I command you to *LEAVE MY HOUSE!*"

The world fell still.

Soft silence filled every sharp gap, to overflowing.

His mind went quiet. Blissfully, mercifully, quiet.

He glared into the shadows and crevices and saw nothing.

It was gone. More importantly, he could *feel* it was gone. As cold and dark as the night was, the house was as warm as if a fire was still raging in the hearth. Light filled the room, and for the first time in seasons, Perrin felt his shoulders relax.

Well done, my boy. Well done!

“Hogal!” he whispered, tears streaming down his face. “Hogal, you were right. Then again, you always were. He’s after me. But now I know how he works. Thank you. Thank you for coming.”

You called, my boy. The Creator’s been waiting for you to call. Took you a while. But then again, you always were slow to accept help.

For the first time in who knew how long, Perrin chuckled.

Then he collapsed on the sofa and sobbed into his hands.

He didn’t notice his daughter watching him through the crack in her door, wiping away her own tears. It’s impossible to sleep when one’s father is screaming at the shadows to leave. But it seemed that they did. Maybe, just maybe, he *was* defeating it. Whatever *it* was.

Nor did he see his son on the other side of the room, peering through the opening of his door. He sighed in relief and slipped back into his bed. He covered his face with his hands just like his father, and lay there quietly until dawn.

Perrin also didn’t realize his wife was at the top of the stairs, weeping silently.

“He’s coming back!” she whispered to the ceiling. “It’s him! Finally! Thank you!”

Perrin stood for a while in front of the door, finally knocked on it, and held his breath until it opened.

“Good afternoon, Rector Yung. Can I have those five minutes?”

Rector Yung grinned. “You can have ten. Even more, if you like. Please, come in, Colonel.”

Perrin stepped into the home that used to belong to Hogal and Tabbit. While the spare furniture was different, the house still had the same warm welcome it always had. He took off his cap and held it uneasily in his hands.

“Please, sit down, Colonel.” The rector pointed to the stuffed chair that was older than Perrin. Clean, but certainly the almost-last possession of a man who had the habit of giving nearly everything away.

“I won’t keep you long,” Perrin said, still standing, “I’m actually out making my rounds, but,” he faltered and cleared his throat. “For the past few days I’ve felt horrible about the way I treated you on Holy Day. Rector, I am very, very sorry.”

Rector Yung had been studying him from the moment he opened the door. “Oh, no need to apologize, Colonel. But I see something has changed since our last conversation.”

Perrin looked down at his cap. “Yes,” he said quietly.

“You had to fight, didn’t you?”

Perrin nodded.

“And this time, you won.”

Perrin looked up at him.

Yung was smiling.

“I did. For once.”

“I could see a difference in your eyes the moment I opened the door. Once again the man I’ve grown to respect stands before me!”

“You’re far too kind,” Perrin mumbled. “I didn’t hurt you at all, did I?”

Yung waved that away. “Merely a nudge.”

“Well,” Perrin chuckled sadly, “I’ve ‘nuded’ men out of my way who ended up with broken arms.”

Yung held up his tiny arms and flexed his nonexistent muscles. “See? Strong as ever.”

Perrin grinned. “Thank you,” he said. “Again.”

The rector took a step closer to him. “Perrin, you won a fantastic battle. The most decisive one you’ve ever faced. Everything changes now for you.”

“Battle? That suggests *a war*, Rector,” Perrin said. Hogal had given him similar counsel, years ago.

Perrin was really beginning to hate the army. Fighting. Battles—

“Yes, it does,” Yung said solemnly. “A war in which you are one of the key players. The battle which you just won has changed the course of the war. For everyone.”

“But it hasn’t *ended* it, has it?”

Yung shook his head. “No, I’m sorry. You’ll be fighting this war for a very long time. But now you know you’re stronger than it. You can defeat it, again and again.”

Perrin plopped despondently on the old chair which creaked in complaint. “That’s not what I wanted to hear.”

Rector Yung squatted in front of him, his tiny frame almost balled up. “Our entire existence is a war, Perrin. The conflict the Creator had with the Refuser has merely shifted to this world. But the fact is, *you* are now in command. Your instincts and decisions are impeccable. You’ll have far more success than failures in the future. Cling to those successes. Keep your family close. Keep Shem close. And just hold on. The Refuser would love to possess you. He nearly did, didn’t he? But you won that battle! Once again, you’re on the right path.”

Perrin sat thinking about that for a long time.

The rector waited patiently.

Finally Perrin looked him in the eye. “You would have liked my great uncle Hogal.”

Yung smiled. “I look forward to meeting him on the other side. I think I already know his voice.”

“Yes, you most definitely do,” Perrin agreed. “You know, this may sound incredibly selfish, but I get the feeling that maybe you’re in Edge just for me.”

Yung looked into his eyes with soul-penetrating power. “I get the feeling you may be right.”

Chapter 7 ~ “Is that my daughter out there?”

Planting Season came miraculously early in 336. Suddenly one day it was sunny, with a promise that the cold was gone for the season. Perhaps the Creator was making up for the late cold weather of last year, Mahrree considered, and the terrible darkness of the current Raining Season.

Perrin started changing a few weeks ago, after shouting at the darkness. He slept soundly without any secret assistance, smiled frequently, and once laughed so loud and long that Mahrree excused herself to go the washroom to weep for joy. When the sun burst out and the snows vanished almost overnight that week, Mahrree wondered if it wasn't the world responding to Perrin's reversal.

But Mahrree still had one concern: as soon as the snow was gone, so was her only daughter. Jaytsy claimed she was going to help Mrs. Briter with her massive garden, but Mahrree feared she was still hiding from the family.

For the moment, though, Jaytsy was home. Mahrree looked out the window at her daughter sitting on the log bench in the yard, mindlessly kicking little stones into the spit area.

Mahrree breathed the same prayer she had since last Weeding Season. “Please help her to find what she's looking for. Please sustain her until then.”

It wasn't fair. When Mahrree was a girl at least there were still ways to be entertained, girls to laugh with—or *at*, Mahrree thought guiltily. But Jaytsy was so alone. Nearly all of the activities her friends engaged in, Mahrree and Perrin wouldn't allow. And now

half of her classmates were hanging around the fort at the northeast entrance, wandering off with soldiers to secluded areas of the safer edges of the forest. That meant that “safe” was a very subjective term.

Jaytsy had maturely distanced herself from her classmates, but also seemed to have distanced herself from everyone else as well.

Mahrree suspected most of her daughter’s retreating had to do with Perrin’s erratic behavior, and Mahrree’s neglect of her children while she tried to help him. But he hadn’t interrogated any of them in weeks and had normal conversations again. That is, when he could find Jaytsy.

Mahrree feared she had missed some critical phase of her daughter’s life in the past year, and could never hope to cover the ground lost between them. She tried hard to think of what they could do together, but her mind was blank as she finished packing the meal for Jaytsy to bring to Perrin.

Maybe this was how Hycymum had felt with Mahrree after her father passed away, fearing they had nothing in common, trying to find ways to make her happy. They had plenty in common now.

But Mahrree couldn’t imagine waiting years to be close to her daughter again. Mahrree had been happy as a teen despite being alone. She loved nothing so much as her books. They were like spending hours each day with her father.

And that, Mahrree concluded, was what Jaytsy needed—besides a real friend *her age*—time with her father to see that the best parts of him were back.

Perrin had changed his duty hours toward the end of Raining Season, on Yung’s recommendation. He now went to the fort at midday meal and stayed till nearly bedtime. Sleeping later in the mornings, then spending an hour alone thinking, reading, and just breathing in the sunshine in the back garden brightened him. When he came in for a late breakfast, and Mahrree kissed him on her way to school, his grin was as wide as ever.

Jaytsy needed to see him smiling like that. But she’d leave early for school each day, and for the Planting Season break she was gone before dawn. Mahrree couldn’t think of anything more miserable than sitting in dirt, alone.

Mahrree took the pail with Perrin’s dinner and walked it out to Jaytsy.

She looked up at her with a small smile. “Father’s dinner?”

“Yes. Enough for both of you. He really enjoys seeing you every

day, you know. This has been a good system.”

“Yes, I know.” She took the pail without fully seeing it.

“He’s doing quite well today, Jayts. Again. Quite nearly his old self.” Mahrree simply couldn’t think of anything else to say.

“Yes, I know,” Jaytsy repeated. “I best be going. He’ll be hungry. I’ll be home in an hour,” and she left through the back gate to the alley.

Mahrree watched Jaytsy walk down the alley, then turn on the main road for the fort. She may have been getting her husband back, but somewhere along the way she lost her daughter.



Jaytsy strolled along the main road that led to the fort, glancing around to make sure Thorne was nowhere in sight. She was sure he was still in the compound somewhere, but she always checked. Too many times she’d run into him at the market or outside of her school. By the look on his face, she knew their brief and uncomfortable encounters were planned. But tonight, there was no mountain lion in sight waiting to pounce on her.

She sighed, breathed in the cooling air, and grinned. She didn’t mind bringing Father his dinner. It was one of the few times she felt free. Free from her mother brooding; free from Lemuel Thorne staring; and free from the girls at school talking about people and activities she’d never know about.

Along the road to the fort she could smile at soldiers and they dared to smile back. She memorized some of their names, too. It was much easier now that Grandmother Peto had stitched labels that decorated each of their jackets. Mother gave Father the idea, after worrying about how anyone could identify him if he were found lying on the side of the road, and Father sent the idea to Idumea. Now every soldier in the world had his last name stitched in yellow thread on a patch worn just above his heart.

By the time Jaytsy reached the fort’s compound late that afternoon, she smiled easily and received easy smiles back. She decided her mood had something to do with being outside. The sun had done her father good, so maybe she was like him in that way. Somehow she’d have to confess it all to her mother. She seemed so worried lately, and it was time to explain.

That she wanted to be a farmer!

Jaytsy giggled as she made her way to the command tower. The smell of the dirt on her hands was soothing. Planting rows of peas with the hope of what might come made her feel connected to the world, the *real* world. Not the world of fancy dresses and strange music, but the real world that bubbled and quaked and grew and, if she listened hard enough, she was sure someday she could hear it exhaling. She loved leaving the house early every morning to see what else she could put in the dirt to watch grow. Why her mother wanted to hide inside poring over books when she could be outside submerging her hands into the dark soil, Jaytsy couldn't imagine. Mrs. Briter taught her so much about soil, insects, seeds, sun, water—Jaytsy had no idea the ground was so alive.

And this afternoon, as she had stared at the back garden, it wasn't because she was intentionally avoiding her mother; it was because she was planning what to do to that pathetic garden, but didn't have the foggiest idea of where to start. She was so caught up in trying to decide if all the weeds should go first, or the rocks, that she didn't even realize her mother had come out of the house. Those green weeds poking up out of the ground were pleading—*pleading*—to be pulled, but Jaytsy didn't want Mahrree to know just yet how she desperately wanted to fix up their yard. She worried about offending her mother, or even shocking her. In a way Mahrree still seemed to Jaytsy a bit fragile, needing of careful handling. It was the same emotion she experienced whenever Grandmother Peto handed her one of her porcelain cups; she loved it, she admired it, but she worried about breaking it.

Not that Jaytsy thought she'd actually break her mother, she considered as she walked through the reception area, but she didn't know what to *do* with her.

But she did know it was time to confess a few things, such as her love of farming. That thought put a smile on her face as she climbed the stairs to the tower. Mahrree's shocked expression would be worth capturing in a portrait, Jaytsy decided with a quiet giggle. She would have to make her announcement in front of Father, Peto, and Uncle Shem so they could all enjoy her reaction.

Too wrapped up in her thoughts, Jaytsy hardly noticed that she reached the top of the stairs until she bumped into a soldier hurrying on his way down.

"Oh!" she laughed as she collided into jacket that stopped her on the steps. "I'm sorry . . . Corporal Wen," she read his chest, looked

up into his face and smiled. “I’ve been daydreaming again.”

Corporal Wen grinned back as he made his way slowly past her on the top stair. “Dream all you like, miss! And to think I was dreading coming up here. I wished I had known my trip down would be so pleasant.”

He tipped his cap and Jaytsy giggled, turning to go to her father’s office.

But blocking her path was Thorne: hands behind his back, feet apart, chest heaving angrily, and his cold blue eyes stern.

“Thorne,” Colonel Shin called from his office. “Is that my daughter out there? I thought I heard a giggle.”

“Yes, sir,” the captain said. His voice was calm but his face was furious.

Jaytsy didn’t understand why.

“Well then let her in—I’m starving!”

Thorne stepped slowly away, never taking his eyes off of her.

Jaytsy pushed past him and into her father’s office, slamming the door behind her.

Half an hour later, after they’d finished eating and Jaytsy had told him of her plan to shock her mother—it was wonderful to hear him laughing again—Jaytsy peeked out his door to the outer office. It was empty except for a private in the corner, whose handwriting looked very similar to the colonel’s, painstakingly copying reports to be sent to Idumea.

“What are you looking for, Jayts?” her father asked. “He’s gone, if that’s what you are wondering.”

She turned back to him. “Actually, yes. Thorne.”

Perrin left his desk, took a peek out the door himself, then shut it quietly. “I know I’ve said a few strange things the last year, but trust me on this one: stay away from Thorne. At least until you’re older. *Much* older. You’ll be sixteen in a couple of weeks and considered an adult according to some laws, but that’s still too young.”

“Don’t worry, Father.” She tiptoed to kiss him on the cheek. “No man could tear me away from you. Especially Thorne. He’s so . . .” Not able to think of the right description, she shuddered instead.

Perrin grinned. “Just the reaction I was hoping to see. I don’t want to visit my grandchildren in Idumea.”

“Eww! Neither do I.”

He kissed her on the head and spanked her playfully. “I’ll see you tonight before bed. I’ll bring home the dinner bucket.”

Jaytsy ran down the stairs, grinning. The sun had just set, but she could still make it home before it grew too dark and cold. As she left the building she decided she had to tell her mother about gardening that night, after Father came home. That revelation would bring down a barrier Jaytsy feared had grown between them, and would be the first thing she wanted to weed away—

“Miss Jaytsy, come with me!” a hiss said in her ear, and a hand gripped her upper arm.

Frightened, she glanced to see who had captured her and was startled by the angry face of Lemuel Thorne. “Why? What do you want?”

He didn’t answer her but marched her through the darkening compound and out the northeast gates.

Jaytsy tried to catch the eyes of any other soldiers, hoping they’d see that something wasn’t right, but no one would look at Thorne, as if they were used to avoiding him.

He steered her to the right, over to the feed barns on the side of the fort. Jaytsy’s insides squirm in fear and she tried to pull away, but Thorne twisted her arm into an awkward position.

“Don’t do that, and stop drawing attention to yourself,” he insisted. “I will snap this bone in two. Don’t think that I won’t.”

He kicked open the feed barn door and pushed her in. She fell on top of some of the large bales, and spun to face him, trying to catch her breath.

He slammed shut the doors and lit a lantern posted nearby. After placing it on the hook, he analyzed her severely. “I want an explanation from you, Jaytsy!” he said bitterly as he unbuttoned his jacket.

“About what?” she demanded, trying not to sound as startled as she felt.

He wrenched off his jacket and threw it on the ground. He stepped up to her, just inches from her face, his blue eyes steely and his broad chest heaving again, covered only by the thin white undershirt.

She couldn’t back away from him without falling over the bales behind her.

“About you and your lies. I’ve watched you. I know you’ve seen me,” he snarled. “Not ready for ‘walking and talking’?” He paced like an impatient mountain lion. “Yet I’ve seen you making eyes at every soldier in this fort!”

“Making eyes?” Jaytsy cried. “I’ve done nothing but smile. There’s nothing wrong with that!”

He lunged at her, forcing her to sit on the bale behind her.

“Nothing but smile? What was that on the stairs back there? With a *corporal!*” he spat. “How many other men have you flirted with? My future wife shouldn’t be looking at anyone.”

As terrified as Jaytsy was, she was suddenly more angry. She pulled her legs up on the bale and stood up. “I’m NOT your future wife! I don’t want anything to do with you, Lemuel. Find some other animal to be the mother of the next general!” She climbed to the next higher bale, looking for a way out.

He jumped on top of the bales to face her, and she scrambled back down them again. She knew she was going further away from the door, but hoped there was a way out the back. She searched either side for an escape but discovered only solid walls of hay. When she twisted back around she saw Thorne smiling, and realized that smiles could be ugly.

“Oh, you’ll be mine. There’s no one else but you.” He jumped to a lower bale. “I’ve been patient.” His voice was strangely calm and measured as he dropped to the dirt in front of her. “But as my father has said, sometimes girls don’t know they want something until they have it.”

Jaytsy’s mouth went dry, and her arms and legs felt floppy. She took a few steps back and found herself hitting another wall of hay behind her.

She was trapped.

Thorne took another step closer and undid the buckle of his sheathed sword. “You *are* ready, and you are mine.”

Shem rode through the northeast gates and felt immediately that something was wrong. He looked up at the command tower where the light was still on in Colonel Shin’s office, but that didn’t seem to be the problem. He reined his horse to a stop and scanned the compound. Nothing appeared out of the ordinary as he slid off his horse.

Feed barns. Now!

The thought was undeniable. Leaving his mount, Shem jogged out of the gates and looked to the barns, but there was no smoke or flames. Confused, he turned to walk back through the gates.

Feed barns. Now!

Shem spun without further delay and sprinted. One of the barns

had light shining through the cracks, and from it he heard a female shriek, “I said *no!*”

Shem kicked open the door and saw no one immediately, but heard a commotion behind a few fallen bales. He hurdled over them and scrambled to the top of the next pile. What he saw in the dim light wrenched his gut.

Captain Thorne was on all fours, looking as if he was about to vomit. His hair and trousers were disheveled and his undershirt was partially torn.

The young woman crawling away from him frantically adjusted her tunic and skirt to cover her, and looked up at Shem.

Shem groaned as he recognized her face in the weak light. Something clicked inside him as a dormant instinct sprang to life, filling him with rage and energy.

“NO!” Shem leaped onto Thorne, flattening him to the ground. In a flash Shem flipped him onto his back, pressed his long knife against his throat, and crushed Thorne’s chest with his full weight. “Jaytsy, OUT!”

Jaytsy yelped and scrambled over the bales, still trying to fix her tunic as she ran out of the barn.

“Oh, what are *you* going to do, Zenos?” Thorne, clearly nauseated, still did his best to sound patronizing. “You certainly can’t kill me, or even cut me. You know that all I need to do is send one message to my father and he’ll have you transferred all the way back to Flax.”

Shem firmed his grip on the knife and pressed the flat edge of the blade hard against Thorne’s throat. “Oh, I’d be perfectly justified in killing you right now, you sniveling piece of—” He couldn’t say the word. Someone as debased as Thorne *wouldn’t* make him say the word. “Don’t you ever touch that girl again. Do you hear me!?”

Despite Shem’s knife pressing down on his throat, Thorne still managed a ragged chuckle. “Let’s get something straight here, Zenos: she’s too young for you—”

“And you!” Shem bellowed, filled with a desire to turn that blade just a little . . . that’s all it would take, just a fraction of an inch and a tiny thrust would end the repulsive captain’s life.

He’d killed before, and each time it left him sickened. But at that moment the thought of stabbing Thorne’s windpipe filled him with a hunger that it should have terrified him, but it didn’t until much later that night.

Instead, he shouted, “She’s too young for you or any man!”

Clinging to his self-control with a shaky grip, he let the knife's angle shift slightly so that the tip repeatedly punctured Thorne's throat as Shem's arm shook.

The captain winced each time it jabbed him.

"She's like a daughter to me!" Shem spat. "You should be thankful it was me who found you and not the colonel! You'd be dead right now! In fact, I have half a mind to drag you to him now—"

Remarkably—or maybe stupidly—Thorne attempted another gasping chuckle. "Shin won't care. He knows this is how it is—"

"Shin would care, he does care!" Shem insisted.

Thorne scoffed, and his belly dry heaved, but still he muttered, "Shin can't get mad for something he used to do all the time. Ever heard the phrase, 'Out to the barn for a roll in the hay'? Who do you think came up with it?"

"Shut up!" Shem yelled.

"He has a reputation, you know. All the Command School men know it, but no one has been able to match it—"

"Shut up!"

"Oh yes—Shin took many a young woman to the barns, when he was even younger than me. At least I plan to marry the girl, so it doesn't matter when I take her—"

"Shut up! Shut up!"

"You should hear the women in Idumea talk, Sergeant. When my mother got around her friends, who had also been officers' daughters—well, let's just say they weren't too discreet—"

It took Shem a moment to realize it really had been *his* fist that punched Thorne in the jaw, and that was why he stopped talking, and why his mouth was bleeding, and why Shem's hand was throbbing.

Perhaps he wasn't allowed to kill Thorne, but the cosmos did approve of hitting him.

Slowly Shem growled, "Thorne, leave Jaytsy alone, and don't you *ever* speak that way about your commander again."

Thorne spat out a mouth of blood. "Zenos, you'll pay for that—" He gagged on his own blood and nausea.

"Oh, I *will* pay," Shem assured him as he repositioned the blade against his throat. "I *will* pay extra careful attention to make sure you stay far, far away from her. You'll learn just how annoying and persistent I can be. Every day and every night I'll be watching you."

The desire to stab Thorne was so intense that Shem's hand nearly burned. But some influence from inside calmed the knife in his hands, and through a force not quite his own pulled it gently back.

And then he heard the words, clearly in his mind: *Not now. Not yet. Another day.*

He had to let Thorne go, he knew that.

But knowing it and doing it are two different things.

Then again, he could just let Perrin handle things, and that would be a most terrifying and yet satisfying death to witness—

Shem shifted uneasily, shocked at his own thoughts, and again he felt his right hand pull away from Thorne's throat. But it, too, desperately wanted to form a fist and punch that smarmy mouth.

"You say a word of this to Shin," Thorne said, blood bubbling from his lips which he tried to spit away, "and I'll have my father transfer you far away."

"I don't have to say a word. Jaytsy will tell him, and then you'll be the one packing up."

Thorne scoffed at that. "He won't believe her. No officer believes his daughter. And if he did, he still can't touch me, or he'd be the biggest hypocrite alive. Besides, taking girls really doesn't matter, Zenos. That's what they're here for—our use."

The voice in Shem's mind reacted before he could thrust the long knife, ordering him to, *Release him—now!*

Shem knew from experience to listen to that voice, even if it went contrary to everything he wanted.

Especially when it went contrary.

Grudgingly, Shem slid off of Thorne's chest, and the captain rolled over, gasping and coughing and spitting out blood.

He scrambled to his feet, a bit unsteadily, and gave Shem a nasty smile. "You want me to stay away from Jaytsy? Well maybe she doesn't *want* me to stay away, Zenos. What then?" Without waiting for a response he snatched up his jacket and sword, and stumbled into a run from the barn.

"Why you little—" Shem shoved the long knife into his boot, his right hand eagerly forming a fist—envious of the left hand's well-placed punch—and he ran to the front doors.

But there he stopped, realizing that by the time he caught up to Thorne there'd be dozens of soldiers around, so beating up the captain in front of them could generate a few questions. Lemuel would have enough explaining to do about his appearance, but he'd probably just

claim he was thrown from his spooked horse.

Shem realized he had other options; he could go tell Perrin, which would doubtlessly result in spectacular retribution—

Jaytsy.

Her terrified face from a few moments ago filled his mind, and he realized he had plenty of time to tell her father. Right now, there was an almost sixteen-year-old girl in likely terrible condition.

Shem closed his eyes and immediately pictured where she was. He sprinted around the side of the barn to a stand of trees where he could just make out a figure cowering on the ground in a tight ball.

“Oh, Jaytsy!” he whispered and gingerly tiptoed over to her. He hesitated to hug her, concerned that the presence of another man might be the last thing she wanted. Instead he crouched and placed a gentle hand on her head, which she had buried in her arms.

Cautiously she lifted her head to see who was there, then, recognizing Shem, she lunged and caught him in a hug.

Shem sat down in front of her to hold her, trying to keep back his tears of rage.

“Come here, Jayts,” he said softly as she curled up into his arms the way she did when she was six years old. She was far too big now, but he found a way to embrace her anyway. “Oh, I’m so sorry Jayts. We need to get you to your mother—”

To his astonishment, she pulled away and exclaimed, “No! Uncle Shem, we can’t do that to them! Mother’s not ready and did you see Father today? He looked *so good*. Next week is so important. He needs to be ready for the ceremony. I can’t do this to them!”

“Jayts, they need to know! Your mother needs to, to . . .” He gave up trying to find the words. What her mother would do to even begin to try fix any of this was, well . . . he didn’t know, nor did he try to imagine. All he knew was that this was far, *far* beyond the role of an uncle.

Jaytsy slid off his legs and knelt next to him. “Shem, I’m all right,” she said, sounding strangely mature and calm. “*I’m fine*.”

When he looked at her more closely in the growing dark, he realized she wasn’t even crying, but grinning. Completely perplexed, all he could say was, “But . . . but . . .”

“He got the worst of it, Uncle Shem! You and Father would’ve been proud of me. I got him, twice! I kick more accurately than Peto.”

“But . . . but . . .”

“He wasn’t successful, Shem,” and he noticed that she once again had dropped the *uncle*, “He couldn’t be. I remembered everything Father showed me, and did most of it. I really *am* all right.” She smiled and patted his shoulder comfortingly.

Shem leaned back against a tree and covered his face with his hands. “Thank the Creator,” he whispered. “You’re something else, Miss Jaytsy Shin. Come to think of it, he did look pretty bad before I even got to him.” He released a tense chuckle. “Ah, Jayts—when I saw you in there . . .” He shook his head at the memory that was still so raw, so enraging. “I was ready to kill him. I really was.”

“You didn’t, did you?” she said, panic rising in her voice. “You’d get in so much trouble. I mean, I heard you yelling at him, but you didn’t—”

“No,” Shem sighed heavily, “I didn’t kill him. Pricked his throat a few times, punched him pretty good in the jaw—”

“*Good*,” Jaytsy said, something deep and bitter in her tone that made Shem’s left fist feel proud of itself.

“Jayts, we need to keep him away from you.

“I know,” she agreed, “but I bring Father his dinner every evening, and I don’t want to miss that. It’s been good for both of us.”

A terrible thought occurred to Shem. “Wait a minute—just how long has this been going on with Thorne?”

Jaytsy shrugged and examined the dark earth she sat on. “He was walking me home every day last year when he first arrived, but by Weeding Season I told him I wasn’t ready for his attention. He did kiss me once, though, last year,” she shivered at the memory. “I’ve run into him a couple dozen times since then, but only for a few minutes here and there. Then tonight,” she paused, her voice a little shaky, “tonight he said I was ‘ready’.”

His right hand balled up into a fist, ready and willing, but Shem forced it to relax. “Oh, Jayts, I’m sorry. I had no idea. I don’t think your parents knew, either.”

“I figured everyone had enough to worry about, so I just handled him myself. Hid in the fields weeding, things like that.”

“You shouldn’t have to, though,” he told her earnestly. “I could have helped.”

“It was a bad time,” she said vaguely.

Then Shem understood, and he closed his eyes. “It was when Perin was first struggling, wasn’t it? And I bet I said something stupid like, ‘We shouldn’t bother him with anything,’ didn’t I?”

She nudged his boot with hers. “It wasn’t stupid, Shem. And I really didn’t want to bother any of you.”

“Well, you shouldn’t have listened to me—and that’s the only time I’ll ever say that again! I could’ve helped. Promise me you won’t ever keep something like this secret again. The whole reason why I’m here is to help your family. I’ve already promised Lemuel I’ll be keeping a very close eye on him, but you know, Jayts, it really would be a lot easier if you told your parents—”

She got up on her knees. “No, Uncle Shem, I’m begging you. Don’t say a word to them! I held him off! You scared him nearly to death, I’m sure. Not a word to my parents?”

“You got lucky, Jaytsy, but you might not be next time. And next time, it may not be Thorne. It may be another—” He recognized her clearly confused look. Grandpy Neeks had been right; soldiers *were* looking at ‘little’ Jaytsy Shin. And she definitely wasn’t ‘little’ anymore. She probably noticed their smiles, but innocently didn’t recognize their leers.

He groaned as she cocked her head at him in question. He really didn’t want to have this discussion with her.

“All right, all right,” he sighed. “I promise: not a word. Whenever you come to the fort, let me walk with you. But let me state right now, I don’t like keeping this a secret from your parents. They *can* handle it now.”

“Come on, Shem,” she kicked his foot again, this time playfully. “I’m sure you’ve kept a few secrets from them.”

Something flashed across Shem’s face that Jaytsy must have glimpsed in the dark.

“You have, haven’t you, Uncle Shem?” she giggled. “So just one more secret then, please? For a little while? If there’s any more trouble with Lemuel, then we can tell them. If not, they’ll never have to fret about what they don’t know.”

Shem groaned softly and rubbed his temples. “All right, all right. Your family’s giving me a headache, Jaytsy. All these secrets . . . don’t tell Perrin he’s being sedated. Don’t tell my parents Thorne tried to attack me. Don’t tell Mahrree that Versula Thorne kissed Perrin in Idumea . . .”

That last one wasn’t an accidental revelation. He wanted Jaytsy to know, on some level, exactly what kind of family the Thornes were. Shem wasn’t disappointed by her reaction.

Jaytsy’s eyes were bulging appropriately when she gasped, “Whoa, Shem! She did *what*?! When you were in Idumea? Tell

me!”

“Yep, she did. Right in front of me, too. But if I told you *all* that I know about *everything*, you’d be so shocked you’d sit there for three days straight.”

Jaytsy giggled despite her surprise. “So what happened?”

Shem smiled halfheartedly. “Don’t you worry, Jayts. Perrin didn’t return her affection and got rid of Versula as fast you got rid of her son. Without kicking her, though.” Then, mumbling to himself, he added, “Why anyone wants to be an officer is beyond me. You people are so messed up. *Be a farmer*, my father said. *You want stress, try growing crops.*”

Jaytsy giggled again and kissed Shem’s cheek. “Thank you for keeping us all straight. At least we keep you entertained, right? You don’t regret being with us really, do you?”

“Entertained? Ha!” Shem barked. “I used to think people went to the amphitheater because they were so bored with their lives that any of that nonsense they show now would be a welcomed diversion. But now I’m thinking if they have lives anything like ours, they go just for some kind of escape! *Entertained . . .*”

She looked slightly hurt.

He gently squeezed her arm. “But no, Jayts, I never regret being with your family. Wait, let me think about it . . . Uh, all right, no.”

“Poor Shem,” Jaytsy laughed softly. “By the way, how did you know to come to the barns?”

“Just a feeling I knew I had to act upon.”

“Well, on behalf of the Shin family, I thank you for coming to the rescue. Again.”

“Oh, I do it so often it’s an old habit now.” He waved it off, got to his feet, and held out his hands to help her up. “Come on, I’ll walk you home. We need to come up with an excuse as to why you’re late getting home. Ah, listen to me. Now you have me making up lies!”

“That’s why you’re an honorary Shin!”

Chapter 8 ~ “It was a good night. All is well.”

Some mornings just feel significant. There’s nothing different in the air, but everything has a singular feel nonetheless. Perhaps the feeling comes from within and is projected outward. When everyone anticipates the day—be it birthdays or Harvest Celebration—perhaps they energize it themselves with their own expectations.

When Perrin opened his eyes early in the morning, he knew what day it was: the 37th Day of Planting. He looked up at the high peaked roof and remembered it was exactly one year ago that the old low roof came down. He thought about the many years before when nothing more significant happened than Peto breaking an arm or him getting another gash that required stitches. When their roof gave way last year it was if everything else collapsed in their world. If only he had known what would transpire in the next year . . .

Well if he did, what could he have done? Anything different? He’d asked himself that many times. Visiting his parents after the land tremor and taking back the stores for Edge—he wouldn’t have changed a thing about any of that.

But afterward? Sometimes he pictured himself resigning in front of the Administrators, or taking a stab at Gadiman when he was on that grotesque table. Once he considered what would have happened if he hadn’t taken that mad ride to Idumea in the first place. Would he still have gone down in that spiral that he had to climb out of so many mornings?

When he went to apologize to Rector Yung a few weeks ago,

Perrin stayed for much longer than five minutes. He revealed to the tiny man that, despite the attention of his family and friends, he'd felt abandoned.

"By whom?" Rector Yung prodded.

Perrin stared at his hands before saying, "The army. Surely they knew this happens to soldiers sometimes. Shem said he read about trauma in the surgeon's book, but even the surgeon couldn't give him much practical advice beyond this bracelet."

He never took it off, and he frequently found himself fingering it, finding an unexpected comfort in the grooves of the soft chain. He still had dreams, but not as fearsome or as intense as before. And each time he did, he looked at his wrist or grasped it if it was too dark. It was when he felt it missing that a slight wave of panic rushed him, enough to jerk him out of the dream. He'd awake to find himself gripping his arm, clasping the thin wool, and then encountering a sense of calm.

Perrin noticed Rector Yung looking at the chain, now a bit darker and dirtier than when Shem first tied it on to him. Mahrree wanted to wash it, but Perrin assured her he scrubbed it each time he bathed. Besides, he thought it looked better a bit worn and soiled.

Perrin released it and tugged his sleeve to cover it. "Rector, I refuse to believe I was the only who ever suffered this way."

"You aren't," Yung said quietly, meeting his eyes. "With no offense to the memory of your honorable father, the army *does* know. There were many cases during the Great War, and have been several since. But you see, the army doesn't want to deal with *broken* soldiers—forgive my choice of words. They want fighters. If you can't fight, then you're ushered out, given a pat on the back, and then it's hoped you fade away."

While Perrin wanted to be shocked at that revelation, he knew it was true. There had been a couple of men he heard of over the years that had *troubles*, then no one heard about them again. He didn't give them much thought, because the thought that even he could succumb to such a state of mind was too terrifying. In fact, that was probably the biggest terror soldiers faced—not losing their lives, or their limbs, or even their families, but losing themselves.

"How do you know this?" Perrin whispered to Yung.

Yung smiled gently. "It's never been the fort surgeons who dealt with trauma. It's always been the village rectors. When men feel abandoned, as you so rightly put it, that's when they come to the

rectors hoping to find the Creator, and quite often we're able to help facilitate a most wonderful reunion. But Perrin, please forgive both Shem and I, but it wasn't the surgeon who suggested your bracelet." Yung squinted his narrow eyes into mere slits and shrugged.

"You?" Perrin sighed. Somehow, he knew. The surgeon never talked to him. In fact, he acted as if the colonel didn't even exist. And Perrin had never sought him out, either. It was an unspoken mutual avoidance, and while on the surface it seemed to work for both men, it didn't do any good at all.

Perrin managed a small smile for the old man crouched in front of him. "You knit?"

The rector chuckled. "No, not one bit! But I have a friend who does, and made me many lengths so that I have a ready supply. You're not my first victim of trauma, Perrin. But you have been one of the most deeply affected."

"So you've worked with others?"

Yung told Perrin about many traumatized men he knew of. Perrin's imagination was captured by the story of a general during the Great War who suddenly doubted everything in his life, even the devotion of his wife and son. For weeks he was confused and angry with everyone. One of his sergeants was the last to see him, wandering toward the forest. He was never seen again.

Maybe Perrin's fascination stemmed from the fact that he'd considered that possibility a few times: just leaving. Maybe existing somewhere else would make the horrors of everything else here vanish. He knew enough of the forest to survive in there. But he also knew his family and friends would foolishly try to find him, and then there would have been even greater tragedies.

So he was left to endure it on his own which, he realized now, he didn't have to. Many wanted to help him, but he refused them. A part of him had feared that they wouldn't have been able to pull him out of the pit, but that he would've dragged them down instead.

Yet when he thought about his past year, *honestly*, he wouldn't have traded any of the experiences. He had the impression that every moment seemed to work for his good. Every raw emotion and each tender nerve was exposed to make him feel it. It was if the Creator looked down and said, "Perrin's had it too easy lately. It's time to test his mettle."

But some days he had felt it was more like his *metal* being

tested, burned in a fire, trying to slough off the impurities he didn't even know were there. He didn't realize he could feel so murderous, or so motivated by pride.

But worst of all, he didn't realize he was so vulnerable.

In all of his talks with his wife he avoided going into detail about those times when he was sure she was dead, and it was his fault. He also tried to forget the night he looked up from the floor in his bedroom to see his children cowering behind Shem, holding onto each other. The more he tried to forget that image the more indelible it became. His weakness took away their security, and revealed to them that their father was just a regular man.

Just a regular man.

He could be destroyed as easily as any rubbish collector, and just as quickly, if the Creator decided it. There was no special protection around him, or around anyone. Each person was in the power of the Creator, or could be turned over to be battered by the Refuser. Every soul was equal in the Creator's eyes.

That was comforting and troubling at the same time.

And Perrin had been powerless to do anything about it. It wasn't as if he couldn't march into Paradise, demand to see the Creator, and insist the trials be stopped because of who he was.

But he had two choices: he could fight the direction his life had taken, or he could try to learn from it. There were times, especially in the beginning, when he felt like surrendering. It was just too hard to face his failures, to see the looks of distress on his family's faces each morning, and to consider going on.

But a quiet voice in the back of his mind would remind him, *Surrender to whom?* To that darkness that tormented him? He'd come so close to giving up that night when he held the long knife just inches away from his chest. But then what?

There was no end to his existence. If he gave up, he would've been in that horror indefinitely. In many ways the terror of that thought pushed him to climb even faster, to try even harder to escape. There was no option of surrender. When you're in a pit, you intuitively look up for a light; that instinct is from the Creator. The compulsion to slump to the ground and weep at the dirt walls was from the Refuser.

He couldn't abide such an existence.

As obvious as the choices appeared, it took Perrin an excruciatingly long time to recognize them. For more than three seasons he was too paralyzed in his world of chaotic thoughts. So many nights

he tried to avoid sleep and what would happen during it. But avoiding it didn't solve anything. Many afternoons he fell asleep at his desk only to be woken up by his own screaming.

But then there were nights when sleep came so deeply he felt glimmers of hope again. The only image he remembered in those dreams was the face of a young child looking up at him, and himself laughing.

When his family knelt with him in prayer he finally felt some of the chaos slow enough for him to see clearly. And now, when he spent each morning in meditation and consultation with the Creator, he could halt the images in his mind long enough to face the day.

Studying himself so intently was far more painful than the beating Shem gave him in that barn on the way to Idumea. But the pain had a purifying quality to it, showing him how to rely on the only one true strength in the world that wasn't even in the world. Only the Creator knew him well enough to fix him. It was the Creator who gave him the strength he needed to face the Refuser that terrible night a few weeks ago. It was the Creator who loosened his grip on the long knife that he was about to plunge into his chest.

It was the Creator who won that battle and turned the momentum of the war—not him. He had to always remember that.

So when Perrin woke up on the 37th Day of Planting Season, 336, he wanted this morning to be significant, to be the day he was truly a new man. He had to start keeping his old hours at the fort again and be sure to be home by dinner. He could no longer allow himself to be consumed *by* himself. There were too many other people needing him, and he could no longer remain indulgently weak. He closed his eyes and repeated the string of meditative thoughts he had established weeks ago.

Who was he? Not a future general, not a colonel, not more important than someone else, but a beloved son of the Creator.

Why was he here? Not to take revenge, not to be important, not to worry about the world's expectations, but to learn His will and to pass His test.

What was his goal today? Not to be the kind of man the world wanted, but to be the kind of leader the Creator wanted him to be. If he was serving others, he was serving the Creator. He needed to be submissive enough to accept anything the Creator chose to allow the Refuser inflict on him. And only with the Creator's help could he overcome the Refuser's trials. The blessings would come

some day. Maybe not even in this life, but most assuredly in the next one. Because he was a son of the Creator.

Perrin opened his eyes and breathed deeply. He rolled over to watch his dozing wife. She used to sleep as if on guard, clinging to her side of the bed with a stiffness that seemed impossible to maintain while one was unconscious.

But now, *now* she lay softly, and closer to him. Her hand was even against his side. In the middle of the night he was aware of her holding his bare upper arm, not feeling his strength, but giving it. She needed that deep slumber, almost as much as he needed to watch her. She needed so much that he hadn't given her.

When they had first come home from Idumea she had cried about "too many miracles." At the time, he had thought that was funny. Then, just days later, so much that he loved in his life was destroyed.

Then he in turn destroyed Mahrree's life.

A few weeks ago during one of their late night discussions he asked her if she felt they still had too many miracles.

"Absolutely!" she said. "It's not that I would ever want to repeat this year, but I never would have wanted to skip it, either. We've learned so much. Besides, there are always more miracles. My father's last words to me were, 'Every story has a happy ending, if we just wait long enough.' Having you back is the greatest miracle so far."

Her staying by his side was the greatest miracle, he thought. He knew she loved him, but her sacrifices for him were *beyond* love, if that were possible. She had pulled him back out of the depths, day after day, for seasons. She used to have to dig deep to find him, but now she needed only to nudge him to make sure he was all right.

Somehow he'd make it up to her. He still remembered her dream house with weathered gray wood and window boxes filled with herbs that she told him about on their second wedding anniversary, the dream he told her was nonsense.

But perhaps it wasn't. Perhaps there *was* something he could do, when he was sure he was solid and complete again. In another year or so, he decided, he would set into motion the next big miracle in her life, something she never would have dreamed possible but Perrin suspected could be.

He felt guilty as she began to stir. Her eyes opened slowly at first, then popped open in worry. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, yes." He stroked her face as if he could pull both strength

and softness from her cheeks, and he craved both. His hand slid down to her throat and rested there a moment. The movement served two purposes—to show his affection, and to subtly check her pulse. “It was a good night. All’s well.”

Although she never said anything, he was sure she knew why his hand rested on her throat. She twisted her head slightly to kiss his arm. “It’s just that you’re up so early—”

“Well, I have to be today.”

“I know. I remember.” She huddled up to his chest. “Let’s see, one year ago I was about right here . . .”

Perrin closed his eyes in sheer contentment. For too long she didn’t dare get that close to him in bed. He wrapped his arms tightly around her as if he could have absorbed her into his body.

“Yes,” Mahrree muttered into his chest, “and one year ago you were right there, holding me. Hmm. It’s much better on top of the bed than under it, don’t you think? Quieter. And no squirrels.”

He chuckled as she kissed his chest, sighed deeply, and placed her cheek against him.

“I have an idea,” she said dreamily. “How about we just stay here all morning, just like this.”

“Mmm, tempting,” he murmured, kissing the top of her head. “But not today,” he said sadly. “How about tomorrow? We could really get into a great argument.”

They’d fought plenty during the past year. Plenty of shouting, screaming, even throwing things . . .

But very little *arguing*, the kind that first drew them to each other, and sent them upstairs to “resolve the issue” while their children frowned, trying to figure out why that involved the bedroom.

But they were arguing again, and he hadn’t realized before how desperately he needed her warmth and softness. Before, he was pushing her away while paradoxically trying to save her. In the confusion of his existence there wasn’t room for her in his life.

Now, he realized, she *was* his life.

She laughed lightly and wrapped her arms around him. “If only there was time, but you know we can’t. I have school tomorrow. *This* is the only day. You declared it a Day of Remembrance, let’s remember *this*. Your holiday, your rules.”

He groaned, only slightly irritated. “For the last time, I did NOT declare it a holiday! Rector Yung and the magistrate did.”

She giggled into his chest. “Ooh, so we’re going to argue *now*? I suppose if we skip breakfast we’ll have time . . .”

He chuckled with her, enjoying the sound of their voices together. “Silly woman,” he kissed her again. “By the way, I’m going to start going to the fort in the mornings again.”

“Are you sure?” She sounded slightly hesitant. “Will you have enough time to prepare yourself each morning?”

“Yes, I’ll have time,” he assured her. “I need to be home for dinner, with you and the children.”

Mahrree sighed. She’d be foolish to try to change his mind. So she’d accept his decisions, albeit conditionally. “We can try it for a week or two, see how things go. I guess this holiday idea of yours is just the thing to get you going. You just shouldn’t have made it for so early in the morning, though,” she gently teased.

“That was the magistrate’s idea,” he reminded her. “To have it at the same time the land tremor hit.”

Mahrree sighed. “Just an hour later would have been good enough.”

“Oh, please. You’d be getting up right now for school anyway,” he pointed out. “At least this way you don’t have any school at all. You should be thanking me for that.”

“Of course I do. Thank you, by the way.” She was quiet for a moment, then asked, “Do you know what you’re going to say at the ceremony?”

“I’ve got it pretty much worked out.”

“That means you’ll plan when you’re on the platform, right?”

“I used to do very well that way during our debates, if you remember.”

“I remember that’s how I frequently beat you.” She sighed, putting her cheek against his chest again. “It will be strange and wonderful to see you up there again.”

“Want to join me?”

She scoffed. “No, thank you! No one wants to see me, they all want to see the Saver of Edge.”

Perrin groaned and rolled on to his back. “Don’t say that. Seriously, you really think people are coming for that?”

She propped herself up on her arm. “I didn’t want to tell you last night, but my mother said that all the inns are full with your *admirers*. Many had been asking about you. She was wise enough, for once, to not tell them that she knew you.”

Perrin groaned again. “Mahrree, you better stand up there with me just so they know I’m married!”

“No way. I want to be in the audience watching!” She laughed. But she added, with considerable worry, “Are you *sure* you’re ready? From what Shem read, something this public and exposed could set you back. We can still do something else,” she suggested. “Or let Brillen handle it. He told me when he arrived last night that he can step in for you. You just give me the signal, and we’re on it.”

He rolled over and kissed her again—properly, on the lips. “I can do it,” he promised. “I really think I need to.”

Mahrree kissed him back, then pulled away to give him a look. He knew that look. It was a slightly squinty, mouth munching, eyebrow raising look, full of anxiety and mischief. She was about to test the waters to see how he *really* was.

“All right,” she said slowly. “As long as you’re sure . . . Colonel Cuddly.” She leaped out of bed, giggling in nervousness.

Perrin roared and jumped out of bed, chased her down the stairs, and tackled her on the sofa.

“Take it back, woman! I told you, don’t ever say that again!” He picked her up and sat down on the sofa, keeping her easily trapped in his arms. But she wasn’t fighting him. She was laughing too hard.

Peto groggily opened his door. “Ah, come on you two. It’s too early for that!”

That made Mahrree laugh even harder.

Perrin held her firmly. This morning he was solid. Absolutely, fantastically, rock solid. He tried to put on a serious face but he couldn’t completely hide his grin from his son.

Jaytsy came out from the washroom and smiled when she saw them. “What did she say this time, Father?” She had the same look as her mother had. One more test. “Did she call you our future Genial Gentle Generous General again?”

Peto started laughing. “That one’s my favorite! Those poets in Midplain know how to make a title.”

Perrin glared, but mischievously. The teasing was significant. The more there was, the better he was. Laughter rooted him.

“Just don’t fight it, Father,” said Jaytsy as she came over to rescue her mother. She evaluated their knot, then tried to tickle her father despite the fact he had no ticklish spots. At least, that’s what he told her. He could just keep a straight face. But this morning he thought Jaytsy was right. Why fight it?

He released his wife and suddenly grabbed his daughter,

tickling her instead. "I said last week, girl," he tried to be stern as she squirmed and giggled, "to never use those names again!" He dropped her unceremoniously and she collapsed on the floor gasping and laughing.

She looked at him with her mother's expression again. "All right . . . *Shin the Magnificent!*"

Perrin growled.

For as much as the fort and Edge were hesitant around him the past year, the rest of the world had rushed to embrace him. He knew what caused it; that first letter he responded to, for Roak at the Stables at Pools. Then he answered another to Gizzada, and another. All thirty-two of them.

He thought that would be the end of it, but those who received his responses must have said something to their families. And their friends. And their neighbors. Perrin heard from Brillen that Gizzada had displayed Perrin's response on the wall of his back restaurant.

Soon more letters arrived at the fort. Then more. Not just from enlisted men in Pools, but from citizens all over the world writing to him that they thought he should be the next High General in honor of his father and his deeds for Edge.

Then one day the fort received an odd announcement from the Administrators detailing the promotion procedures, and ordered that the notice to be put up on all the village message boards. Perrin wrote to Brillen asking if he knew why any villagers would care about that dreariness.

Brillen explained that he'd heard citizens were also writing to the Administrators, flooding them with insistences that Perrin be promoted to general. Instead of responding to the letters, Idumea showed villagers back with dull notices.

And it didn't work.

Because next the fort began to receive letters from people saying that if they could choose the High General the way they could choose the local magistrates, Perrin would win. Three weeks ago the mail wagon brought a large bag packed with messages all for the colonel. He hadn't dared look into the bag when he dropped it on the table late one night after returning from the fort.

"What is *that*?" Mahrree asked, surprised to see the lump sitting on the papers she was grading.

"My letters," he said miserably. "Anyone want to read them?"

"Yes!" Jaytsy cried, and she and Peto started snatching and

opening letters.

“I just don’t have time for this.” Perrin sat on a chair and regarded the pile with dread.

“We can help answer them,” Jaytsy volunteered.

Peto grinned. “Yes, but Father, I may need some help. This is from a group of ladies in Marsh.” He waved a folded parchment.

“Oh *really*?” Mahrree said with a glint in her eye.

Perrin sighed.

“Yes, and they want to know,” Peto cleared his throat and assumed an official tone, “Colonel Shin, what is your favorite color?”

“Favorite color?” Perrin sneered. “People have favorite colors? Who wants to know?”

Peto looked down and chuckled. “The Association of Woolen Weavers for Perrin Shin for General, Marsh Chapter.”

Mahrree smirked. “That’s quite a mouthful.”

“So, what is it?” Peto asked solemnly. “There may be a scarf involved.”

“I don’t know,” Perrin shrugged. “Anything but pink, I guess.”

“Hmm,” Peto said, shaking his head. “Too vague an answer. Need something more specific. I think rocks. That’s a good color.”

“Rocks?” Mahrree exclaimed. “That’s not a color!”

But Perrin smiled as he looked at their walls. “Rocks is good. Lots of different shades. Tell them that,” he nodded to the message. “Make them think I’m a little crazy.”

Peto patted his hand. “But we all know you’re a *lot* crazy.”

Perrin had smiled at that. It was Peto’s way of bringing his father along. Mahrree talked, Shem hovered, Jaytsy hugged, and Peto ridiculed. The more he teased, the better Perrin knew he was that day. It was the days when Peto said nothing to him that Perrin realized he was standing at the edge of the pit again.

“Ooh, Father, here’s a good one,” Jaytsy glanced at her brother. “These girls at Upper School #6 in Pools want to know what your son is like.”

“I want that one!” said Peto, lunging for it and throwing Jaytsy the letter he was holding. “You can have the old weaving ladies.”

“No, I’ll take that one.” Perrin grinned as he reached for Jaytsy’s letter. “I’ll tell them he’s annoying, disrespectful, and skinnier than a rail.”

“Mmm,” Mahrree said. “Words to make any fourteen-year-old girl go, *Eww!*”

Peto stood up, put his hands on his thin waist, tried to puff up his scrawny frame, and said with mock seriousness, "I don't appreciate your attitudes. I'm exactly what some woman out there wants. Paint a portrait of me. Send it to them. No one will ever remember my father, only me!" and he struck a regal pose.

His sister rolled her eyes while his parents laughed.

The stack of letters, which Peto assured his father many of the most popular ball players received, kept them amused well into the night. Mahrree had tears in her eyes when she finished one from a woman in Scrub that went on about the supposed merits of Colonel Shin. She had closed it by saying, "I'm sure such a wonderful man like you must also be cuddly as well."

Mahrree had tears of laughter, that is. It was immediately her new nickname for him: Colonel Cuddly.

They had answered the letters, sending out three hundred responses over the past few weeks, but more kept pouring in. Perrin suggested having a woodcut made of a message: Thanks for the sentiment. Please don't write anymore. Perrin Shin.

Mahrree said that was rude. There were only a few hundred more to still answer. But she didn't know about the second full bag that arrived at the office yesterday. Shem just chuckled when he set it down in the corner.

Now Colonel Cuddly looked at his daughter on the floor on this significant morning. She was trying hard not to smirk at his feeble attempt at austerity for having been called Shin the Magnificent, a title bestowed upon him by cobblers in Winds.

"Your punishment, for saying those names again, is to get me my breakfast. Now!"

She leaped to her feet, saluted sloppily, and ran to the kitchen.

To Peto in his doorway, Perrin said, "We leave in an hour."

"Then wake me in fifty minutes," Peto said and shut his door.

Mahrree started up the stairs, "I'll make sure your dress uniform ready, Your Highness."

Perrin grumbled at her, but winked.

And then he was looking out the front windows, all alone on the sofa. The sun would soon be rising. He leaned back and released a sigh that had been building all night.

It was coming. He felt it a couple of weeks ago, but didn't know how to tell Mahrree. She would've thought his paranoia was returning, and occasionally he wondered if that might not be true. It wasn't

as if he was *perfectly* cured; he knew that he'd never be. A couple of times each week he sat up gasping, but he could deal with it now. He breathed and prayed and concentrated to send it away again. After about only an hour he'd fall back asleep. Those interruptions felt were mild compared to what he used to experience.

But he knew this feeling was different. It was as if he was being warned by Someone else.

Brillen's visit last night had been what he needed to validate his suspicions. Lieutenant Colonel and Mrs. Karna had come by the house to see the family since they'd be attending the Remembrance Ceremony this morning. While Mahrree and Brillen's wife got acquainted in the gathering room, Perrin walked Brillen out to the back garden so they could talk.

"Colonel Shin—*Perrin*," he corrected himself when his former commander scowled good-naturedly at him. "You look good. Better than good!" Brillen smiled at him, but only briefly.

Perrin knew his knitted brow expression all too well. "What is it, Brillen? You know I'll get it out of you eventually, so let's just make this easier for both of us. Let's pretend I've already cajoled, teased, and even threatened you to the point that you break down and give me the bad news you're dreading to say."

Brillen chuckled, his eyes pained. There really was no more time to delay. "Perrin, the Guardians are back. And they may be looking to stay. Scouts from Quake went on a surveillance ride to Moorland and discovered that houses nearest the forests were occupied. Major Fadh sent me an urgent message yesterday wanting to make sure you knew. You're most likely to get hit first, since you're the closest. But both of our forts are ready to assist in any way. I'm sure Major Yordin at Mountseen will offer assistance as well. If you need extra men, or supplies, or leadership—"

"I appreciate that," Perrin cut him off, putting a hand on his shoulder. "But I'm sure we can handle it."

Brillen shook his head. "If anything happens to you, half of Idumea would demand the execution of Cush, Mal and the Administrators, I'm sure. Even *we* hear the stories about you. The Compassionate Colonel. The Colonel Who Cares," he winced at the titles. "People in Rivers stop me on the road to ask questions about you. You're more popular than that kickball player, whatever his name is. My niece has his name written all over her school slates."

Perrin chuckled and squeezed his shoulder. "It's good to know I still have a few friends."

“Perrin, you’ve got more than a ‘few friends.’ You’ve got the world!”

As Perrin sat this morning on the sofa thinking about Karna’s gleaming evaluation, he knew it didn’t matter how many friends he had: the Administrators couldn’t be happy about the citizens fawning over him. The fact that he hadn’t received any personal communication from the garrison for the past season seemed telling. Captain Thorne had been distant for the past week, thanks to Shem, so Perrin didn’t know what Thorne’s father or grandfather were thinking.

But Perrin knew what *he* was thinking. Whoever was in charge of sending cats to watch the injured falcon had now called in the mountain lions. He felt as if they were slowly closing in, surrounding him, waiting for the ideal moment to strike.

“They believe I’m still trapped helplessly in the barn,” he whispered to the dawn. “But recently Shem relayed to me a most brilliant battle, carried out in secret. A victim that was surprised, but still overpowered the stalker and rendered him temporarily impotent.” He sniggered in satisfaction.

“So,” he announced quietly to the growing light, “if even my daughter can fight her way out of a barn, surely I can too.”

His next thought was, Why should there even *be* a ‘barn’?

He got up from the sofa and walked into his study. Instead of taking the seat behind the desk, he sat down in the chair across from it where he could view his bookshelves crammed with books, rolls of old maps, parchments . . . *maps*—

“There shouldn’t be a ‘barn’,” he whispered. “As long as it exists, others can be imprisoned. So how does one bring down the barn? No, scratch that. How do *I* bring down the barn?”

A twisting knot of anticipation formed in his chest and radiated, hot and prickly, down his arms. He knew what that meant. He’d felt it before on the rare occasions he was about to embark on a completely different way of thinking, or do something that was about to change the course of his life. He felt it when he was tutored by Hogal when he was eighteen, again when he was twenty-eight and learned Edge would be getting its first fort, and once more at the moment Mahrree Peto first came into view. That sense of significant excitement had come to him a few times since, but what he felt right now was more powerful than ever before.

“*I* bring down that barn. Correct?” He looked to the ceiling for confirmation.

His heartbeat increased.

He nodded. “So . . . who’s in control of that barn? That’s easy: Nicko Mal, Aldwyn Cush, and Qayin Thorne. But . . . there are also the Guarders. And in the barn, they are—oh, forget the analogy.”

He folded his arms, sat back in the chair, and stared at the shelves.

“There are actually two enemies—the Guarders, and my three little friends in Idumea. Both need to be brought down . . . but who should go first? It’s all about power,” he decided.

He glanced up again for confirmation, nodded once, then tapped a finger on his lips.

“Power to . . . create fear? Control fear? Manipulate it? Or maybe,” he leaned forward, “it’s all of it, isn’t it? Fear controls people, keeps them confined. So, eliminate the fear and you free the people. I overcame my fear of my dreams, my fear of the Refuser—”

His voice trembled briefly, still overwhelmed, but not because of what he felt from the Refuser, but from the memory of how the Creator rescued him.

It was the Creator who pulled him from the barn.

It was important to always remember that.

“Dear Creator, tell me what to do, and I’ll do it.”

He sat quietly for another minute, then slowly nodded.

“You already have, haven’t you? If I eliminate one threat, the other will fall on its own, won’t it? The army and Administrators function primarily to protect us from the Guarders. If there are no more Guarders, then the army becomes nothing more than a peace-keeping force. The politics of it all *ends*.”

He began to grin.

“Cush and Thorne would be bored silly! Mal would . . . I’m not sure what he’d do, but if the people began to feel a sense of freedom, then . . . Mal just might find himself out of a job. Who needs a controlling protector when there’s nothing left to protect them from? Suddenly there would be options, possibilities. Opportunities to climb over the walls, and—”

He was grinning broadly now.

“—*head into the forests!*”

His cheeks began to hurt from the width of his planning.

“That’s it! Obliterate that stupid barn! Let *everyone* out!” He gazed eagerly at the rolls of maps on his shelf. “And then . . . *and*

then, I could do some amazing things for some remarkable people. Perhaps the army could create a new occupation. Those going exploring may need some guards.”

He sat back, closed his eyes, and let the prospect wash over him until he worried that he might drown in the exhilaration of it all.

Clanging in the kitchen—likely a dropped pot—signaled that a mess was occurring and that Jaytsy was nearly finished cooking, pulling him back to the present. Reluctantly, he opened his eyes.

“So, what has to happen first?” he asked the ceiling.

Immediately he knew. Karna had told him last night that one enemy was congregating, just ten miles away from his home. Three other commanders would be willing to help—

That was more than one thousand soldiers.

“Eliminate one, then the other will also fall. Then, everything in the world changes.” He looked to the ceiling and smiled. “That’s what you’ve been trying to teach me, isn’t it? It’s not about revenge. It’s not about changing things for me. It’s about changing things for *everyone*. That’s why I’m finally getting it now, because my primary target has just taken up residence down the road. How *convenient*. So, when do You want me to begin changing the world?”

He listened for an answer.

Another pot fell in the kitchen. Jaytsy called out, “Breakfast’s ready!”

Peto’s voice came from his bedroom, muffled, “Is it edible?”

“Peto, you’d think a boot’s edible,” Jaytsy snapped back.

“Oh, grand,” Peto whined loudly. “She’s mistaken my boots for the oatmeal again. Father, I have to go barefoot today—”

But Perrin didn’t answer. He was staring at the ceiling, his eyebrows up in surprise.

Obediently he threw a salute to the highest general he knew.

Chapter 9 ~ “We are here to remember.”

An hour later the Shin family walked to the amphitheater at the center of Edge. Well, more like weaved and squeezed their way. All of Edge was there, along with visitors from other villages. To Mahrree’s amazement, there was no more room in the amphitheater and people were waiting outside.

“Head for the soldiers,” Perrin said when they saw the crowds. “We’ll use them to sneak to the back entrance. I don’t need to meet any members of the Committee of Retired Goat Milkers for Perrin Shin today.”

It was fortunate Lieutenant Offra was as tall as Perrin—something he confided to Mahrree that he hadn’t noticed before about the reticent officer—because Offra served well as a shield to smuggle the colonel past several groups of non-Edgers, who really didn’t know who they were watching for, but knew enough to look for insignias and name patches on the uniforms.

Behind and below the platform was a flurry of people. Several soldiers, Magistrate Wibble, Rector Yung, and Lieutenant Colonel Karna were discussing the program, while the new chief of enforcement Bernie directed some of his assistants in crowd control.

But Mahrree found her eye caught by something else: her old favorite oak tree by the warm spring. She hadn’t been behind the amphitheater since her and Perrin’s last debate when she thought she might never see him again. When she saw the oak so much flooded back to her from their first tempestuous and wonderful season together. The tree had grown significantly over the years, despite being enclosed by the amphitheater and frequently covered

overhead by oilskins when it rained during a performance. Mahrree stood there for a moment, just to remember.

Her family kept walking, but Perrin turned abruptly when he realized she was no longer with them. He smiled when he saw why.

“Been a long time, hasn’t it?” He returned to her, took hold of the trunk and tried to shake it. “It certainly doesn’t move anymore. I once gave this tree a real thrashing. I came back after that last debate of ours, late at night, and tried to rip it out of the ground to take it back to the fort.”

“Really?” Mahrree said. “Why?”

“I thought it might be the last thing I’d have to remember you by. Besides the holes I punched in my office wall.”

Mahrree laughed softly. “There was something I always wanted to do by this tree, but,” she looked around her timidly, “now is *certainly* not the time.”

Perrin’s smile was full of mischief as he took a step closer. She hadn’t seen that expression on his face in a long time, and she loved seeing it again. “What is it?” he asked in the deep hushed tone that he knew always gave her goose bumps.

Mahrree bit her lip and took another step closer to him. “I guess this tree has the same appeal for me as the stand of trees back at the university had for you.”

“Maybe you and I just have a thing for kissing in the trees?”

Mahrree grinned at the old Perrin she always knew and adored. “Ooh, don’t let Captain Thorne hear you say that. He’ll turn us in on suspicion of secretly being Guardsers.”

Perrin chuckled. “That’s why I left him at the fort today. But I promise that someday we’ll sneak back here, late at night, and do *whatever* you want under our tree.”

Mahrree’s eyebrows went up.

Perrin winked meaningfully, took her arm, and led her away.

Mahrree and her children found the bench that had been saved for them at the front while Perrin joined the others behind the platform to discuss the ceremony. By the time it started every seat encircling the platform was taken, and any spot where a standing body could be wedged in was filled. Mahrree worried that some in attendance were there for the wrong reason: to see Colonel Shin, who was with the other presenters below and shielded by curtains.

But soon it was evident everyone felt the land tremor as deeply as the Shin family had. When Rector Yung took to the platform the

crowd grew silent. Just one year ago no more than a hundred people knew who he was, and only half attended the sole congregational meetings.

But after the land tremor, attendance at his meetings included most of Edge. Then, just as quickly as his flock grew, it scattered again. After five or six weeks of listening to his sermons on healing and renewing, Edgers felt healed and renewed—especially after the caravan of supplies arrived from Idumea—and stopped attending. When the crisis was gone, so was the need to feel the Creator.

But this morning the entire audience bowed their heads as Rector Yung led them in prayer. He thanked the Creator for preserving them, for sending the food that saw them through, and for the sacrifices of so many. It was a beautiful prayer, but Mahrree was sure she heard the distinct sound of snoring behind her.

Yung then introduced Lieutenant Colonel Karna, who joined him on the platform to great cheers and applause of the village that knew him for so many years and was happy to see him return for the day. He read a description of what happened to the village, gave a report on the buildings burned, damaged, and demolished, and amused the crowd with a recitation of the variety of meals served at the Shin house each night that first week.

When he introduced Magistrate Wibble, a wisp of a man, there was only polite applause that greeted him, but the magistrate bowed and grinned as if they loved him as much as Karna. Wibble described in flowing detail the efforts to join together to help in cleaning up and rebuilding. He never seemed to remember that it was Colonel Shin who developed the plan. With great emotion that was mostly genuine, he retold the story of the family with the twins that were found after all hope had been lost to recover any more people.

At that point Karna went down the front steps and stood in front of the family sitting on the second row. He gently pulled up the emotional father and mother. They scooped up their young children and the crowd began to applaud as they wiped away tears.

Then one man who was sitting next to them stood up. So did his wife. Then another woman. Within seconds the entire crowd was on their feet, applauding the family who were overcome with emotion.

Karna helped them to sit back down, crouched in front of them, and said a few quiet words as the crowd began to sit down as well. Mahrree watched the young couple's faces. They brightened as

Karna spoke to them, then they laughed and wiped away more tears. Karna gave their two children quick kisses.

As he stood, Mahrree caught his eye. She grinned proudly and winked at him. He was no longer the hesitant but obedient lieutenant Perrin had dragged through the forest as they chased Guardians for the first time. Now Lieutenant Colonel Karna was every whit as capable and confident a leader as Perrin. Yet Brillen's light brown complexion developed a slight shade of bashful pink as he walked back up the podium stairs.

Wibble spoke for a little longer, but Mahrree couldn't remember what the flimsy voice said. He was sounding a little like a campaign speech about the value of living in Edge.

When it was clear that he was finally winding down to introduce the next speaker, Mahrree instinctively looked at the left side of the platform where Perrin had always appeared at their debates. She saw him slowly walking up the stairs, partially shielded by a curtain and reading a piece of parchment.

Mahrree held her breath and took him in, remembering it was just over seventeen years ago when he first bounded up those stairs, stopped, and stared at her with a look she now knew meant, "Ah Hogal, that is *not* an old spinster teacher."

This morning, at age forty-five, his face was more somber, he was a little thicker around the middle, certainly grayer along the edges, with lines etched more deeply around those dark eyes, and with many more medals, ribbons, and patches on his dress uniform.

But the cobblers of Winds got it right, Mahrree thought: he *was* magnificent, even now, after this terrible year.

No, *especially* now. *Because* of this year.

Choosing to continue to love him was the best decision she had ever made. What better thing could she have done with her life besides staying by his side? He *was* her life.

He was almost to the top of the stairs now. Mahrree bit her lip and wondered if all women adored their husbands as much as she adored him. How would she feel about him in another twenty years? Or thirty, or forty years, if they had them? She remembered Tabbit and Hogal bickering good-naturedly around their kitchen table with a great fondness in their eyes she didn't understand when she and Perrin were first married. She thought she loved Perrin then, but it was nothing compared to what she felt now. She smiled as she pictured Perrin and her as a wrinkled, white-haired couple arguing about who

really ate the last piece of pie.

Then she heard a roar behind her.

He was no longer only hers. The crowd saw him as he fully emerged from the curtains. The roar raced around the entire amphitheater, completely encircling Perrin as he slowly made his way to the center of the platform. Before the magistrate could introduce him, his voice was drowned out by the audience cheering and rising to their feet for the Saver of Edge.

Perrin now stood several paces behind Wibble, still focused on the parchment, but seemingly taking up the entire platform. Karna and Rector Yung stepped to the edges of the platform as if his presence pushed them aside.

Next to Mahrree, Peto began to laugh at the crowd's enthusiastic reaction. "He can't even kick a ball straight!" he shouted to his mother, barely audible over the noise. But he grinned as he stood as well. Jaytsy was on her feet too, clapping loudly.

Mahrree could hardly see her husband anymore as she stood up, because tears blurred her vision. To read the letters was one thing; to see thousands of people on their feet cheering and now shouting "General!" was overwhelming.

Perrin hadn't raised his head but was still staring at the parchment in his hand. Something rigid and worrying seemed to have overtaken him.

"Oh, no." Mahrree murmured and took a few quick steps to the edge of the raised platform. If she was feeling overcome by the enthusiasm of the crowd, what might he be feeling? Shem was right—it was too much, too soon. She wished Perrin didn't have his father's sword strapped to his side.

Brillen caught her eye. She shook her head briefly at him and shrugged.

The crowd was relentless, growing louder every moment, wanting to be acknowledged by Colonel Shin.

Brillen walked over to Perrin, put a hand on his shoulder and said something in his ear. Perrin shook his head, flashed his friend a brief smile, then finally looked out to the crowd.

Mahrree didn't think they could get any louder, but they did, to deafening levels.

Perrin stared straight out, slowly scanning the people now chanting "General Shin! General Shin!" in unison. He pivoted gradually, his eyes traveling around the entire enclosure, until he returned to his original position.

Mahrree's worried gaze darted between Brillen and her husband.

Brillen remained by Perrin's side, gently taking him by his sword arm as if worried he might draw the blade.

But Perrin glanced at him again, nodded in assurance, and took several steps to the front of the platform.

Karna remained behind him, his arms folded, his eyebrows furrowed, his stance ready.

The chant of "General Shin" continued, now accompanied by foot-stomping which trembled the ground.

Perrin looked down at his wife . . .

. . . and winked.

She blinked back, stunned. "Oh, you've got to be kidding me!" she mouthed at him.

He could read her lips, she was sure. One of his eyebrows went up subtly and looked out again at the crowd, which, surprisingly, was even louder.

Mahrree shook her head. He always had a natural flair for the dramatic, and now he was working the crowd.

"Oh, that man!" she exclaimed, but no one could hear her chuckling.

Eventually Perrin held up a hand and the chanting crowd fell silent. He turned slowly, pushing his hand forward as he faced each section of the amphitheater, and everyone obediently sat down.

Mahrree suppressed a giggle and took her seat between her children. If the Administrators could see what power he had over the citizenry they would've suspected an overthrow was in the works.

The crowd watched Colonel Shin expectantly.

He waited until there was no sound, then waited three seconds more to make sure the thousands surrounding him were breathless with anticipation before he finally held up the parchment.

"We are here to *remember*," he emphasized, his deep voice booming out beyond the amphitheater. "To remember the events that happened one year ago today. I'm here to read the names of those who perished in the land tremor here in Edge, and those whose relatives lived in Moorland. Remembering the ones we lost is the greatest honor we can give them."

The raucous energy of the crowd was replaced by hushed reverence as Perrin's voice rang out loud and clear.

"Salita Avety. Wills Avety. Yenali Briter." He slowly recited each name with great solemnity, accompanied by sniffs and sobs scattered

throughout the audience.

By the time he read the 204th and last name, people were openly weeping and the heavy mood was tangible. Noiselessly, Perrin began to roll up the parchment.

Until someone near the back shouted, “General Relf and Mrs. Joriana Shin!”

The audience gasped as the words shattered the silence.

Perrin stopped in mid-roll and looked up. His jaw shifted and the crowd collectively held their breath. After a frozen moment just long enough to become uncomfortable, he nodded once and announced, “We thank you for sacrificing your morning to be with us. You have all given up so much over the past year, and we are stronger together because of it. May the Creator remember all of you, as you remember Him. Thank you.”

He pivoted and headed to the back stairs of the platform. The audience rose to their feet again, cheering and applauding and calling, but the colonel, as if not hearing any of it, trotted down the stairs and out of sight.

The magistrate, however, took to the middle of the platform as if the applause were for him, while Karna and Rector Yung waved and followed after Perrin. All alone, Wibble beamed and headed down the front stairs looking for hands to shake while the crowd began to file out.

But as soon as Perrin had turned to exit the platform, Mahrree had set off in a quick jog to find him. He reached their oak at the same time she did. The sound of the audience followed him, and he sat on the bench by the spring staring at the parchment in his hands.

Worried, Mahrree sat next to him.

Karna and Rector Yung paused at the bottom of the stairs and anxiously watched Mahrree.

She gave them a hopeful smile and nodded that they could go. But the two men looked at each other and only stepped to the side to wait.

“You did a wonderful job,” Mahrree whispered in Perrin’s ear. “They love you. Can you hear it?”

He scoffed. “They love the *idea* of me, but they don’t really love *me*. But that’s all right. I can live with it.”

“So what’s wrong? Your eyes are darkening again.”

“My eyes are always dark.”

“You know what I mean, Perrin.”

After a quiet moment he said, “Ah, Mahrree, I never realized how much power there was in those words: General Shin.” He reached over and put his hand on her knee. “If ever it happens . . .” He paused and shook his head.

Mahrree waited, trying to read his enigmatic expression. He never wanted the title of general, but he must have entertained the thought while thousands of citizens practiced it on him.

“Perhaps,” he finally whispered, “we best pray that day never comes.”

Zenos sat on one side of the large desk in the command tower drafting a new training schedule. *His* way, not the captain’s, and based on information Karna told him about Guarders in Moorland.

It was also a good way to keep an eye on Thorne, who sat across from him reviewing personnel files.

Thick tension hovered between them like an angry vulture daring either of the men to actually look up and acknowledge its presence. For the past week Shem had remained annoyingly close to Thorne. They took their meals at the same time, were scheduled in the office at the same hours, and whenever Thorne spied him on the compound, Shem made it a point to sharpen his new long knife. He realized it was best to carry a couple of them at all times.

That morning of the Remembrance Ceremony a strange sound carried up to the tower. Shem paused in his writing and listened. He looked over at Thorne’s hand and saw that he, too, had stopped writing to pay attention to the quiet roar coming from the village.

Then the noise developed a rhythm.

Shem didn’t mean to, but he found himself watching Thorne.

Thorne looked up at him at the same time, and the tension froze into an icy chill.

But the sound that was growing in volume demanded that the two men continue their indignant staring contest another time.

Thorne stood abruptly and made his way to the large window which sat on metal pins, allowing it to swing open. Zenos leaped to reach the other side to open it first, but not quickly enough.

Thorne unlatched the frame and swung it open with a small triumphant smile. The echoing noise was now distinct and carried all the way to the command tower. Thorne’s smile faded as the cold morning

air hit his face along with the sound.

The corner of Shem's mouth tugged upward slightly as he glared back at Thorne.

In the air floated the chant, "General Shin! General Shin!"



When Peto got home, after the soldiers escorted their family to keep his father from being mobbed by admirers, he ran to his room to take off the confining black suit which his grandmother had bought him last year. He was pleased to see when he put it on that morning that it was getting tight and short. Not only would he never have to wear it again, but he was finally growing. He threw it on the floor, put on his regular shirt and trousers, then, feeling a touch of guilt, gathered up his grandmother's suit and respectfully folded it. He opened the wardrobe doors and placed the suit carefully on the shelf where it had sat the past year.

Then he slid out the envelope that lay hidden under it and pressed it to his chest. He checked to make sure his bedroom door was still closed before he whispered to the air.

"Grandfather, you should have seen them! You should have heard them! If someone had a crown, they would have made him king this morning. They were already chanting General Shin!"

It was all coming together, in some sort of way, and Peto was seeing the signs. As they had passed the abandoned peach orchard he and Yung had worked last year, Peto was stunned to see that the trees were so heavy with blossoms that the air fairly stank of them. There's was some kind of meaning there—Yung would likely quiz him later—about nourishing the trees, and his father grinning again, and the northern half of the world chanting "General" at him.

Peto gave the envelope a quick kiss, then slid it back under the suit and shut the wardrobe doors.



When Colonel Shin reached the fort after the ceremony—after changing out of his metal-heavy dress uniform—he marched through the compound and straight up to the command tower. The door to his office was slightly open, and the only person at the

large desk in the forward office was Zenos.

Perrin raised one questioning eyebrow at Shem.

Shem gave his commander a slight wince, raised both eyebrows briefly, then nodded once to the window.

Perrin narrowed his eyes at the master sergeant and tilted his head slightly to the side, twitching his left eye.

Shem tipped his head to the office door and curled his upper lip.

The colonel winked.

The longest conversation they'd ever had without speaking a word was over three minutes. But the silent communication they had a week ago far surpassed that. All kinds of new expressions had to be wordlessly created and deciphered, and Shem's message had left Perrin completely speechless.

And then completely enraged.

In fact, he had leaped over his desk, his long knife in hand, and lunged for his office door, which Shem barred.

"You can't!" Shem had shouted. "You know you can't! I vowed I wouldn't say a word—"

"And you didn't," Perrin had seethed. "Very disturbing *actions*, however. Now move, Zenos, or you're going to regret it—"

"No, you'll regret it if I do. You can't kill the captain."

"I'm just going to give him something to *remember me by*," Perrin growled. "Every time he looks in the mirror. Or relieves himself—"

"You can't do any permanent damage that his parents and grandparents might notice when he goes to The Dinner in a few weeks," Shem reminded him, wrenching the long knife out of his grip.

Perrin squinted. "That bruised jaw he got last night—not kicked by an errant horse, right?"

Shem smiled and held up his fist. "Feisty little steed, isn't it? And he was walking stiffly this morning because of your daughter's kicking ability." As Perrin smiled acerbically in approval, Shem suggested, "Confront Thorne only once you've calmed down a bit. Besides, Jaytsy didn't want you to know, remember?"

"And why is that?" he snapped.

Shem only had to give him a long, studied look.

And Perrin's shoulders had sagged. She had plenty of reasons to not trust her father.

"But I trust you," Shem said, reading his thoughts. "Just . . . not at this moment." He slipped Perrin's long knife into his own waistband. "I'll give it back to you tomorrow. And hand me Relf's sword for the

day, while we're at it."

It had taken Perrin a few days to feel in control enough to address the putrid, out-of-control mushroom that had been threatening to overtake his fort for the past year. Today, he knew what to do.

Still, as he took a quiet step toward his office, he paused and retrieved his long knife from his hip. He set it down noiselessly in front of Shem who snorted into his jacket sleeve.

Perrin pointed a finger of warning at his friend, and Shem nodded, sliding the knife into his boot.

Colonel Shin took a quick breath, sent one last look to his master sergeant that said, *Enjoy the show*, and pushed his office door open with a loud bang.

Captain Thorne jumped in the chair he was sitting in and dropped a quill. He looked up, startled, as Colonel Shin walked into his office and slammed the door behind him. He placed his hands on his desk and leaned ominously toward Captain Thorne.

Lemuel gulped.

"I know what you've been up to, *Captain*," Perrin snarled.

The captain turned white.

"And despite what you may have heard this morning, you don't need to draft your little message. I don't want their jobs or to even be a general. Tell them that when you go back to the mansion tomorrow!"

Captain Thorne relaxed a little, but his eyes hardened. "Why, *Colonel*," he simpered. "Whatever makes you think I'm writing something about this morning's—"

"Because I know you," he sneered. "I know why you're in my fort, and what you've been doing. So I'm telling you, Captain—I'm not standing for it anymore. Things are going to be different, starting now. This is MY fort. MY men. MY procedures. And if you want to change something, you will present it to me for MY approval. Second in command means you see to it that MY orders are fulfilled. You do NOT make your own. Is that clear?!"

Captain Thorne's jaw dropped ludicrously.

Perrin leaned even closer. "And if I *ever* find out that you've been touching something that belongs to me again," the colonel eyed his chair that Captain Thorne was warming without permission, "I'll begin to show my displeasure by breaking both your arms, then I move *downward*. Is that understood, Thorne?"

Captain Thorne quickly got up from the colonel's chair and

turned a nauseating shade of gray. He snatched up his papers, mumbling a, “Sorry, sir,” somewhere in there, and started for the door, trying to find a way around the colonel as he blocked the exit.

“Thorne!” Perrin bellowed in his ear.

The captain froze in his tracks, gripping the door handle.

Perrin stepped up to him, his face just inches from Thorne’s. “That includes MY *daughter!*” he roared.

Then he did what some poor girl’s father should have done to him when he was seventeen. Perrin slugged Thorne square on the jaw, right on top of Shem’s week-old bruise which was just starting to fade.

Thorne dropped like a log, his pages and folders sprawling across the floor, along with his body.

Vicious delight filled Perrin as he hovered over the prone form fading out of consciousness, and he massaged his fist which was eager to punch him a dozen times more. Several targets on the captain’s body presented themselves, and just as Perrin raised his arm to let it connect with another, the office door opened.

Shem stood there, his hands on his hips, his expression that of perfect innocence. “Oh dear, oh dear, *oh dear*. Colonel, what happened here? Did our captain *slip?*” he said loudly for the benefit of the sergeant and corporal who had come up the stairs.

Perrin dropped his arm and shook his head sadly. “He did. Stumbled right against that . . . cabinet.” He showed Shem his happy fist before unclenching it.

The sergeant and corporal leaned around Shem to see Thorne.

“He tripped and caught the corner on his jaw, just where that steed kicked him the other night, and bam! Down he went.” Perrin ignored the snickering of the enlisted men.

Thorne was coming to, groaning as he held his face. “Muooof!”

Perrin blinked in almost believable concern. “What was that, Captain? Ready to sit up? Careful, now. You’re a bit clumsy—”

“My toof!” he exclaimed as he struggled to sit up. With fury in his eyes, he glared at Perrin. “Yoo knockuf my toof!”

The sergeant behind Shem said, “Spit out that blood, Thorne, before you speak again. *Almost* sounded as if you were accusing our colonel of causing your little accident, sir.”

Thorne looked up into the four unsympathetic faces. When his eyes met Perrin’s rock-hard glare, something of the captain’s brittle demeanor cracked.

Yes, things were going to be different now. Both men knew it.

Thorne coughed into a handkerchief the corporal handed him, filling it with a mouthful of blood and a broken molar. Even though each of the four men reluctantly offered him a hand, he ignored them all and unsteadily got up on his own.

“Sergeant,” Perrin said, “would you help Thorne down to the surgeon’s? Nothing they can do about that tooth until he gets to Idumea later this week. Maybe one of those new dentists can figure out something for him.” Feeling some guilt about that, Perrin shoved his proud and throbbing fist in his pocket. “Until then, the hospital can stop the bleeding and check him for any other injuries.”

The sergeant winked slyly at his colonel before he led a wobbly Thorne down the stairs. Perrin also noticed the corporal grinning broadly before Shem subtly shook his head at him. But then Shem followed it up by returning a quick grin.

Perrin kicked Thorne’s papers—he’d have the corporal gather them later—and looked out of his south-facing windows.

“Now, Idumea,” he whispered, “because more and more I suspect that’s where all of *you* are really from: send me what you’re planning. I’m back in command.”



Lieutenant Offra was brushing down his horse—his daily reprieve from the hovering of the captain who kept his horse Streak in its own private stable—when he felt the presence behind him. He turned slowly to face it, then immediately stood at attention.

“At ease, Offra, please. I was just passing,” Colonel Shin said as he ran a hand down the haunches of Offra’s horse. “Lovely mare, isn’t she? Always been one of my favorites. I’m glad to see you’re giving her so much attention. She deserves it.”

Offra stared at his commander. For the past few weeks he’d been far easier, but too often he had seen Shin suddenly turn like a rabid dog. “Yes, sir?”

Shin smiled at him with surprising softness in his eyes. “I wanted to thank you for acting as my shield this morning, getting me into the amphitheater. A little crowded, wasn’t it?” he chuckled tightly.

Offra dared to smile. A little. “Yes, sir. I don’t think anyone

expected such a turnout.”

“Me most especially. I hadn’t realized before you’re my same height. We give the tailors a fit, don’t we?”

Offra swallowed, still not sure what any of this was about. “I suppose we do, sir?”

Shin looked him up and down. “But you’re not as bulky as I am. Rather on the lean side, Offra. You could become quite impressive with some extra muscle. Don’t enjoy the food here?”

Offra reddened. “No, the food’s just fine, sir. I’ve just . . . I’ve just not had much of an appetite, sir. Actually lost a little weight since I came here.”

Something in Shin’s eyes looked pained, as if he knew he was part of the cause of his officer’s anxiety. “I’m sorry to hear that, Offra,” he said quietly. “Truly.” He ran his hand over the horse again. “But I have a remedy for that. Like you, I’ve lost a bit of muscle this past year and I need to get it back. What I’m planning can get you bigger and stronger as well. What do you say?”

Offra cocked his head, unsure of the colonel’s direction. “Sir?”

“Want to be my training partner?” He leaned closer. “You see, Zenos used to be, but since he’s beaten me twice in that ridiculous Strongest Soldier Race he thinks he’s got me for good. I want to surprise him in six moons’ time at the next Harvest Season. But I need a partner to push me. So how about it? A half hour run before every midday meal, then a long run each week through Edge?”

Offra, completely taken aback, took another moment before he could respond with, “Sir, I’d be honored. Thank you.”

Shin grinned and slapped him on the back. “Good. Offra, how old are you anyway?”

“Twenty-five, sir.”

Shin nodded. “Twenty-five. Good age. We’re going to make it a great age. This will be at least one way you can get the upper hand over a *lower man*.” He raised his eyebrows meaningfully.

Offra just looked at him blankly, knowing the colonel was trying to communicate something, but he had no idea how to read the man.

Shin inspected the horse’s leg, picked off an invisible speck, and said, “Hmm. A thorn. One of the Creator’s most irritating creations, wouldn’t you agree? Just gets under your skin and—” He twisted the invisible thorn in the air and made a face.

Offra caught on that time and smiled broadly. “Indeed I do, sir.”

Shin winked at him, completely throwing the poor lieutenant.

“Then tomorrow, before midday meal. Leave your jacket in the office. And Lieutenant, I’m embarrassed to admit this, but . . .” The colonel looked down briefly, sincerely ashamed. “I don’t even know your first name. Usually I’m much better at these kinds of things.”

No one in the fort had ever asked his first name. “It’s Jon, sir. Jon Offra. My father pronounced it ‘Yon,’ but my mother thought that sounded like people were tired of me, so she and everyone else pronounced the j.”

The colonel smiled. “Unusual, but I like it. ‘Jon’ suits you. You’re definitely not tiring. Then again, depending on fast you run, maybe you are! Well, Jon, tomorrow then?”

“Absolutely, sir!”

Captain Thorne picked at his food in the mess hall, sitting next to Radan who eyed him.

“You’re a bit quiet today, sirrr,” said Radan, in his usual and ingratiating manner. “Jaw bothering you, I suspect? Rotten luck, getting hit in the same spot twice in one week. Up to going home tomorrow? The Dinner and all? I can’t wait until I get an invitation,” he hinted. “All those officers, all their experience . . . just to sit at the same table as them, soaking in their wisdom—”

“Marinating in their stale jokes,” Thorne intoned, “their same old stories, their exaggerations.” He dropped his fork in disgust. “Not what you think it is, Radan. I’m better off staying here.”

“Why, sirrr?” Radan asked. “I would think you’d be most eager to get back. Especially considering what happened this morning with the colonel.”

Thorne’s head snapped up. “What do you know about this morning with the colonel?”

Radan frowned. “What everyone knows, sirrr—the chant of General? I’m sure they heard it down in Idumea! If not, what a juicy bit of news *you’ll* be able to deliver.”

Thorne shoulder’s relaxed slightly. “Oh. Oh that. Yes. They won’t be too happy to hear about that, I assure you.” His shoulder twitched. “Along with a few other things,” he mumbled to himself.

“Such as?”

“None of your business!” Thorne snapped. “Slag, Radan—what

do you want from me, anyway?"

The lieutenant rocked back in surprise. "I just want to *help*, sirrr. It's you and me holding this fort together. Everyone knows that."

Thorne drummed his fingers and looked out across the soldiers talking, laughing, and *not* interacting with him. They were afraid and unsure of what he meant to them, which meant he was becoming the perfect officer.

Until today. He'd noticed Shin changing some weeks ago. He was far more alert, no longer napped, but was walking and talking among his men, and even laughing with them.

And then, *today*. All of which was completely unexpected.

First was the message from his father that he anticipated hearing news about Lemuel's engagement to the daughter of a certain colonel. Then there was the show of solidarity for Shin at the amphitheater, followed by the *discussion* in the command office . . .

Apparently some officers do believe their daughters.

Everything Lemuel had been doing was unraveling, and he'd have to report all of that to his father.

Edge was a far safer place than Idumea right now.

"No one appreciates what we do," Thorne brooded. "But I'll find out what we do next."

There was nothing that he dreaded more than that.

Chapter 10 ~ “Tell me everything you know about Moorland.”

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

“Do you realize what this MEANS?” Mal shouted.

“Nicko, I think you may be overreact—”

“OVERREACTING? To thousands crying for General Shin? The chant’s being taken up all over the world! Keeping him confined to Edge hasn’t slowed support for him—it’s getting stronger!”

The good doctor held up his hand in a vain attempt to calm his companion whose veins bulged in six places. It was a good idea that Brisack brought his heart medications, because Mal’s would be bursting out of his chest in about five minutes. “Now, now, I think you’re reading far too much into this—”

“How can you be so relaxed?” Mal bellowed. “Don’t you see the pattern? What happened the *last* time the citizens became enthralled with a man they thought would deliver them to some different end?”

Brisack smiled cautiously. “They cleared the way for you to be installed, Nicko.”

“Precisely, Doctor! People are no better than sheep—they’ll follow anything that moves, despite the care given them for the past twenty years. They’re too stupid to realize what they dumbly follow. Well I’ll not have it! He will NOT steal my flock! I’ll not sit by while *King Perrin* builds himself a throne in Edge!”

“Flock of dumb sheep,” said Brisack thoughtfully. “Intriguing comparison, albeit inappropriate. I think you’re confusing sheep with ducklings. But I can’t help but wonder—*why* are they

shifting their devotion?”

“Because he answered their inane little letters!” Mal snapped.

“He doesn’t have a Letter Skimmer service? Personalized attention?” Occasionally Brisack felt the need to practice his sarcasm.

Mal wasn’t impressed. “I’ve got proof,” he said, standing up. He made his way over to a desk and picked up a small piece of paper. “When I first heard that Shin was responding to regular people’s mail, I had one of the reception area recorders write him a letter. A couple of days ago, he received this.”

Brisack held the letter to catch the faint light coming from the stables. “Clever, Nicko. Information gathering from the very source. This doesn’t look like an adult’s handwriting.”

“It’s not,” Mal fumed. “It was written by his son! Horrible penmanship, too, considering his mother is a teacher.”

Brisack scoffed. “Penmanship has nothing to do with intelligence, and everything to do with conformity. The more complicit the hand, the more timid the mind. That’s why much of the younger generation writes identically. Let’s see . . . *‘Dear Merk: Because my Father is overwhelmed with letters, he’s dictating responses to me and my family’*—Well, can’t excuse the atrocious grammar right there, especially for a boy of nearly fifteen. *‘My father thanks you for your concern for our family and wishes you well. He also offers this advice: You live in Idumea? Get out! Ha-ha.’*”

Brisack pursed his lips in an effort to suppress his guffaw, but part of it leaked out anyway.

“Yes. Ha-ha,” Mal said flatly. “That’s why we don’t employ teenagers as letter skimmers.”

“It’s . . . it’s . . .” Brisack shrugged, his face still contorting, “certainly authentic. Seems he has quite a bit to say. *‘Just kidding, Merk. My father didn’t say to write that, but I’m certain he agrees. See the signature of his below? He put that there before I finished the letter. If he ever finds out what I’m writing, he won’t make that mistake again. I’m just now filling up extra space. Anyway, thanks for the letter! Perrin Shin. I’m working on imitating his signature. How does this look? Perrin Shin. Yeah, it still needs work before I can attempt to requisition anything from the garrison. Do you want anything? I can try to copy his signature to requisition you a nice horse so you escape from Idumea. Let me know. Peto Shin.’*”

The good doctor rubbed his mouth vigorously with his hand, trying to eliminate the laugh.

“Go ahead,” Mal grumbled. “All the recorders laughed before I confiscated it. They thought the boy was both cocky and charming. No wonder everyone writes to his father. They want to see what he’ll let his bratty son get away with next.”

“He could deplete the garrison, requisition it all away!” Brisack couldn’t help but add with a chuckle. “Now I wished I’d spent a few moments speaking with the boy at The Dinner last year. Didn’t realize he was so . . . independent.”

“All of them are independent,” Mal seethed. “And that, my good doctor, is why they’re so dangerous! What about your project in the north? Is it ready? Because if it’s not, then we’re going back to my original plan of eliminating Mr. Independent!”

Brisack’s chuckle died. “It’s nearly ready. We should’ve recruited some men with minds a bit brighter than midnight, but if I go up there myself, I’m confident that I can refine the mixture in a matter of days. Don’t worry—all of this is still in our control.”

“You still believe that? It’s completely *out* of control!”

“No, no, Nicko. This is what politics is about, right? We help the people discover the threat to their security, then we provide them with a solution. Granted, in the past we *created* the threat that sent them scurrying to us for help, but I’m still convinced we can turn this to our advantage. Another threat has merely revealed itself all on its own. Now,” Brisack continued with a smile that tried to suggest confidence, “it’s a little early in the season for fishing, but then again, I suppose it’s *always* a good day to go fishing, and I haven’t yet taken Shin up on his offer to check the rivers in the north—”

“Brisack!”

He leaned over to Chairman Mal. “Relax, Nicko. When I’m finished no one will be chanting General Shin—or even *thinking* King Perrin—ever again.”

It was Sewzi Briter who first noticed the colonel approaching the house after dinner.

Her husband noticed next, because his wife was making a panicked gurgling noise. Cambozola rushed to her at the kitchen sink, then realized that it wasn’t a dried pea she was gagging on but her terror of the colonel who she spied in the gap between her yellow curtains.

Cambozola patted his wife. “He’s been a lot calmer lately. At the Remembrance Ceremony he was quite . . . impressive.”

“Yes,” his wife whimpered, eyeing the sword strapped to the colonel’s side. “I remember. What’s he doing?”

Cambozola tilted his head to better see the colonel in the gap, who had paused a few feet before their door. “Well, if I had to guess, I would say he’s . . . practicing smiling? Who practices smiling? Oh, there’s a different kind. And another one. How odd. What kind of man has different smiles? Oh, I *do* believe he’s settled on one. And now he’s got it pretty well fixed—”

His wife leaned away from the window. “We shouldn’t be watching him like this!”

“Why not?” Cambozola grinned. “He’s good entertainment.”

There was a loud knocking at the door.

Sewzi clenched her teeth.

“Remember, Sewzi, he’s Jaytsy’s father. He can’t be all bad. And he just figured out how to smile!”

Her husband’s reassurances didn’t help, and Sewzi anxiously twisted the dish rag in her hands.

Cambozola steeled himself and swung open the door. “Sir! Good to see you. Something I can help you with?”

“Actually, yes,” Colonel Shin said, still with his smile that tried to be friendly yet contrite. He aimed it straight at Sewzi.

She pursed her lips and nodded once at him, the best acknowledgment she could muster.

Shin turned to Cambozola. “Briter, I’m looking for some help. May I come in?” he asked, almost nervously.

“Of course! Of course!” Cambozola said, holding out his arm to the kitchen table. “We were just about to have some pie.”

“Oh, I didn’t mean to interrupt,” Shin said, sounding genuinely apologetic as he stepped into the house. The kitchen shrunk in proportion to his stature, and Sewzi fought the urge to scuttle back into a corner to be out of his way. “Especially pie. The best conversations happen around pie. Pie’s sacred.”

Sewzi looked into his dark eyes—just like Jaytsy’s—and something twinkled back at her.

Feeling a bit safer, Sewzi found her voice. “I think my husband was trying to offer you some, sir. If you’d like to join us?”

Shin’s smile changed yet again, becoming more gentle. “As I said, pie’s sacred, and I’ve done nothing to deserve pie. I made wrong

assumptions about you when you first arrived, and my treatment of you this past year hasn't exactly been pie-worthy. For that, I'm very sorry."

Sewzi couldn't help but smile in response.

Her husband chuckled softly. "Ah, but you have, Colonel. At the Remembrance Ceremony, the third name you read was my mother's. Yenali Briter. No one here knew her, or her love of goats, or of knitting, or of knitting goat hair. *Or* her ability to make a most wonderful raspberry pie, for which you'll have to wait for a few moons. But you, Colonel, were the first to speak her name in Edge. And that, sir, is pie-worthy."

To the Briters' surprise, the colonel's eyes became shiny. "I just hope we didn't miss anyone. I sent out inquiries and asked around about your mother. I will remember the name Yenali Briter as if she were my own family. And I also wish to thank you."

Cambozola grinned magnanimously. "My goodness," he said to his wife, "this evening is just filling with surprises—"

Sewzi tried to subtly smack his arm to shut him up, which, because the kitchen was small, was a rather obvious gesture.

But the colonel just continued to smile, and Sewzi thought she heard a low chuckle rumble up from some depth.

"I want to thank you," he said, "for your care of my daughter the past few seasons. She's loved being here, and your farm was a welcomed sanctuary when she couldn't find any at home."

Sewzi was still terrified of him—and she suspected she always would be—but the sincerity in his eyes and the growing emotion in his voice made her almost want to hug the man. Almost.

"Sir," she said instead, "I love your daughter. She's an excellent young woman, and her father definitely deserves a piece of pie."

Colonel Shin grinned genuinely, and for the moment Sewzi understood what Mrs. Shin saw in him. He nodded and sat down at the table.

The Briters exchanged stunned expressions, and Cambozola sat down next to the colonel as Sewzi retrieved another plate.

"So," Cambozola said grandly, as if entertaining Chairman Mal himself, "how do you think I can help you, Colonel?"

The colonel's gaze sharpened and he leaned on the table. "Mr. Briter, tell me *everything* you remember about Moorland.

Lemuel left the black coach and strode smartly up the wide stone stairs of the High General's mansion. His grandparents had wanted him there so they could have the honor of hosting him for his visit back to Idumea.

The soldier on duty at the large oak doors saluted before opening one. Lemuel almost smirked at the motion, enjoying that the soldier was a decade older than him, yet was his servant.

But the smirk died before it ever surfaced, because standing in the foy-yay of the Grand Hall of the mansion was General Thorne, waiting with his arms folded.

Lemuel hadn't expected him. Surely there would have been something for him to be doing at the garrison at dinner time, then he should have traveled to his own stately home several blocks away.

Lemuel immediately came to attention, as he had learned to do when he was three years old.

Qayin Thorne nodded once. "Captain, you're late."

Lemuel swallowed and said, "Yes, sir. There were problems with some wagons above Pools. Seems a shipment was stolen so the wagons were scattered and burning, creating a delay."

"Did you stop to render assistance?"

"No, sir. I knew reaching here at an acceptable hour was the priority. I told the driver to go through the fields around the accident."

"Well done. I—" Qayin was interrupted by a blur of a woman.

"Lemuel!" Versula Cush came running from the dining hall, her arms out to embrace her son. "I thought I heard your voice!"

But he remained at attention. "Mother."

Versula stopped suddenly, noticing the unexpected presence of her husband. Still, she bravely stepped up to her stiff son and hugged him anyway. "So glad to see you arrived safely! A year is far too long." Her eyes grew wide as she examined him. "My goodness, what happened to your jaw? That's a nasty bruise—"

"Tripped and fell," was all Lemuel responded.

Versula was a woman who knew about bruises that one didn't want to explain. "You must be hungry. Dinner's just about—"

"Enough!" Qayin barked. "We're not finished here."

Versula firmed her stance. "I just want to feed my boy—"

"He's not a boy, Versula!" Qayin reminded sharply. "Hasn't been a 'boy' for many years, if his bragging is to be believed."

Versula flushed red and only glanced in the direction of her son.

“He’s an officer first. Remember that. Being ‘your boy’ is so far down the list it doesn’t even make the page. We’ll come eat when we’re ready. Understood?”

Versula nodded submissively and sent her son a quick look.

He understood it. *Just do whatever you have to.*

Without another word, she scurried back to the dining hall where her mother was giving orders to the maids about the seating arrangements.

Qayin cocked his head toward the study and started for it, and his son dutifully fell in behind him. Qayin threw open the door and promptly went to sit behind the grand desk that was the High General’s, but apparently the Advising General felt comfortable to take over whenever he felt the need.

Lemuel paused for the slightest of moments before following. He’d been in that room a few times before, tagging along with his grandfather when he went to visit Relf Shin. The office had changed in the last year since the Cushes took over. Gone were the sweeping red drapes that covered the tall windows. Instead, dull planks of wood served as shutters on the inside, rather than the outside.

Missing, too, was the large portrait of Pere Shin. Lemuel was surprised at his disappointment of that. As a boy he watched Pere’s eyes when he visited the mansion, feeling as if Pere could see right through him. The portly man, while large and threatening, also seemed to have a bit of mischievousness about him, as if he held secrets. Maybe Cush moved the painting to the Command School.

Qayin Thorne would have moved it to a rubbish heap.

“Sit,” Qayin ordered, pointing to a plain wooden chair.

Lemuel sat between the cushioned and forbidden chairs on either side of him.

“Your biweekly reports have been thorough, but you’ve left out some key information. I suspect you did so to maintain discretion about certain people and activities?” Qayin’s question was more of a restatement of what his son should have already understood.

Lemuel was used to the questioning. It began when he was four. “Yes, sir. I was as forthcoming as I could be, sir.”

Qayin frowned at the vague response. “What have you learned from Master Sergeant Zenos?”

Lemuel hadn’t expected that to be the first item of business. He blinked and hesitated, even though he knew it would annoy the general. “Uh, I’ve learned a few things from him. What, sir,

specifically do you wish me to learn? He just an enlisted man.”

Qayin rolled his eyes. “*Just an enlisted man . . .* how dense is this captain?” he muttered loudly. “What have you learned?”

“Uh . . . scheduling. Training of new recruits. Uh . . .”

“UH?” Qayin bellowed. “What kind of response is that, soldier? I knew you were unprepared for this assignment. I told them you wouldn’t be ready, but they thought you could pick things up on your own.”

Lemuel couldn’t help himself. “Who, sir?”

Qayin ignored him, as he frequently did. His son existed only when he was convenient. “Without the proper training, what can he do?” Thorne lectured the desk. “He wasn’t graduated early for intelligence, but because we needed an inside man!”

This was the first time Lemuel had heard any of this, and it smacked him with confidence-shattering force. Before he could start to work out all of what his father meant, he realized General Thorne was staring at him.

“Tell me, Captain: what does Zenos do *besides* his duty?”

Lemuel frowned, not knowing.

“Does he hang around the taverns?” Qayin barked.

“No, sir.”

“Does he spend his free time with a variety of women?”

“No, sir.”

“Then what *does* he do?”

Suddenly Lemuel understood. “He spends all of his free time with the Shin family, sir. He’s Colonel Shin’s best friend, sir.”

Qayin held up a finger. “Exactly. And why?”

It was then that Lemuel realized he had wasted an entire year, and that horrible insight left his empty stomach queasy. His father had told him he should be learning from Zenos, but he had expected lessons and private discussions—

Now Zenos was making him look stupid.

He hated Zenos.

“He acts as their best friend so that he is closer to Colonel Shin,” Lemuel confessed miserably.

Qayin nodded. “He’s Perrin’s confidante. I recognized that last year. No other soldier would dare use Shin’s first name in a public setting as he did. He attacked his commanding officer, yet they left the garrison the next day as if they were brothers. Zenos has been very careful to plant a most extensive and deep root system, growing

ever more closer to Shin. When the time is right—and it will be sooner rather than later if I have my way—Zenos will be able to uproot Shin in a most devastating manner.”

Lemuel swallowed hard, understanding only about half of what was said, but he’d never admit that.

“And you, son—” it was only on rare occasions that Qayin called him ‘son’—“will be by his side when he does so. You need to be involved, and then I can involve you in *many more things*. Do better, Captain.”

“Yes, sir.” He made to get up, but his father’s head tilting told him to sit back down.

“Now, about a certain young lady whose affections you are to secure . . . have you done so?”

A bead of sweat broke out on his brow. “Not yet, sir. She’s still a bit immature.”

Qayin’s lip curled. “Why should maturity matter?”

Lemuel had worried about this line of questioning. “She’s not interested in courting yet, sir. I have, however, made it clear that I’m always near, always watching, and always present. Just as you instructed, I’m a veritable mountain lion.”

Qayin’s jaw shifted. “You’ve been there nearly a year. It didn’t take me that long to convince your mother.”

Lemuel looked down at his hands and felt his stomach wrench as it had the night Jaytsy demonstrated her ability to kick with shocking accuracy.

“Did you do *everything* I instructed?”

And there was the question he’d been dreading. “I tried to, sir.”

“Tried to?”

Lemuel just nodded. “She, uh . . . wasn’t receptive.”

Qayin sat back. “Then you did it wrong. Or rather, didn’t do it at all!”

“No, sir,” Lemuel whispered.

“Again, you need to do MUCH better.”

I need to avoid her kicks, he thought bitterly to himself. But to his father, he said, “I will, sir.”

“Learn from Zenos; be as close to Shin as he is. Find your own way into his mind. Then when Perrin admires you, he’ll persuade his daughter to accept you.”

When Lemuel couldn’t think of any response, Qayin sighed in annoyance. “You know why I have only one son, right?”

Lemuel knew. He’d been told many times.

“So that I could pour all of my efforts into one select child. But I’ve come to the conclusion that was the wrong approach. Your mother had begged to have a second child, but I thought the competition would have been bad for you. But I should’ve had a second son in case my first son disappointed me, as he is right now.”

Lemuel knew he shouldn’t mention the possibility that the second child could have been a girl. A female hadn’t been sired by a Thorne for three generations. A daughter would have been too great a disappointment, if it had the nerve to show up.

Qayin stared at his son, who sat immobile. Finally he said, “Go. Your grandparents will be expecting to eat soon, and if you keep Cush waiting, he’ll get his revenge by eating everything.”

It wasn’t a joke. Qayin didn’t believe in those.

Lemuel stood up, saluted his father, and headed out of the study.

His mother caught up to him before he reached the washing room, and she pulled him aside into a recessed doorway.

“So good to see you!” she said with a practiced smile. She got right to business. “Your father was right about one thing,” she said as she wiped some road dust from his silver buttons as a pretext for their secret conversation.

Lemuel knew she’d been listening in. She always was.

“If her father admires you, Jaytsy will feel obligated to accept you.”

Something dark opened up in Lemuel’s gut, and he saw a flash of anguish in his mother’s eyes. He realized then how she came to marry his father: obligation.

“Also realize,” Versula continued to fuss over her son, “that with a father like Perrin, Jaytsy doesn’t wear two faces.” She gently fingered his bruise which she wouldn’t ask twice about. “Now, go wash off the rest of that road dust. You know Grandmother doesn’t like filth at her table.” She turned to float elegantly back to the dining hall.

Lemuel continued to the large washing room, turning his mother’s words over in his head.

She doesn’t wear two faces.

As he ran his hands under the piping hot water that Idumea’s springs generated, pouring out from the ornate gold-plated spigot, he wondered: Didn’t everyone wear two faces?

He scrubbed his face and couldn’t remember the first time his mother instructed him how to find his second one. But he knew, since he was very little, that the tears he shed when his father beat him had

to disappear before Lemuel left the house.

“Put on your second face, Lemuel. The strong one,” she’d tell him.

His anger had to be tempered. “Second face, son,” she’d remind as he left for school. “The proud one.”

And when he went to Command School Preparatory Courses, where, if his grades weren’t perfect, his father expressed his fury with his belt, he remembered himself. “The defiant face, Lemuel.”

He’d made the shift so often that his second face—the public one—automatically appeared since he was eight.

His mother perfected it as well. At home he saw her pleading whenever Qayin dragged her upstairs. But she’d come back later with a calm façade despite the redness in her eyes and the bruises on her arms. In public she was sophisticated and superior. But at home, Lemuel saw the anguish she revealed only briefly as she had a moment ago. Living with a husband whose fury and beatings made him seem more of an animal than a man had taught Versula how to come across as even more than a woman. She was the envy of all the other officers’ wives. Lemuel had heard them gossiping about Versula Thorne, never suspecting that what they admired was her second, perfect face.

Qayin Thorne, however, was the master—of his family, of the army, and of the second face. He could be outright charming and pleasant when it served him. Lemuel hadn’t quite figured out how his father did it, but he would, eventually. It was crucial to his own future success.

As Lemuel dried his face and hands with the scented thick clothes, he remembered how his mother had said “Perrin.” The fervor of her voice sounded like longing, and he wondered why Perrin didn’t require his family to have two faces. They could’ve used two faces last year, but strangely, they didn’t. Their exhaustion, frustration, and even fear had been evident. Lemuel was experienced in recognizing what was lurking in a person’s eyes, despite what the rest of the face said. The Shins had tried to hide some of it, but not effectively, as if they really didn’t know how.

And now, for the past few weeks, their eyes were brighter and clearer, almost deceptively so. But then again, perhaps . . . perhaps it was *real*. Maybe the delight and strength that exuded from Jaytsy was genuine, and not a performance.

He laid down the cloths on the sink basin, careful to fold them just so to please his grandmother, then inspected himself in the

wide mirror. He removed his cap, quickly combed his short-cropped hair to lay smoothly—his father would take note of any slips of imperfection—and regarded his face. He was the most handsome and perfectly proportioned male ever in Idumea or the army, even with the manly bruise. Surely Jaytsy could see that, and wasn't that what females of any species worried about, the appearance of the father of their offspring? He had it all. She just didn't see that yet, because of her immaturity.

Lemuel nodded to his reflection. Now that Perrin was improving, so would everything else. He needed to be more obliging to Perrin, slide under his wing so Jaytsy would see him there. Already Perrin was treating Lemuel as a son: shouting at him and striking him, just as Qayin always had.

Lemuel had to keep the correct balance, though. Perrin knew that he was a future threat, so he had to revise his two faces; one had to be as endearing as a son to the colonel, and the other had to demonstrate he was still a strength to be relied upon.

Command was complicated.

At least he had a week to think about how to work the colonel to get his daughter. And then, he'd get everything else he deserved.

Knock-knock . . . knock-knock-knock.

It *had* been a wonderful week. Perrin was more firm than the mountains before him, the fort was running smoothly, the soldiers were responding to him again, and that blasted “knock” had been gone to Idumea for The Dinner.

Just like bad things, all good things come to an end.

Perrin took a deep breath and said, after a longer-than-necessary pause, “Come in.”

Captain Thorne opened the door as if he had been rehearsing to do so with measured gusto. It was good to see him so unsure, as if he had been thrown down and was now trying to find his feet.

Perrin tried on him his most threatening glare.

Thorne swallowed hard.

Internally, Perrin grinned. Oh yes. He still had it. Let the power struggle begin.

“Sir?”

“I see you’ve returned from The Dinner, Thorne,” Perrin intoned. “Enjoy yourself?”

“It was good to be home again, sir. But to be honest, I enjoy Edge even more.”

So *that’s* how he was going to play it, Perrin thought. Ingratiate himself to the authority. So life in the tower will now be nauseating.

“Check the duty roster on your way out. Zenos didn’t scheduled you until tomorrow morning. You have time to settle in from your trip.”

“Thank you, sir. I trust Zenos’s duty roster meets with your approval? I realize how insightful and perceptive his approach is.”

It took all of Perrin’s will to not groan out loud. A duty roster that’s insightful? Perceptive? He almost preferred the undermining captain to this sniveling, groveling excuse for a man. *Boy*.

“I’m sure you’re hungry, Thorne. If you hurry, you can catch dinner in the mess hall—”

“Sir, there’s something else,” Thorne said. He looked behind him to make sure no one was listening in, and shut the door. “Sir, I want you to know my father and grandfather tried to keep the news quiet, but it seems that the Administrators heard about what happened here. About the chant for you to be a general?”

Perrin sat back and folded his hands on his lap. It was the only way to keep them from forming fists. “And exactly *how* did they learn about that, Captain Thorne?”

Thorne paled slightly. “Sir, there must have been over eight thousand people here! Surely *someone* is going to say *something*.”

“Yes. They would.”

Thorne swallowed again. “Anyway, sir, my father and grandfather felt you should be released from your probation now. They even made that recommendation to Chairman Mal, but you see, the chant has made the Administrators nervous.”

“Nervous,” Perrin repeated dully. He hadn’t expected his probation to be lifted. Likely not ever. And that was fine by him.

But Thorne was trying to use it. “Sir, it’s Mal who won’t lift your probation. My father and grandfather are petitioning—”

“There’s no need,” Perrin told him. “I don’t want either of them doing any favors for me. Is that understood, Captain?”

Captain Thorne blinked in surprise. “Of course, sir.”

“Anything else, Thorne?”

Thorne licked his lips anxiously. “Just that . . . I’m sorry, sir.”

Really? Perrin nearly blurted out. Finally? Sorry for attacking my daughter? For trying to supplant my authority? For being a roach that begs for my boot to stomp on you?

But he only said, coolly, "You are?"

Thorne nodded. "You really should be released by now, sir. It's been almost a full year."

Perrin's glare sharpened to a piercing point.

Thorne didn't know what to do with it. He tried to catch it, match it, evade it, then after ten uncomfortable seconds cleared his throat. "I'll go get dinner now, sir. Unless there's anything else?"

"No." Unless he was ready to hand over his resignation, but the captain's hands were disappointingly empty. "Dismissed, Captain."

Perrin clenched both of his fists as the captain went out the door. "Well," he said after a minute of deep breathing to calm himself. "Now that he's back, I suppose it's time to start burning down the barn. But first, we have to build a couple of others."

The next day Perrin came out of his office to see his three young officers sitting obediently at the large forward command desk, wearing expressions of apprehension. This was, after all, the first time since they'd come to the fort that he held a weekly officers' meeting. He was about fifty weeks late to follow procedure.

Well, as they say: best now than never was.

"Thank you for coming," he said cheerfully and loudly as he dropped a stack of files next to the open chair. The other officers, he noted, were seated about as far away as they could be around the desk. "We'll be doing this on a weekly basis, by the way, so make sure your schedules are cleared for this hour."

"An excellent idea," said Thorne, and Perrin had noticed that his sycophantic style from last night was in full force.

"You see, sir," Thorne continued eagerly, "we did something like this last year as well, as per and in accordance to Fort Procedures, Section 3—"

"Yes, yes, yes," Perrin interrupted as he sat down to the desk. But it was the manner in which he sat that helped establish the mood of the meeting.

He had a few ways of putting his body down; subtly, normally, and a way that Mahrree called *big-ly*, as if everything around him couldn't

help but lean toward his direction, much as when he sat in the middle of the sofa.

Today, though, he made sure he sat *huge-ly*. That the chair made an audible creak when he thunked his full weight on it only added to the effect.

“Thorne,” he said, after making quite a bit of noise scooching the chair closer to the desk so that the three pairs of eyes were glued to him, “I frequently skimmed the notes you took. But now we’ll be holding the weekly meeting the *correct* way.”

There were three things Perrin picked up in that moment; first, Thorne was so full of pride that it was easy to insult him, as his affronted scoff, which he tried to keep in, demonstrated; two, Offra *was* capable of smiling, and hiding it in almost an instant; three, Radan was *incapable* of holding in his snicker, for which he had to cover his mouth with his hand.

And, as a pure bonus, Perrin also picked up that Thorne and Radan had had some kind of arrangement, and that one of the many strings that held them together was severed by Radan’s snickering.

Perrin sat back in the chair. Oh this was going to be fun.

“Now,” he announced, “and Thorne, take notes—”

“But sir, that’s enlisted man’s work. Now, while I do enjoy having only officers here—”

Perrin twisted fully to face Thorne who paused, unsure of why the commander was scowling at him.

“There’s a space at this desk next to me that will, in the future, be occupied by Sergeant Zenos,” he told Thorne steadily. “He’d be here today if he wasn’t south on leave visiting his father and sister. And as per accordance to whatever section you were just trying to quote, Beneff may also attend this meeting. However—” and this was where Perrin was about to lie, “—because I don’t want us to be disturbed, Beneff is manning the reception desk downstairs and will ensure that no one comes up to the tower.”

He just couldn’t put up with Beneff’s doddering, nor his recent habit to hum at random moments and dig his finger into his ear.

“Now, Thorne, you will do as you are told by the commander of the fort, because that is, actually, what I am, and while I concede that in the past year I acted as considerably less than that, I’m done with my little break and am back fully in charge. Pull out that quill and paper, Captain. And follow standard procedures this time, not whatever that little chart thing you came up with about seven moons ago. That helped absolutely no one.”

Thorne, stunned, could do nothing but follow the direct order.

Turning back to the other smirking young men, Perrin began with, “A new year, and new projects. Lots of responsibility to hand around, and we’re going to start today. Gentlemen, the growing and collecting of the taxation last year was a big success, for which I belatedly thank each of you. However, we can’t sit back and think that Idumea will come to the rescue again should another disaster hit us. Nor do Edgers, I’m sure, want to be beholden to Idumea again.”

Perrin could tell Thorne wanted to say something, but he wasn’t about to give him—scribbling frantically to keep up with the deliberately fast rate in which Perrin spoke—any chance of interruption.

“So I’m instituting our own ‘reserves’ program. This year we’ll once again grow as much as we did last year, but instead of sending it to Idumea, we’ll store it here in Edge in barns which we’ll designate as storehouses, similar to the one we have in the compound. Then, if there’s an emergency, we can provide. We’ll continue this storing procedure each year, restocking each Harvest, and distributing the old goods to those less fortunate in Edge.”

Thorne’s lips were moving as he scrawled, something on his mind that he couldn’t express until he was done recording.

Perrin made sure he didn’t get that opportunity. “This project will be in addition to our regular work, so it will require a great deal of dedication for the next several moons. There are two main components: securing land and constructing the storehouses, and explaining the procedure to the villagers and visiting families—”

“—which I will gladly take on, excellent ideas, Colonel.” Apparently Thorne could babble while taking notes. “When Idumea hears of our plan, I’m sure they will—”

“No,” was all Perrin said, and *huge-ly*. He had a manner of speaking bigger than anyone else, too.

Thorne’s quill stumbled on the page and he looked up as if he’d been slapped. “No?” He seemed like he was ready to slap back.

Oh the toady was already slipping, poor captain.

“No,” Perrin repeated more easily, his focus solely on the two lieutenants. “This project is for you two men.”

Radan and Offra both sat a little taller, their eyes darting over at Thorne with hints of superiority.

Perrin pointed at Radan. “According to your file, you did some construction down in Midplain. Therefore I’ll put you in charge of securing land, timber, builders—everything we need to build two

storehouses, one on either side of Edge. You may find an unused barn already available which we may be able to convert. I want frequent updates, and we'll meet once a week to evaluate progress."

"Yes, sirrrrr!" Radan said, enthusiastically adding even more r's.

That had annoyed Perrin to no end, and if he was going to work with this young man, something had to change. "Radan, I appreciate the zeal, but 'sir' is supposed to be a quick response, not take half the afternoon to get through. Work on that, if only when you're around me, all right?" He added a friendly smile that relaxed Radan's tense shoulders.

"Yes . . . sir."

"Well done. Now, Offra," he turned to him, "I understand you helped Zenos with the collection of the taxation, and I want you to resume that. Because Zenos will initially be busy with other matters, I'm putting the project of contacting villagers, plotting—"

It was Thorne's prolonged throat-clearing that caused Perrin to stop and look at the captain. For good measure, Perrin slapped him, hard, on the back. "Something caught in there, Thorne?"

Thorne, who had been bristling like a porcupine for the past five minutes, raised his eyebrows. "Sir, I must protest. I think *I* am much more up to the task of—"

"And I don't. Offra," he turned back to him, "as I was saying—"

"Sir, have you read his file?" Thorne demanded.

Perrin didn't even glance at Thorne as he said, with a faint smile aimed at Offra, "Yes, I've read Offra's file. But more than that, I've observed the man himself. I believe he's far more than 'adequate' to handle this assignment. Besides, his former commander is an arrogant twit who can't recognize character if it bit off his nose. However," and now Perrin turned to see that Thorne's face had gone beet red, "I've also observed *you* over the past year, and I recommend that you shut your mouth before a new entry is added to *your* file."

Thorne clamped his mouth shut so tight there was an audible click, and he turned an enraged shade of purple.

"And a *well done* to you, too," Perrin said, as if speaking to an eight-year-old. "I suppose you *have* learned something since your diplomacy courses."

Even Offra sniggered at that, and Radan looked quickly out the

observation windows to hide his grin.

“As I was saying, Offra—dig out the files of what you did last year, and tomorrow we’ll go over them to see what needs modifying. Then you’ll begin creating a strategy to present this to Edge. I want this to be strictly voluntary. I believe that when Edgers see the wisdom in it they’ll come around and want to contribute.”

“Sir?” Offra piped up. “A question?”

“Of course! This is, after all, a meeting where all opinions and questions can be freely stated,” said Perrin generously, fully aware that his treatment of Thorne since the beginning contradicted all of that. Well, had to keep the young officers on their toes, right?

Offra cleared his throat. “Could we . . . offer incentives?”

“Yes? Yes?” Perrin encouraged in the same manner he used on his old dog Barker to get him to finally bark. Which he never did.

Offra nodded nervously. “Such as . . . maybe villagers’ names would be posted on the message boards for their contributions? Announced at the amphitheater? Something public that feeds people’s egos? They tend to respond to that, you know.”

Perrin grinned. “Yes, they absolutely do! Good ideas. Jot them down, Thorne. You seem to be falling behind, there.”

With an angry harrumph—likely forgetting that wasn’t a subservient noise to emit—Thorne went back to scribbling.

“Keep ideas like that coming, Offra,” Perrin said.

Offra’s hand went up like a timid school boy’s.

“I see the lieutenant in the corner has another question?”

Offra smiled in embarrassment. “Just one more thing, sir? Last year Rector Yung assisted in convincing some of the villagers to help. May I use him again?”

“And the marvelous suggestions just keep coming, don’t they Thorne?” Perrin slapped him hard on the back again, making sure he hit the same spot as before. That’d have to be the last time, Perrin knew, because he was enjoying hitting that boy far too much.

The quill in Thorne’s hand flipped out, leaving a messy trail across the notes. “Oh, sir!”

“Oh, dear,” Perrin tsk-tsked. It really was just that easy to undo the captain. “Well, you needed to rewrite all of those anyway. Three copies, just like your grandfather requests.”

Radan was fully grinning now, and Perrin thought he heard a few more strings between him and Thorne snap.

Now Radan raised his hand.

Perrin leaned forward. “Really, boys—no need to raise hands. We’re not in Command School anymore, thank the Creator.”

Radan’s arm sagged as he glanced at Thorne. “But last year we always had to . . .” He trailed off as Thorne glared at him.

Perrin smiled kindly. “Never was in section 3, or wherever the procedures for weekly meetings are. In fact, when a group of officers get together, it’s expected a few shouting matches will occur. All part of the fun, right? Now, what do you want to say?” Radan grinned as Perrin added to Thorne, “And be sure to get all of this.”

“Sir, any particular kind of barns you want for the storehouses?”

Perrin leaned back and looked at the ceiling, contemplating. “I don’t really know, Radan. Surprise me. We’ll go over the plans you find, and work from there. Did you get all that, Thorne?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“My, you could split a mountain with a response like that, Captain.” Perrin slapped his hands on the desktop, causing Thorne to make yet another inky spill on his notes.

“Oh, sir! Really!”

“Oh, I am *so* sorry about that. Maybe next time we’ll have Zenos take the notes.”

“Yes, please!”

“Because his writing is *so* much neater . . .”

Half an hour later Perrin grinned as Offra and Radan saluted him readily before heading down the stairs, and Thorne grumbled as he began to rewrite his notes.

When Perrin got up, it was with a *huge-ly* bump against the desk, which meant Thorne growled out loud, crumpled up the sheet of paper he had just began—now covered in spilled ink—and slapped down another sheet to begin once more.

“Don’t *worry*, Captain,” Perrin said soothingly, “I have another officers meeting scheduled soon, and that’s where you’ll likely get to witness a real shouting match or two. And someone else will take the notes.” Then, unable to help himself, and because it felt so right, he slapped Thorne’s back one last time, leaving a red mark on his hand that burned with enormous satisfaction.

When Perrin closed the door to his office, he chuckled.

Being in command was fun again.

Chapter II ~ “Men, it’s our turn to go hunting!”

A week later, and three weeks after the Remembrance Ceremony, Colonel Shin sat at another officers’ meeting, but this one was much larger and better well-attended by a dozen men seated at the large table with him. The meeting was being held behind locked doors in a side training room off of the mess hall. Across from Perrin at the rectangular table sat Master Sergeant Zenos, then Lieutenant Colonel Karna and his lieutenant to one side, and Major Yordin and his master sergeant on the other. Along a shorter side was Major Fadh and one of his assistants, and across from them were Sergeant Major Beneff, because Perrin couldn’t come up with a reason to exclude him, and Captain Thorne.

Thorne was actually closest to Perrin, who occupied one long side of the table all by himself where he’d spread tidy stacks of pages and notes. But Thorne had a manner of sitting away from his commander that suggested much more distance than there was. He had learned to sit *small-ly*, and for once, Perrin approved of his behavior. Seated behind the table were three more sergeants, accompanying their commanders who traveled there to keep careful notes of the conversation.

“I appreciate all of you attending today,” Perrin began, “and I realize the fort at Rivers would have been a more central site, but seeing as how I’m *still* wedded to Edge’s borders—”

The officers rolled their eyes at Colonel Shin’s extended probation, except for Captain Thorne who sat stoically, if not uneasily.

But there was nothing Perrin wanted to do more on the anniversary of his parents’ death than to conduct this meeting.

“—I appreciate all of you journeying to Edge to join us.”

“Any time, Colonel. You know that,” said Lieutenant Colonel Karna.

Major Fadh of Quake nodded, and Major Yordin of Mountseen said, “I’m sure all of this will die down again soon, Colonel. Just give Idumea a little more time to forget how *loved* you are, and you’ll be a free man again.” Yordin emphasized his point with a confident slap on the table.

Perrin smiled. Yordin’s hand would be red by the end of the meeting, making Perrin wish that Thorne’s back was in smacking distance. The major wasn’t nick-named Roarin’ Yordin for nothing. While his skin was a usual light reddish-brown, and he was of usual height, he was, however, of unusual strength and ferocity when provoked. He kept his head shaved as smooth as his firm chin, so that even his scalp looked muscular. He was who you wanted on your side in a fight, and someone to run away from if he was rooting for the other man. Even though he didn’t enter the university until his late twenties, he soared through the ranks. That was probably why he was headquartered far away from Idumea, just like Perrin.

Sergeant Major Beneff shook his head. “Not so sure about it all dying down, Major, with all due respect, ho-ho. The cows know how to smell the sunset, after all.”

Perrin was used to this, the silent pause that hung in the air after one of Beneff’s bits of knowledge fluttered to the ground, and everyone stared at it wondering what in the world *that* was. A few of the officers looked at Perrin for an explanation, but he merely shook his head to indicate they really didn’t want to pursue it.

Who he felt sorry for were the enlisted men sitting against the wall taking notes for their commanders. The three other scribes looked at Perrin’s, who closed his eyes and silently sniggered.

“Not so sure about it dying down at all, hi-ho. Have you heard about the play?”

Perrin rubbed his forehead as Karna chuckled. “I have!”

Perrin raised an inquisitive eyebrow at him.

Sergeant Zenos’s snort caught Perrin’s attention next, and Shem quickly shook his head apologetically.

The two majors sat up taller.

“Well I haven’t,” said Fadh with a cautious glance at the colonel.

Perrin was surprised at his interest. Major Graeson Fadh was taller than Yordin, slender, darker brown in skin with black hair, and a

perfect foil for Yordin. As roaring as Yordin was, Fadh was quiet, thoughtful, and reserved. That made him an exceptionally sharp man, and allowed him to notice nearly everything.

Except for maybe one thing. “What play, Beneff?”

“We don’t need to hear about that right now,” said Perrin firmly.

But his reticence intrigued Yordin. “Oh, then I think we do! Come on, Beneff. Out with it!” Slap.

Beneff smiled at the majors’ encouragement, and didn’t notice his commander trying to stare him down. “Seems they’re practicing down in Orchards right now. Best plays come out of there, you know. ‘Course, I don’t really know. That’s just what I hear, hum-hum, and one should never ask the rock where the dirt is—”

Yordin’s eyebrows furrowed at that one.

“My brother and his wife live there,” Beneff droned on. “She loves the actors, that woman does. She’d drag us out to everything they put on. Rather glad I got transferred up here—”

Karna made a rolling motion with his hand at Beneff, encouraging him to get to the point.

Perrin just sighed and made himself comfortable. Once the floor was given to Beneff, he wouldn’t give it up until he covered it all.

“Yes-yes. The play is all about our colonel here, called ‘The Midnight Ride of Perrin Shin.’ About the caravan and the attack and the delivery to Edge,” he grinned. “My sister-in-law says it’s very moving. But you know, if the boot leaks, check with the bakers—”

Perrin was used to skipping over Beneff’s rambling, but Major Fadh was now leaning earnestly toward the doddering old fool, as if determined to discern some pattern to the randomness.

“—All kinds of costumes, scenes, movement, noise, ho-ho. My sister-in-law sits in on the practices with her friends. Whole collection of biddies, with their yarns and stick things and so—” He tried to make knitting motions with his hands.

Perrin sighed louder and looked up at the ceiling, wondering if it needed patching. The other soldiers began to smirk.

“—Supposed to open in Pools in just a few weeks. The play, that is. And it’ll be all the rage!” Beneff predicted. “The lead is that popular young buck, what’s his name?” he said, snapping his fingers. “Straw? Reed? Wool?”

Karna squinted. “Weaves?”

Perrin raised both eyebrows at Brillen that time.

“Yes!” Beneff slapped the table in Yordin fashion. It was

contagious. All of them would be doing it by the end of the meeting. “That’s the man.”

Brillen burst into a grin. “That’s the name written all over the other side of my niece’s slate.” He turned to Perrin. “Nice going, there. Apparently every female under fifty loves him.”

The majors began to laugh, and their assistants covered their mouths just in case their laughter wasn’t appropriate.

Shin glared at Karna.

Brillen and Shem tried to hide their smiles, but not too hard.

Only Thorne sat stony faced.

“Oh yes-yes,” Beneff agreed. “Excellent bit of casting there, hey-hey. Couldn’t find a more popular actor even if the flowers weren’t blooming purple.”

Perrin’s mouth began to twitch, curiosity getting to him. “Has he ever been to Edge?”

Beneff shook his head. “Edge? Ho! That’s a laugh. Edge for Weaves. He’s too popular to have ever been here. But then again, I imagine they’d try to bring the production up—”

“No, no, no!” Perrin shook his head. “Definitely not.”

Shem snorted into his sleeve and tried to pretend it was a sneeze.

“Oh, I don’t know, Colonel,” Beneff said slowly. “Quite the thing it would be, hum-hum. Eh? Now, while we all know that spiders have different opinions about the cat, *I’d* be interested to see how they make that handsome young buck look as old as you. Ho, he’s only in his late twenties, if that.”

Shem’s next snort was so loud that Brillen slapped him on the back as a warning. He started coughing in a meager attempt to cover his laugh.

The majors and lieutenant colonel pressed their lips together firmly and stared at anything else but the colonel. Their assistants sitting next to them followed suit.

Because Perrin’s glare at Beneff had become deadly.

But the old coot didn’t notice. “You see,” he said turning to Karna’s lieutenant, “I’ve seen how they transform someone into another. Quite clever, really. They have these squishy cushions,” he gestured a bit aggressively, “that they put under the clothing to make someone appear bigger and fatter—”

Perrin felt himself sucking in his gut ever so subtly. His trouser size had increased only two, maybe three inches since he was a lieutenant, but still. He glanced at Shem to see if he noticed, but Master

Sergeant Zenos was staring at his lap, his shoulders spasming every few seconds.

“—then,” Beneff continued enthusiastically, now looking at Major Yordin’s master sergeant who held his face surprisingly well, except for the twitching near the corners of his mouth, “they put this powder in the hair to make it all gray—”

“I’m only *starting* to go gray,” said Perrin quietly.

There were indefinable noises that emanated from nearly every soldier, mostly from their mouths and noses.

Except for Thorne who remained sat completely still.

“Well, *of course*, sir. But for dramatic effect, you see,” Beneff explained. He focused all of his attention on poor, struggling Zenos. Shem’s shoulders kept shaking, and he refused to look up.

“Then they take this special charcoal, ho-ho, and draw the lines around the eyes and mouth to emphasize all the wrinkles—”

A violent outbreak of coughing and snorting and back slapping struck the officers and their assistants.

Perrin had finally had enough. “Sergeant Beneff!” Some of the men had deadlines to keep, after all. “We can discuss this later.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Perrin noticed that Shem was now hiding his face in both of his hands and shaking uncontrollably. Only Thorne, of all the men in the room, maintained his complete composure. Apparently, Perrin decided, there was a benefit to having no natural sense of humor.

“Well, of course, sir,” said Beneff innocently. “You’re correct, and with cake on the side, ho-hum. We *should* be getting to your business, sir.”

“*Thank you*, Beneff,” said Perrin generously, and he surveyed the condition of the men in the room.

Some were bravely looking directly at him and practicing their serious faces, while the others cleared their throats, coughed, wiped their eyes, or repositioned themselves in their seats.

After a few moments the only one not near any semblance of attention was Shem, who was still vibrating. Something painful happened to him under the table, either from Karna on his left or Yordin on his right—by their demeanors, it may have been both—which made him jump in his seat. Finally Master Sergeant Zenos looked up with tears of suppressed laughter, and now pain, welling in his eyes.

Colonel Shin gave him a few seconds before saying, “Do you need to be excused for a while, Master Sergeant?”

Zenos's mouth moved in a variety of ways before he eventually muttered a pained, "No, sir!"

The smallest hint of a satisfied smile crept around Perrin's eyes. Shem was probably the only man who recognized it. "Then may we get to the situation at hand, Zenos?"

Shem nodded and put a hand to his mouth, just in case.

Perrin exhaled and leaned forward in his chair. With the entertainment portion of the meeting concluded, it was time for business.

"You all know by now that Guarders have taken over some of the houses in Moorland. The longer we let them be comfortable there, the more brazen they'll be when they attack. With the weather warming, I doubt it will be long before they come to Edge, or Mountseen, or Rivers, or even Quake." Without pausing to let the commanders add comments to their nodding in agreement, he hit them with: "Gentlemen, I've asked you here to propose that we join together and go after them *first*."

Perrin fully expected the outburst of responses, and hoped that Thorne noted he was now seeing his first officers argument—the way an officers meeting should be conducted.

"An offensive hit?"

"We strike first?"

"That's never been done before!"

"What does the High General think of this?"

"What kind of precedent will that set?"

Perrin waited for the surprise to die down before he continued. "I know this is uncharacteristic of the way this army has acted in the past. We've always been organized for purely defensive reasons. But I fail to see how sitting and waiting like a *young buck* in hunting season—" he glanced at Beneff, "—is going to preserve our villages. We know where they are for the first time, and we have people who know the area. A farmer working the fields across the road here used to live in Moorland. Mr. Briter has helped me create a detailed map of the area, and marked the houses which remained intact after the land tremor. Those are the most likely structures sheltering Guarders. If we combine the forces of our four forts and hit them with one major strike, we could wipe them out. Men, it's our turn to go hunting!"

The soldiers sat quietly stunned at the table, considering the idea, and Perrin worked his shoulders deeper into the chair, waiting. They would see it, he was sure. The obvious solution—

Fadh was the first to slowly begin nodding. "It could work. We

could scout out the area again and see how many there are—”

“No,” said Perrin firmly. “They always seem to see us before we see them. Sending scouts would alarm them to our presence, and maybe even to our intentions. We need to catch them unaware. We make a full force strike with everything we have. One thousand armed men ought to eliminate whoever’s hiding there.”

Someone at the table let out a low whistle.

“And what does the High General think of this?” Thorne’s voice was thin.

Perrin had known it was his captain who had asked that earlier, and he’d been waiting to hear it again. He interlocked his fingers in front of him and leaned to his side. “I don’t *know*, Captain. I haven’t bothered to ask him. I suppose you could have discussed it when you were at The Dinner, but I didn’t have my plans completed then. High General Cush never seems to respond to my messages anyway. Do you know why that is?”

Actually, Perrin had sent only two unimportant messages about how many forms he was supposed to keep on hand at all times, or if he could burn the fort down instead, just to see if anyone was paying attention at the garrison. No one was.

Captain Thorne shifted restlessly in his chair and looked around the table. Every eye was on him, and none of them friendly, Perrin noticed with no small sense of satisfaction.

“No, sir. I don’t,” Thorne said. “But I’ll send General Thorne a message directly after this meeting if you wish.”

“I’ll take care of the messages to the Advisor myself, Captain Thorne,” Perrin informed him. Turning to the rest of the officers he said, “Here’s the first problem of several. While I have a plan of attack drafted and ready, I’d not able to lead the attack myself since I can’t go beyond the borders of the furthest farm, still three miles from Moorland. The owner of that farm has already agreed to postpone planting his crops so we can use the land as a staging area. The fort at Edge can keep us supplied, and I can direct from that point, but others will have to lead the attack should you agree to the plan.”

“Agree to this plan, agree to everything, sir!” Major Yordin said with a broad grin. “And if no one here minds, I’d be honored to lead the attack. Perhaps if we have an officer from each fort leading different sections, it will help unify the men under one commander. For example, if young Thorne here would represent Edge—”

Zenos cleared his throat loudly. “Uh, Major, excuse me, but *Colonel?*”

“Yes, Zenos?”

Perrin could see exactly what Shem was thinking: the captain couldn't be trusted further than he could be thrown. Zenos looked around the table and caught Thorne's gaze.

Thorne's face remained stony but a definite spark of fear was in his eyes.

Shem noticed it, too, and he leaned back, a little less worried. “I'm sorry, sir. Never mind. Please go on, Major Yordin.”

Yordin sent Zenos half a smile. “As I was saying, Captain Thorne could lead the Edge contingency, under *my guidance* of course,” he nodded to Zenos next to him, “and really earn those patches on his uniform!”

Fadh smiled. “This idea's getting better and better. And I would be honored to join Colonel Shin at the staging area and let my captain have the opportunity to earn his patches as well.” Fadh gripped his captain's shoulder and shook it.

Fadh's captain sat taller and nodded at Major Yordin. “Absolutely, sir! Quake will proudly serve next to Mountseen to eliminate the Guardians in Moorland. I welcome the opportunity. I've served for six years and look forward to some real action.” He shot a quick look to Thorne intended to stab him.

Thorne's shoulder twitched.

Karna smiled. “Sounds like there's going to be quite the party, and Rivers would hate to miss out on it. As many of you know, Shin and I have had our share of chasing Guardians. I was just a lieutenant the first time we engaged them.”

Perrin smiled at the memory of dragging a young, nervous Brillen through the forests for days and nights trying to flush the Guardians like pheasants. They killed their first Guardian together, promoting them from mere officers to real soldiers. Karna was definitely no longer that hesitant officer, and probably had more experience with Guardians than anyone except Perrin.

Karna continued, “But it's time to let someone else get some experience, so I think I'll let Captain Rigoff battle it out with my lieutenant here for the honor of leading the Rivers contingency.”

Karna's lieutenant smiled back at him. “He may be older, sir, but remember, *I'm faster*. Major Yordin, it would be an honor!”

Brillen chuckled and winked at Perrin.

Perrin took a deep, contented breath. He thought getting the commanders to agree to an offensive would be far more difficult than this. But apparently sitting and waiting to be hit had become as tiresome to them as it was for him. Enough playing the wounded falcon. This bird may not have been able to fly out of his barn in Edge, but he still had talons and a sharp beak and lots of fight. And now he had hunters—

“Are *ALL* of you mad?”

Twelve pairs of eyes stared at the youngest officer in the room whose face revealed that he regretted opening his mouth. Even the sergeants keeping notes looked up from their pages. But there was no going back now for Captain Thorne. His words hung in the air, more obviously than Beneff’s.

Perrin folded his arms. Well, he *had* told him that officers’ meeting usually included a bit of shouting—

Captain Thorne looked at each of them, his eyes finally resting on Perrin. “Colonel, with all due respect, since when is being the aggressor the prescribed method of defense? They never taught this in Command School!”

Before Perrin could respond, Roarin’ Yordin did.

“You’re right, Thorne,” said Yordin. “But the field is far different than what you’ve been taught in the classroom. We do an injustice to students letting them believe that we’ve prepared them for life when they graduate. The university doesn’t do that. Only experience does. That’s why you’re here, young man. To *get* that experience, not to tell us what some old men behind desks think was accurate a decade ago.” He slapped the table.

“Hear, hear!” said Karna.

Fadh smiled in agreement.

“But, but . . .” Thorne gestured in exasperation, “you’re not supposed to go contrary to the prescribed methods without the explicit consent of the hierarchy!”

“Sounds like you recited that straight out of the book, Thorne,” said Perrin easily.

The other soldiers chuckled.

“Well I did!” he defended. “Considering who wrote it, I thought it was important to remember. You know who wrote that book, Colonel?”

“Yes, I do, Thorne. My father. When he was first made the High General. And that was a few decades ago. It no longer applies.” Perrin’s voice grew husky. “Much of what he wrote and believed

no longer applies.”

“Thorne,” Yordin leaned across the table. “You obviously can memorize and remember everything. But boy, you’re inexperienced. Out here you learn to think on your feet. There isn’t a ‘prescribed method’ for every situation. If I wrote to your grandfather for approval of every decision, nothing would ever get done. As commander, I am in command. If the High General doesn’t like my decisions, he’s welcome to tell me himself. I like Colonel Shin’s idea. It makes sense. No, it’s not standard procedure, but these aren’t standard times.” He leaned back in his chair. “Do you know why I became an officer?”

“No, sir,” Thorne said, his jaw set.

“Years ago—now, mind you, I’m not as old as Old Colonel Shin here,” Yordin smirked. “I’m only forty-two. But when I was a boy, my grandfather and grandmother disappeared.”

“Really?” Perrin had never heard about that.

Yordin nodded to him before turning back to Thorne. “First my grandfather, then the next day my grandmother. My father didn’t know why or how. There was no forced entry into the house, no bloodshed, and no sign of them suddenly deciding to move and not telling anyone—which wouldn’t have been in their nature anyway. A few unimportant papers were gone, but nothing else. My father called for the chief of enforcement the night my grandfather went missing. He and several enforcers scoured the village looking for clues. My grandmother sat distraught in the house with my mother. I remember her crying, and late into the night my mother fell asleep on their sofa. I was groggy and leaning against her when I felt someone kiss my forehead. I opened my eyes and in the dim light I saw my grandmother. That was the last time anyone saw her. The next morning she was gone as well.”

Thorne had the decency to seem disturbed. “I’m sorry to hear that, Major. But sir, people go missing every year. It’s not our domain. That’s always been the responsibility of the enforcers.”

“True,” conceded Yordin. “And my father had little faith in the enforcers of Vines. After only one day they gave up, said they had nothing to go on. My father went all the way to Idumea looking for someone to help, and he found someone willing to listen: High General Pere Shin.”

Perrin studied his hands and gave them a small smile.

Yordin continued. “General Shin had heard of other people

missing as well. He had done some investigating on his own and had a theory that he shared only with my father: Guarders.”

Perrin’s head snapped up, his eyebrows furrowed in surprise. His hands came apart as he said, “What?”

Major Yordin nodded. “This was still the time of the kings, you realize,” he said again to Thorne, who looked very interested. “At the time, some suspected King Querul the Third actually controlled the Guarders, or at least a small portion of them. It’s handy to have a secretive society doing your dirty work for you, such as assassinating those who speak out against you. General Shin couldn’t make his suspicions known or he would’ve been the next victim.” Yordin shifted his gaze to Perrin. “I’m sorry, Colonel. I’ve never told anyone this before. But now it seems imperative.”

Perrin nodded his agreement. “My father said the kings used a secret group of assassins. King Oren, not so much. When the Administrators took over, Relf thought he’d identified and eliminated the last of them that were still around. But I’m not sure he even knew of Pere’s suspicions, that Guarders might be *abducting people*? Over a hundred years ago, yes, that happened, but thirty years ago? He never said anything about that to me.”

“I’m sure your father didn’t know,” Yordin told him. “When your grandfather died the next year, and Relf replaced him, all communication with my father stopped.”

“I’m sorry, Gari. Pere was a sloppy record keeper. I think that’s why Relf was so obsessive about his paperwork. He must’ve suspected information had been lost when Pere died so suddenly—.” Perrin didn’t finish, but went back to studying his hands.

“But Major Yordin,” Thorne said, “what would Guarders want with an old man and an old woman?”

Yordin scoffed. “They weren’t *old*, Thorne! At least, I don’t consider fifty-four and fifty-five as ‘old’. Not since I turned forty,” he admitted. “But you ask a legitimate question. Why’d they take them? I’m not sure. I would’ve thought they weren’t taken at all but met with some kind of accident instead, if it weren’t for the fact that they went at different times. My grandmother knew something that she didn’t tell us, and I think she was kissing me good-bye because she knew her fate. That’s what’s troubled me all these years. That’s why I eventually chose a career that would allow me to make sure nothing like this ever happened again.”

Fadh had been very quiet, listening. “Yordin,” he started tentatively, “a family from Quake went missing about four weeks ago.

A father, mother, and two little boys. No sign of forced entry.”

Yordin went wooden.

“People go missing all the time, Major,” Captain Thorne reminded him. “Maybe a hundred every year. The ones recovered had been kidnapped by past lovers or by angry land owners looking for back rent. That’s not our domain. Maybe they went for a walk and fell through the crust of a steam vent, or fell in a river and drowned. Little boys can’t swim. They could’ve been washed away—”

“Enough!” Perrin barked, noticing Yordin’s still frozen face.

Thorne shut his mouth, frustrated.

Fadh ignored the captain. “Yordin, do you remember any details about your grandparents’ disappearance?”

Yordin shook his head. “I was just eleven years old. So often I wished I had asked my parents about it, but I never did before they passed away.”

Shem cleared his throat. “Sirs, I wonder what would be the purpose in taking a family with two small boys?”

Fadh shifted in his seat before answering. “I must confess, Zenos, the idea that the family was *taken* occurred to me a while ago. I have nothing to go on but a hunch. But usually my hunches are correct. Consider, Master Sergeant, that if the Guarders are losing ranks—and since they were quiet for many years, that’s a fair assumption—what better way to increase those ranks than by forced conscription? *Kidnap* new recruits.”

Shem groaned. “In a few years, those two little boys would be fully indoctrinated to fight for the Guarders.”

“That’s brilliant!” Beneff said, shaking his head. “Because if the leather rips, ho-HO!”

The officers ignored that.

“But why take the parents?” Perrin wondered aloud, a terrible idea forming in his mind.

Fadh shrugged. “Maybe to get to the boys? Maybe they don’t even keep the parents once they have them.” He cringed as he considered the same conclusion Perrin had drawn.

Brillen blinked with a new idea. “They might be in Moorland—”

Yordin clapped his hand on the table. “That’s why the houses in Moorland! To raise a new fighting force! Shin, they’re *growing* a new force!”

Fadh leaped to his feet. “Colonel—those little boys . . . we can’t attack children!”

“Majors, Majors,” Perrin raised his hands. “Calm down. We’ve established nothing. We don’t even know *why* that family vanished. Fadh, who headed the investigation to their disappearance?”

“The chief of enforcement, but I assisted,” he said, slowly sitting down again. “My wife knew them. Even though we can’t have them, she loves children. They moved to our neighborhood a season ago and my wife would sneak the boys sweets when they walked past. She was very distressed by their disappearance.” Fadh sighed, his eyes clouding. “We found nothing at all. She’s still searching when she can.”

“How old were the boys?” Perrin asked, as gently as he could.

“Four and two, almost.”

Shem groaned again. “Just babies.”

“I’m telling you, it’s brilliant!” Beneff said. “The bears may break berries, but hee-hee. Get them while they’re young—”

“Beneff!” Karna said, noticing that Fadh’s color had been fading. “Enough, *please*.”

Beneff raised his hands, but his face still reflected appreciation.

“Gentlemen,” Perrin said, “do we have access to records about how many people have disappeared over the years? Honestly, Yordin, Fadh, I think we’re chasing after nothing here but I’m intrigued. Maybe there’s a connection. Why *are* the Guardians in houses after all these years? It’s worth looking into.”

Karna shrugged. “We can contact all of the chiefs of enforcement around the world and ask them for numbers. I have a feeling they don’t keep very good records about their failures, though.”

“Probably true,” Perrin said. “But let’s see what we can find.”

“After all,” Beneff began again, “all water runs downhill.”

In the perplexed silence that followed that wholly accurate but still contextually odd comment from Beneff, a sergeant in the back whispered, “While I understood that one, I still don’t get it.”

“Colonel,” the young, slow captain piped up again, “I’m afraid I still don’t understand why the Guardians, if it *were* Guardians, would want to take Major Yordin’s grandparents.” Thorne turned to him. “I realize the fifties aren’t that old. My parents would agree with you there,” he offered a small smile.

Yordin didn’t accept it.

“But of what value would they be?” Thorne continued. “Not everyone is as in excellent fighting shape as my father or you gentlemen. Or would be, when you are that age.” His little speech was rapidly growing lame.

Perrin smirked at Thorne's clumsy attempt at diplomacy. He *was* trying, in so many ways.

"The captain has a point," he said reluctantly to the room. "But maybe they weren't looking for soldiers. What did your grandfather do for a living, Gari?"

Yordin's broad forehead wrinkled in thought. "He was a scientist. He worked for a time at the university in Idumea before moving to Vines. He was doing something with . . ." The major tugged on his ear until his eyes lit up. "Metallurgy! That was it!" Slap. "He was experimenting with different kinds of alloys. I remember all kinds of shiny samples in his study."

Thorne tried not to scoff, but it came out anyway. "What good is that to Guardians?"

"Strength of metal," Perrin said evenly. "The better the alloy, the stronger the sword. Or *dagger*."

Yordin nodded. "He was working on swords for Querul the Fourth." He closed his eyes. "Maybe that's what they were after: better weapons."

"But why take his wife?" Thorne pressed.

Yordin looked at Shin for ideas.

Perrin had one that he grudgingly shared. "What better way to coerce a man to work than to threaten what's most precious to him? I'm sorry, Gari."

Yordin closed his eyes again, and his hand rose to pinch the bridge of his nose. Shem put a consoling hand on his back.

The major released his nose and smiled feebly at the men, but his eyes were fierce. "Colonel Shin, you tell me the day and time, and I'll be there with every man I have. Let's eliminate them now!" He slapped the table.

"I appreciate your zeal, Major. But let's do a little more investigating first," Perrin suggested. "All we've tossed around this morning are speculation and ideas. Let's spend a few days trying to find out who has disappeared in the last few years, and what evidence they left behind, or didn't."

Brillen shifted in agitation. "But if we wait too long, the Guardians may attack us first."

"I know, Karna, I know," Perrin assured him. "That's why I recommend we spend only a few days gathering evidence, and no more. We'll stay in contact until we have more information to go on. The idea that children are being housed is a long shot, but if there *are*

children—and I don't care whose they are, ours or the Guardians—we will not harm them. Unlike the Guardians, we don't harm innocents. Is that understood?"

"Understood and appreciated," Fadh answered.

Yordin shook his head. "How innocent would those children still be, Shin? You and I both have sons. I'd rather my son die than ever have sympathy for the Guardians."

Shem flinched and turned to Yordin. "Major, certainly you don't believe that. *Your own son?*"

Yordin glanced at him before saying to Perrin, "Would you want your son on the wrong side, Colonel?"

"No, Yordin, I wouldn't," he said heavily. "But I honestly don't know how I'd react if I found my boy with my enemy. I've never considered the possibility."

Shem leaned across the table toward Perrin. "You don't know? I do! You'd rescue him! You'd drag him out of there! Whatever dark corner of the cold wasteland they convinced him to reside in, you'd crawl into and retrieve him!"

The entire table of men was silenced by Shem, now on his feet in earnestness to make his point as he stared at Perrin.

Perrin, startled, stared back.

Yordin's voice broke the silence. "Zenos, are you a father?"

Shem, his chest heaving, answered with his eyes still on his friend. "No. Not yet. But I feel like one."

Perrin cocked his head.

Yordin's voice came gently, along with a hand on Shem's shoulder to pull him back into his chair. "Until you have a son, Zenos, you wouldn't know what such a betrayal would feel like. I appreciate *your* zeal, but you really don't understand."

Shem slowly sat down, finally taking his eyes off his colonel. He nodded reluctantly to Yordin and folded his arms.

Yordin now looked at Thorne who seemed to enjoy the public conflict between Shem and Perrin. He had a small smile on his face that lasted only until he noticed Yordin glaring at him.

"And Thorne, until *you* know what it's like to lose family to the Guardians, you may not understand why some of us," he gestured to Perrin, "refuse to wait for them to hunt us when we can hunt them first." He leaned on the table. "Honestly, Lemuel, I don't know how your grandparents can sleep in that mansion," his voice was very low as he glanced at Perrin to gauge his steadiness. "Knowing what happened to the Shins, even under guard, which

guard may not have been all the Shins were led to believe—”

Thorne wet his lips nervously.

“—if I were you, *dear Captain*, I’d be in the lead of that first attack wave. You may be the only one who can preserve your grandparents and parents.”

Thorne swallowed hard, the weight of Major Yordin’s words visibly piling on his shoulders. “Then sir, I guess I will have to race you to Moorland.”

Yordin broke out into a broad smile and nodded his approval to Colonel Shin.

Perrin sent a fake smile to Thorne as well and slapped his hand on the table before Yordin could.

Beneff slapped as well. “Because when the deer are in the meadow, you know the moons will soon be singing.”

That Beneff nugget froze every man in his position, as if every drop of thought was needed to evaluate the saying.

Eventually Fadh cleared his throat and leaned forward to resume his examination of the old man. “Beneff, what’s a meh-doh?”

“Meh?” Beneff blurted, as if someone had just awakened him up from the briefest nap in the world.

“Yes, I was wondering that too.” Yordin scratched his chin with his table-slapping hand. “Meh-doh?”

Beneff blinked.

Perrin noticed Shem watching him steadily. Shem shifted his glance to Perrin and pulled the corners of his mouth tightly, a signal which meant *I’ll have a word with the surgeon about him*.

Perrin twitched back in agreement.

“You know,” Beneff shrugged. “Meadow. Place where grass and flowers grow. Deer eat them.”

“So . . . like a garden?” Fadh the investigator watched him closely. “Next to the forests?”

Beneff pondered that. “Garden? I suppose so, but people don’t normally plant it, you see—”

Shem caught Fadh’s eye and shook his head slightly.

Fadh smiled faintly back. There wasn’t *that* much to figure out about the old man. He was merely old.

Glad to see that Beneff had confused himself into silence, Perrin slapped the table on last time. “One week, gentlemen. We’ll meet here again with our findings about the disappearances. Then we’ll finalize the arrangements for the first offensive attack on the Guardians.

Agreed?"

Even Thorne chorused his approval.

Chapter 12 ~ “Do you think I’m ready?”

Shem trudged in the thick mud to the steam vent late at night. His contact was already waiting at the log which was now pushed slightly away from the hot steam. By Weeding Season the log would be several feet away from the heat.

“I think these boots are each five pounds heavier,” Shem said. He sat down and tried to scrape off the mud with a stick.

The large man with the deep voice chuckled. “Building muscle, Shem. Remember that.”

Shem rolled his eyes. “How much more muscle can I build?”

His companion held out his arms.

“All right, Jothan. Until I’m as big as you, I’ll quit complaining. And of course, no one’s as big as you.” He gave up on the mud and tossed the stick. “Had an interesting meeting.”

“That’s why I’m here.”

“Shin wants the four forts in the area to attack Moorland.”

Jothan let out a low whistle. “Unexpected. Interesting.”

“Told you. There’s more. I need to know—was there a group of four, from Quake recently? With two young boys?”

“Yes. Through your channel,” Jothan said. “Why?”

Shem sighed. “The commander of the Quake fort knows about their disappearance. A major with a name you should enjoy—Graeson Fadh.”

“Ah, wonderful!”

“And the officers suspect Guardians.”

Slowly Jothan nodded. “Even more interesting.”

“Do we need to be worried?”

Jothan thought about that. “I’ll relay that information and get back to you at the usual time. But unless someone uncovers more, I can’t

imagine that explanation would be a problem.”

“They’re sending messages to all the villages requesting details about people who’ve vanished over the years,” Shem said. “They’re worried that abducted people might be housed in Moorland.”

“Hmm,” Jothan pondered that. “We’ve been very careful over the years. I doubt more than a dozen or so names will be uncovered. Surely not enough to look suspicious.”

“That’s what I thought,” Shem agreed. “It’s been rare that anyone asked. Usually no one seems to care about new neighbors suddenly vanishing. The Fadhs were just unusual.”

“Well, with a name like that, of course they would be.”

Shem chuckled. “I have another name for you to check: Yordin. About thirty years ago?”

“Yordin? Yordin . . . oh, yes. Yes, there were two. Gone now, but they came through as well.”

Shem nodded slowly. “Their grandson is another major.”

“Wished I could have been at that meeting!” Jothan laughed.

Shem smiled. “You would’ve enjoyed it. I certainly did. There’s also going to be a new play,” he grinned, but only for a moment. “Jothan, I’m worried about Beneff. He used the word ‘meadow.’”

Jothan whistled under his breath. “Did anyone hear him?”

“Everyone heard him! Fadh and Yordin even asked what it meant.”

“Not good. And what did he say?”

“Well, he got confused on those points. Now everyone thinks a meadow is a garden by the forest where deer come to eat. But no one plants the garden.”

Jothan sighed. “His mind’s really slipping then, isn’t it.”

“I told Shin I’d have the surgeon take a look at him. He thinks Beneff’s just getting confused in his old age.”

“Good. That can cover a whole multitude of Beneff mistakes.”

“Agreed. But in the meantime, tell the others to keep an eye out for him. If he wanders out here he should be taken care of.”

“We’ve been trying to get our hands on him for a very long time. Nudge him out here, if you can. Incidentally, Shem, we have another group coming through. An emergency situation all the way from Waves. We predict they will reach here by midday meal, day after tomorrow.”

“In the *day*?”

“Time’s critical. There’s no other option. Can you keep the east

clear?”

“I’ve already scheduled massive maneuvers for the western edge of the forest to practice for the attack,” Shem said. “I’ll need to get the colonel distracted. He was going to stay in the command tower to work on the details of the plans. He rarely looks out the eastern window, but still the spyglass could pick them up . . .” A smile began to spread across Shem’s face. “I have the very thing. Our new chief of enforcement is greener than a meadow,” he said with a wink. “He’s going to encounter a problem day after tomorrow, and may need to call on Perrin.” Shem nodded. “All will be clear.”

“You always find a way, don’t you, Shem?” Jothan nudged him with his elbow.

“I’m telling you, I’m as fit as any man and my mind’s sharper than a . . . a sharp thing that can cut—a sword! Yes, than a sword!”

The fort surgeon Dr. Stitch patted Beneff genially on the shoulder. “Of course you are, of course you are. You know, I’m retiring in another moon. Lots of things for men our age to do—”

“*In* the army, ho-hi!” Beneff exclaimed, trying to put his shirt back on.

“Beneff, according to my records you’ve been serving for over fifty years, and we don’t have an accurate age for you. All that was recorded when you joined is ‘about 24’. Weren’t sure of your age when you signed up?”

“I knew my age!” Beneff insisted, missing a button and restarting again. “Lied like everyone else, don’t you know, don’t you know? So I’m not seventy-whatever, now am I?”

“More like ninety-whatever,” Stitch murmured to himself.

“What, what? Huh! As if the fish know where to harvest the corn. Big push we have coming, you know—”

“I *do* know,” Stitch sighed. “That’s why we need to make sure you’re able—”

“My whole career’s been waiting for this!” Beneff declared, hopping off of the exam table. “My heart’s beating, my lungs are breathing, my head’s thinking, and I have a duty to perform!”

Stitch nodded. “Yes, Colonel Shin’s told me you’ll be helping to set up camp and he wants to make sure that you’re—.”

Beneff scowled. “That’s not all, hi-hee and with cabbage to spread it around. That’s only one part! I’ve been waiting a long time. I have a duty to perform! You’ll not stop me! Not you nor a herd of elephants!”

Stitch put on a smile appropriate for seven-year-old boys. “Now, now, no one’s trying to stop you, but I can’t help but ask: are meh-dohs where the elephants feed?”

“Ha! HA-HA!” Beneff barked. “You know nothing! So stick *that* on a horse and watch it simmer!”

Beneff kicked open the door furiously and headed down the hall, shouting something about ducks and their inability to use tools.

An assistant sidled up to Stitch. “Well?”

The surgeon sighed. “In two weeks we’ll force his retirement. Let him finish out his last ‘great’ duty in setting up tents for the colonel’s offensive, then let him leave with a shred of dignity.”

Beneff passed the open door, having initially gone in the wrong direction, and still not done expressing his displeasure. “Told you, my heart’s still pumping,” he bellowed as he headed down the other corridor, “my mind’s still thinking and . . . my pipes are still leaking! Ho, hum—where’s the blasted privy?”

“What were you saying about his dignity, Stitch?”

“I said, only a *shred* of it.”

Three days after the officers’ meeting Perrin trotted up the stairs to his office. He was going to beat the sunrise and watch it come through his window. Anxiousness filled him with a desire to get back to his attack plans as quickly as possible. He *had* to finish today or his energy would propel him straight out the windows.

His schedule the previous afternoon to rework the plans had been utterly demolished. First, he had to answer the distress banner at the village green just before midday meal. The frazzled chief of enforcement Bernie and his officers were overwhelmed trying to undo Edge’s first real Idumaic jam.

A very apologetic rector, an older man visiting from Midplain to see Rector Yung, somehow caused three wagons, two carts, four horses, three mule teams, a broken crate of chickens, and an overfriendly hog to block an entire section of the granary district. Perrin still thought enforcement might have had all of that under

control, except that's when three of Mahrree's students taking a stroll during midday meal when they should have been at school were attracted by the accident, as all boys are. They saw the driver of a wagon transporting mead leave his team to offer assistance. In a flash they stole the wagon, and the fort was summoned to help.

Since Zenos and Thorne were leading nearly all of the soldiers in a practice for the offensive along the western side of the village, Perrin, Lieutenant Offra, and a couple of enlisted men were all that were available to track down the boys. They retrieved them soon enough: the teens had stopped at an intersection to argue over which direction to take their stolen goods. When Perrin finished incarcerating them at the enforcement building, he went back to the jam to observe its untangling before heading to the fort.

That's when he spotted the old visiting rector wringing his hands in worry and shouting apologies over and over. Perrin finally escorted him to Rector Yung's and the elderly man couldn't stop talking during the three-roads walk to the rectory. As they neared Yung's, he took Perrin's hand and shook it vigorously.

"Again, Colonel, I am so sorry. Really not in my nature, you know, to cause problems! I've been spending some time in Idumea and I guess it just rubbed off on me. But it's a great honor to meet you, sir. I've admired you for years, and I hope to see you again some time. Truly, such a privilege to finally meet you!"

Fortunately at that moment Rector Yung came out of his house, saw his old friend approaching, and escorted him home, nodding his apologies to the colonel.

Perrin just chuckled and wondered for the briefest of moments why the Midplain rector said "admired for *years*."

By that hour in the afternoon Perrin was forced to make good on his promise to Peto and watch his son's first kickball game against a team from the south side of Edge. While Perrin thought it would have been far more entertaining to be on the field with his son playing with him instead of watching, he had to agree that Peto at least knew what he was doing. He scored the only two goals his team earned, and even though they lost, Peto grinned from ear to ear. Perrin had difficulty in focusing on the game when so many different strategies for Moorland were battling in his mind like the boys dodging each other on the field.

The evening was taken up by pretending to listen to Jaytsy describe every bug she found in the Briters' farm, and if it was harmful or

helpful. Perrin found himself naming the different sections of the attack after the insects. Mantis. Aphid. Locust. Centipede. When Jaysy mentioned “ladybug,” Perrin smugly thought that could be a name for Thorne’s division.

Then the hour before bed was his nightly, “Tell me about the day—all of it,” ritual with Mahrree. He’d given her so many details he’d considered making her an honorary officer. She could take over if ever he were injured. For the past eight weeks he’d been as solid as ever, and he was considering ending their practice so he could have some time to himself, but Mahrree had grown accustomed to Colonel Cuddly on the sofa, and he owed her that much.

It seemed only in the early mornings could he find the solitude he craved in which to concentrate on the plans without interruption. But as he reached the top stair of the command tower that morning, he realized that his hour wasn’t going to happen today, either.

Captain Thorne sat at the large desk in the forward office with a thick envelope in hand.

Perrin growled softly, thinking that he could have named Thorne’s division after ants which he loved to crush under his boot. He wondered which kind of ant Thorne would prove to be this morning: the *sycophant*, or the *defiant*.

“Colonel! I thought I’d catch you this early,” he said cheerfully.

Sycophant, Perrin groaned to himself. He would have preferred him *distant*.

“How long have you been waiting, Thorne?”

“Just a couple of minutes, sir. From my quarter’s window I saw you arrive this early yesterday morning, so I just assumed—” The light faded from his eyes and he looked worried about having revealed he’d been spying on the colonel.

Perrin wasn’t too surprised by the worried look. It would have been good to see *if* it were genuine. But he wasn’t convinced yet. Lemuel Thorne was to be trying to be a different officer these past few weeks—more humble and willing—but only when he remembered to be. Apparently this morning he was attempting to be a perfect subordinate.

Well, Perrin thought, we’ll see just how long this lasts.

“You made a safe assumption about my being here this morning, Captain,” Perrin said stiffly. “What can I do for you?”

Thorne’s face relaxed a little. “This came late last night, from

Lieutenant Colonel Karna. In the message that accompanied it he said that I shouldn't wake you, but just be sure I give it to you first thing in the morning. This *would* be first thing . . .”

Perrin gave him a fake smile as he took the message. He had perfected the smile so well a year ago at The Dinner that he had decided to keep it. He used it on the magistrate, the chief of enforcement, and on the group of admiring basket weavers from Mountseen who “happened” to run in to him as they slowly walked up and down every road several evenings ago.

“Come into my office. Let's see what this is about.”

Perrin would have much rather preferred to discuss this with Shem, or even with Offra or Radan, who were pouring their hearts and souls into establishing the new storehouses.

But no, he had Captain Thorne in front of him, his second in command, and Perrin realized that at some point he might actually have to start treating him as such. Perrin sat down behind his desk and gestured for Thorne to take the chair opposite of him.

Thorne sat carefully, not too close, not too far away, with an oddly eager smile on his face.

Perrin tried to ignore the captain, who was almost painful to look at this morning, as he opened the thick envelope. Karna had sent a report about missing people. It wasn't a complete list yet, but there was a name Brillen found interesting: Wistacerly Riplak.

“Riplak?” Thorne repeated when the colonel read it out loud. “As in the missing lieutenant from your parents' home?”

“Yes, seems that way. They never did find him. Knock off a few letters here and there,” Perrin gestured to the document, “and ‘Wistacerly’ becomes Tace.”

“*Wistacerly*,” Thorne sniggered. “I can see why he wanted to be known as ‘Tace.’”

Perrin didn't reply. He didn't think the name “Lemuel” was anything to be proud of. Knock of a few letters, he becomes Muel. *Mule*.

“Thorne,” he said, instead of dwelling on the delightful possibility of muling the captain by knocking a couple of other things off, “do you know how old Riplak was?”

“He wasn't in my year at Command School, so maybe a couple years older than me, sir. Maybe twenty-four last year?”

Perrin nodded. “Sounds about right. He was working in the stables at my parents' before he went to the university. My father thought he was living with an uncle. He must have been in Idumea for about

eight years. According to what Karna found, his parents reported him missing at age sixteen. That makes Wistacerly Riplak the correct age.”

“A runaway?”

“Another safe assumption, Captain,” Perrin attempted to give him a friendly smile, but he didn’t feel it. A part of him tried to remember that this *boy* was only twenty-three and still learning. He had made mistakes, there was no denying that, but everyone deserved a second chance, especially someone whose father was Qayin Thorne.

But then a much larger part of Perrin fumed every time he saw the insolent boy who thought he was entitled to his daughter.

Captain Thorne gave him back a wary smile.

“Perhaps Riplak wasn’t a runaway,” Perrin speculated out loud. “According to the report he’d had problems with thievery in Orchards, but no other conflicts with his parents. The runaways I’ve encountered usually are trying to escape their parents.”

“But what if the parents didn’t report any problems, sir? What if they lied and told enforcement they had a good relationship?”

Something in the way Thorne said those words made Perrin believe he had some experience with that. “A valid point. I’m sure most parents don’t want to admit any conflicts with their children.”

Thorne nodded.

Perrin wanted to feel some compassion for him. He really did. The Writings said he should. Lemuel’s family undoubtedly expected that he would someday become the High General, and it was difficult to live with such pressure, Perrin knew.

But as he looked at the anxious young man, the urge to leap over the desk and punch that boy in the mouth overwhelmed him again. He fought it down, just as he did a dozen times each day.

“What if, instead of running away, Riplak was coerced away?” Perrin suggested. “What if he was recruited by the Guardians so they could have a man on the inside?”

Thorne nodded at the idea. “But the university is so expensive. Where would he or the Guardians get the money to pay for it?”

“I used to believe that the money came from his ‘uncle,’ who may not even exist,” Shin said. “But I’m working on a new theory. When the Guardians, or *thieving teenage boys*, raid houses what do they take?”

Thorne shrugged. “Jewels, gold . . .” Understanding passed across his face. “Things of value! Things they can sell and use for

purchasing what they need, like a Command School education?"

Perrin shook his head. "Stealing to afford an education. I never would have imagined *that*," he muttered more to himself. "No one wanted their money's worth when I was there. We were always looking for excuses to skip class. We actually cheered when one hated professor was sick for two weeks."

Thorne narrowed his eyes. "Might that have been Berts?"

Perrin knew what Lemuel was trying to do, and it twisted in his gut. Diplomacy. Drag your enemy to a neutral ground, then find something in common there. Perrin had walked right up to it. But he was curious to see where Thorne might take him.

"Berts was the world geology professor back when I was there."

Thorne nodded. "He's still there. The man was drier than a drought in Sands. I fell asleep in his class once. Only time it *ever* happened in my time at the university," the captain insisted. "Berts was so furious that he pulled me off my desk and marched me all the way to the garrison to my grandfather's office, who also wasn't too pleased. But General Shin?" Thorne looked down with a small smile. "Your father just laughed. Told me to spend the day in the office if I wanted." Thorne lifted his head and tried to hold the colonel in his gaze. "He got me out of trouble that day."

Perrin felt like applauding. *Oh, nicely done*, he thought. A dry attempt at humor, followed by bringing in Relf, then finding a way to honor his memory. No wonder he graduated early. He could create a whole course on authority manipulation. Perrin didn't even have a way to verify if the story was true.

"How nice." Perrin looked down at the report to fight the urge to break a few more of Thorne's perfectly straight teeth. He'd heard that the molar he smashed had been repaired in Idumea, so it wasn't as if Lemuel couldn't spare losing another one. "Thank you for coming so early, Captain. This may be some evidence of Guarder conscription. You're excused until your shift begins in two hours."

"Thank you, sir. Uh, sir?"

Perrin looked up grudgingly to see Thorne appearing to be sincerely concerned about something. "Yes?"

"Do you think I'm ready? I mean, ready to lead the Edge contingency in the offensive?"

This boy just won't quit, Perrin thought. Now he's trying to appeal to the authority he just tried to manipulate. He looks almost pathetic. It suits him.

Despite Perrin's eagerness to get rid of the captain, he decided he could spare a few moments in leisurely amusement. "No. Absolutely not."

By the way Thorne flinched, he hadn't expected that answer.

Perrin leaned back in his chair. It was good to see the boy squirm. "You have no experience and no contact with Guards. Have you ever even taken a life, Thorne?"

He tried to sound confident in his answer. "No, sir. But I know how." The squirm gave him away.

"It's one thing in the practice arena," Perrin said. "It's quite another in real life."

"How old were *you* the first time?" Squirm. "When you and Karna had your first engagement?"

It was no longer amusing. Diplomacy again. Dragged unwillingly to the common ground.

"I was almost twenty-nine. Lieutenant Karna was twenty-three—your age. I'd been a captain for nearly six years, but it was the first real opportunity I had to prove myself."

Thorne nodded. "I want to be ready, sir. The exercise with Zenos went well yesterday, I believe. You'll have to ask the new sergeant major what he thinks, though. I want to prove myself to you. I respect your opinion, sir, as much as I respected your father's."

Perrin couldn't suppress his groan. There was only so much a person could take this early in the morning.

Thorne bit his lower lip, unsure of how to read the colonel's pained expression.

Perrin had to get rid of him before he became fully nauseated. "Thank you, Thorne. That will be all."

After midday meal Sergeant Major Shem Zenos jogged up the stairs of the command tower. He nodded at Thorne who was talking with a corporal.

Thorne's nod was so brief that Shem almost missed it. He chuckled to himself and knocked on the colonel's door.

"Come in!"

Zenos stepped in and closed the door behind him. Perrin bobbed his head toward the wall. Shem winked, and while Perrin finished writing on a stack of pages, he walked over to the bookshelf,

removed two large wads of cotton stashed in a hollowed out book, took them to the wall, and slid up the detailed map of Edge. Underneath were two fist-sized holes which, when filled with cotton, created a thorough dampening effect.

One of these days Captain Thorne would discover why some conversations in the tower were harder to listen in on than others.

Shem sat down in the chair across from Perrin.

“New jacket looks good, Shem.”

“I have you to thank for that.”

Perrin shook his head. “I’m not the one who’s exceeded recruiting goals every year for the past twelve years. And I’m not the one who’s consistently trained the most disciplined and talented soldiers in the world. You earned that new rank all by yourself, soldier, and you’re the youngest man to ever do it. You’re practically a general. There’s only one rank higher—Command Sergeant Major, equivalent to High General—and that was bestowed only once, during the Great War. Since it likely it won’t ever be again, I can’t help but wonder what you will do with yourself in the army for the next thirty years.”

Shem shrugged meekly. “Keep you out of trouble, I guess.”

“And I’m sure that’s precisely what some men in Idumea hope you’ll do,” said Perrin. “That new rank’s really your reward for controlling me this past year. You realize that, don’t you?”

Again Shem shrugged.

Perrin smiled at his friend’s modesty. “How was your afternoon yesterday?”

“Not as exciting as yours, I understand,” Shem chuckled.

Perrin sat back in his chair. “Idumea’s following me. If that jam were caused by anyone else besides that timid old rector . . .”

“Well, *my* afternoon was quite successful, as you saw in that report. The men seem eager and ready, we tried all the patterns you detailed, and had no problems executing any of them. On a larger scale it should be quite effective.”

“Good. Now, what I really need to know is,” he lowered his voice and glanced briefly at the wall, “how did our little Thorney friend out there do?”

“I hate to admit it, Perrin, but he did well. I was hoping he’d be a complete disaster, but when the pressure was on—even though it was pretend pressure—the men listened to him, and he thought well on his feet. I’m sorry I have nothing worse to report. I tried to make things difficult for him, really I did.”

Perrin chuckled. "I'm sure you did. Thank you for your attempts. Yordin wanted a report. I think Gari's a little concerned about leading so many untested men. I'm going to recommend that Fadh be out there bringing up the rear. No need for him to sit with Karna and me warming our backsides in the tents."

"Good idea," Shem nodded. "I'm a little worried as well. But how else will they ever be tested?"

"At least you, Rigoff, and some of the older officers will be in the field with Yordin. That makes me feel a little more confident." Perrin slapped the desk lightly. Thinking about Yordin always made him do that. "So, everyone will be back here in two days with their reports. Shem, I'm telling you this now because I want you to be prepared. I will call for the attack three days later."

Shem's eyebrows rose. "You don't think there are children in Moorland?"

"No. I just feel the answer's no. But there *is* something there that needs to be taken care of as soon as possible."

Shem nodded, but it seemed to Perrin that he was a bit uncertain. "You think you'll be ready?" his new sergeant major asked.

"The forces are ready. We're wasting time, every day. Who knows what the Guarders are planning. It needs to happen now."

Shem thought for a moment. "Maybe I should restate my question. Perrin, do you think *you* are ready? The past season you've done so well, but being so near the action . . . you may even come in contact with a retreating Guarder, and I'm concerned that—"

"No, Shem," said Perrin with as much determination as he could express. "It must happen now. We can't wait. I know that, of a surety."

The thoughts had been pouring into his mind for several days and nights. Timing was most important, but Perrin had no idea why. However, he saw it clearly in his mind, even the date when the offensive should take place: the 59th Day of Planting Season. The information came to him in a steady, calm manner so he was sure it was inspiration from the Creator.

"And it's not my old paranoia talking, Shem, I promise. I'm feeling quite solid, and I even have a long run scheduled with Offra soon. Sounds like I'm doing well, right? So do you trust my judgment?"

Shem studied him for a moment before admitting, "Honestly, in the past year it's been a little hard to do that. But lately you're the same Perrin I've always trusted."

“So who am I at this moment, Sergeant Major?”

“The commander of the offensive on Moorland, sir,” said the sergeant major cagily.

“And do you trust the commander?”

Shem offered a faint smile. “I really want to, Colonel. But to be honest, this sergeant major still thinks it’s too soon.”

Perrin leaned forward. “Then what about my brother? Does my brother believe I’m doing the right thing? Be my Guide, Shem.”

Shem’s smile turned downright embarrassed. “I could never be worthy to be a Guide, but Perrin—I’ve always trusted my brother.”

“Then I’m ready for the offensive, Shem. Are you?”

Shem nodded. “You keep yourself prepared, and I’ll make sure *everyone* is ready for the attack in five days.”

Later that evening Shem knocked on the back porch door of the Shins’ home using a rhythm—very unlike Thorne’s—that they would know it was him. A moment later the door opened and Mahrree beamed at him.

“Sorry to bother you so late, Mahrree,” Shem apologized as he stepped into the kitchen. “But I saw your light was on. Is Perrin still up?”

“No, he’s asleep,” Mahrree said. “Should I wake him?”

Shem scoffed. “Since when would I ask you to wake up Perrin when he’s sleeping soundly? No, it’s nothing too important. He wanted a report on movements east of Moorland, but I can just leave him a message on his desk.”

“It’s not bad news, is it?”

“No, actually quite good. Everything is quiet.”

“Good,” Mahrree sighed. “You know, I think Perrin overdid it today racing Lieutenant Offra. I’ve never seen him so worn out. I think he was trying to impress the younger men.”

Shem grinned, partly at the idea of Perrin running himself to exhaustion. “That’s what I heard, too. A sergeant told me they stumbled back to the fort pale and wheezing. I think poor Jon Offra overexerted himself, too. But they were also both smiling.”

Mahrree closed her eyes. “Shem, you have no idea how pleased I am to hear that he’s having *fun* again. Sounds so silly, but it’s so important.”

“Not silly at all. I agree. It’s wonderful to see him back to normal again. I need to get back to the fort. My shift’s not yet up—”

Mahrree took his arm. “Can you give me just a few minutes?”

He looked down at her small, soft hand on his muscled arm, and he tensed.

“I wanted your opinion: do you think he’s ready for this? Can Perrin handle being so close to the action? I know he won’t actually be in Moorland, but he’s going to see wounded and bloodshed and—” Her chin began to wobble.

Shem saw no other option but to put a comforting arm around her. “I’m worried about him too. He may witness soldiers that appear to him to be manifestations of his nightmares. But I can’t convince him to delay this.”

Mahrree rested her head against his chest and sniffed. “Nor can I. But I’ve also noticed he seems quite himself again. Still, I can’t help but worry.”

“I know,” Shem said, pulling back from her and removing his arm from her shoulders. “But he’s the colonel, and he’s in command, and we just need to trust him again. Well, I shouldn’t keep you any longer—”

“Shem,” she gripped his arm again, “before you hurry off unnecessarily, just one more thing—this has been on my mind for some time, but . . . I haven’t thanked you yet. Not properly.”

“For what?” he said, a lump building in his throat.

She rolled her eyes. Her green-gray eyes that, for the first time in nearly a year, were sparkling again. She focused them solely on him. “For what? For this past year! Shem, you’ve done everything for us!” Her grip on his arm tightened, and she stepped closer.

Shem held his breath.

“For so many nights, for so many days, for staying by our side no matter what he did. For being his best friend—”

Shem tried to swallow down the lump.

“—for comforting our children . . . for comforting me.” She released his arm and took his face in both of her hands.

Shem froze.

She looked at him with such sincerity, such sisterly love.

“I don’t know how we’ll ever be able to repay you. You’re truly one of the greatest men I’ve ever had the privilege to know. I hope someday we can be worthy of your friendship.” She stood up on tiptoe and kissed him on the cheek. “Thank you.”

Shem nodded dismissively and said, “I *really* need to go—”

She released his face and smirked. “You can’t take it, can you?”
“Pardon?”

She folded her arms and glared good-naturedly at him. “Someone thanking you? You’re too humble to accept even gratitude, aren’t you?”

“Yeah, that’s me.” His chuckle was strained as he said, “Mr. Humility. Good night, Mahrree.”

He turned abruptly and jogged out the back garden, Mahrree’s chuckles following him. He hopped over the fence, took the reins of his waiting horse, and mounted it without looking back to see if his best friend’s wife was still watching from the back porch. He rode up to the fort, returned his horse, jogged up to the command tower, left the note he promised he would on Perrin’s desk, told the sergeant on duty that he was ending his shift early for the night since the forests east of Moorland were quiet, then headed straight for the washing rooms. He undressed and stood in a stall underneath one of the showering pipes, turning on only the cold water. He closed his eyes and let the chill pour down on him, waiting for it to work.

Someone took the stall next to him. “Good evening, sir,” said one of the newest recruits. “Sir, that looks cold. Is the warm water pipe clogged again?”

“No, Private,” said Shem, not opening his eyes. “Plenty of warm water for you to wash off the day’s grime. I just prefer the cold.”

“Really, sir?” chirped the eager-to-learn soldier. “Do all sergeant majors prefer cold water?”

Shem didn’t want to acknowledge the ridiculous question, but he felt the young man waiting for his response. “Only the ones trying to be their best, Private. Especially before turning in for the night. It’s . . . restful. Distracting. Takes one’s mind away from *other* thoughts.”

“Interesting, sir.” He sounded worried.

“Been doing it off and on for fifteen years now, Private.”

“And it really works to relax you, sir?”

Shem sighed and opened his eyes. “Actually, no. Never has worked.” He reached up to turn off the water. “But someday, it just might. Good night, Private.” Shem grabbed a thick cloth, wrapped it around himself, and left the stall.

The private looked up at the water pipes, shrugged, turned on the cold, and shivered for five seconds before shutting it off.

Perrin rolled up the map and tucked it under his arm, ready to head for home. Everything was prepared—*perfectly*, he'd dare say—for tomorrow, and every last man was enthusiastic about the army's first offensive.

Except for one.

Perrin sighed when he saw him come in his door. "And what do you want?"

Shem closed the door behind him. "Perrin, just tell me one last time: are you absolutely sure about tomorrow?"

"Yes, Shem," he tried to say patiently. "Has anyone ever told you you're like a mother hen?"

His friend began to smile. "Well, not exactly—"

"It's *NOT* a compliment!"

Shem's smile disappeared.

"You're sounding like Mahrree now," Perrin said. "You've been talking with her, haven't you?" he accused with a twinkle in his eyes. "Alone? I can always tell, you know."

Shem held his hands up in surrender. "She talked to me about some concerns about you."

Perrin groaned. "Enough already. Would you two just trust me again? I've been put in charge of this endeavor, and I promise you, I take my orders only from the Creator."

Shem dared to smile again. "You know, I actually believe that."

Chapter 13 ~ "And then by tomorrow, we'll have some very fascinating results."

"Seriously," the older balding man sighed loudly at the men

gathered around him, “how difficult is it for you to put it all together? I sent *you*,” he pointed at a hefty man who blushed, “one section to accomplish, then I told *you*—”

A slender man looked down at his feet and fidgeted.

“—specifically what materials to gather, and sent an order to . . . where are you?”

He looked around until he found the offender hiding behind a taller man who also wore a sheepish expression.

“Ah, yes *you*—sent an order to you with timings and . . . *you!*” He jabbed an accusatory finger at another man who tried to appear stoic. “I explained personally to you how it all goes together! Now, how is it that one brilliant man like me can figure all of this out, create detailed descriptions, and send it to semi-competent creatures who then bungle it all up? Does this mean that ten of you aren’t equal to one of me? Fascinating,” he mumbled as he sifted through the confused notes. “May have to create some speculations about the ineptitude of committee work when I finally get this mess straightened out. Look,” he announced to the men again. “It’s really quite simple, and you *nearly* have it all correct—”

“Why didn’t you just send us all the entire plan to begin with?” asked the attempting-to-be-stoic man.

The balding man looked up at the ceiling. “They really are that dense, aren’t they?” he asked the building. Dropping his gaze to those surrounding him he said, “What do *you* think? All of this information in the hands of just one man? Or several? What if it were intercepted before it reached here?”

“No one would have been able to figure it out,” someone bravely murmured.

The balding man squinted. “An *intelligent* man could! Now, since some of this was done correctly, I can salvage this. And then by tomorrow, we’ll have some very fascinating results. *Very* fascinating indeed. We just might change the entire world . . .”

On the morning of the 59th Day of Planting Season, 336, Perrin tried to leave the house early in the morning by the kitchen door but was held back by his wife.

“I promised you already that I won’t go beyond the border of the farm, I’ll be miles away from the fighting, and nothing—absolutely

nothing—will go wrong,” he told Mahrree as she kept her arms wrapped around him, her face pressed against his chest.

“Just let me go with you,” she pleaded. “I’ll stay back at the farm and help the surgeons with the injured. You can’t promise nothing will go wrong. Shem warned me that—”

“You need to stop listening to Shem, Mahrree!” He held her at arm’s length and stooped to look at her straight in the eyes. “When the two of you start nattering together—”

Her chin quivered.

“I didn’t mean it like *that*. But I’m tired of being pecked at! Karna will be at my side the entire offensive. He knows what to watch for, and he’ll send you a messenger if I go berserk, all right?” he said, shaking her a little. “And honestly, a little berserk might be exactly what this offensive needs. Ever consider that?”

To his surprise she chuckled sadly. “All right, all right, Colonel Berserk. Go play. I’ll sit here with your children for the next three days fretting and worrying, but you have fun now.”

“I love you. You know that, don’t you?” He shook her again.

“You have a strange way of showing it, Mr. Shin.”

He pulled her in for a kiss long enough that Peto, who was walking in for his last goodbye, grimaced before turning around.

“Give them a few minutes, Jayts. You don’t want to come in here—trust me.”

“Poor boy,” Mahrree laughed to her husband as she reluctantly stepped back. “He has the worst timing in the world. By the way, I do know you love me. I love you, too.”

“I know. And I will be *fine*.”

Mahrree sighed. “Please come home to me.”

“You can’t get rid of me too easily, woman.”

After good-byes to his children he mounted his horse waiting in the alley and rode to the fort with two eager sergeants.

He took only a moment to run up the stairs of the command tower. He smiled at Hycymum’s purple banner with the word *Edge* stitched in brilliant yellow, took it off the wall, and bundled it under his arm. “This offensive is for Edgers, after all,” he murmured.

He jogged over to the supply building, took a pole he prepared earlier, and attached the banner to it. Grinning, he positioned it in the saddle bag on his horse where it could flap for everyone to see.

“Don’t want anyone getting lost now, do we?” he said cheerily to a corporal who eyed the bright and slightly garish banner.

An hour later two hundred men rode from the fort straight to the

west and the staging area for the offensive. Nothing could wipe the smile from Perrin's face. Not even Captain Thorne who rode on his right and frequently looked behind him to make sure the soldiers stayed in formation. The fort didn't have enough horses for each man going to Moorland, so many were borrowed from the village, and Thorne—being the horse man he claimed to be—was put in charge of making sure none was lost. Perrin noticed that Sergeant Major Zenos, on his left, however, kept watching Perrin from the corner of his eye.

As they neared the barren farm waiting to be flattened under so many boots and hooves, Perrin spotted a cloud of dust rising in the southwest. Soon it revealed several hundred men, led by a beaming Major Fadh. Before Perrin had the chance to absorb the fantastic scene of three hundred men plus their horses and wagons, to the south arose another massive cloud, eventually producing Major Yordin and Lieutenant Colonel Karna, who combined their six hundred men and rode together, trampling all kinds of terrain for several miles, and grinning all the way.

The only one not grinning, Perrin noticed—besides Thorne—was Shem, who kept eyeing his commander. But Perrin didn't care. By dinner time a tent village was erected three miles from the village of Moorland and the more than one thousand men were happy, eating, and eager to go hunting.

Perrin spent only one moment of the hectic afternoon to pause and take in the scene. Men, horses, tents, shouts, and swords; a farm turned into a camp for an army the size of which hadn't been seen in generations; a nervous farmer and his wife cowering in their house, their curtains flickering as they watched column after column of soldiers turn their rich dark fields into a mucky mess—

Perrin's chest swelled and burned with pride. "Father," he whispered when he had an uninterrupted minute, "I hope that you're in the part of Paradise that will let you see me breaking your rules, because I think you and Grandfather Pere would love this!"

"Hum-hum . . . this doesn't look right . . . ho-ho, what's this? A crevice. Hmm. Not good, not . . . good."

Beneff stretched his leg over the gap in the ground that presented no discernible bottom. He grasped hold of a tree limb above him, used

it to stabilize himself, then jumped over the crack in the earth. Safely on the other side, he chuckled smugly.

“Still know my way around, hee-hee. Younger men learn a thing or two from me still, hum-hum. Just need to bring them to where my true expertise lies. After all, the wood knows how to grow and burn. And Gadiman thought I couldn’t do any of this anymore. Well, is he in for a surprise!”

He looked around at the trees.

“Seems thicker than some years ago. Taller, too. Suppose forests have a way of growing, you see, ho-hi. Thicker . . . denser . . . hmm. Oh my. This isn’t quite . . .”

He stopped and stared off into the distance which, at that point in the forest, was only about three feet in front of him.

“I think the wind’s about to hit the droppings. The question is, Am I the wind, the droppings, or what’s about to get hit?”

After another ponderous moment he said, “Now where the slag did that mountain go?”

After dinner twelve men stood around a large detailed map of Moorland in the command tent, studying the marked houses and the directions outlined for the assault.

Everyone except for Shem, who looked around the tent. “Colonel, where’s Beneff?”

Perrin waved that off. “Said he wasn’t feeling too well, some hours ago. We really don’t need him now. He got his section of the camp set up so I told him to go lay down for a while.”

Shem shifted nervously. “Permission to go check on him?”

Perrin looked up from the map. “You think that’s really necessary?”

The look in Shem’s eyes was undeniable.

Now several other officers looked up from the map and stared at Zenos.

“Sir, I know the map and your plan as if I wrote it myself,” the sergeant major told him. “Please give me just a few minutes to check on Beneff.”

“Of course, Zenos,” Perrin said, unable to decipher the veiled look in his friend’s eyes. It was something he’d never seen before, and that was rare. “But get back soon. You don’t know

everything.”

Shem nodded and darted out of the tent.

Yordin looked at Perrin for an explanation, but Perrin shrugged. “Zenos will just have to catch up. You all have had the past two days to review the attack plans. I’ve worked in your suggestions, and now I have one more announcement to make.”

Each man looked up from the map at Perrin.

“We don’t attack at dawn,” he said quietly. “We hit Moorland after sundown—tonight.”

“Tonight!” Karna cried, saying what every other man would have said if his mouth were not hanging open.

“I’m sure Colonel Shin has a good reason for attacking tonight,” said Thorne loyally.

Perrin fought the urge to roll his eyes. “I do. We now all realize that even the most trusted soldier might be an agent for the Guarders. Should there be any other Tace Riplaks among our men, they will still believe the attack is in the morning . . . until they find themselves in the middle of it, incapable of sending an early warning to his partners in Moorland.”

The expressions on the other commanders’ faces suggested they had considered the same possibility.

“We now have only eleven,” Perrin continued, “who know the attack will begin in just one hour. If the Guarders at Moorland have been warned in any way, they’ll be preparing right now to ambush us while we sleep. So we’ll just have to get them first.”

Yordin grinned. “Then what are we waiting for?” Slap. “Call in the rest of the officers, and let’s mount up!”

Perrin smiled. Sometimes, his job was just so easy.

Shem didn’t know this part of the forest as well as he did the forest above Edge.

Actually, he didn’t know it at all. It had taken him several minutes just to circle back far enough to find a route in without being noticed by any soldiers. And once he was in the trees he felt for the first time the nervousness every other man must have felt about the forest. He didn’t know where anything was, not even Beneff. He wasn’t in his tent, and none of the men from Edge had seen him for the past three hours. And now Shem, just thirty paces into the unfamiliar trees,

smelled a hint of sulfur. Not knowing its source made him jumpy.

The whole day was making him jumpy. But he couldn't reveal that to anyone, especially Perrin.

The colonel was in rare form. As hesitant as Shem was about the offensive, Perrin was enthusiastic. A part of Shem was thrilled to see his friend so engaged in something besides his paranoia. Watching Perrin sit astride a willing brown stallion, directing their 200 hundred soldiers, 30 wagons and teams, and 150 horses as they rode in massive formation from the fort was breathtaking. Hundreds of villagers had rushed to see the spectacle heading west.

Perrin, riding at the front with Shem by his side, was . . . well, the only word Shem could think of was *glowing*. He had something to do and he was on fire to do it.

But he was almost frightening. Perrin's countenance shone with what Shem could define only as ferocious joy.

And all of the men felt it, too. If any were apprehensive, they simply looked at their commander and were instantly infected with his determination to rid the world of its most vexing neighbor. The thirty men left behind at the fort with Radan and Offra—some ill, some injured, some timid—looked almost envious they weren't joining the throng.

Shem saw the same joyful ferocity contaminate the other armies that met them at the farm. Yordin, Fadh, and Karna broke into grins at the sight of the massive army. The four commanders shared conspiratorial winks as if they were teenage boys who were just about to pull off the greatest prank in the history of the world.

And in a way, Shem thought to himself, they were.

He seemed to be the only one worried about how all of this might shake down in the end.

Besides Lemuel, that is.

But Shem wasn't going to devote any more thought to the captain—unpredictable and recently quiet—than he had to. He just kept reminding himself that in this battle situation, Shem outranked him. It was the only thought that cheered him that day.

A few times on the ride over, Perrin caught Shem watching him. "What is it, Sergeant Major?" he finally said. "I've never seen you so serious."

"This *is* serious, Colonel," Shem reminded him.

"I know that," Perrin responded, almost insulted. "But look around you, Zenos: did you ever imagine we could bring something like this together?"

That was part of his concern. There were many things Shem had seen that Perrin had never imagined.

Years ago Shem had felt overwhelmed by his position at the fort. It didn't help any that Hoyal Densal had pulled him aside, told him he knew—*really* knew—who Shem was and why he was there, then told him it was his duty to keep watch over Perrin. After that everything became so . . . complicated.

And it never, *never* got easier. Sometimes he felt as if he could barely keep it all straight. Days like this, for example, were especially taxing. And now the forest had swallowed up one of Shem's most nagging worries.

"Beneff!" he muttered. "Where did you go? You're not supposed to be out here!"

Shem crept cautiously up a rise, picking his way between the trees and listening for hissing, bubbling, or babbling, as Beneff was prone to do. Shem had been gone for at least forty-five minutes. Perrin surely must have missed him by now.

A horn blast in the distance spun Shem around. The blast drifted toward him a second time, then rapidly for a third time.

"No! Not already! Perrin! We're not attacking until morning, remember?" Shem kicked at a rock and groaned. He had to take the risk. "BENEFF!"

He felt a presence right behind him, then a hand covered his mouth while an arm wrapped around him tightly.

"What is *wrong* with you, Zenos?" the voice hissed in his ear. "You're going to ruin everything!"

The arm released him and Shem twisted away to face his captor. "Oh, Dormin, am I glad to see you! It's been a while, hasn't it?" he said to the man in dark green mottled clothing.

"No time for reunions, Shem. Why are you yelling at the trees?"

"Beneff's out here—I know it. He's going to warn the Guardians we've arrived, but—"

"It doesn't sound like that matters anymore," Dormin said. "The colonel is starting the offensive right now. Isn't that what the three horn blasts mean? Mount up?"

Shem shook his head. "I had no idea. Honestly. No idea he was up to this. I need to get back. I'm supposed to be leading the charge on the north side!"

"Then go! We're ready. And we'll watch for Beneff."

Shem slapped Dormin on the back and ran out of the forest, hoping

he was going in the right direction. How ironic would it be if he couldn't tell his future grandchildren about the first major offensive in the army's history—the one that he *missed*—because he was lost in the forest?

Perrin sat atop his mount watching the last of the men ride west. The sun had set ten minutes ago and he quickly lost the silhouettes of Yordin and Thorne as they led the charge of nine hundred men. Not since the Great War had so many soldiers ridden together toward a common enemy which, back then, meant the soldiers of the northern villages attacked those of the southern villages. At least now the enemy was clear, with no innocents involved.

Or so Perrin hoped.

If there *were* children there—

No. No, he couldn't explain it, but he was sure there weren't. Something else was there, however, which needed to be destroyed. Tonight, on the 59th Day of Planting.

As the cloud of men and horses rumbling like thunder faded into the dusk of the evening, Perrin envisioned for the hundredth time the attack patterns six of the groups would execute in order to reach each remaining structure at the same time. Torches would be lit, swords and long knives would be employed, and if it all went well—which it should, because there was no reason why it shouldn't—all of it would be swift and humane, which was more than the Guarders could say about their assaults on the world.

A seventh swath of soldiers would encircle the village, trapping any Guarders that tried to escape. And, if perchance a Guarder slipped through that line, there'd be another fifty new and somewhat raw recruits not so skilled with the sword, but well-trained in bows and arrows, and ready to take aim.

And maybe—just maybe—one exceptionally lucky and desperate Guarder may slide past them and find himself running blindly to the east, and perhaps jump across a canal where he could meet the sword of Relf Shin—

Perrin gripped the reins tighter, unsure if he really wanted that or not. Instead, he focused on the fantastic sight leaving him. He wished he'd hired an artist to render the image. The uniforms. The horses. The dust. The fading golden light. The rumbling of hooves. There was no way to capture that sound, but the ground trembling

as they cantered away would stay with him forever.

And there he sat on his horse watching it all go on without him.

He wished for a moment that he *was* a falcon. An aerial view of the soldiers weaving through the village in perfect precision would be extraordinary to witness. No Guarder would have time to warn his neighbors. They may hear the commotion of the approaching army—Perrin was betting on that to bring each Guarder to his door in confused curiosity—but no man would have time to react to the offensive, arriving just after dark.

Just like *they* attacked.

And Perrin would miss every moment of it. He growled in frustration as the last soldier and horse left his field of vision.

At a gallop, even that last soldier would be upon Moorland in less than half an hour. Perrin closed his eyes to envision the small, scruffy hill that served as a buffer between the cluster of houses that used to be the village, and the farms beyond it. The mound of earth effectively shielded much of Moorland from the world's view, and also would block Moorland's view of the approaching army.

Perrin's mental eyes rushed over the area until his mind decided to give up the useless dreaming. He opened his eyes to the abandoned farms before him, laid open in a wide expanse all the way to the ditch that marked the border between Moorland's and Edge's territories where Perrin's mount stood as restless as its rider.

"This is stupid," Perrin mumbled to Karna on his horse next to him.

Perrin's horse trampled the ground and snorted in annoyance. For the first time Perrin had found an animal that matched his weight and personality, and he couldn't let it run as desperately as he wanted it to.

"Even the horses know sitting here is stupid! Why am I here?"

"Colonel," Karna said in his best calming voice for approaching a hungry bear, "because you're needed here. Yordin's fine. He's the only man I know more aggressive than you. There's plenty of leadership out there, and what happened to, 'I can handle this'?"

"I thought I could, Brillen," he said sullenly. "I'm not needed here, you know that. Because of stupid old men eighty miles away I can't leave this farm!" He pouted as he swung his horse around and looked longingly to the west.

Brillen sighed. "You used to call me your second mind," he reminded him. "I realize that Thorne now—"

Perrin's severe look stopped him. "—will *never* be my second mind! You may have your own fort, but I still claim your mind."

Brillen smiled at that. "Good. Then take my advice: get off your horse, Perrin."

"What?"

"Just get off. Let's go back to the map, review different scenarios should something unexpected happen, and be useful here."

"Useful here," Perrin repeated with a snarl.

"Part of leadership, you know. Realizing when it's time to let the younger ones have a chance. Knowing that letting them go is difficult to watch, but vital to their development."

Perrin scoffed. "Well that's stupid, too!"

Karna's eyebrows went up. "That's the little speech your father told me when he first saw me off to Edge: let the younger ones have a chance. Lots of officers thought the job of starting a new fort was too much for just a captain and a lieutenant. But we did all right, didn't we?"

"My father didn't say anything to you," Perrin grumbled. "You're making that up."

"Does it sound like something I would make up?"

"No," Perrin admitted. After a moment he said, "I've been wondering what he would think of all of this. I'm not sure what he'd say, but I think Relf would be pleased."

"I think he would, too."

Perrin stared out in the darkness. "Really, Brillen, who's going to know if I break my probation?"

"Only about nine hundred men out there, the hundred plus in the tents behind us overseeing supplies and waiting for injured, and last and most worrisome of all, the High General's main tattler, his grandson Lemuel. Come on." Brillen dismounted and gestured to Perrin. "We have work to do."

Perrin's persistence flagged. He sighed, dismounted, tied up his horse to an old fence post, and trudged after Brillen to the tent.

Brillen lit a lamp and sat down at the large detailed map laid out on the makeshift table. "You really created this? All by yourself?"

Perrin scoffed. "What's that supposed to mean? I had Briter's help, if that's what you're wondering."

"I mean," Brillen chuckled consolingly, "that I didn't know you were a mapmaker. I know you have that collection of old maps you salvaged from the trash heaps in Idumea years ago, but I never knew you could draw one yourself."

“I sense a compliment in there, so I’ll take it,” Perrin winked at him. “But yes, I consulted my outdated maps for different ways to designate terrains, buildings, and movement. Drawing all the little trees took forever, though.”

“But they’re very consistent,” said Brillen as if praising a six-year-old. “I think you got nearly every single one represented.”

Perrin scowled affably at him then looked out of the tent opening to the west, to the masses of trees that taunted him to come see if he drew them correctly.

“I was thinking,” Brillen said, and it sounded to Perrin as if he were very far away, “that should the Guardians retreat into the forest, over here to the east—Colonel, are you paying attention? Over here to the east, the forest narrows. We should deploy the remaining bowmen within this clearing just off the edge of the forest. Eyes here, please, Colonel. Good boy. They could take shots at anyone trying to return to Moorland in the morning . . .”

Perrin exhaled as he sat down by Brillen. He rested his chin on the map and stared past it.

“Stupid,” he whispered to the tent.

Shem glanced behind him, his heart racing faster than his horse.

Just twenty minutes ago he’d run from the forest—doing up his trousers to look as if he’d been detained with some *other* kind of business—and reached his mount just as Yordin signaled for the collective army to form up behind their assault commanders. Shem had barely scrambled on to his horse as his 150 soldiers positioned themselves behind it, and regarded Shem with not a great deal of confidence seeing as how he joined them at the last minute. Most of them weren’t from Edge, either, and perhaps were a bit put out that they’d be following the horse with the showy purple and yellow banner, hoisted high on a straight stick secured in the saddle pack and flapping in the breeze. Still, he was in place to lead them, and as Yordin waved his torch in the air, Shem kicked his mount and the race was on.

It was to be as silent a race as possible, though. Colonel Shin wanted the residents of Moorland to be surprised, to hear thunder or Deceit rumbling. He didn’t want them to realize the northern Army of Idumea was barreling down on them, swords swinging.

Shem frequently glanced over to Yordin, a man he knew was a natural ‘whooper.’ If the major could keep silent, so too would the rest of the soldiers.

But Yordin was grinning widely, probably catching a few bugs in his teeth in his excitement. The torch he had waved was now in a holder on the back of his saddle. Each of the commanders had a torch, something for his men to follow in the growing darkness, then to throw into the wooden structures to set Moorland on fire.

Shem’s men could also follow the banner that Perrin had shoved into Shem’s saddle pack.

“For me,” he’d said when he lashed it into place. “Since I can’t see the attack, at least the banner will.” Then, before the wretchedness of Perrin’s disappointment in missing it all, and the solemnity of the moment could sink into Shem’s heart, Perrin added, “And make sure that hideous thing doesn’t catch on fire, all right? Hycymum would kill me.”

Behind him the 150 horses and riders maintained a steady gallop, and Shem saw the low hill before Moorland beginning to take shape in the twilight shadows.

Again, conflicting emotions bombarded Shem. Taking lives always shook his resolve. He hoped anyone hiding in the building would escape it before he set it alight. He’d lead the soldiers to the slaughter, but he didn’t want to be the butcher. That wasn’t why he signed up.

The small hill loomed larger, and behind it would be the remains of Moorland sheltered peacefully against the hills nearly surrounding it, and oblivious.

Shem reached behind him, gingerly pulled out his torch to raise as a signal, and made sure it he didn’t hold it too high to catch Hycymum’s banner snapping in the wind. Rigoff and his division would be following Shem’s group going to the right, while Yordin and Thorne and two more divisions took the left. In the mass of darkness moving behind him, Shem made out two torches bringing up the rear: Fadh and his lieutenant, ready to redirect any lost soldiers.

Shem raised his torch and waved it four times to signal his group to follow him around the hill.

Impressively, Yordin held in his whoops as he waved his torch in another pattern and split off from Shem.

Faster than Shem expected, there were the structures—many of them lit by lamplights and with smoke rising from chimneys,

indicating that yes, they were indeed inhabited—and immediately Shem spied his target: the only remaining two-story building faintly highlighted by the last of the twilight.

Perrin was an excellent mapmaker and route planner, regrettably. Shem firmed his grip on the torch and swallowed.

The older man bustled about the room, lining up boxes, straightening up supplies, and barking out orders.

“Keep it organized. What did I say about organization?”

The scruffy men standing against the sides of the room looked daringly at each other. Someone had to put an end to his meddling, but no one was about to do it in here with such ingredients surrounding them.

“Precision. Organization. Neatness. Keep clean, keep cautious, or we’ll have a disaster! And while we *want* a disaster, we don’t want it happening to *us*. Once we get this to Edge, then—”

A noise outside the windows of the stone and mortared building caused the old man to pause in his efforts to cover a crate. He looked up as the sound increased—like a rumble of thunder—and the men he was lecturing frowned and glanced around.

“Must be a storm coming,” one of them decided.

The older man shook his head. “Clear sky before the sun went down. No wind, no storm. What *is* that?”

“Maybe Deceit rumbling?” offered another man. “Did that during the land tremor.”

The older man sighed loudly at their inanity. “Do you feel anything shaking?”

“Well I do *now*,” someone declared.

The older man was about to open his mouth when he realized that the ground *was* beginning to tremble—

Someone outside shouted, followed by dozens more yelling.

The older man squinted out the window into the vacant lot. Men were streaming toward his two-story structure—toward any structure—in a panicked run.

Irritated at the commotion, the older man made his way to the door and yanked it open. Before he could demand what was going on, he heard a distinct shout.

“Soldiers! Soldiers!”

Around the corner of a still-intact building rushed a swarm that made the old man gasp in dismay. Soldiers, hundreds of them, all on horseback causing the ground to tremble and the air to whoosh. Each soldier had his sword drawn, slicing man after running man, and trampling those who fell.

A horse and rider burst past him, slashing at him but narrowly missing. The old man dropped to the ground in shock, watching as dozens more of his men fled into buildings, only to be chased by streams of soldiers that never ended, and all of them with blades.

It was the flash of purple that caught his eye. A banner of some sort, raised high like a flag on a horse that whipped past him. And stitched on to the purple cloth was a word in bold, sickly yellow—
EDGE.

“SHIN!” the old man cried out. “Slagging son of sow!”

Soldiers and horses poured in from every corner, hitting buildings with shocking precision as if they knew exactly where to go.

The man looked wildly around, trying to discern if any of the soldiers were actually Perrin Shin himself in direct violation of the probation that they set on him—

Uh, that *the Administrators* had placed on him—

But there was too much chaos. Men screaming, running, torches, horses, blades, bodies falling in front of him with wounds he knew were too accurate to treat.

He scrambled to his feet and raced back into the building, slamming the door behind him.

His workers paced from window to window, staring out at the commotion and bumping into the crates—

“Be careful!” the old man shrieked, shifting a crate so that it wouldn’t bump or worse, crash into another. “The last thing we need right now is—”

“Fire!” cried a man, frantically gesturing to the window.

The old man rushed to it, along with the rest of his workers.

That was the very last thing they needed right now.

Even more soldiers poured into what used to be the small village green, now dead and brown, throwing torches through the windows of the remaining buildings—

“No, no, no, no . . .” the old man murmured frantically, spinning and turning and looking for some kind of solution—

“They’re coming!” someone shouted.

The old man rushed to the window as a soldier on horseback charged toward his building, the hideous purple banner behind

him, flapping.

In the torchlight the old man recognized the soldier's face in the fraction of the second he could focus on him.

“Quiet Man?!” Brisack exclaimed.

Zenos threw the torch.

The window imploded.

Doctor Brisack watched in horror as the black powder on the table next him begin to dance—

Chapter 14 ~ “You’re in a lot of trouble, Colonel Shin.”

Perrin had been pacing impatiently when the messenger finally returned with the news he’d been hoping for.

“Moorland’s infested, sirs! And completely surprised and overrun! We’re encountering no resistance at all.” The private slid off his horse to take the fresh one waiting for him, but first he had to endure the overly enthusiastic slap on his back from Colonel Shin.

“YES!” Perrin cried and ran for his mount.

“Colonel?” Brillen said from the opening of the tent, his arms folded in a fair impersonation of Mr. Hegek when he waited beyond the school grounds for escaping twelve-year-olds. “And just where do you think you’re going?”

Perrin stopped at his horse and held up his hands. “Just instinct, Karna. Sorry.” He rubbed his forehead, kicked a rock into the ditch, and squatted, facing west. It was fully dark now and he strained to hear anything of the battle that might be ensuing.

“Anything else, Private?” he asked the young soldier who had mounted and was now wincing slightly at what was likely a large red welt on his back in the shape of a hand.

“No, sir, sorry. Captain Thorne sent me as soon as he was sure our surprise was complete. I’m to return now. Do you have any messages?”

“No, no. None at all.” Perrin stood back up. “Wait. Private, what size is your jacket?”

“My jacket, sir?”

Brillen chuckled. “Nice try, Colonel, but no one would believe *you* are the messenger. Off with you, Private. Come back as soon

as you can before the colonel tears apart the camp waiting for more news.”

The private nodded and kicked his horse into a full run back to the west.

Perrin didn't go back into the tent. Staring at his map of Moorland only made him want to get there. Even the bowmen he and Brillen had sent, their newest recruits, could venture further than the commander of the offensive.

He paced back and forth along the border of the farm while Brillen, seated on a stump outside the command tent, watched him. Mischievously, Perrin jumped across a ditch, then back again. He jumped over to the other side and grinned. “Look, Brillen,” he taunted. “I'm out of the farm!”

Brillen sighed. “Perrin, get back here. How old are you, anyway? Now, I won't tell the Administrators, but I will tell your *wife*.”

Perrin jumped back across. “Hm. Very good. You certainly know how to threaten a man.” He kicked at another rock. They were becoming scarce in the farm this evening, so at least he was doing some good for someone.

“I should have insisted on updates every five minutes,” he said as he headed to the command tent.

“Colonel, everything is probably going better than we imagined. Look around you—no wounded yet, no additional messengers in a panic. I hate to tell you, but maybe your plan *was* perfect.”

Perrin stopped right in front of Brillen. “Of course it was perfect,” he said, affronted. “Every one of my plans has been perfect. You should know that.”

Brillen chuckled. “Oh, all of them *perfect*, eh? Let's talk about some of those *perfect plans*, shall we? I seem to remember something about a captain dressed in all white heading out into the snowy woods to hunt himself some Guarders.”

Perrin didn't even twitch. “Worked *perfectly*, didn't it.”

“Except when said captain's wife came to the surgery to take home his 'slashed' overcoat and jacket, only to find them in *perfect* condition.”

“She forgave me. Eventually,” Perrin said, the corner of his mouth tugging ever so slightly.

“Yes, yes, she did,” said Brillen, looking out into the darkness. “But I've always wondered how it came to be, in this *perfect* plan of yours, that I was rumored to have been running in the freezing night

to the feed barns and back naked.”

Perrin snorted. “I never said naked in my cover story, Brillen. I gave you the dignity of wearing your shorts.”

“That’s not the version I heard,” said Brillen, a bit coldly.

Perrin squinted. “Mahrree told you I said you were naked?”

“Never heard it from Mahrree.” There was a glint of antipathy in the lieutenant colonel’s eyes. “Heard it from my dear bride. Apparently your wife spoke to my wife when we came up for the Remembrance Ceremony, and my wife asked me for a *demonstration*.”

“So did you?” Perrin’s mouth twitched.

“Colonel!” Karna said in feigned fury. “I hardly think that’s an appropriate topic for us to be discussing at this time.”

“So you *did!*” Perrin burst out laughing.

Brillen couldn’t keep his face sober any longer, and he began to chuckle.

Until they both heard the roar which interrupted their laughter.

Perplexed, they stared at each other in an attempt to discern what exactly it was that they heard.

It came like a roar of thunder, but more concentrated, and oddly, seemed to originate from the ground. Perrin spun to the west and Brillen leaped to his feet.

The sound grew louder, rumbled over the camp, and dissipated beyond them just as an orange glow began to lighten the sky in the west.

“What the slag was *that?*” Brillen exclaimed.

Perrin shook his head. “I have no idea. It sounded like one of the mud volcanoes when it erupts, but much louder.”

The two men looked at each other.

“An eruption?” Brillen scowled.

Then they heard it again—another roar, but this time louder, bouncing off the mountains and echoing around them with frenetic force. The glowing orange grew rapidly into a massive smoking mushroom, propelled by a streak of fire rising bizarrely into the sky.

Perrin lunged for his horse, grabbed the reins, and mounted.

Brillen didn’t argue. He was right behind Colonel Shin, scrambling onto his horse as well. Behind them a few dozen surgeons and aides came running for a clearer view of the oddity rising in the west, but Perrin and Brillen weren’t about to respond to their questions.

The two men dug in their heels, and the horses bounded eagerly over the ditch into the dark fields toward the streak of orange fire. While Perrin's horse was the strongest one he could find for that venture, it wasn't as fast as he wished. Still, it would carry him the distance at a full gallop.

Brillen kept pace next to him.

"I don't think that was an eruption, Colonel," he called from his horse. "I've never seen an eruption of fire before."

"Me neither," Perrin called back. "Watch for retreaters."

"Are you planning to stop for them?"

"No. I'm not stopping until I reach the source of that flame, Brillen. Report me if you wish, but I don't care. You can help the retreaters."

"Don't need to. The surgeons see what's happening. They'll get here. I'm supposed to stay by your side, Colonel, and that's where I intend to stay!"

Shem could do nothing but stare in morbid fascination. All he did was throw the torch through the window.

It wasn't even that big of a flame, either.

He'd even hesitated, riding by twice before guilt and duty convinced him to do it on his third pass.

He sat rooted on his horse which was growing hysterical, but nothing in Shem seemed capable of reacting. It didn't matter that the ball of fire was growing above him, rising, billowing, expanding, so that the heat was now scorching his eyebrows—

"Zenos, MOVE!"

Someone grabbed the reins of his horse, and the animal whisked Shem away. He finally pulled his eyes from the fantastic eruption to see his rescuer, Captain Rigoff.

"What's wrong with you? Got hit in the head?" Rigoff shouted as the men raced away from the fire.

"I just, I just was so surp—" That's all he got out before another tremendous roar rose up behind them.

Both Rigoff and Zenos twisted in their saddles to see another ball of hot orange rise up behind them, far more massive than the first. Bits of rock, dirt, and burning splinters rained down upon them.

"What is that?!" Zenos shouted.

“Don’t know, don’t care,” Rigoff called back, gesturing frantically to soldiers to run away. “Don’t think any of them will survive to tell us about it either. MOVE!”

Finding the glowing orange village in the dark was easy for Perrin and Brillen. A few hundred paces away from Moorland they encountered the first soldiers heading to the staging area, helped by aides. There were only a handful of injured, but as they sped past them in the dark, Perrin caught the scent of burned flesh and hair.

He glanced over at Brillen, and the cringe on his face told him Brillen smelled it too.

“It’s got to be some kind of fire, then,” Perrin called to him.

“Strangest fire I’ve ever seen!”

They rounded the small hill that sheltered the village and were greeted by a view so chaotic that they stopped the horses abruptly, unsure of where to go.

Flames were everywhere, burning buildings from the tops down. Men in black and blue ran in all directions. Some were on fire, but all were racing away from the black billowing smoke. The plume was so baffling that Perrin knew he had to get closer.

“Come on!” he yelled to Brillen and kicked his horse. The men dodged and weaved their mounts through the shouts and yells and debris. Perrin was sure he heard Yordin calling after him, but he ignored him and continued on to the bulging smoke.

He and Brillen dismounted about a hundred paces away and tied their skittish horses to a large green tree.

“Colonel, no!” came Shem’s voice from the chaos, and he appeared amidst the smoke and noise to pull them back. “It’s not stable!”

“What’s with that crater?” Perrin called over the commotion.

Shem shook his head. “It wasn’t a crater when we got here,” he yelled over the shouts of men and the crackles of fire. “It was a building. The two-level store. Stone, timber—I threw in the torch and . . . it just erupted!” He sounded apologetic. “*Exploded!*”

“I smell sulfur, but there are no hotpots around here!” Perrin yelled. “Briter didn’t say any were in the village.”

“This wasn’t natural, Colonel. We think they were making

something they can explode themselves. It's already blown twice. Rigoff and I just evacuated all the soldiers then you two come *barging* in here—" By now Shem had dragged them to their horses.

Brillen and Perrin snatched the reins of their animals who reared and whinnied in terror, and ran from the smoking pit toward the end of the road where several soldiers waited for them. But Perrin kept turning back to see the fire, trying to imagine the large building that used to be there and realizing that the structure laid in charred pieces all around him.

At end of the road his jog was interrupted by the shout of, "You're in a lot of trouble, Colonel Shin."

Perrin shrugged guiltily at Major Yordin. "You try staying away from that," he retorted as he mounted his horse, Karna and Zenos following him.

Grinning, Yordin leaned over from his mount and slapped Perrin on the back. "But I'm glad you're here. This will be our little secret." He glanced at the two young officers with him who nodded in agreement. "We need to head to the north," Yordin told Perrin. "A mass of Guarders were seen running toward the forest there. We've already dispatched a couple hundred men to chase them. All seems clear here. The explosions took care of most of it for us."

The officers rode at a fast gallop through the quiet road to the forest's edge, passing several groups of soldiers on foot entering buildings to look for holdouts.

Perrin grumbling in frustration. It wasn't supposed to be *this* messy. It was supposed to be swift, decisive, and humane, although they didn't deserve that. The Guarders should have been eliminated by now. It all should have happened within minutes, with all Guarders summarily executed . . .

But this was sheer chaos.

Good thing the commander of the offensive showed up.

Within moments Perrin and his men came upon a broad field that stood as Moorland's buffer between the village and the forest.

And that's when Perrin's heart caught in his throat.

Well over one hundred soldiers were on foot, battling just as many Guarders in black who were bafflingly armed with swords.

And, for half a second, Perrin hesitated.

While the men on horseback with him veered off to various parts of the field to render assistance, Perrin took in—for one horrible moment—the scope of the battle. The blades. The blood. The men in

black. The men in blue. The running horses. The clanging steel. The blood. The fire spreading to the tops of the trees illuminating far too much of the field before Perrin, as if it were day. Bodies running. Bodies falling. Bodies bloodied—

Something in his chest clenched and shuddered, and he fought the urge to grab his chest in terror.

Because then Perrin knew what he needed to do. He grasped the ornate filling-gree hilt of General Shin's sword—the one that had been waiting years to be initiated—and everything in Perrin's world slowed down as if completely in his control.

Which, right now, it was.

Instinct took over as he drew the general's sword. Its balance was perfect, the blade sharp and eager. Perrin kicked his mount and headed for a cluster of Guardians rushing a small group of soldiers. He overtook his soldiers and held out his father's sword. A familiar rush of energy filled him as he turned the tip slightly and steadied his arm. The targets hurried to meet the blade, and it connected once, twice. He heard the unmistakable thud of bodies falling behind him and swung his horse back around for another pass, taking out two more men as his soldiers engaged the remaining three.

“Shin?!” he heard one of them call as he rode toward the trees and to another knot of Guardians slipping out of the forest. They ran straight for him. He cut his horse hard to the left, catching the furthest Guardian with a slash across his throat, then dodged to the right to hit two more Guardians from behind. Three Guardians scattered before him, so he aimed his horse at the closest one and flattened him, while his two companions found themselves surrounded by more men in blue. Shin faced the forest again but saw no more bodies running to meet his father's blade.

“No one said anything about the army attacking!” one man in black whimpered as he huffed his way into the forest. “Bad enough we live in rubble and trees, but now the army—”

“Shut up!” his companion hissed at him, although the complainer was simply stating what all ten in their group was thinking as they ran, panicked, into the forest. This wasn't what they signed up for. And where was the gold?

“We’ll hide in here until the army gives up, then—”

As if hitting an invisible wall, the retreating men stopped, stunned.

Actually, they’d hit a line of what seemed to be trees but which abruptly thrust out arms and hit the men, dropping them into the dried leaves. They barely had time to shake off their astonishment to comprehend that they were now surrounded by men in green and brown mottled clothing. Dozens of them.

And that they were holding long knives.

“You’re not hiding anywhere,” rumbled one of them, a massive brute of a man if not actually a bear in a tunic and trousers. “Two options: go back out there and fight like . . . well, not sure if you’d know how real men fight, but you can pretend. Or, you stay in here with my friends and me.” He shifted his grip on the long knife.

Another man in green and brown spoke up, his words coming from somewhere behind the leaves that made up his hat. “Really the only option is, by whose hands do you wish to die?”

One of the men in black looked frantically from one camouflaged face to another. “Who are you?! Where’d you come from?”

The bear-man shrugged. “Looks like you’ll die here, and with a lot of unanswered questions.”

Perrin swiveled in his saddle to identify a new target.

Zenos had just leveled a Guarder, and by the ungainly way he fell Perrin knew he was dead. Shem was already engaging another Guarder and likely didn’t notice his efficiency. Just beyond Shem, Perrin saw a young officer on foot, his sword clashing furiously with his opponent. He stepped awkwardly under the pressure of the more experienced man, who stumbled momentarily in his pursuit.

Perrin kicked his horse and headed for the officer who hadn’t noticed another Guarder creeping up behind him. Perrin aimed for that Guarder and rushed past the stunned figure of Lemuel Thorne.

“Colonel?!”

“Eyes forward, Captain!” Perrin ordered as he took out the Guarder behind Thorne, his now-lifeless body dropping.

Lemuel turned abruptly to see that the first Guarder had found his footing and was about to run him through. Thorne dodged out of the way, but the Guarder’s sword still caught him across his side. Thorne collapsed to the ground as Perrin cut his horse to the right and came

upon the remaining Guarder. As the stallion leaped over the prone body of Thorne, Perrin leaned off to the side and ran through Thorne's other Guarder who crumpled next to Lemuel.

Perrin came back around to see the young captain gasping and holding his side, his hand drenched in blood, and his terrified gaze fixed on the dead man in black who lay nearly on top of him. Lemuel stared up at Colonel Shin with awestruck surprise.

"Stay down," he commanded. "I'll be back for you."

Thorne nodded wearily and let his head fall to the ground, but through the slits in his half-closed eyes he watched the colonel.

Perrin swung back to the field, satisfied that there were fewer men in black among the growing crowd of blue soldiers. But some of those Guarders were becoming brasher in their panic, and one had acquired a horse. That man was Perrin's.

The Guarder was intent on reaching Gari Yordin who was already battling two men so he wasn't aware of a third galloping up behind him.

Perrin roared to get his attention. The Guarder, just a few paces from Yordin, yanked his horse around to face Perrin instead. He charged, but Perrin darted his horse just out of his reach. He turned sharply to come behind the Guarder, slashed him across his back, and felt the old scar on his own back itch in approval. The wound Perrin inflicted, however, was incurable, and the Guarder tumbled off the trotting horse. Confident that there was one less threat in the world, Perrin spun to help Gari.

He caught up to him just as Gari received a deep swipe along his sword arm, and he dropped his weapon with a shout. Perrin rode to his right to catch the two Guarders between them. With a quick slash and another swipe, the Guarders fell lifeless to the ground.

Perrin rounded again, his father's sword vibrating in his steady grip and ready for more exercise. But as he searched for a new target, there were no more men in dark clothing standing. Instead, only soldiers in blue remained upright, scanning the area cautiously, their swords and long knives at the ready. Guarder bodies—as well as a few groaning men in blue—littered the field.

Perrin spun to look into the blazing forest, but nothing more came running out of the smoke-filled woods.

He squinted into the shadows which danced erratically in the glow cast by the nearing fire, because he thought he saw something—some *one*—standing just behind a tree. If someone was

there, they wouldn't be for long. Perrin squinted harder, just to be sure, but when the smoke obscured his view, he gave up. The fire would either flush him out or consume him.

Facing the field again, Perrin did a quick head count. Dozens of soldiers were down, along with Thorne, but the majority were standing, panting, and now daring to smile at each other.

Perrin spied Gari Yordin holding his bleeding arm, still on his horse. A soldier on foot was straining to bind the major's wound, but Yordin caught Perrin's eye and grinned.

Hoof beats came up fast to Perrin's side. He glanced at Shem and Brillen, then did a startled second look. Brillen was bleeding from his leg, his eyes were filled with pain, yet he too was smiling.

But Shem was pensive, studying Perrin and trying to read his mood. Perrin returned the gaze, hoping Shem would recognize that he was as firm and strong as ever, but he noticed the doubtful expression in his friend's eyes. Their staring contest was interrupted by a triumphant roar.

Naturally, it was Gari. "If you won't declare it, then I will, Colonel: the night is ours!"

The men cheered and Perrin finally smiled as well. "Only on this field, Yordin," he said, trying to calm his own growing enthusiasm.

Guarder bodies were everywhere, more than he'd expected. Probably over one hundred in the field alone, and they'd passed dozens on the way. It was an infestation, and they had arrived just in time. His chest burned with the desire to roar back. Not only had they succeeded, he was still feeling as whole and solid as a boulder.

But it wasn't the commander's place to act like a relieved first year soldier. The offensive wasn't over just yet.

"We need thirty men to stay here and to bring the injured back to the staging area," he gestured to the field. "The rest of you will finish going through the houses, then meet back at the old fort at the front of village for new orders. I'll oversee removing the wounded here. Zenos, you appeared uninjured. You can relieve Yordin."

"No, he won't," Gari said cheerfully as he slipped off his horse to allow the soldier to properly wrap his gash. "But he can ride by my side. I'm not going back yet!"

Perrin eyed him. "You're losing a lot of blood, Major. You'll lose consciousness soon, too."

"Tighter, man," Gari said to his wound wrapper. "That's better. Zenos will watch out for me, won't you, Sergeant Major?"

Zenos nodded at Yordin. “Colonel Shin, why don’t you get Karna and the others back, *now*,” his voice heavy with meaning. “That Rivers captain can oversee things here. This fire will take over the rest of the village soon and there will be little left to find.” He gave Perrin another searching look.

It was one Perrin had seen every day for the past year, and alarmingly in the middle of the night in his house. While it was astonishingly presumptuous for a sergeant major to suggest the next procedures to the colonel, Yordin and Karna didn’t censure Zenos, but instead watched the colonel closely.

Perrin winked at Shem and sent him a quick facial tick that indicated that he was all right.

Shem’s shoulders relaxed and he offered a small smile back.

Yordin and Karna exchanged a relieved nod.

Perrin turned to the field of standing men. “How many of the Mountseen group? Excellent. Start locating our wounded. Those trained as surgeons’ aides from each fort—stay here with me. The rest of you follow Yordin and Zenos to help Fadh. And men,” Perrin said with a glint in his eyes, “I guarantee an extra day off when this is over to whomever picks the unconscious Major Yordin off the ground and brings him back to me before dawn.”

The soldiers laughed and Perrin sent one last appraising look to Gari who was helped on to his horse by his men.

“Remember, Colonel—you’re already in trouble! And now, we have witnesses.” Yordin grinned and kicked his horse, and a pack of soldiers followed him and Shem back to the village.

Perrin turned to Brillen who, upon closer inspection, looked worse than Gari. “You’re growing paler than me, Brillen. Get down. Let’s wrap that leg.”

Brillen merely nodded and practically fell off his horse. Perrin dismounted and rushed to his side to help him lay on the stubbly field. The thigh wound was deeper than he expected, and the dark blue cloth of his trousers was already saturated.

Perrin groaned when he realized the severity of the gash. “I’m so sorry, Brillen,” he whispered.

Karna’s eyes closed in pain and fatigue.

“This is all my fault. Aide!” Perrin called.

A soldier rushed to his side and opened his surgeon’s aide pack. Perrin pushed him out of the way and hurriedly dumped the contents of the bag on the ground. He grabbed a large wad of cotton and the soldier unfurled a long wrap.

“Colonel, please,” the aide said, clearly not pleased that someone was taking over his job. “I can do this. Go supervise the others.”

“No! I caused this, I fix this.”

The captain gently pushed the colonel away. “Sir, you’re *not here*, remember? I’ve been trained. You haven’t. Now, go supervise the others. Sir.”

“Go, Perrin,” whispered Brillen, his eyes still closed. “Doctoring is not your talent. Killing is. I noticed that you were as deadly as ever tonight, and I don’t want to die.”

The corner of Perrin’s mouth went up ever so slightly. He nodded and patted the captain on the arm, who was already cutting the drenched wool to expose the gash.

Perrin got to his feet. He had promised someone he would come back for him.

He jogged through the slain on the ground, his attention focused on the far side of the field. Soldiers were already attending to the injured, and placing small strips of white cloth by those who were dead. Not a single Guarder seemed to have survived—either because of the efficiency of the soldiers or the Guarders’ custom to commit suicide rather than be taken prisoner—but right now Perrin didn’t care about that. His mind was too preoccupied by what he might find when he reached his destination.

If Lemuel Thorne were dead, there would be a lot of questions to answer.

If he were alive, there would be even more.

He found the captain lying motionless in the brown grass, his eyes closed. As he stood over him, Perrin pushed a variety of thoughts from his mind, most of them not altruistic. He paused for a moment before reluctantly kneeling at Thorne’s side to place his fingers on his neck.

There was a pulse, slow and weak.

Perrin didn’t know whether to be relieved or annoyed.

He unbuttoned Thorne’s jacket. The gash had sliced neatly across the bottom of his ribs, and he had lost a lot of blood, drenching his formerly white undershirt. But the wound wasn’t deep and likely not life-threatening if taken care of quickly enough.

Again Perrin hesitated. Only for a fraction of a second, but it felt much longer than that.

He looked around the field and waved over an aide who was helping another soldier to stand up on a wrapped leg. The aide jogged

over to him.

“Get the captain bandaged up. We need to start moving the men out of here. The wind’s shifting, and the smoke from the fires will soon grow too heavy to see clearly.”

The aide nodded and started to work on Thorne.

Almost an hour later Perrin watched as the last of the wounded were helped out of the field and onto litters and wagons to be sent to the staging area where surgeons were already at work. Brillen’s eyes were still closed and his face even grayer when his litter passed Perrin.

“Don’t worry, Colonel,” Karna’s captain assured him. “The surgeons at the camp will take care of him. He should be all right.”

Perrin nodded and gave him The Dinner smile, hoping it would mask the guilt he felt for yet again leading a willing and devoted Brillen somewhere Perrin wasn’t supposed to be. They had both been serving at the Fort at Edge for less than two seasons when Perrin had ordered a nervous Lieutenant Karna to follow him into the forest. Today Brillen had followed him willingly, and was seriously wounded for his loyalty.

Misplaced loyalty, Perrin sighed to himself. If Brillen Karna didn’t recover, or lost his leg . . .

Perrin shook the thought out of his head and watched as the rest of the soldiers were carried past him. When Thorne’s litter passed, Perrin only glanced his way. Lemuel was hazily conscious with a faraway look in his eyes. He’d survive.

With a heavy sigh, Perrin mounted his horse, a creature proving its worth that night. Perrin patted its neck gratefully; perhaps he’d finally found a horse he’d claim as his own. He looked around one more time, evaluating the remaining soldiers. The last aides went to find Yordin and his men still searching the houses with Fadh. Soon they, too, would be back at the staging area. Everyone alive was on their way out of Moorland.

Content that the field of battle was deserted except for the dead, Perrin quietly clucked to his able horse and set off for the crater that used to be a building.

“Come on,” one man in green mottled and brown clothing whispered to another. He glanced up nervously at the burning timbers

above. Ash and sparks floated down, singeing their clothes with tiny holes. “We need to get out of here!”

“But Dormin, where’s he going?” asked his companion. “Shin’s headed the wrong way! He should be going out, not back into Moorland. We should do something.”

“You’ve done enough!” Dormin hissed in his ear. “I can’t believe he didn’t see you.”

His companion flushed with the growing heat and embarrassment. “I couldn’t help myself. There he sat on his horse peering in, and the next thing I know, I’m saluting him.”

“You’re not the first one to do that,” Dormin said, dragging him away from the flames and deeper into the forest. “I was surprised too. It’s been decades since I’ve seen Relf’s sword. I admit I felt the urge to salute as well. However, those who do so are usually hidden well away in the forest, not under burning embers threatening to expose them to his view!”

The other man blushed deeper. “I just didn’t expect to see him. He’s not supposed to be here, you know.”

“Yes, we know,” Dormin said, deftly winding his way along invisible paths, his companion struggling to keep up. “But beyond that tree line is no longer our jurisdiction. We accomplished what we came to do, and now it’s time for use to melt back into the forest.”

The second man followed him obediently, constantly looking back at what used to be Moorland.

“But *where* is he going?”

What used to be the village green was eerily quiet.

The fire traveled north through the forest, since there was little left to burn in Moorland. Yet still a few stubborn logs and planks refused to give up, and lit the way to the massive hole.

About a hundred paces away from the crater was a tree still standing. Well, significant parts of it were. Perrin tethered his remarkably calm horse to the remaining trunk before picking his way through the debris. He slowed as he neared the pit that now had only a fine wisp of smoke rising from it. The smell of sulfur still hung in the air, as well as a faint scent that reminded him of urine.

He crept over to the edge of the hole and peered in. The ground all around was relatively smooth, as if an enormous spoon had scraped

out the contents in one scoop. He looked around the perimeter and noticed that the remains of the building were scattered from the crater in an almost uniform manner, with black lines and ash radiating outward.

Perrin kneeled on one knee, scraped up some of the black powder, and sniffed it. Definitely sulfur—

And then he understood.

He scrambled to his feet, panic rising and his lungs gasping for air.

They were trying to harness the power of the forests—

They were trying to make their own eruptions—

And they had succeeded.

He took a few stumbling steps back, his breathing rapid and shallow. If they could do this amount of damage *here* . . .

Images flashed across his mind that he couldn't stop. All that he'd successfully fought for more than two moons was back, forcing him to see all new horrors.

Exploding eruptions in Edge. At the fort. His home. His family.

A sharp pain stabbed him in the chest, as if the knife he nearly plunged there was sticking out of his heart.

Perrin twisted away from the crater, closed his eyes, and gripped his head. "No, no, no," he told himself, "Not real. Not happening anywhere else but here. You did it. *You killed them*. You killed them *all*. They killed themselves!"

Perrin fought to breathe more slowly, more meditatively. Feeling something hot near his feet, he opened his eyes to see a log smoldering by his boots. Another smell reached him.

The object wasn't a log.

"NO!" Perrin cried as nausea wrenched his stomach. Images clouded his vision, and he sprinted from the crater to his horse, leaping over debris and other objects he chose not to identify. He yanked the reins off of the tree and scrambled on to his steed. The pain in his chest intensified, and he pushed on his heart in a vain attempt to slow its beating.

"No, no, no. Only happening here. Get away from it! It can't follow you," he told himself as he kicked the horse and rode as fast as he dared from the village. "You killed them all. You didn't even get a scratch! Mahrree will never know."

Tears of pain and worry streaked down his face.

"Dear Creator!" he whimpered as his horse headed into the darkness unguided. It was all the prayer he could muster. For

several minutes the horse galloped while Perrin tried to ease the thumping of his heart. Completely disoriented and feeling a sufficient distance away from the horrors, he finally reined his horse to a stop and closed his eyes.

“It’s gone. It’s gone. It’s far behind me,” he mumbled, trying to convince himself that was true. He focused on a point just above his heart where over a year ago he felt his parents for the last time. “I’m alone. I was victorious. I was right. They were doing worse things than raising an army. I stopped them. It’s over. I’m a son of the Creator—”

His horse pawed the ground restlessly as Perrin continued to breathe and think and murmur to himself.

Eventually he opened his eyes. To his right he saw the burning forest in a distance, and he turned the horse around to face the east where Edge, the camp, and the sun would be. He sighed and looked up at the stars.

“Dear Creator, I need help. You know it, and I’m asking—”

He lowered his head, ashamed at trying to command the Great Commander.

Penitently he slid off the horse, went immediately to his knees, but then collapsed on the dirt with his cheek against the earth. There he laid, exhausted and terrified—maybe for minutes or maybe for hours—before he found the strength to speak.

“Dear Creator, please, *please* help me,” he whispered. “I know I’m not worthy of Your attention. This ground below me trembles when You command it, but when You cause me to tremble I demand a reason for it. I’m lower than this dirt, but still I beg for Your mercy. I’ve tried to do Your will. I know You wanted us to make this attack, to destroy whatever it was they were trying to make. But Creator, it’s now destroying me. I can’t shake the images—”

He gasped and shuddered as they flooded his mind again. “Mah-ree!” he whispered and squeezed his eyes shut.

It was another horribly long minute or hour before he continued.

“Please help me hold it together. My friends are injured, my brother had to end lives, and our leadership is compromised. I don’t know who’s left and able to lead these soldiers home. Please help me get myself together, get the men back, and get me home. You’re the only one in charge, You’re the only one with real power. I’m at Your mercy. Help me finish Your will.”

He blew out another deep breath and felt his lungs fill again, but

something else filled him too.

The warmth that always remained near his heart grew. A smile came across his face, but he didn't know why. And he didn't have to know why—he just needed to accept it.

Breathing became easier and the pain in his chest faded. Clear images of what needed to happen in the next several hours came to his mind, as if he were seeing vivid drawings in a book. And with that came the desire to get up and get to work.

Never before had he sighed so loudly or with such gratitude. Once again he was full and strong and unstoppable. He was back.

Perrin got to his knees, brushed the dirt from his cheek, and addressed the stars. “Well done, Sir! Thank You!”

Grinning into the dark, he mounted his weary but willing horse, and kicked it into a run to the east.

Shem had been growing more uneasy as the darkness in the west revealed nothing but darkness. He and the rest of the army had returned an hour ago, having found no more Guarders. Moorland and the Guarders were utterly devastated.

When he strode into the command tent to deliver the good news to the colonel, he was greeted by a lone corporal manning the map.

Shem helped get the wounded to the surgeons while always watching the west. He took care of his horse, glancing behind him into the dark. He discussed the next moves with Fadh, who was currently in command since he was the highest ranked officer not injured, while keeping an eye on the glow of the Moorland fires.

Major Fadh kept vigil too, waiting for Colonel Shin to finally appear. The two men stood together now at the ditch on the edge of the camp, scanning the darkness.

“Did anyone see what direction he went?” Fadh quietly asked Shem. “It's been hours now.”

“The surgeons' aides thought he was right behind them.” Shem massaged his hands. “Five more minutes, then I'll go looking.”

“Take some men with you, Zenos. He wouldn't . . . he wouldn't go *in* to the forest, would he?” Fadh whispered, glancing at the trees burning in the distance.

Shem stared in the same direction, his worry doubling. “Why would he do that?”

“Brillen told me that’s how he and Shin first engaged the Guarders, years ago,” Fadh murmured, as if concerned that any of the soldiers keeping a respectable distance behind them might overhear. “You know him better than any of us, Shem. What do you think?”

Calling him by his first name promoted Shem to Fadh’s equal, and Shem appreciated the show of faith.

But that was the kind of man Fadh was; he just didn’t know it.

Besides, considering the amount of officers and older enlisted men wounded, the fact that Perrin was missing, along with Beneff, and that Graeson Fadh had been serving in the army for about a year less than Shem, and that the situation was still considered a battle, Sergeant Major Shem Zenos was likely the ablest senior soldier and therefore in charge of the offensive at that moment.

But Shem didn’t want that distinction. He only wanted his brother to come back. As he surveyed the burning distance, the awful notion that Perrin might *not* return entered his mind for the first time.

“Shem,” Fadh said, searching the dark for movement, “considering his past behavior, maybe something in him snapped and he thought he needed to try going into the forests again.”

Shem groaned. “This was too much, too soon. I told him I didn’t think he wasn’t ready, but he insisted it had to be now.”

Graeson Fadh squeezed his shoulder in a brotherly manner, and Shem marveled at the familiarity of the gesture. Then again, Shem knew Fadh well. Actually, he knew men *like him* very well.

“I never doubted his timing or his resolve, Shem,” Fadh confided. “Obviously he was right about the attack tonight. I’m just worried now about *him*.”

Shem smiled dimly at that. Typical Fadh response. But again, Graeson didn’t know that.

Shem’s smile dissolved as he realized Graeson likely never *would* know, and once again the two worlds that Shem tried to keep separate threatened to collide and create a disaster in his mind.

There were enough disasters tonight already, and Shem knew it was his growing dread for his best friend that currently endangered his own ability to keep his thoughts straight—

Out of the darkness came the sound of a horse galloping. Graeson gripped Shem’s arm in hope. A large horse with the larger figure of Colonel Shin emerged from the darkness, leaped easily over the ditch, and continued past the two men and into the camp.

Fadh burst into a grin. “Yes!” He shook Shem’s shoulders

enthusiastically and broke into a run after the colonel.

Shem jogged after Perrin as well, trying to discern his demeanor by the way he held himself. Too many things could have gone wrong. It was too much stimulation for such an imbalanced mind.

Perrin reined his horse once he was in the middle of the tent village, and soldiers shouted in triumph at their commander. As Perrin wheeled the horse around, Shem caught a glimpse of his face.

Perrin was smiling.

No, not merely smiling: beaming, almost glowing.

Shem halted his pursuit and watched.

Soldiers were rising to their feet, punching the air, and shouting “Shin! Shin!” Even many of the wounded being tended to on the southern side of the camp were trying to sit up, or shouted from their prone positions. Somewhere Roarin’ Yordin would be smacking the ground, Shem thought with a smile. His smile grew as he watched his friend take the cheers, a little embarrassed by the loud outpouring aimed his way.

Colonel Shin raised his hand in an effort to quiet their roar, but it only made the men shout louder.

Shem chuckled as Perrin turned slightly pink. He noticed that even the surgeons were chanting “Shin!” as they wrapped wounds. A few calls of “General!” also punctured the air.

Shem could only hope that Thorne was already sedated.

Somehow Perrin spotted Shem in the crowd, and for a moment their eyes met. Only Shem was adept enough at reading Perrin’s face to recognize the shadow of darkness that flickered across it.

Something *had* gone wrong, but Perrin was on top of it.

In fact, right now he was on top of the entire world, with a devoted army to make sure he stayed there.

“Men, men!” Colonel Shin tried to shout over the chants of “Shin!” that continued to pummel him. “Please! It’s the middle of the night, you know. Some drowsy officer in Idumea’s trying to sleep, and your racket will startle him off of his desk.”

The shouting dissolved into laughter as the combined armies looked with admiration at the mastermind of the offensive.

“You’ve all done remarkably well,” he announced to them. “I’m astounded and impressed at our victory. Each one of you will be able to boast to your grandchildren that you were at the Moorland Offensive—the attack that devastated the Guarders, that destroyed their secret weapon, and finally brought peace to our

world.”

That started the cheering all over again, with Colonel Shin vainly trying to quiet it. For once no one felt like obeying the colonel. Then again, the colonel wasn't *ordering* them to settle down.

Shem folded his arms and watched with amused approval. After such a miserable year, Perrin Shin deserved to feel a little success.

The colonel called again over the shouts of the army. “Now, that’s not to say this offensive was executed perfectly. I’ve discovered deviations to my plan which I’ll discuss with your commanders. However,” he paused as he glanced around at the dirty, burned, and bloodied soldiers that looked up at him with reverent awe, “this isn’t the time for admonishment, but for celebration. Men, I couldn’t be prouder of you tonight. And more importantly, the Creator is pleased with you too. Well done!”

Before he could direct his horse over to the makeshift stables, he was swarmed with eager soldiers who forgot all protocol and tried to reach up to shake his hand, slap him on the leg, or—more appropriately—salute him.

Shem grinned at Perrin’s futile efforts to slip away. “Just enjoy the moment, *General* Shin,” he whispered as the soldiers mobbed him. “And that title is coming, my brother. But I must inform you, it’ll be yours in a way, and at a time, that you’ll never suspect.”

Chapter 15 ~ “Seeing as how some people weren’t where they were supposed to be . . .”

Perrin evaluated the eleven men surrounding the map just as dawn peeked over the horizon. Most of them had a couple hours of sleep, but it wasn’t enough. The map was now on the ground of the command tent to afford every man a clear view, with the colonel towering over almost all of them.

“Look, maybe we should do the briefing individually—”

“No!” Gari Yordin called feebly from his horizontal position on a litter. He made an attempt to slap the side of the tent in emphasis, but the canvas merely gave way.

“Sir?” His assistant next to him on the ground held up his hand.

The major smacked that instead. “Well landed, Burk,” he said, pleased with the smacking effect. He looked up to Perrin who was trying to hide a smile. “We started this together, we finish together!”

Brillen Karna, also on the ground, nodded wearily. He was propped up against a stump on his left with Shem on his right, who sat next to him as a support. Brillen’s normally light brown face was pale from loss of blood, and his leg was bandaged extensively. Still, he proclaimed, albeit weakly, “Hear, hear!”

Out of loyalty, the officers’ assistants also sat on the ground taking notes and offering support to their injured commanders.

Perrin glanced at Graeson Fadh, the only other uninjured officer, standing next to him.

Fadh shrugged. “Whatever they want, sir.”

Only a faint moaning sound came from the vicinity of Lemuel

Thorne. He was slumped awkwardly on the other side of Zenos, his head propped up slightly against Shem's arm, but lolling back and forth as he moved in and out of consciousness. Shem leaned toward Brillen in a pretense to help him sit more comfortably, and the young captain flopped to the ground with another groan.

Shem quickly looked around apologetically at the other soldiers, on his face an overly dramatic expression worthy of the amphitheater that conveyed, *Ooh, did I do that?*

Several men snorted.

Perrin shook his head slowly at Thorne. "How much sedation did they give him, anyway?"

Shem grinned slyly. "It seems our brave captain has a thing about needles. When he heard how much stitching the surgeon planned to do, he nearly passed out all on his own. He asked for as much sedation as possible so he wouldn't feel anything for a very long time. That's why he's not *entirely* with us yet."

Perrin shook his head again, trying to dislodge tempting thoughts of how they could test just how much or little pain the captain could feel right now. The notion of dropping him from varying heights was presenting itself in his mind when he noticed Brillen gesturing slowly.

"Colonel," his frail voice came as forcefully as it could. "Don't criticize sedation until you've experienced it. That stuff is a miracle, and you know I don't believe in miracles."

The only man in the tent who knew just how much sedation the colonel had experienced found, at the most opportune moment, the strength to keep his face completely somber.

"And a 'hear, hear' to that!" Yordin called from the floor. His assistant held up his hand again for the major to smack. "Days of planking are over!"

"What was so bad about being planked?" Perrin asked.

Yordin tried to push himself up into a sitting position but he cringed in pain and collapsed.

Perrin winced in sympathy. The major's arm wasn't the only thing injured. He took a deep dagger plunge into his *upper back thigh*—he wanted to make sure everyone referred to the location of his injury that way as well—when he startled one of the last Guardians hiding in an abandoned bedroom. If Yordin tried to lie on his side to relieve the pressure on his thigh, his injured arm had to support his weight. If he shifted to the other side, then his thigh wound bore his weight. The

only option was to lie on his stomach, which Gari refused to do claiming it wasn't dignified.

The other officers had a bet as to when he would finally relent. Perrin guessed by midday meal.

Now the major tried propping himself against his ever-ready Burk who struggled to find a way to support Yordin without inflicting more discomfort. Burk offered him his knee to lean against. For about a minute, Gari would be comfortable. "Shin, have you ever been planked?" Yordin said from his semi-prone position.

Brillen and Shem both began to chuckle.

Perrin ignored them. "Yes, maybe a couple of times."

Shem chortled. "Maybe a couple?"

Brillen jabbed him in his side and coughed back his own laugh.

"Well, each time they hit me over the head to knock me out for stitches, I wake up with a headache worse than the pain of the stitching!" Yordin declared. "With sedation, I wake up only groggy as if I'd had a bad jug of mead. Since I'm used to that from my Command School days, I'll take sedation over planking any day."

Perrin nodded obligingly. "I'll be sure to look into it if ever I need stitching again."

Another low groan came from Thorne.

Shem gave him a casual glance and waved at Perrin. "He's fine. Best get on with your briefing before he's fully awake. He's got maybe ten minutes."

"Heard that," moaned Thorne.

"Bet you won't remember it!" Yordin chuckled.

"With any luck," Fadh murmured, "he won't remember a great many things."

Colonel Shin cleared his throat, unsure of what to do about those *many things*. "Additional wagons are on their way from Edge," he told the men in the tent. "Because of the explosions, our casualty numbers are higher than we anticipated. But I sent a messenger to Edge telling them of our situation, and my surgeon assures me we can care for all of the wounded in our training arena, provided we can borrow a few of your surgeons for a few weeks?"

The commanders nodded at that.

"So the wagons to head back to the fort will be those carrying the most severe cases first. Once the injured are taken care of, we'll use the wagons to retrieve the dead, likely this afternoon. Fadh and

I will go to Moorland to oversee the retrieval of our fallen—”

Shem shook his head. “You’re not supposed to leave this farm, Colonel. Have you forgotten? You did so well last night staying where you should, don’t ruin it now.”

Several of the assistants smirked and looked down at the ground. Yordin’s guffaw was so loud that Perrin saw the tent wall move.

“Thank you for the reminder, Zenos,” Perrin said dutifully.

“Besides,” Shem continued, “I’m sorry to report that your horse is, um . . . *unable* to take you.”

Fadh cleared his throat as if Shem had just broken some agreement they had.

Perrin squinted. “Why?”

Shem shrugged an apology to Fadh, who gently took Perrin’s arm. “We found it dead, this morning. Exhaustion, maybe colic—we’re not sure. I’m very sorry.”

Perrin exhaled and rubbed his forehead. Of course there were more casualties than he anticipated, but *the horse* . . . He was even trying to think of a good name for it, too. “That was actually the first decent animal I’ve had since I’ve been to Edge.”

“You’ve never claimed a horse, Shin?” Yordin was amazed. “Request one! From the Stables at Pools. Tell them what you want.”

Perrin sighed. “Maybe I will. Ah, well, there are still plenty of riderless horses today, and I fail to see how staying here now—”

“You *will* stay *here!*” Shem’s tone was more forceful than Perrin had ever heard it.

He glared. “We’ll discuss this later, Sergeant Major.”

Brillen found enough strength to say, “You *should* stay here, Colonel. Let Zenos go with Major Fadh. We need you here.”

Perrin sighed at the well-intentioned insubordination. He was being overruled at every turn. But they were also right.

“I’ve asked Rigoff to compile a list of the missing men,” he said in resignation. “He should have that completed within the hour. We will take that—I mean, *those going to Moorland* will take a copy of the list, along with soldiers from each fort to help identify their dead should their name patches be unreadable.” He glanced around the tent. “No one’s seen Beneff yet, have they?”

The men shook their heads.

Shem stared off at a corner.

“Zenos, you went looking for him last night. Did you—”

“No, sir, I didn’t. I even went to the forest’s edge.”

Perrin frowned. "Was there any activity in the forest near our camp? Anything whatsoever?"

"No Guarder activity at all, sir." Shem looked him in the eye.

The doddering old fool likely wandered back to the fort and was asleep in his quarters, Perrin decided.

"My goal," he continued, "is to have the camp dismantled by tomorrow afternoon. I also want a team of volunteer to investigate the crater in Moorland. I want to know what happened there."

Major Fadh shook his head. "I'm not sure that's a good idea, sir. There could be more of that black powder, in smaller amounts, somewhere in the area. I made sure the men touched nothing as they raided the houses. We don't need another explosion—"

"I agree. That's why we can't leave it then, can we?" Perrin said. "As much as I'd like to believe we killed every Guarder last night, I know that's not the truth. What's to stop any survivors from returning for that substance and using it against us?"

"Then burn whatever's left of Moorland!" Yordin insisted. "Pull out our dead and torch the place. Don't give anyone else a reason to settle there."

Burk held up his hand for another Yordin slap.

The rest of the men agreed loudly with the major until Colonel Shin held up his hands for quiet.

"I agree. We destroy the village. But first we should find out what caused the blast. The knowledge of how to create it may have escaped last night, and someone may be able to duplicate it somewhere else. If we know what it was, we may be able to fight it."

"Colonel," Shem said, "how could we fight Nature? What they did was a re-creation of Nature. You can't conquer that. You can only run from it. It will do us no good to pursue this—"

"But Zenos," Perrin said, "what if we re-create it ourselves?"

The air in the tent went deathly still.

"Find out the secrets ourselves, Shin?" Zenos glared at him. "And use it where? Who are *you* planning to annihilate, sir?"

Perrin felt the stares of nearly all the eyes in the room. Thorne's remained closed, and the only sound was his faint, nasally snoring.

Perrin held up his hands again. "Just a thought."

Shem shook his head. "Get rid of that thought, Colonel. We shouldn't be copying the Guarders. We're better than that."

Fadh turned to Perrin. "Sir, respectfully, I agree with Zenos. Let's just torch the remaining areas, and hope that if the secrets did escape those who hold them are too terrified by what happened—"

”

“Fadh, that’s not the way Guarders think,” Perrin hissed at him. “*Nothing* terrifies them—”

“Colonel!” Shem interrupted. “We’ll put it to a vote if we must. But since you’re confined by the Administrators to this farm, and each of us here have pledged to serve the Administrators and follow their decrees and *make sure you stay here*, I don’t see how you’ll stop us from torching the village without us first finding its secrets.”

Now all the eyes turned and stared at the sergeant major, but his hard gaze held Perrin’s equally cold one. Perrin had never seen Shem so adamant, nor so angry. “We’ll discuss this later, Zenos.”

“I’ll tell you what I’d like to discuss,” Yordin said, trying to break the tension, “since you two will be discussing quite a bit on your own later—I’d like to discuss what kind of medal I should get for being stabbed in the upper back thigh!”

A couple of men began to chuckle.

“In fact, I imagine there will be quite a few medals handed out in the next few moons,” Yordin declared. “Consider what we’ve done, gentlemen: we’re the first to find a Guarder holdout, wipe them out, and destroy their new weapon! I’m going to need stronger cloth to hold up the weight of all those new medals on my uniform.”

Now even Perrin was smiling, but stiffly. “Actually, that *is* something we need to discuss: the report we send to Idumea.”

“Yes,” said Brillen thoughtfully. “There may be a bit of a problem with that.”

Fadh nodded. “I agree. Just how much detail do we provide?” He folded his arms and looked steadily at Colonel Shin. “Seeing as how some people weren’t where they were supposed to be . . .”

A fragile voice from the corner piped up. “If he was where he was supposed to be, I wouldn’t be here now.” Thorne tried to roll over, but the thirty stitches in his side wouldn’t let him.

The words *Don’t remind me*, nearly came out of Perrin’s mouth.

Thorne attempted to sit up, and Shem halfheartedly offered him a hand.

“Indeed, Colonel Shin,” Yordin smiled as he slowly slumped along Burk’s leg. “For what you put together, the success we had, and your valiant personal effort on the field, I can’t see how anyone could argue you don’t deserve immediate promotion to general!” His assistant already had his hand out waiting for the slap.

Karna, Zenos, and Fadh grinned and several of the assistants cried

out, "Hear, hear!"

Perrin knew he was turning red, but he couldn't imagine how to stop it. Then he had an idea. He looked at Thorne.

The captain had struggled to a sideways sitting position, trying not to lean on Shem any more than necessary. He regarded the colonel with an expression Perrin couldn't quite decipher, but it seemed to be part worry, part defiance, and part admiration.

"There'll be no promotion for me, gentlemen," Perrin said quietly, meeting Thorne's unreadable eyes. "In fact, there'll probably be an extension to my probation for violating it so willfully. And as for planning the offensive in the beginning, without the 'express permission of the hierarchy'?" He shook his head.

Shem smiled at him. "Sir, probably the only thing that will keep you from being demoted to a measly private is that you saved the grandson of the High General of Idumea. Hmm. Too bad. I could have outranked you," he said with a twinkle in his eyes.

Thorne glanced sharply in his direction, but nodded. "Funny." Shem looked up, as if searching for strength.

"Any volunteers to write our report?" Perrin asked the officers. "You may have all my notes, and my permission to relay the facts as best as you remember them," he said in a tone full of suggestion.

"I'll do it," Fadh said. "My men were the first to see them in Moorland, I sent the message to Karna who contacted you, so I started it all. Let me finish it, sir."

Perrin nodded at him. "Thank you, Major."

A messenger appeared at the tent flap. "Sirs, the first wagons from Edge are arriving. Along with a little *extra help*." He sent a wary look to Perrin.

Perrin shifted the look to Shem, with an additional level of, *All right, Shem—what have you done?*

Shem leaped to his feet, nearly knocking Thorne back down. "We have our orders, right men? Fadh, I'll need just a few minutes with the colonel before I join you for Moorland. Perhaps you can see to helping Thorne back to the surgeons?"

It was presumptuous for Zenos to issue *suggestions*, but every man in the tent could see something was up between him and Shin, and no one wanted to get in the middle of it. Fadh nodded while Shem took a startled Perrin by the arm and pulled him out of the tent. "We need to talk."

"That's right, we do!" Perrin growled at him. "This could be considered insubordination, and we weren't finished—"

“Yes, we were,” Shem said dismissively. “More importantly, we need to talk about what happened last night. About *you*.”

He led a fuming Perrin to the edge of the woods where the first wagons were pulling up in the large open area, the camp well behind them on the other side of the command tent.

Shem murmured, “I know something happened with you. I saw it in your eyes when you came back last night. You also haven’t slept enough, and—”

Being hen-pecked by Shem was the last thing Perrin wanted. “Shem, I’m fine. And where are we going?” he added in annoyance.

A wagon rolled to a stop in front of them, and he stiffened when he saw the “extra help.”

No, *this* was the last thing Perrin wanted.

Mahrree climbed off the side without waiting for assistance from the soldier who brought her. Jaytsy and Peto jumped out the back and stood by the wagon with eager, but apologetic, faces.

“Ah, Shem!” Perrin snarled. “What’s she doing here?”

Mahrree marched up to him. “Don’t ‘Ah, Shem’ him! This was my idea. You went out there, didn’t you?”

Perrin was furious.

At least, that’s what the emotion felt like. His wife, checking up on him as if he were a twelve-year-old runaway. How absurd.

But there she stood, hands on hips, and her eyes severe as she gazed into his. Until she softened. “Perrin?”

He wasn’t sure what she saw in his face, but the urge to grab her throat and check her pulse overwhelmed him. He took her wrist instead and dragged her past the edge of the forest into the shadows for some privacy. Her pulse quickened under his fingers as he sat her down on a fallen tree.

Shem followed them in—apparently this morning no one remembered Pere Shin’s first rule about staying out of the forests—and waited for the Shins from a little ways off.

“Yes, I went there,” Perrin confessed. “But I didn’t get hurt.”

“Mahrree, if it makes you feel any better, he was pretty good out there,” Shem offered.

“So you were, Shem,” Perrin said. “I’m actually more worried about you. Last night you were very effective, for once. More than once, by my count.”

Shem looked down at a lone pinecone. “I know. I had no choice. I’m working on that myself.”

Perrin took a deep breath. “Well, add that to the list of things we’re going to discuss later. We have enough to talk about for riding all the way to Waves. Now, I promise both of you that I had no problems during the battle.”

Mahrree looked deep into his eyes. “But after?”

Perrin couldn’t hold her gaze any longer. He sat down in the dirt in front of her and stared at a decaying log. There were no more images, but just the memory of the images. Of smoldering. Of Mahrree.

“Shem,” he whispered, “we can’t let them use that weapon.”

Perrin felt his wife’s arms wrap around him. “Weapon? Tell me what—”

“No!” he exclaimed, pulling out of her embrace. He’d never tell her, especially here among the rotting wood that reminded him of burning limbs. “I never want to see it again!” He dared to meet her eyes, and searched himself as she searched his face. He didn’t feel the same as before. He *was* beating it, right there.

“I can deal with it,” he assured them, “because Shem’s going to destroy whatever remains.”

Mahrree turned expectantly to Shem.

He nodded back to her.

Perrin took Mahrree’s face. “You shouldn’t have come here.”

“But you need us,” she said. “The children and I can help get the injured to the wagons.”

“How long were you planning this?”

“Ever since you told me what you were planning.”

“Women don’t belong out here.”

“Prove it.”

He managed a short chuckle. “I don’t have time to debate you right now, woman.”

“No you don’t,” she agreed, “But do you have a few seconds to accept my apology for checking up on you?” She put her arms around his neck again and kissed him.

Of course he had to be polite and return the gesture, ardently . . .

Shem groaned and turned around.

“No, Peto,” he called loudly. “Stay at the wagon. Trust me.” He murmured to himself as he ambled out of the trees. “Yes, yes, advantages of marriage—you remind all the time . . .”

Mahrree and the children proved to be more help than Perrin imagined they could be. While the surgeons and assistants attended to the more seriously injured, his family handled the minor cuts and the changing of bandages. He was surprised that wounded men responded so cheerfully to his wife and son. Seeing another face besides a sour surgeon's seemed to be an effective treatment.

But he was not at all surprised by the attention afforded his daughter. Soldiers who were barely injured suddenly needed Jaytsy to rewrap a wound that had just been bound by an aide, or required her arm around their waists to walk them to a departing wagon even though they had wandered over to the surgery area on their own.

Perrin tried to stay nearby to shoot warning glares at the young men who happened to be lucky enough to have the beautiful—yes, Perrin had to acknowledge she'd become uncomfortably stunning— young woman notice their “need.”

Soldiers from other forts who somehow missed the fact that her dark eyes, nearly black hair, and confident gait were identical to the colonel's were usually enlightened by Edge's men, although a few were allowed to naively try to sweet talk her, just to see what kind of punishment the colonel hovering behind would impose on the hapless soldier. It was usually their ranked yelled loudly in their face, followed by the words, “Would you like *me* to get *a little bit closer* to check your wound?”

Perrin tried to steer Jaytsy—who seemed innocent to the differences between smiling and leering—away from where Thorne was waiting to be loaded onto a wagon, but she happened upon him by accident when Perrin was distracted elsewhere. Too late Perrin turned to watch from several wagons away as Jaytsy adjusted the bandages on a soldier whose face she only glanced at with a practiced smile. One of the surgeons had asked her to rewrap the oozing wound three litters away, and her attention was focused on the blood, not the bleeder. Without his undershirt and jacket, and splattered with dirt and dried blood, Captain Thorne was not immediately recognizable to Jaytsy.

Until he put a hand gently on her arm.

She looked up with the same comforting smile she gave all the soldiers, but then her face froze and the smile dissolved.

Perrin took a quick step forward but decided instead to observe

from the distance. He could make it to her side with his fist ready in less than two seconds, and he rather hoped for the opportunity. He hadn't spoken to Jaytsy about what happened between her and Thorne a few weeks ago—he needed her to keep her confidence in Shem—and now he wanted to see her reaction to Lemuel.

He had a clear view of his daughter's eyes when she recognized Thorne. They bulged in anger. But she bit her lip and went back to fixing his wound, albeit more aggressively.

Perrin beamed when Thorne flinched as Jaytsy tightened the bandage around his ribs.

But Lemuel still held her arm and squeezed it gently. She paused in her straining to *really* tighten that knot, and shifted her hardened gaze to his face. He said something quietly and Perrin's hand balled into a ready fist.

Jaytsy's face remained wooden, but she nodded slightly and went back to securing his bandages that would likely require a knife to remove. She stood, glanced briefly in the direction of her father without fully seeing him, then turned to help the next soldier as Thorne's litter was hefted into the wagon.

It would be hours until Shem returned to find out for Perrin what transpired between the two of them. At least seething over Thorne holding his daughter's arm, especially since he told him just over three weeks ago to *never* touch her again, gave Perrin something else to think about instead of the burning at Moorland.

Chapter 16 ~ “Who gives gifts like THIS?”

As the horses lurched to take the wagon back to Edge, Mahrree turned around one last time on the bench.

Perrin waved again and gave her a look that said, *Trust me*. He promised he would be home for dinner tomorrow, and that she didn't need to come check up on him again.

She felt a little guilty about seeing him this morning, but her relief that he was fine outweighed the guilt. She knew he wouldn't have been able to stay within his confinement. The smell of action would be too strong, and he'd violate any decree to do what he thought was right.

But before Mahrree and the children left, Perrin pulled her aside to the empty command tent.

“To be honest, I'm a bit concerned about how all of this may be interpreted. Although we were successful, once word of this reaches Idumea—well, Mahrree, how would you feel being married to a forty-four-year-old lieutenant?”

She gripped his muscled bicep. “You still feel the same to me.”

He'd startled her by stealing a quick kiss and whispering, “I love you,” before he escorted her to the wagon.

She glanced down behind her at the three wounded soldiers resting in the bed of the wagon. The most seriously injured had been sent back hours ago. These three had mostly superficial wounds, but they couldn't walk or ride well. Perrin insisted on sending his family home with this last wagon of injured. He didn't want them going home with the dead, and he received no argument about that from his wife.

Peto sat in the wagon bed chatting with a corporal who had a

wounded leg. The soldier used to live in Idumea and had watched the champion kickball team. The young men talked about plays and strategies and people Mahrree didn't know, but it didn't matter. Peto was happy.

She had just turned back around when she heard Peto say, "When we move to Idumea, I'm going to try out for one of the teams."

Mahrree gulped, even though her mouth had gone dry. She subtly leaned back to eavesdrop on the rest of the conversation.

"When do you think you're going?" the soldier asked Peto.

"Soon as they make him general. I guess I can wait a couple of years, though. I need to improve my defensive game."

"I heard it'll be a lot sooner than that. Some were saying last night he's definitely going to be promoted now, because of what happened."

"Yes!" Peto exclaimed. "Perfect!"

Mahrree fought down a worried whimper, reminding herself that corporals didn't decide transfers and promotions, and glanced to her side to see if Jaytsy had heard.

But Jaytsy's mouth was moving as if she were carrying on a conversation with herself. She stared intently ahead, oblivious to everything else.

Mahrree had been waiting for an opening to talk to her. She'd seen Jaytsy tending to Lemuel Thorne before he was brought back to the fort, and while Mahrree had no real reason to not trust him—except that he was the son of Versula Thorne—for some reason she just didn't *like* the young captain. He had looked at Jaytsy with an earnestness that Jaytsy didn't return. At least, not yet.

Mahrree prayed silently again. *Dear Creator, I know it's not as if there is one perfect man out there for her, but could there be some other options sent her way so Lemuel isn't her only choice?*

Mahrree glanced around again. On the bench before her, the driver of the wagon was busy in conversation with his relief driver; behind her, Peto was exchanging more strange words related to kickball with the soldier, and the two other injured soldiers were snoring quietly in the bed of the wagon despite its jostling. Mahrree assumed they must have been exhausted or sedated. Her daughter was trapped by her side for the next hour. Good as time as any.

Mahrree patted Jaytsy on the leg. "Doing all right? Quite a day."

"What?" Jaytsy blurted, as if Mahrree had just pulled her out of some faraway thought. "Oh, I'm fine. Yes."

Mahrree tried again. "I was quite pleased with how well you did. The sight of all that blood and the burns . . . a few times I had to go take a break. Some of those men really took a beating, didn't they?"

"Yes, I suppose. It wasn't that bad, really. All of them seemed to be smiling."

Mahrree chuckled. "Smiling at you!"

Jaytsy rolled her Perrin-brown eyes, but then turned to her mother. "You really think so?"

"Of course! What wounded man wouldn't be thrilled to have a beautiful girl fawning over him?"

Jaytsy faced forward again, her long ponytail cascading over her shoulder where she caught it and fretfully fingered the braid. "I don't know. Sometimes it just seems there aren't any right men in the world. Plenty of men, but not the *right* ones, you know?"

"Right one for you?"

Jaytsy nodded. "I mean, I know I need to seriously consider what's before me, but—"

"Jayts, you have time!" Mahrree exclaimed, but quietly so as to not disturb the soldiers around them. "You're only sixteen. There's no need to rush, trust me."

"Mother, I really don't want to wait another *twelve years* to find my husband like you did," Jaytsy exclaimed quietly back. "And I don't want to get married next week, either. I just wished I knew when, and who."

"Don't we all?" Mahrree sighed. "The biggest decision one can make, and you don't even know when you get to make it. It's not all up to you, I'm afraid. But that's also good," she decided. "It's got to be the Creator's timing. He knows when we're ready to find a good match. I wouldn't have wanted to marry your father if I'd met him in Edge when we were eighteen, and we weren't ready for each other at twenty-seven, either. It took us time to become the person the other would love. You're probably not ready for him yet. Or he's not ready for you, but both of you will be eventually."

Jaytsy twisted to face her mother. Something in her words had certainly pricked Jaytsy, but Mahrree didn't understand why her daughter wore an expression akin to pain.

"Not *ready* yet," Jaytsy muttered. She sighed and faced forward again, gripping her ponytail. "Mother, how did you know Father was the one for you?"

Mahrree had been waiting for this question, but she thought she

had a few more years to prepare for it.

“Your father wasn’t *the* one for me. I don’t believe in that. There were a couple of men I’ve been attracted to over the years. Before and after him,” she confessed. “But he was the one I chose to love. Not only was I attracted to him, but I loved his mind, his spirit, his personality—”

“How?” Jaytsy turned to her. “I mean, you hardly spent any time with him alone before you were engaged, right? It was through the debates you fell in love with him. So how did you know everything *else* about him?”

She’s got me there, Mahrree thought, scrunching her lips. They really did have an unusual courtship; it occurred *after* they decided to marry. She had often wondered why she said yes to his proposal. As flimsy as it sounds, the idea just felt right.

And then there was her own father . . .

“I didn’t really know that much about him—that’s true,” Mahrree conceded. “But I *felt* he was a good choice, and I never felt that way about any other man. And there was something else—Jaytsy, my father liked him.”

Jaytsy started to respond, until she thought more on what her mother just said. “Umm . . . Grandfather Peto? I hate to ask this, but wasn’t he already dead?”

Mahrree smiled. “Yes, he had already died. But when I need his guidance about something that’s important, I still feel him. And marrying the right man is *very* important. The first moment I saw Captain Shin, I felt my father distinctly and I had the impression that he liked this man. He’s told me that many times, even after we were married. And he’s also told me that I should always trust my husband, which has been a little hard to do this last year—”

Jaytsy nodded in agreement.

“—but I should always have faith in him, too. Trust *your* father, Jaytsy. I guess if there’s any man that he likes, you have his blessing to love him.”

Jaytsy sighed again. “Any man that Father thinks is worthy of finding or saving?”

Mahrree hesitated. “Uh, all right,” she said, trying to understand Jaytsy’s odd phrasing. “Perhaps.”

Jaytsy blew out heavily, as if she was having a hard time catching her breath that afternoon. “I still have time,” she said more to herself.

Mahrree massaged her hands, realizing that she was missing

something.

Shem returned from Moorland in the afternoon, but it wasn't until later that night that Perrin finally got him alone. Perrin had been briefed by Fadh about the fire to destroy the remaining structures, and received the final count of the dead, but there was one more piece of information that only Shem could supply.

"I saw Jaytsy talking to you before she left—what did Lemuel say to her when she was changing his bandage?"

Shem started to twist his face into an odd configuration.

"No, no, no," Perrin stopped him before Shem rearranged all of his features. "She didn't say, 'Not a word,' did she?"

Shem searched his memory. "You're right, she didn't. Good. I was having a hard time figuring out how to do this one."

"So?"

Shem smirked. "Your *thorney little friend* said to your daughter, 'Your father thinks I'm worth finding and saving. I hope you will think so too. Please save me, Miss Jaytsy.'"

Perrin scowled. "Oh, that's awful. That's the best he could do? Good."

Shem pointed at Perrin's expression. "Exactly the same face she made when she told me! Granted, the boy *had* been under sedation most of the night, and likely didn't have a lot of time to prepare something less sappy. What was Jaytsy's reaction to him?"

"She didn't look impressed, from what I could tell," Perrin said. "But she nodded slightly. Should I be worried about that?"

Shem shook his head. "I wouldn't. She's starting to recognize his manipulation. She asked me if it would be her fault if he wasn't 'saved,' whatever he meant by that. I told her only Lemuel was responsible for Lemuel's successes and failures—not her or anyone else. She seemed to accept that. And *then*," he paused, "she said if you had known what he tried to do to her in the barns, you probably would've left him to die on the field."

Perrin released a low whistle. "For a second, I considered it."

Shem folded his arms. "So why didn't you?"

Perrin couldn't have been more surprised by Shem's response; he actually sounded disappointed.

"Why didn't I? Because he's still my responsibility. Because I

have a duty to protect him.”

Then Perrin smiled partway.

“Because then I was also struck with the thought, ‘Not today. Some other battle.’”

Deep in the forest east of Moorland, four men dressed in mottled green and brown clothing picked up the body in the blue uniform and brought it to wide crack in the ground. It was the last to go into the bottomless crevice which had already swallowed dozens of Guarders who died as the soldiers chased them last night into the woods and into their waiting blades.

The dozens of other men in concealing clothing watched silently as the four hefted the old man, swung him over the chasm, and released his body, letting it tumble to depths unknown for a burial not to be commemorated.

No words were said over the body of Beneff.

No words *should* be said for a traitor.

Late the next night, Perrin was thrashing in bed again.

Mahrree next to him wasn't worried or disturbed, but was chuckling.

“Do you realize—*really realize*—what we've done?” he asked for the sixth time.

“I do, Perrin. You destroyed the Guarders!”

It was only now that it hit him—now that everyone was back safely to their forts, after the dead soldiers were given a proper burial, after the injured were secured and recovering, after the borrowed horses were returned, and the trees remained exceptionally silent—now that he went to lay down in his bed for the first time in a few nights, it finally hit him: over a hundred years of terror might finally be over.

He sat up abruptly again, pulsating. “I mean, true—we need to wait to see. Probably a year, I'm afraid, to make sure there are no other attacks and that they are truly gone, but then?”

In an effort to try to relax him enough to sleep, Mahrree sat up to massage his shoulders. But even as broad as they were, she had

a hard time finding him because he fidgeted so.

“And then,” she answered his question, “*then* the world can be declared a different and better place. We may not even need forts or the army anymore. Who’s there left to fight?”

“Even more than that, Mahrree,” he bounced in enthusiasm. “The world can be declared *open!*”

She stopped trying to rub his shoulders. “Open? What do you mean?”

“I’ve been thinking about this for a while.” He turned eagerly to her and tried to search her features in the dark. “Remember on our second wedding anniversary when you came up with a ridiculous plan to go through the Guarder land and find a new place to settle?”

She swallowed down a lump that appeared in her throat. “Yes.”

“Well, it wasn’t a ridiculous plan, and I apologize now for ever thinking so. Remember how my grandfather went over the wall to free the servants—”

“Oh, Perrin,” she whispered in anticipation and anxiety, “I know where you’re going with this. You want to find Terryp’s land!”

“And more! Mahrree, if there are no Guarders what’s to keep us confined here? Poison? The entire world simply can’t *all* be poisoned.”

Mahrree hugged her legs, suddenly very nervous. “Remember something else from that discussion we had on our anniversary? That Guarder women have many children?”

“I’ve thought about that, too,” he said, now on his knees and ready to bounce through the roof. “We got that information years ago from the delusional Guarder that Shem was talking to. I never trusted him, and soon after that he vanished. Consider this: the rumors have always been that Guarder women and children are armed, but never in the entire history of fighting Guarders have we ever seen women or children. I had Fadh and Shem look specifically at the Guarder dead in Moorland, and all they found were men, ages late teens up to middle-aged.”

Mahrree swallowed again.

“Here’s my theory,” he plowed on. “Those who raid from us? They’re castoffs from their own society that exists somewhere far, far away. Maybe even hundreds of miles from us. They don’t even know about us, like we don’t know about them. These men, though, are maybe thieves or murderers and were booted out. They wandered and happened upon us during the Great War, then assumed the role of

Guarders. They've been using us to survive ever since. That would explain their poor communication, their lack of consistency, their changing strategies—they're just a bunch of criminals, and they recruit others to join them from among us, like they did with Riplak, to make their jobs easier."

When Mahrree didn't say anything, he gently shook her shoulder. "What's wrong? I thought you'd be all over this? If the vast majority of them are gone, their power is stripped! They're finished! Even their local recruits will surely be scared out of compliance with them."

She couldn't move. It was a fantastic theory which, if true, would open possibilities no one had considered before.

But she knew something that he didn't.

There *were* Guarder women.

Well, at least one who chided Mahrree to tears and out of the forest thirteen years ago.

But she couldn't confess that to him, and while she sat stewing a terrible thought came to her: what if that woman's sons had been killed in Moorland? Or her husband—

For absolutely no logical reason whatsoever, thoughts of Rector Yung suddenly filled her mind.

She shook her head to dislodge him and to focus back on her husband, who was now bobbing like a four-year-old in search of convenient bush.

"I am *all over this*," she assured him. "I'm just stunned," which wasn't exactly a lie. "I just never thought of anything like this before, and need to let it sink in a bit . . . Wait. If there are no Guarder women, how are there Guarders now?"

"More castoffs," he said easily. "Maybe this is how that other civilization deals with their criminals, by throwing them out. They keep coming here generation after generation. Isn't that amazing?"

"That they loot us?!"

"That we finally put an end to all of this!"

She sighed wearily, wondering how that Guarder woman fit into any of this. The words she said to Mahrree that night long ago still didn't make any sense: "All I do is save lives."

Whose lives? Where?

There were so many variables missing to this equation that Perin was trying to write, and it wasn't as if math was Mahrree's best subject to begin with, but after midnight her ability was even more diminished to figure out all of the parts, especially ones he didn't

know were supposed to be in there.

“Oh, Perrin, I just don’t know,” she confessed, truly dismayed. “I mean, I wish—”

She was startled by him suddenly kissing her on the lips.

“I know, I know. There are so many possibilities and we have to wait. It’s a mess in my mind, too, so just think about it Mahrree? Help me get to the bottom of this? And, maybe in a year or so, should there be no more Guarders and no more need for defense, all kinds of marvelous things could happen.” She could even hear him grinning in the dark; he practically lit up the room.

She could never tell him what she knew, or what she did so many years ago, even though she thought he’d understand and even forgive. She was just too prideful, and she was ashamed of that.

Not ashamed *enough*, however, to confess to her husband about sneaking off to the forest and running back home a coward—

She came up with a perfect avoidance strategy. “In the meantime,” she said, hoping she sounded coy even though her mind was reeling, “maybe something marvelous could happen *now* . . .”

And she kissed him back for so long that he forgot all about talking for the rest of the night.

The next evening Perrin put away his paperwork and picked up his cap to go home. He’d decided that morning, while Mahrree was still dozing on his chest, that he had to put aside the possibility of no more Guarders because the idea filled him with too many possibilities that’d completely sidetrack him. But as he looked around the office, he was struck with the idea that maybe—just maybe—in a year this fort might not even be needed.

Well not as a defensive structure, but perhaps instead as a jumping off point for those brave enough to explore the mountains to the north. Because, he realized with a growing smile, they’d need a guide through the natural hazards, and who better to serve as a guide to the forest than Perrin Shin: *former* colonel in the *former* army?

He had to stop thinking like that, because the grin on his face was just too wide. But perhaps people would think he was happy for many reasons.

First, all the wounded soldiers were healing.

Second, nearly the entire village had got wind of what happened

in Moorland, and they were waiting yesterday to give the returning soldiers a heroes' welcome. *And* also to make sure they got their borrowed horses and wagons back because Edgers, while grateful, were also practical and a bit distrustful.

Third, Edgers' surprise and joy at the success in Moorland inclined them to be more willing to plant extra crops to fill this year's local storehouses. The file Perrin put away was an updated list of villagers who had signed Offra's commitment sheet today.

Then fourth—and best of all—Captain Thorne's injury meant he was unable to climb the tower stairs for least another week.

Oh yes; for the past year, life had been scowling at him, but today? It smiled upon him again.

And now, he was going home.

Maybe . . .

He sighed as he saw Shem bounding up the stairs to his office, sheets of folded parchment in hand. "Heading home?" Shem asked.

"Trying to."

"But you'll want to see this."

"Walk home with me. Eat dinner with us—I promise Jaytsy's not cooking tonight—then come back to man the tower."

Shem smiled at the invitation and handed Perrin the file.

He opened it as they headed down the stairs. "Fadh's report already? We just got back yesterday!"

"He didn't want to waste any time. He was even dictating it to his assistants when we were cleaning up in Moorland. He wants Idumea to see his report before they get word from anyone else."

As they walked through the compound Perrin skimmed the facts sheet. Nothing like the grim tallies of the injured and dead to bring one out of future fantasies.

"These numbers look right. Confirmed Guarders dead: 267. Assumed dead in the explosion: 40+. Prisoners: 0, naturally. Soldiers wounded: 151. Soldiers dead: 36. Soldiers missing: 14, including Beneff . . . The garrison will see those as acceptable ratios, as if lives can be reduced to ratios—"

"Read the next page, Fadh's description of what happened."

"I'm avoiding that. Can't you tell?"

"You'll enjoy it. I promise."

Perrin sighed and turned to the next page. He held it at an angle to catch the last of the sunlight as they left the fort's compound. A minute later he moaned. "What's he done?"

Shem began to laugh. “It’s beautiful, isn’t it? Graeson should’ve been a poet.”

Perrin cleared his throat. “*Colonel Shin acted out of intense concern for the welfare of the citizens of Idumea. His immense devotion extends not only to his village, but to the surrounding village and more importantly to the Administrators, High General of Idumea, and the General’s immediate family’ . . . oh please!*”

“Right here—read this,” Shem pointed further down the page. “It’s my favorite. Why you broke probation.”

“*Out of heartfelt fatherly concern—*’ Hold me, Shem; I may swoon.”

Shem laughed.

Perrin tried again to read the words that churned his belly. “*Out of heartfelt fatherly concern, Colonel Shin violated the orders of his probation to ascertain the welfare of the youngest officer, Captain Lemuel Thorne.*’ Not a poet, Shem. A writer of fantastical fiction!”

He continued. “*Shin felt that more important than holding to his confines was the need to ensure that each of the men under his care was successful in his first major endeavor. Not only did the valiant efforts,*” Perrin paused to shake his head, “*of Colonel Shin save Captain Thorne’s life, as several witnesses can verify (see their attached testimonies)—*”

“Fadh’s very thorough,” Shem pointed out.

“*— but his unsurpassed skill also preserved the life of Major Yordin and at least a dozen other soldiers.*” Perrin slapped the papers. “Nicko’s not going to buy this! We need to make revisions.”

Shem’s face contorted with pained amusement. “It’s too late.”

“What do you mean?”

“It went out already, early this morning. This is a copy. The original should be in the hands of the Chairman and Cush right about . . . now.”

“No! Fadh!” Perrin yelled, as if he could be heard in Quake. “What were you thinking?”

Shem handed him a small note.

Perrin read it out loud. “*Colonel Shin, you may wonder what I was thinking . . .*” He paused to scowl. “Fadh can also predict the future. Talented man. ‘ . . . you may wonder what I was thinking when you read the report. It would be unrealistic to assume that all of the men would keep quiet as to your whereabouts. The truth would get out eventually. We might as well be the ones to present and control it.”

Remember, you said I could explain the situation as best as I recalled it. I'm sorry I didn't get to find out exactly why you chose to break your probation, but I assumed my explanation was probably as accurate as any. Get ready to buy a new jacket, General. Major Graeson Fadh. ”

Perrin put the note in the file and folded it with a frustrated sigh. Maybe the sooner the forts could be shut down, the better.

“You don't want to read the rest?” Shem elbowed him. “Some riveting stuff in there. I came off looking quite well, and apparently Thorne dispatched someone before he got hit, and ‘nobly’.”

“I'll read the rest later when I've got nothing better to do,” Perrin grumbled as they turned down the alley to his home. The men hopped over the back fence and walked up the back porch.

“Got room for another for dinner?” Perrin called as they walked into the kitchen.

“Always!” Mahrree patted Shem's arm as he came in.

“Mahrree, I've got some great reading for you,” Shem said, pulling the file out of Perrin's hand.

“No, no, no! Give me that!” Perrin lunged for it vainly.

But Mahrree snatched it out of Shem's hands. “If he doesn't want me to see it, then it means I really should!”

She opened the file and Perrin, resigned to the fact that she would've finagled it away from him sooner or later, started for the gathering room.

“Wait, Perrin!” Mahrree cried. “I need to warn you—”

But her warning came too late. Perrin stopped, dead in his tracks, at what he saw on the rug in the gathering room between his teenagers. For the first time in his family's life they heard him swear, and loudly.

“What the SLAG is THIS?”

With his hands on his waist, he glared at the small creature that stared up at him. His perfect day was now perfectly ruined.

Instantly Mahrree was at his side, taking his arm in a pretense to calm him, but more likely to keep him from drawing his sword.

Shem had followed close behind Mahrree, his hand on his own hilt and expecting the worst. He stopped suddenly as well, and his shoulders relaxed as Perrin's tensed.

“Ah, it's so cute!” Shem crooned. “Why, that kitten can't be more than five weeks old.”

Perrin shot Shem a look full of daggers before turning to his two shocked teenagers sitting next to the tiny cat, their mouths wide

open at hearing the word only the coarsest of soldiers ever uttered.

“I *know* what it is,” he said darkly. “I want to know *why*.”

The black and white kitten offered up a pitiful mew, and Peto scooped it up.

“He didn’t mean to scare you,” he said to the kitten. He held it up to his father. “Look at that face. Tiny little nose. Whiskers. Come on, admit it. It’s cute.”

“It’s a *cat*,” Perrin snarled. “Why is it here?”

Peto looked at Jaytsy, who was cringing. “It’s a gift,” she murmured.

“Who gives gifts like THIS?” Perrin bellowed.

Mahrree now gripped his sword arm with both hands. “It’s a thank you gift,” she said gingerly, “from Captain Thorne.”

“THORNE!”

“I don’t think he meant anything by it—”

“A CAT? Wanna bet?”

Still cringing, Jaytsy held up a piece of paper. “This was in the basket the messenger brought this afternoon.”

Perrin snatched it out of her hands.

Shem read aloud over his shoulder. “*Miss Jaytsy, this lonely little animal was found lost and wandering in the surgery wing. All it needs is someone to love and care for it—someone to save it—and it will turn into a devoted creature that will adore you until the day it dies. When I saw it, I thought of you. When you care for it, please think of me. Thank you for your tender care on the field. Yours devotedly, Lemuel.*”

Shem’s voice developed a sneering quality halfway through the message, which grew into disdain with the final three words.

“Mahrree, I’ve lost my appetite. Permanently.” Perrin sat down on one of the stuffed chairs and crumpled the note in his hand. He held it up. “Sorry, Jayts. Did you want to keep this?”

She quickly shook her head.

“Give me the cat,” Perrin ordered. “I’ll take care of it.”

Never had five words sounded so final.

“No!” four people shouted at him.

“Father,” said Jaytsy tentatively, “I’d like to keep it. Not as a remembrance of Thorne, but because it has nowhere else to go.”

“How about the river?” he suggested.

“Perrin!” Mahrree snapped.

He held up his hands. “Seriously? You all want to keep this . . .

thing?”

The kitten wriggled out of Peto’s hands and walked clumsily to Perrin. It sat down in front of his boots and gave him a pitiful cry.

“Ah, he wants you, Father!” Peto said.

Perrin remained unyielding, staring at it.

It wobbled to the side of the upholstered chair and began to climb it with its needle-like claws.

“No, don’t do that!” He pulled the kitten roughly off the cloth and was surprised by how light it was, its thin ribs poking out of its paper-thin skin and fur. Not knowing what to do with the fragile thing, he dropped it on his lap. It mewed again, curled up into a ball, and began to purr.

Perrin glowered at it.

His family smiled at him adoringly.

“My father had a theory about cats,” Mahrree said. “No matter how many people are in the room, they always find the person who hates them the most and try to win him over. Colonel Cuddly, you have a kitten.”

Shem turned to her. “Colonel *Cuddly*?”

Mahrree turned pink, remembering that she’d never used that name in front of Shem. “I best check on dinner. Children, make sure your father doesn’t take a walk with that kitten,” and she darted into the kitchen.

Shem raised his eyebrows at Perrin. “When you’re promoted, will you be General Giggles?”

“You’re no longer invited for dinner, Zenos,” Perrin said steadily. “You may leave now. And take this with you,” he pointed at the ball of ragged fluff on his lap.

“Oh, Father,” Jaytsy crawled over to him and took the kitten. “If we really need to, we can find it a new home tomorrow.”

“It needs a name,” Peto said, petting its head with his finger as it rested in Jaytsy’s arms.

“No it doesn’t!” Perrin protested. “Give the cat a name, you get attached. And why are all of you still touching it?”

Shem sat down on the floor with Jaytsy and Peto, and pulled a short rope from his pocket. He dangled it in front of the kitten who batted at it awkwardly. The three of them laughed when the tiny cat got a claw caught in the rope.

“Sergeant Major Giggles,” Perrin muttered.

Shem shook his head. “Doesn’t have the same ring to it. Sorry.”

The kitten stayed through the night, somehow wobbling its way out of Jaysy's room, struggling up the stairs, wandering into Mahrree and Perrin's bedroom, and climbing the blankets up the mountain-like span to reach Perrin's chest where it exhaustedly curled up in the middle of the night and purred loudly.

Mahrree didn't hear it over her husband's snoring, but she *did* hear him bellow, "What is THIS?"

She sat up, alarmed and confused, until she heard the purring. Trying not to laugh, she explained, "It's a baby animal that feels you can protect it."

"Get it off me, Mahrree!"

She scooped it up. "It really is a sweet little thing."

"It's a cat!"

"Just give it a chance, you giant falcon."

Perrin growled.

The cat mewed back.

In the morning it followed him everywhere. Perrin almost put an end to the entire issue when the kitten climbed onto the sofa just as he was about to sit down on it.

"Stop!" cried Peto, pulling his father away.

The two of them turned to see the tiny black and white face meow up at them.

"You nearly crushed it!" Peto scooped up the kitten.

"Yes. That would have been a problem," Perrin sighed.

When he came home for dinner the tiny cat was still there. It hobbled up to him and began to climb his trousers.

"Get it off!" he yelled, shaking his leg.

Mahrree extracted the kitten from his knee. "Honestly. How can a grown man be so afraid of a tiny kitten?"

"Afraid? That's what you think I am? Afraid!"

"Yes! Give me another reason why you run in terror from it."

"I don't run."

"Well, you shout!"

"That's ridiculous!"

"You're shouting now!"

"So are you! Give it to me."

Mahrree clutched the kitten to her chest. "What will you do?"

"Prove you wrong," he beckoned. "Hand it over."

“Don’t hurt it!”

“I won’t hurt it. Just hand it over.”

Reluctantly, Mahrree gave him the kitten. Perrin held it up to his face. It mewed in a manner that sounded like a whimper of fear.

Perrin stared into its tiny eyes.

It stared back, then looked down at the height at which it was dangling. It flailed in fright, so Perrin cradled it in his other hand, and the thing began to purr.

“Why does it do that?” he asked, bewildered.

Mahrree’s mouth twitched. “Because it likes you. I can’t imagine why, but it does.”

He evaluated the creature.

It didn’t resemble a Thorne—captain or general—in any way. It was just a tiny, helpless animal. With needle-like claws. And it made annoying sounds, although quietly.

Still, those claws were unreasonably sharp, snagging the wool on his uniform.

Still yet again, it was just a baby.

“Hm,” he said eventually. “Fine. It can stay.”

He handed it back to Mahrree who kissed him gleefully.

“But it doesn’t need a name!”

Chapter 17 ~ “He’s gone fishing, Thorne! He returns tomorrow!”

In Idumea it was impossible to not hear the news. Everyone was yelling it in the Administrative Headquarters and at the garrison a few miles away. And soon, everyone in the great city was shouting, “Did you hear what happened in Moorland?”

Chairman Nicko Mal was sure the large sealed folder that the messenger from Quake rushed to him late in the afternoon was supposed to be confidential. But as the corporal shouted through the vast halls of the Administrators’ Headquarters it was apparent no one had told him that. “The commanders in the north have killed all the Guardians in Moorland! The Guardians are gone!”

His fellow messenger was also just as naively vocal as he rode shouting through the garrison to deliver his copy of the report from Major Fadh to High General Cush.

Mal heard later that there was a crowd of officers and soldiers waiting impatiently outside the High General’s door. Mal believed it, because when he finally opened his office door—after staring dazedly for many minutes at Fadh’s report—he was met by Administrators, assistants, workers, and citizens who happened to be in the building. They clogged the hall like starved mutts waiting for a bone.

The Chairman had to publically rejoice for the wild success of the army and the increased safety of his people.

But Nicko felt as if he’d been punched in the gut.

He couldn’t quite catch his breath for the better part of an hour, and desperately wished Dr. Brisack would return a day early from his “fishing trip” to tell him what to think about this unprecedented failure.

Success.

Whatever.

In the meantime, the world sat panting at his door.

Once he finally opened it, he knew there was only one possible response. “Citizens of Idumea and the world—rejoice! A most remarkable thing has happened in the north . . .”

“But it’s a disaster!” Qayin Thorne snarled at him hours later.

Nick massaged his temples, having seen others do it and wondering what it was supposed to accomplish. His office at the Administrative Headquarters had grown dark with the evening, but he’d lit only two candles hoping the dim light would calm the pounding in his head. Next he’d need to find a way to slow the erratic beating of his heart.

“Do you realize that?” The general leaned over his desk.

Mal slowly looked up at him with a glare that could have crumbled a boulder. “You really don’t think I don’t know the severity of the situation, Thorne? Dead—267. Missing and presumed dead—more than 40. Men we’ve been training for years, new recruits we brought on for the onslaught of Edge using Brisack’s mixture—you think I don’t realize the scale of the problem? *Hmm?*”

Thorne stood back up and straightened his jacket. “So what are you going to do?” and he added a respectful, “Sir.”

“I’m waiting for Brisack,” Mal told him, abandoning the useless head rubbing. Instead he took a deep breath and blew it out of his mouth. Brisack had told him to breathe slowly in instances like this, but there was no easing of the stabbing pain growing in his chest and radiating down his arm. At home he had some of that brew of the doctor’s, but he should have kept some in his office.

“Brisack will have a better report. We had around 330 men, from our best estimates. That’s what he was to discover, too: a full count. Along with doing other things,” he added in a whisper.

Qayin rolled his eyes impatiently. “Mal, you have to face the fact that Dr. Brisack *is dead*. One of those 267, probably blown apart by his own brilliant explosion,” he added with disgusted head shaking. “He’s gone.”

“He wouldn’t dare,” Mal said stoically. “He alone knew the

entire formula, but was going to train some men up there in it. Many would know it now. According to the sizes of the blasts described by Fadh, the good doctor got the formula right.” Mal tried massaging his hands while his eyes darted all over his desk as if in search of something he knew he’d never find. “Exploding key sections of Edge can *still* happen, mark my words. When Brisack returns tomorrow, he’ll bring me the details—oh yes, he will—and we’ll begin again. I have complete faith in him. You shouldn’t doubt him, Qayin.”

General Thorne leaned across the desk, forcing an uncharacteristically timid Mal to look into his eyes. “Chairman, it’s not that I doubt the Administrator of Family Life. It’s just that I doubt that he’s *still alive*.”

Mal slammed his fist on the desk. “He’s gone fishing, Thorne! He returns tomorrow!”

“Just like Gadiman?” Thorne pressed.

Something caught in Mal’s throat, making it impossible for him to respond. That is, if he knew *how* to respond.

“Gadiman’s been missing for a year now,” Thorne pointed out, and Mal was startled to realize it had been so long— “and are you *still* expecting they’ll find him in his office under all those crates? You know, he has a few loyal assistants who have been collecting more names and information that could feed your so-called studies, but you’ve been too obsessed with one colonel in the north to notice. Yet interestingly, all of your preoccupation with Shin hasn’t resulted in his demise, but our own!” Thorne leaned in so close that Mal couldn’t back out of his spitting range. “Are you *sure* you really know what you’re doing with all of this, Nicko? Or is it time for some new leadership?”

There’s only so many stabs in so many sensitive places that one man can allow. Mal snapped. “General, I *am* thinking of some new leadership, in place of YOU! Get out, before I strip you of command—*all of them!*”

General Thorne stood up, deliberately slowly, and cocked his head. “Ask yourself this: *How* did the northern forts know about what was going on in Moorland? Who tipped them off? I believe you’re losing control of the world, Chairman. Gadiman’s long dead—it’s obvious. Get over it because someone, somewhere, knows about your secrets and is talking, maybe even to Shin himself.”

“Not Zenos the Quiet Man,” Mal insisted. “He didn’t know about this.”

Thorne shrugged. "You need a new Administrator of Loyalty with a heavy fist to pound the truth out of a few people. Unfortunately I'm already overloaded with work or I'd volunteer for the job. Then again," Thorne said with such smugness that it should have been a crime, "if you keep letting things slide, maybe I'll just take over your positions—*all of them.*"

Mal didn't rub his aching chest until Thorne had slammed the door behind him.

"Slag, I hate that man. Why couldn't *he* have been in Moorland?"

The Cat, as the tiny creature that invaded the Shin household was immediately *not* named, followed Perrin everywhere. It was supposed to be Jaytsy's, but as soon as Perrin appeared The Cat ran to him and climbed up his leg to perch on his shoulder, digging into Perrin's flesh with his—Shem identified the gender—tiny claws that left needle-like gashes. Every night in bed Perrin found himself pulling the kitten off his chest. He tried once leaving it out of the room and closing the door, but its constant high-pitched meowing disturbed him more than its purring.

And in a way, Perrin admitted on the fourth night, the purring did have a rather calming quality about it.

And the kitten purred only for him. And it was needy.

And he was in charge of seeing to the needs of those in the village . . .

In the end it took only a week for the kitten to conquer the colonel. The world was completely upside down, Perrin realized, because he now willingly owned a cat.

There were two chairs in a dark office of an unlit building, but only one man. A week had passed since the report arrived about the incident in Moorland, and still that chair remained empty.

Nicko Mal stared dully at it. In his hand was a note from Mrs. Brisack, begging to know if the Chairman had heard anything from her husband.

Mal tapped his fingers on the armrest.

He leaned forward aggressively.

He sat back worriedly.

Then he crumpled the message and dropped it on the floor on top of Major Fadh's report.

Dr. Brisack was never late for a meeting before. The world was completely upside down now.

And Nicko needed two new Administrators.

Perrin becoming a cat owner wasn't the only unusual thing that happened in the next few weeks. Two new Administrators were named in an announcement that was delivered first to the fort, then the next day to the public in general.

Mahrree and Perrin read and reread the contents of the message, trying to find hidden meanings between the lines.

"Doesn't seem right," Mahrree said on her fourth time through it. "Gadiman's been ill for over a year? And only *now* they've decided to replace him?"

"I don't think he was ever 'ill'," Perrin told her quietly. "I suspect he's dead. He wasn't at my hearing, and I wonder if anyone had seen him since. I asked Thorne about it once. He said he hadn't seen Gadiman the last two times he was in Idumea, and usually he met with him as a formality during Command School."

"Thorne would meet with Gadiman?" Mahrree asked, immediately suspicious. "That doesn't seem right, either."

"That's what I thought, but he wouldn't say anything more about it, nor did I want to continue the conversation any longer than necessary. But *Brisack*—that's even more mysterious."

"Presumed missing in a fishing trip," Mahrree reread the words. "He never told us he was coming, did he?"

Perrin shook his head. "It says only that he was heading north for a holiday four weeks ago and hadn't been heard from since."

Mahrree went pale and she grabbed her husband's arm. "Perrin, I just remembered—at The Dinner last year, didn't he say they were experimenting with sulfur? I thought he also mentioned something about Moorland, about wanting to get new samples."

"What are you suggesting?"

"Something awful. Perrin, what if Brisack was in Moorland? During your attack? What if it was *him* experimenting with that black

powdery substance? You said it smelled sulfur-based.”

Perrin scoffed. “Mahrree! We’re talking about Dr. Brisack. The man wasn’t perfect, but you liked him, remember?”

Mahrree didn’t answer that. How much could she approve of a man who wanted reports on how her husband was responding to secret testing?

Perrin broke into her thoughts with, “Why would Brisack be experimenting with Guarders anyway?”

Mahrree shrugged. While she didn’t approve of Brisack’s meddling, she did have to acknowledge that he’d been most helpful in sending the sedation, and seemed earnest in his frequent messages to know how Mahrree was doing although she never answered the nosy old man’s queries.

“I don’t know what I was thinking,” she said dismissively. “It just seems that . . . well, would you have been able to recognize any of the bodies at the crater?”

“No,” he told her gruffly. “Burned beyond recognition.”

Mahrree winced and nodded. “Sorry. I shouldn’t have asked. Do you know anything about this new Administrator of Loyalty, Mr. Genev? Is he as paranoid as Gadiman was?”

“Evaluating paranoia is such a subjective thing,” Perrin sighed with more experience than he wanted to admit. “Genev was his assistant for quite some time, so things should be about the same for the Office of Loyalty.”

Mahrree bit her lip. “Is that good or bad?”

“As long as there *is* an office,” Perrin said, instinctively glancing around him for a red coat and white ruffles that might be peering into their gathering room windows, “it’s bad.”

Mahrree fidgeted with worry. “Then what about Brisack’s replacement?”

Perrin shook his head. “I don’t know anything about him. Worked in Brisack’s office for a while, but I don’t remember meeting him.”

“Hmm,” Mahrree pondered. “Perhaps all of these changes are why we haven’t heard any response from the Administrators about your attack on Moorland.”

“Or maybe they’ve forgotten all about me,” Perrin smiled.

“You CANNOT be serious!” General Thorne bellowed at the Chairman.

Nicko merely raised his eyebrows and looked over at the High General to see if he would rein in his hound.

“Qayin,” his father-in-law said consolingly, “think about it. What else can be done? Besides, all of the Administrators have agreed.”

“You could—” Qayin faltered, gesturing madly. “Or, or, or . . . you could, could—” His hands continued to flap uselessly as if somehow they would smack randomly into a different solution.

Mal clasped his hands calmly in front of him. He had drained the entire bottled heart concoction he acquired from an associate of Brisack’s that morning, just in anticipation of this meeting. “You see the problem, don’t you? He’s been nothing but loyal. So loyal that he even violated his probation to save *your son*. How exactly are we to punish loyalty, General Thorne?”

Qayin scoffed, gestured, started and stopped and foamed in exasperation, but he had no response. Eventually he slumped in his chair. “So he just gets off?”

Mal rolled his eyes very slowly, to make sure General Thorne got the message. “It’s an excellent strategy until we get a new one.”

High General Cush cleared his throat. “I’m not hearing this, you understand. I’m just here to give my approval, and to also tell General Thorne that he’ll deliver this news personally.” Cush absent-mindedly rubbed his chest.

Mal wondered if the High General had his own supply of heart tonic. He was pale enough to need some.

Thorne glared at his father-in-law. “Me? Why me?”

Cush chuckled in his normal way, which today sounded as natural as an ox laughing. “Because I’m simply not up to it.” A bead of sweat formed on his broad forehead. “And because your going there will demonstrate to the world the honor and veneration the army has for the colonel, just as the rest of the world feels for him. And you’re also to check on my grandson. Thirty stitches? Make sure they sewed him up correctly. Nothing . . . dangling out.”

Thorne pursed his lips in thought. “Lemuel’s been exceptionally slow in a few things. I do want to see what’s happening, especially with the Shin girl. Maybe if I can get *her* alone—”

“Even I don’t think that’s a good idea,” Mal said with a squint. He knew very little about teenage girls, but even he could tell that Thorne’s idea was worse than saddling a skunk. “Lemuel has to win

the Shin girl over himself when the time is right. Something like that,” he waved vaguely.

Thorne grumbled. “Says Versula as well. So,” he exhaled moodily, “I get to go to the Edge of the World, then.”

The Chairman shook his head. “I don’t understand you, Qayin. You have everything: second in command of the army, and at a relatively young age. Possession of the third largest home in Idumea. Rank of general, which is one higher than *him*. A son who’s the youngest captain in the army. *And* you have the ear of the most powerful man in the world—me. What more could you want?”

Thorne glared. “*Him*. Dead.”

“No you don’t,” Mal smiled narrowly. “What you want is him, *tormented*.”

Cush stood up abruptly, quite the feat for a man of his diameter, and huffed to catch his breath from the exertion. “I’m not listening anymore, you know that. Qayin, you’re going to Edge, and you’re going to put on a face fitting for a man whose *subordinate* has just handed him a most welcome victory. I’ll see you at the garrison.” Cush wheezed and left the office, slamming the door behind him.

“It’s about time he left,” Mal said, watching the door. “If he keeps up this interference, he’ll have to take the oaths. I don’t understand why he’s so opposed to that. Misplaced loyalties to a dead friend, I suppose.”

He shifted his earnest gaze to General Thorne. “Qayin, if Shin’s dead, he’s no fun, and we’ll need to find a new falcon. But there simply isn’t one as complex and intriguing as him. To be honest, I rather miss Relf. I miss his exasperation and his cluelessness, and the fact that I knew exactly what was causing his trouble but he never could figure it out. There was great pleasure in watching his frustration. You really don’t want that to end so soon with Perrin. I certainly don’t. We’re laying a new foundation to test him with, and while I don’t entirely know what kind of structure will come of it, I promise you that it will be most magnificent and worth the wait. And you, Qayin Thorne, will have a front row seat to it all. You will watch Perrin Shin squirm and shrivel.”

Thorne slowly nodded his head. “I hadn’t seen it in that way,” he said thoughtfully. “The reports from Lemuel last year had been most entertaining about the colonel and his madness. Rather miss hearing about his rants.”

“Give me some time, Qayin. You’ll be entertained again,” Mal

assured. "When a man has fallen to such depths, it takes very little to push him back into it again. We just have to prepare the right hole. In the meantime, you'll go to Edge, and you'll smile at the colonel because you're on top of the world, and you know that soon he'll be in yet another pit."

"One where I stand above him and spit on his head?" Thorne asked.

"Bucketfuls," Mal promised.

Knock-knock . . . knock-knock-knock.

Wonderful, Perrin sighed to himself. He's mobile.

He stretched his fingers before saying, a bit drearily, "Come in."

The door opened not too slowly, not too quickly, and there stood a pale Captain Thorne.

"Should you be up and in uniform?" Perrin asked, hoping against hope the captain was disobeying the surgeon's orders. But on his desk was the report of which men were fit to return to duty that day, and Thorne was on the top. Apparently Stitch was as eager to release him as Perrin was that he should stay in the hospital wing.

"I am, sir!" Thorne said proudly. "I need to take it easy still, but I promise it won't affect any of my performance, sir."

Which performance? Perrin nearly said out loud. The one where you pretend to be an obedient and diligent officer? Or the one where you try to find ways to undermine me?

"I'm sure you won't, Captain," he said, turning again to the work on his desk.

"Sir?" Thorne ventured, "May I say something?"

Perrin gritted his teeth and looked up. "Of course, Captain."

"About Moorland—"

Don't say it, Perrin thought to himself. Don't you dare thank me for saving you from that Guarder. Don't you dare remind me—

"I think you made the correct decision, sir," Thorne said. "Breaking your probation. Your presence secured our victory. The world is safer because of you."

Oh, the little manipulator was clever. Now Perrin was going to have to say the words. There was no other response he could offer that would be appropriate.

"Thank you, Captain," Perrin nearly choked.

“I’m certain, sir, that when the garrison responds to our success, they’ll be cognizant of the fact that you had no other alternative but to behave in the manner that the situation demanded,” said Thorne in fluent army speak. “I even wrote to my father and grandfather affirming that, sir.”

Oh, the words had to be said *again!*

“Thank you,” Perrin said as dully as he dared. “Dismissed.”

Later that day a decision from Idumea came in the form of a little man in a red messenger suit. He brought the news that General Qayin Thorne was on his way to *personally* congratulate the Fort at Edge on the success of the offensive.

Everyone in the forward command office had stood in silent terror at the news.

Five seconds later every man except Colonel Shin was running frantically down the stairs to deliver to the word that the fort needed to be prepared for an official visit the next day.

Perrin merely nodded at the message and folded it again. “Well, then. Soon we’ll see, won’t we,” he murmured to himself. “Will I be a general, a lieutenant, or a guard at the Edge of Idumea estates? It’ll only be for a year, until we have proof that all of the Guardians are gone, and the forts are irrelevant. Maybe.”

Over dinner Perrin broke the news to his family.

“Time to get a new jacket, Father?” Peto said with a grin.

Mahrree sighed. “Maybe one with a single lieutenant’s braid?”

“They wouldn’t do that to him!” Peto declared. “How could they? And why else would General Thorne come all this way?”

“To check on his son, I think,” Perrin said. “Make sure he’s healing well, that *everything else* is progressing as he thinks it should.” He glanced at his daughter who had stopped eating.

“Well,” Mahrree said decisively. “We just won’t fret about it! Nothing we can do. We’ll just accept what happens, and trust in the Creator. Yes. Fine. Will be a pleasant visit. No doubt.”

“Very convincing, Mahrree.”

Colonel Shin was ready the next day for the arrival of General

Thorne. *Everyone* was ready. The fort was spotless. Even the dirt on the stable floors had been smartly raked. The men were nervous, which made them each stand a little taller. Captain Thorne was so agitated in the command tower that when Zenos accidentally dropped the long knife he used to pry open a stuck window, Lemuel drew his sword in readiness.

Perrin rather enjoyed it all.

He'd never been on this side before. He didn't really care about what would happen that day, and found that thought surprisingly freeing. He'd waited before for the worst the hierarchy could dish out. And the worst was—well, while the past year *had* been bad, it *was* only temporary. He realized he could handle anything temporarily.

He sat serenely at his desk reviewing reports, not even looking out the window like the tense corporal who was filing the papers. Perrin was sure the young man would alert him when someone was coming, and he was right. He hardly recognized the high-pitched squeak as human until he looked up at the scared soldier.

“Blue banner, sir! Far south tower. He's been sighted approaching Edge!”

Perrin nodded sedately. “Good. Now gather up all the papers you dropped and re-file them please. We still have a bit of time.”

With another squeak of compliance the soldier was on the floor.

A few moments later Captain Thorne stood at the door. “Sir?”

“You'd like to meet your father at the gate, Captain?”

“Yes sir, if you don't mind?”

The colonel shrugged. “Bring him up here when he's done with his inspection. I've got a few things to wrap up first.” He didn't add, *Before I'm demoted and you're placed in command over me.*

Perrin didn't need any warning to know when General Thorne arrived at the command tower a while later. The sound of scuffling boots and frantic calls for “Attention!” were heard throughout the building. Perrin slowly rose from his desk, walked casually to the door of his office, and stood in the forward command office just as General Thorne jogged up the stairs.

He gave Colonel Shin a surprisingly warm and generous smile. Perrin concluded that Qayin must have practiced it at The Dinner two moons ago.

“Perrin, wonderful to see you again! This place is a marvel. Your father didn't do it justice in his descriptions. Absolutely amazing. We should be replicating this fort design all over the world.”

With a hand gloved in black, General Thorne pumped Colonel Shin's hand vigorously, and Perrin wondered for a moment, who was this cheerful man wearing Qayin Thorne's face and uniform? Only a year ago he held a sword to Perrin's head. The look in his eyes at that time begged for any reason to thrust.

Perrin put on his Dinner smile as well. "General, I hope your trip up here was pleasant. Good time of year to be traveling."

"Very pleasant, thank you." He continued to smile in a manner that made Perrin think of cheese left out in the sun: hard and a bit sweaty. "High General Cush was hoping to accompany me, but he's been unwell. His health has been slowing him down, but he sends his regards. Perrin, I never realized how remarkable the scenery here is. Up close the mountains are almost worth looking at. No wonder Lemuel was eager to return. He looks good and his side is healing nicely. Been treated well here, I can see. We could hardly keep him in Idumea. I suppose he finds the north most appealing."

Captain Thorne stood behind his father, still stiffly at attention but beaming.

"Well," Perrin tried to think of the best way to put it, "Edge wouldn't be the same without him, sir." Something caught his eye, just above General Thorne's name patch. It was a pin of gold, about half the size of his thumb, the shape of which stopped Perrin from breathing.

The general noticed. "Beautiful craftsmanship, isn't it? Best goldsmith in Idumea made it. Mal has commissioned a few more to be presented to all future generals in the army."

His next sentence was completely unnecessary.

"It's a mountain lion."

Perrin barely nodded as he stared at the dangling object which was the outline of a prowling mountain lion. Its front paw was raised in anticipation, its shoulders hunched in the same posture of The Cat when he was about to pounce on a floating piece of fluff.

"Interesting," he said, hoping he sounded uninterested.

Qayin continued his mucky cheese smile. "A symbol, to remind the citizenry." His voice was far too jovial, and it was clear he wasn't used to doing jovial. "After all, mountain lions are known for their courage, their tenacity—"

Their ability to sneak up and bite your throat out, Perrin supplied to himself. He glanced behind Thorne to see Zenos standing at the top of the stairs, his eyes slightly narrowed in uneasiness.

“—fitting reminders for the world that the Army of Idumea is here to protect their interests,” Qayin finished.

Perrin heard the multiple layers of meaning in Thorne’s proclamation. “How interesting,” he said again.

General Thorne slapped him genially on the back.

“And gloves now, too, sir?” Perrin asked as he watched Thorne meticulously pull off the thin, form-fitting black gloves. Perhaps he wore them only for patting Perrin on the back.

“Of course!” Qayin said, again with too much jolliness. “Gives a more complete look to the uniform and keeps one’s hands clean.”

From what kind of filth? Perrin nearly blurted.

Qayin Thorne pocketed his gloves, after fastidiously folding them. “Let’s go sit down in your office, Perrin. We have lots to talk about. Captain Thorne, please join us.”

“Yes, sir!” the captain chirped.

Perrin held out his arm for the two Thornes to go into his office. One brief facial tic told Zenos to sit down at the large front desk and be ready for anything. The cotton was still in the bookshelf, so eavesdropping would be easy. Colonel Shin followed the Thornes into the office and shut the door.

Zenos sat down at the large desk, motioned to the other soldiers to get back to work, then leaned back in the chair, picked up a manual whose title he wouldn’t remember later, and rocked the chair back to lean against the wall underneath Hycymum’s purple and yellow Edge banner.

Mahrree could hardly concentrate on school that day. Twice one of her students set fire to another student’s trouser leg and she didn’t notice until he did a stomping dance in the aisle.

Peto worriedly watched his mother during midday meal. He couldn’t concentrate either, especially once they saw the blue banner go up at the tower nearest the school.

“Think he’s going to be in trouble?” Peto asked.

“He’s *always* in trouble,” Mahrree muttered as she fussed with her sandwich.

When they left the school in a fast march home, Jaytsy caught up to them. “Any news yet?”

“No,” Mahrree said. “But I don’t expect any until dinner.”

“Or maybe earlier?” Jaytsy said as they turned on the alleyway to the house.

Perrin’s latest horse, a white gelding, was tethered to the fence. Mahrree stopped.

She had a habit of running through her mind every scenario she could imagine, then anticipating how she’d react when it happened. Yet it always seemed to be the unanticipated option that occurred, leaving her shocked at the outcome despite her hours of mental preparation. Some day she would learn to quit planning ahead. No scenario that she’d anticipated had him home early.

She started walking again. “Maybe he’s just there to check on The Cat.”

“Of course,” Peto said dismally.

When they entered the kitchen, Perrin turned partially in surprise, his back still to them.

“Oh, I thought you’d still be a few minutes.”

“Why are you here?” Mahrree asked, her tone full of dread.

“To check on The Cat,” he told her.

“Uh-huh,” Peto said.

“Well, I got one right,” Mahrree said more to herself. “No really, why?”

Perrin’s arm tried to drop subtly to his side, and a small mew fell to the ground. His forced smile was outlined in pain as The Cat climbed back up his trouser’s leg. “I have news, and I need to go back to the fort soon. I just needed to get . . . an early dinner.”

As the family sat down apprehensively at the table, Peto bounced in his chair. “Anything about Idumea?”

“Yes,” Perrin said. “We’re not going there.” A purring sound began from his lap.

Mahrree and Jaytsy sighed in relief.

Peto just sighed.

“I’ve not been promoted to general,” Perrin continued, “nor have I been demoted. It seems the army, upon the advice of the Administrators, has decided that before a colonel can be promoted to general he must serve as a full colonel for three years, unless there are extenuating circumstances, which circumstances have yet, of course, to be determined. In any case, I have nearly two more years until I’m eligible to become a general.”

“That’s trash!” Peto yelled.

“That’s *politics*,” Perrin clarified. “Same thing, though.”

Mahrree breathed easier every moment.

“There’s more,” he added with a smile. “My probation has been lifted. I am to be awarded a new medal for services above and beyond the call of duty, or something wordy like that. I get another Officer of the Year proclamation which I’ll just slide next to the other ones on the shelf. And—” he paused for effect, “—tonight the fort is to be officially renamed. That’s why I’m here now. I need to change into my dress uniform although I don’t really see the need. You all need to be dressed up as well. Sorry.”

“Renamed?” Mahrree asked.

“Yes,” he sighed. “Fort Shin.”

“So they’re promoting *the fort* instead of you?” Jaytsy clarified.

“You’re getting smarter every day, Jayts,” Perrin pointed at her. “This way I’m ‘honored’ without anyone having to actually do, concede, admit, sacrifice, or change anything significant. They just tack a few meaningless letters up on a wall, some self-important men say some forgettable words, a few people cheer without knowing why but do so because it’s expected, and then everyone decides they’re satisfied. *That*, Peto, is politics.”

“Well, I’m satisfied!” Mahrree said, putting her head on the table in relief. She lifted it back up. “So nothing’s really changed, has it?”

“Well, there’s a new symbol for the generals,” Perrin said, trying not to clench his teeth. “Thorne wore it proudly on his uniform just about his name patch. A pin in the shape of a mountain lion.”

“What, a big kitty cat?” Peto sneered. “Ooh, scary!”

Mahrree didn’t say anything, except met her husband’s careful gaze that said much more.

Jaytsy looked nervously at her parents.

“Some believe that cats are highly underrated,” Perrin told his children. He and Mahrree had never told them of Qayin Thorne admiring a cat’s ability to torment a wounded falcon trapped in a barn, nor that he used the story to explain to Shem the way Guarders saw the world. “And a mountain lion? There’s no deadlier animal, Peto. It can sneak up behind you and take you out with one swat of its claws and one bite of its jaws. You shouldn’t trust it, even when its purring.

“There is something more,” Perrin continued. “There’s no sign of Guarder activity anywhere. Not even in Trades or the gold mine. They must have moved up north, all of them. General Thorne has been watching, but so far—nothing. We may have finally dealt them a death blow, once and for all.”

Mahrree was surprised at his tone—it was much heavier than she

expected. Just a few nights ago he was bouncing happily like a teenage boy in a knife shop, but something today had sucked all of the potential joy out of him. She was just about to ask what was wrong when Peto spoke.

“So what will they need any generals for? Or even an army?”

“Well, Peto,” Mahrree started when she realized some of her husband’s old brooding had returned, “if we no longer have an enemy to fight, then your father can go on and do whatever he wants to.”

She watched Perrin closely, who was staring at a knothole in the wood and likely scratching The Cat’s head judging by the movement of his arm.

“Would they just get rid of the forts?” Peto said, shocked.

Perrin finally sighed. “I spoke to General Thorne about that. I suggested that if, in a year, there’s no sign of Guardians that maybe we can relax a few things, reduce the army, maybe even let people explore the forests and beyond.”

Jaytsy sat up taller. “Why . . . that’d be amazing!”

Her father only shrugged at that. “Yes, it would be. But that’s not how Thorne and Cush and the garrison see things.”

Mahrree squirmed in her chair, discouraged to see her husband so low again. “Why? What did Qayin Thorne say?”

Perrin looked up at her, his eyes clouded. “He said, ‘Why in the world’—and he used language a bit uglier than that, but I promised I wouldn’t use that word in the house again—‘Why would we want to do *anything* to reduce the army and its influence?’ Then he said something that I don’t believe, but apparently everyone in the garrison does: ‘Colonel Shin, there are *always* more enemies.’”

Mahrree felt something inside recoil, and noticed the worried looks in her children’s faces as well. Perplexed, she asked, “But Perrin . . . what would that other enemy be?”

He shook his head slowly. “I guess that’s the real question now, isn’t it? Who are the mountain lions stalking today?”

Knock-knock . . . knock-knock-knock.

Perrin looked up at the roof and wondered how hard it’d be to construct an escape hatch. He could reach it if he stood on his desk.

“Come in.”

Captain Thorne opened the door and beamed. It was as genuine as the light of the moons: borrowed, from some other source. “Sir, I just wanted to be the first this morning to tell you how proud I am that your name now graces the walls of the fort where I serve.”

He was doing it again, trying to squeeze himself under Perrin’s wing to make himself appear so accommodating, so necessary, so important.

And worse, trying to make Perrin say those ingratiating words, *thank you*. There was immense power in someone thanking you that elevated the receiver of the thanks, and made the speaker of the words somewhat equal—no: somewhat *subservient* to whom he thanked.

But Perrin had a different strategy this time.

“I appreciate the sentiment, Thorne.”

He appreciated the falsity that was employed to make the captain seem sincere.

“I look forward to seeing you someday wear the label of general, sir,” Thorne added with a small smile. “And I imagine you may want to take a vacation for a time now that you’re no longer confined to Edge. I’ve checked the files and you rarely leave the fort. You have several weeks of leave available to you, sir. Perhaps, after such a long year, and with the threat of Guardsers eliminated because of your exceptional leadership—”

Perrin really needed to find a way to keep his stomach from churning.

“—I wanted you to know that should you feel the desire to take Mrs. Shin somewhere for some well-deserved rest, I can certainly handle things here.”

Perrin rubbed his forehead. Smooth. Usher out the commander, take over the fort . . . at least Shem was always here. And since he was a sergeant major, they didn’t need to replace Beneff who, after weeks of searching, was still unaccounted for. They concluded he was lost in Moorland.

“I have no doubt you could handle things here,” Perrin said heavily. “However, I feel no need to leave. Edge is my home.”

Thorne shifted his position slightly. “Not that I’m trying to send you away, Colonel,” he simpered. “I just want you to know that you can rely on me, as second in command.”

There is was again. That *reminder*. As if someone suffering from the stomach flu needed reminding of his ailment. Was the stench not enough? And in this case, the stench was . . . lavender, today. Not

even Hycymum smelled as flowery as this boy.

“Understood, Captain. Is there anything else?” Perrin asked in a tight tone.

“Well, yes, now that you mentioned it . . . is Miss Jaytsy enjoying the kitten?”

Anything to generate a conversation. Perrin knew the tactic: get the other side talking about something you have in common.

He realized just then that all of the officers took a few courses in negotiations, but never had they negotiated with Guarders. Perrin didn’t know why it never before occurred to him that all of the diplomacy classes were designed for officers to manipulate other soldiers and the citizenry.

He employed strategy number eight in avoiding a sticky question: ask a stickier one in response. “I’ve been wondering, Thorne—where exactly did that kitten come from? We don’t have cats in the compound.”

Thorne’s eyes lit up, as if he’d been waiting for the question. “Sir, that *is* a strange thing, isn’t it? Why, of all places, would a helpless creature be wandering around in such a dangerous place?”

Perrin’s hand under the cover of his desk formed a fist. If Thorne dared draw a parallel between himself and the kitten—

And Perrin was quite sure that the kitten had never been near the fort. He suspected that Thorne employed Radan, who had delivered the basket, to snatch some kitten from its mother while he was evaluating empty barns to become storehouses.

“Immediately I knew,” Thorne continued in a well-rehearsed speech, “when I saw it bobbling between the cots, that the only person capable of taking care of such a needy living thing was your own very conscientious daughter. I saw her once in a garden last year, carefully tending to a row of corn, and knew that she—”

Perrin held up his hand. “Let me get this straight. Because Jaytsy flicks the bugs off of corn, you assumed she’d want a cat?”

He blinked at that. “Uh, well, not exactly following that chain of thought, sir, however—”

That was the thing about throwing people off their scripts, Perrin thought smugly to himself as he allowed his fist to unclench. If someone relays the truth, it’s easy to pick up the thread again. But if it’s a story they wove themselves, they frantically fuss over the sudden appearance of a rope they didn’t anticipate, and generally tie themselves up in it.

They taught recognizing *this* in Command School, too, but

never taught how to disentangle yourself.

Perrin settled in for the duration. He was more than capable of an extended head-to-head with the boy who coveted his chair, his fort, and his daughter. He sat back, confident that Lemuel Thorne wouldn't get any of it.

"—it's well-known, sir, that young women enjoy taking care of baby animals—"

"Is it, now?" interrupted Perrin. "My wife's never mentioned that."

"Well, uh, she's obviously a bit different then, sir—"

"Really? How so?"

"Uh, not exactly knowing your wife, sir, I wouldn't dare hazard a guess—"

"*But*," Perrin cut in frostily, "you'd guess that my daughter would want a scruff of an animal that complains in a high-pitched whine day and night which causes me to lose precious sleep again. Why? Did you think it'd remind her of you?"

Blank eyes stared back at Perrin, and Thorne's color faded a bit. "That . . . that wasn't the intention, sir."

"It is, however, the effect." Then, with several layers of meaning that Thorne couldn't possibly miss, Perrin said, "The next time you find a *lost* creature that needs *saving*, do us all a favor and *throw it in the river*. Now, anything else, Captain?"

Thorne took a nervous step backward, having understood enough. "No, sir. I suppose not."

One man sat in the dark office of an unlit building.

It was useless.

He couldn't think, all alone. But he couldn't end it yet. So much remained to be done. All of his research needed to be compiled into the greatest evaluation of the animal nature of humans that the world would ever know.

If he decided to ever let the world know of it . . .

But it was useless.

Nicko Mal could only wring his hands while quietly cursing Perrin Shin, and stare dismally at the empty chair.

Chapter 18 ~ “Please, Mahrree, please. Stay for me.”

Edge was quiet.

Six weeks after the attack on Moorland it, too, was quiet, as were Quake, Rivers, Mountseen, Idumea and the entire world. If there was another enemy—be it Guarders, or mountain lions, or whatever—it was either busy with planning or licking its wounds, Mahrree decided.

And that was more than just fine with her. Ever since the land tremor she craved monotony and the sense of easy happiness that came with it which people generally dismissed as “routine”. That Weeding Season, now a year and a season after the tremor, showed real promise. Jaytsy was happy weeding the Briters’ garden each day, Peto was happy practicing kickball with some professional players who traveled looking for future recruits, and Perrin was happy because the fort was calm, he slept like a teenage boy all on his own, and Captain Thorne’s schedule was, thanks to Shem, usually opposite of his. And soon Hycymum Peto would be happy as well. She was dying.

She’d been declining for the last year; she got up slower, moved less, and was losing weight. She even quit cooking at Edge’s Inn last season. The doctor, unsure of what was wrong, gave her until the Harvest Celebration. She was fine with that.

“I’ve been without your father for thirty years now. He may not even want me back. Who knows who he’s met in Paradise.”

She said that on the 13th Day of Weeding, almost two weeks after Peto’s 15th birthday. Mahrree had brought her mother dinner again. She chuckled as Hycymum tried to fluff up her mostly gray

curls, as if those would be traveling to Paradise with her.

“Oh honestly, Mother, who would Father possibly want instead?” She set down a tray of food on Hycyum’s sewing table, still with a few unfinished projects but folded neatly and waiting. Hycyum had been too weary to leave the house more than a couple of times since Peto’s birthday, and now she sat on her lavender sofa propped up by numerous pink and yellow pillows. Even though it was a hot day, she still wanted her green blanket over her legs, giving her the appearance of drowning in a flower bed.

Mahrree dragged the sewing table over to the sofa, positioning it so that her mother didn’t have to leave her comfort to eat.

Hycyum, her hand wobbling, scooped up spoonful of Mahrree’s vegetable stew and analyzed it. “You know, this looks remarkably good! Mahrree, you’ve become quite the cook in your own right, you know that?”

Mahrree felt herself blushing at the compliment from the finest cook she’d ever known. “The vegetables are straight from the Briters’ farm, picked this morning by Jaytsy. Mrs. Briter wanted you to have them, to see if they would help.”

Hycyum sniffed the stew on the spoon, sampled a bit, and smiled. “Wonderful. Tell Mrs. Briter and Jaytsy that they’ve made my daughter into a marvelous cook.”

“Now, stop that. It’ll all go to my head if you keep talking like that.”

Hycyum picked up a slice of bread and examined it. “Well, then how’s this: your bread’s still a bit flat, Mahrree. You’re not letting it rise enough. Has that humbled you again?”

“Yes, thank you!” She sat down on a blue poufy chair next to the sofa. “I mean that,” she added more soberly. “Thank you, Mother. For everything.”

“Now *you* stop that,” Hycyum said, her voice shaky as she scooped up more stew. “You keep talking like that, and I’ll cry into the parsnips and make them too salty.”

She could finish only half the bowl, and just a few bites of bread, before she slouched again. “Maybe you can leave the rest in the kitchen under a dish cloth,” she murmured. “If I get hungry in the night I can finish it.”

Mahrree smiled sadly. “Of course,” she said, as if Hycyum would really find the energy to go looking for a midnight snack. “Let’s move you to your bed for the night, shall we? There’s a cool

breeze coming from the mountains already, and that will feel nice tonight.”

After extracting Hycymum from the flowery sofa and planting her again in her overly soft bed, Mahrree opened the window a crack.

“A bit more, Mahrree,” Hycymum said. “I’m starting to feel the heat of the day catch up to me.”

Mahrree adjusted the window, feeling safe in the fact that no Guardsers would be coming after Colonel Shin’s mother-in-law ever again. “Anything else before I go?”

“No, but thank you for everything.”

Mahrree sat down on her bed to smooth a blanket and kissed her mother’s cheek. “You know, you don’t feel as cool and clammy as you have in the past. In fact, you’re rather warm! Maybe you’re improving?” She pulled a thicker blanket off her mother, leaving her with only a sheet.

Hycymum sighed. “Please don’t take this the wrong way, but I hope not. I love you and Perrin and the children, but I feel it’s time for me to go. And I miss your father. Lately I’ve been unable to think of nothing but Cephas. I’m ready to be with him again.”

Mahrree didn’t know how to respond to that.

“I’m not worried about dying, Mahrree,” Hycymum told her. “I’m more worried about the pain of lingering.”

That, Mahrree understood. “Well, Mother, I’m happy to have every day I can with you, but as much as I’ll hate to see you go, I’ll pray that you can go as quickly as the Creator will allow.”

As Mahrree got up to leave, Hycymum called to her again. “Tomorrow, how about a nice veal chop for dinner? Do you know how to do that?”

Mahrree grinned. “Of course, I do. I follow your recipe.”

“Which one? I have four, you know.”

Not realizing that she did, Mahrree pretended to contemplate that for a moment. “I’ll surprise you, all right?”

“As long as it’s the recipe with the rosemary and salt jacket.”

As she walked home that evening Mahrree wondered what a “salt jacket” was, and made a mental note to visit Rector Yung in the morning for fresh rosemary.

But early that next morning, Mahrree lay in bed trying to understand what disturbed her awake. Perrin wasn’t snoring, The Cat was silently stretched out between them, and outside was still. But something had definitely had roused her. She tried to listen to the

air, then felt the presence of her father Cephas.

She needs you, now.

Mahrree sat up. Hycymum must have fallen on her way to get an early breakfast, or was struggling to make it to the washing room. Perhaps, Mahrree considered as she dressed quickly without disturbing Perrin, they should move her to their house for a time.

Downstairs she wrote a note for her family as to where she was going, then started out—the air already surprisingly warm—for her mother's house. By the time she fumbled with the lock on her mother's back door the sun had yet to rise.

Mahrree made her way through the shelves of knick-knacks and paddy-whacks and saw that the dinner from last night still untouched under the towel. Mahrree crept quietly to her mother's bedroom, unsure of what she'd find.

"Mother? Are you all right?"

Between her shallow breaths, Hycymum whispered, "Mahrree, always remember that the Creator is real. I asked Him to send you to me this morning, and here you are."

Mahrree's eyes filled with tears. "Father told me to come."

"I know. He's waiting over there by the wardrobe. I love you. Tell the children and Perrin I love them, too."

And then she went still.

Mahrree grabbed her hand. It felt surprisingly hot to the touch, but rapidly began to cool.

She sat down clumsily on the chair by her silent mother and stared in astonishment.

"But I was going to make you a veal chop for dinner . . . with rosemary—"

It was over? Just like that?

She knew the end was coming, but just four days ago her mother had enough energy to go with the other women in her neighborhood to see the new line of hats on display in the market. How could it have happened so quickly?

But then again, Mahrree thought as she gently replaced her mother's hand on the bed, how could she have wished for anything else for Hycymum? Her passing had been relatively painless, swift, and with family. And Mahrree distinctly felt both of her parents, joyful, leaving the room together.

But that didn't keep her from sobbing by her mother's bed.

Had she said everything? Done everything? Was there anything

Mahrree missed to share with her?

It was now too late.

Did she thank her mother enough for her ever-damp-and-ready shoulder that terrible last year? Did she . . . oh, there was too many things to consider that maybe she hadn't done.

After some time—Mahrree didn't dare guess how long—and feeling weak from so much weeping, she dried her eyes, went out of the house, and sat on the front doorstep. All of the Cottages, with a capital C, were painted in one of four colors approved by the community. The effect *was* nice, but Mahrree felt a new rush of grief realizing that she'd never again have to argue with her mother about moving to the neighboring development, with grander houses and *five* color choices.

The sun had risen and already Mahrree felt the heat promising to be an oppressively long day. One of Hycyum's neighbors came out and waved as she went to check her tomato plants. But when Mahrree didn't wave back, the older woman rushed across the road. She cradled Mahrree as a new batch of tears began.

About two hours later, after half the neighborhood consisting of Hycyum's old sewing club had come to her Cottage, assured Mahrree they would prepare her mother for burial, and gave her wet kisses, Mahrree finally accepted a ride home.

She didn't think she'd feel this awful but she could barely keep upright. The heat and agony kept pushing her down. All she wanted to do was put her face on the floorboards of the wagon. A few roads from her house the wagon passed Perrin walking on his way to Hycyum's. He took one look at Mahrree's distraught pale face, leaped on to the wagon, and held her for the rest of the way home.

Perrin carried her up to the bedroom, but Mahrree hardly noticed. She felt so heavy, hot, and sad that nothing seemed to make sense. For a time she bizarrely thought a snowstorm had come into the house. She shivered under the blankets of her bed, wishing she hadn't put away Hycyum's plaid down comforter they used in Raining Season.

Then all she could do was weep as she fell in and out of bizarre dreams.

Perrin didn't go to the fort that day, but Mahrree didn't know that either. She once felt her husband kiss her forehead, and heard other voices in the room, but everything blurred together in a rush of hot, then cold, then quiet and confusing dimness.

At one point she found herself sitting straight up in bed. Everything was dark except for a candle on the dresser. Perrin stood at the door talking quietly to Shem and another man Mahrree didn't recognize. The three of them looked at her, and the strange man quickly approached. The motion seemed to move the air in front of her in such a powerful way that it pushed her back down.

The next thing she remembered was shaking from cold as the sun rose. Somewhere in the back of her mind she realized her mother had died, and she started to weep.

Her husband's arms come around her. "Just one more day," he whispered strangely to her. "They say it'll pass in one more day. Just hold on. You can make it." He kissed her cheek and his lips were so cold that she flinched.

If it was day or night, snowing or hot, Mahrree couldn't figure it out.

She remembered death.

Twice she saw her parents shaking their heads at her, pushing her away. They wouldn't let her run to embrace them and she couldn't understand why. They gave her sad smiles and kept waving for her to go.

Then she felt a cold rag on her head that chilled her, heard her children asking what they should make for dinner, heard Shem say it was his shift, and felt a strange man lift her eyelids.

And she knew Perrin was sitting next to her, almost always next to her. Sometimes she thought he was a log, or a boulder, and even once imagined him as a cuddly bear, as if bears could ever be something someone would want to embrace.

Nothing made sense. The harder she tried to grasp reality, the more slippery it became.

Once she felt a strong hand hold hers, and heard a deep voice whisper earnestly in her ear, "Please don't leave me, Mahrree. I couldn't bear it. Please, Mahrree, please. Stay for me."

The odd thing was, it wasn't Perrin, but *Shem's* pleading.

Nothing made sense.

At some point she opened her eyes and felt, for the first time, that she knew exactly where she was and what was happening.

She was sick. And mucky, as if she'd been sweating for days.

And her mother had died.

There was sunshine outside, but on the wrong side of the house. Late afternoon.

Jaytsy was sitting by the door reading a book, with The Cat slumbering at her feet.

“Jayts? What time is it?”

“Father! I think she’s coming out of it!” Jaytsy called and came to sit by her mother. She touched her head experimentally and smiled. “You’re not so hot anymore.”

Mahrree heard steps pounding up the stairs. Perrin and Peto appeared, worry evaporating from their faces when they saw her.

“You’ve been one sick woman,” Perrin smiled at her.

Suddenly she remembered. “My mother! Perrin, when’s the burial?” She struggled to get out of bed but got tangled in the blankets.

“No, no, no,” he said gently pushing her back in. “I’m sorry. You don’t remember, do you?” He sat down next to her and smoothed her damp hair off her face. “We buried her two mornings ago, next to your father. Rector Yung said the blessings. We brought you there in the fort’s coach, but you were out of it the whole time, just lying on the bench. Afterward Rector Yung asked a special blessing for you. Mahrree, I’m so sorry.”

She tried to swallow but her mouth was too dry.

Perrin motioned to a mug of water on the wardrobe, and Peto hurriedly brought it to her.

“I *missed* it? Her burial . . . I, I missed it?” she asked, astonished. “How long have I been here?”

“This is the fourth day,” Perrin said gently, trying to give her the mug, but her hands trembled too much to grasp it. “That seems to be how long the fever takes to run its course.”

“Fever?” Mahrree’s hands flew to her face in surprise, where she received another shock. Her skin felt rough and bumpy. Once she touched it, it itched.

Perrin cringed. “That’s the next stage.” He took a wet rag offered by Jaytsy and dabbed her face. “You’re a little, uh, *pocked*.”

“Pocked?!”

Her children nodded somberly.

“Some soldiers in Idumea had this last year,” Perrin said, tenderly wiping her face. “They quarantined them, but obviously it didn’t work. We’re not sure how the illness got up here, but it’s starting to work its way through Edge. The new fort surgeon thinks your mother may have had it too. That’s why she went so quickly. Not everyone breaks out in the pocks.”

“It’s good that you do, Mother,” Jaytsy tried to assure her.

“Those who don’t tend to . . . not make it.”

Mahrree closed her eyes and laid back on the pillow. “How bad do I look?”

“Really doesn’t matter,” Perrin said firmly.

Her eyes flew open. “That bad?!”

“They say it should fade, Mother!” Jaytsy gave her father a nasty look.

Peto nodded in agreement, but bit his lip anyway.

“Just one quiet season,” Mahrree whispered. “That’s all I wanted. A quiet season with nothing major happening, just time to rest.”

Her son shrugged. “*You’ve* been pretty quiet for the past few days, not doing much of anything, just resting—”

“That’s not what she meant, Peto!” Perrin snapped.

Mahrree wanted to laugh. Then she wanted to cry. She was too parched to do anything but lay there. Perrin tried to help her drink from the mug but she hardly had any strength to do it.

“You’ve got to drink,” he told her with tender earnestness. “You’ll never get better unless you do. You’re very dry.”

“That’s not good for your skin, either,” Jaytsy tried to say encouragingly, but her wince gave her away.

For the rest of the day Mahrree couldn’t lift herself out of bed but was well-attended to by her family. Once she finally started to drink she didn’t think she could ever stop. She downed mug after mug, feeling the water fill every inch of her dehydrated body.

Shem came by at dinner time and released a huge sigh of relief to see Mahrree in a somewhat sitting position.

“Mahrree? Are you actually there?” he asked hesitantly as he walked into her bedroom.

“What kind of question is that, Shem?” she said weakly.

Perrin, following him in, smiled. “You’ve been mumbling a few odd things. More than once you sat up and baffled us.”

Shem sat down easily on the bed next to Mahrree, as if he’d done it many times in the past few days. He gently touched her forehead. “Much cooler! Thank the Creator,” he sighed. “Perrin, tell her what she did last night.”

“Why? You’re the one who witnessed it. I had fallen asleep,” he said apologetically as he sat down on the other side of her.

“But he never left your side,” Shem told her. “Risking illness himself, he’s never been gone for more than a few minutes. Last night you sat up, looked around, and said, ‘I think the peach blossoms are

a lovely idea.” Shem tried to keep a straight face, but the corners of his mouth were twitching.

Mahrree scowled. “Peach blossoms? Since when have I ever cared about peach blossoms?”

“That’s what we were wondering,” Perrin chuckled. “Another afternoon you mumbled something about moving the rocks off of the rug—”

“Why would we have rocks on a rug?”

“And then there was the time you said you could see the flooding,” Shem said.

Mahrree stared at the two men. “What flooding?”

Shem shook his head. “That’s too bad—I was really hoping you’d remember that one. I’ve been wondering about that myself.”

Perrin chuckled again, as if he couldn’t do it enough, and put his hand over hers. “Doesn’t matter anymore.”

Mahrree remembered something. “Wait a minute—you’ve been here the *entire* time I’ve been ill? What about the fort?”

He looked into her eyes. “The fort can function without me for a while. I had some leave coming anyway. I belong by your side.”

Mahrree blinked. “Four days? You’ve never been away that long without being unconscious or seriously injured.”

He shrugged. “Shem kept an eye on things for me. So did Jon Offra. Whatever Thorne may have changed in my absence, I’ll just right again.”

“Oh, Perrin. I’m so sorry!” Mahrree said, trying to grip his arm, but only managing to tug on his sleeve. “Look, maybe you should go up there now, just for the evening. I’m feeling much better now, and I’m sure you’ll feel better about seeing to things—”

The change in his eyes revealed that was exactly what he was hoping she’d suggest. Four days was a very long time when someone like Lemuel Thorne is second in command.

“But Mahrree, only if you’re sure—”

“Positive! Shem’s here, the children are here—I’m fine. Go. Make sure it hasn’t been renamed to Fort Thorne in your absence.”

Perrin grinned, kissed her quickly on the cheek where there were no pocks, and stood up. “I’ll be back before midnight. I promise.” He pointed to his sergeant major. “Keep a close eye on her.”

Shem blushed ever so slightly. “Always do.”

“Remember—I’ll be back,” he said as he removed his jacket that remained ever ready on the chair by the bed. “Midnight.”

“Go!” Only after she heard his footsteps fade down the stairs

did Mahrree turn to Shem. “Really? He *never* left?”

Shem patted her hand awkwardly. “You’ve been one very ill woman,” he said, his voice cracking. “We thought you were going to leave us.”

That’s when Mahrree remembered one of her odd dreams. It was someone pleading quietly in her ear, *Please don’t leave me. I couldn’t bear it.*

And it *was* Shem—she was sure of it. He sat next to her now, unusually close. There had been only rare moments when he’d been in their bedroom, usually wrestling with her half-awake husband. But apparently the past few days had introduced an intimacy she wasn’t aware of. Shem sat easily with his hand still enveloping hers, as if he’d done that before, and Mahrree wondered if he knew she had heard him whispering in her ear.

But by the naturally happy look in his blue eyes, which were growing shiny, he didn’t seem to think anything about that moment was inappropriate.

She remembered many years ago when Shem was an injured young corporal with a bashed-in head, lying still at the village green when the Guarders first attacked the village. Mahrree had sat by his side all night holding his hand looking for signs of responsiveness. The only time she got any reaction was when she’d whispered, “I still need you!” His mouth had twitched.

She later suspected that he had heard everything she told him that night, about how she and Perrin thought of him as their younger brother and how Perrin had great plans for him. Then again, maybe he heard only bits and pieces, as Mahrree had. Maybe Shem had said even more to her, but that was all she remembered.

She looked into his innocent blue eyes and patted his hand with her other. “I’m sorry I worried my little brother. Now I need to thank you again for all of your attention.”

He blushed and stood up hastily from the bed, as if suddenly remembering something. A guilty countenance came over his face—at least that’s what Mahrree decided it was because she’d never seen that look on him before.

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t be taking up your resting space.” He glanced over to the side where Perrin normally slept, and stepped over to the chair where his uniform always lay ready. His trousers were still there, since he had gone to the fort in his regular clothes and uniform jacket.

Shem gingerly picked up the trousers and draped them over the back of the chair before he sat down. “No thanks needed,” he said, then added, as if eager for a new topic, “Can I get you something to drink?”

Perrin trotted up the tower stairs, bracing for the worst.

Instead, he faced the best. “Jon! Why are you up here? I thought Thorne was on duty tonight.”

Lieutenant Offra saluted. “Sir, I should be asking the same thing of you—aren’t you supposed to be at home with your wife?”

“Her fever broke this afternoon. She’s doing much better.”

Offra grinned. “Oh, sir—that’s good news! I was a bit worried about her, to be honest.”

“We were *all* worried,” Perrin told him, sure that the relief was evident on his face, “but she’s quite back to herself again. And although she’s a bit pocked and dehydrated, she’ll recover. Wait—*where’s Thorne?*”

“He’s down too, sir. Since yesterday.”

“Thorne has the pox?” Perrin tried to keep the hopeful tone out of his voice.

Oh, he *shouldn’t* think like that. No, no, no. It was bordering on contemptible to hope—and *certainly* inappropriate to pray—that perhaps Thorne would be one of those who didn’t break out in the pox, but instead—

Dear Creator, he prayed anyway in his mind, I’m so sorry for what I’m thinking, but surely you understand, right? And if I have to lose another soldier, may I submit a personal request as to who that might be—

“Sir?” Offra pulled him out of the most unworthy prayer ever. “Thorne broke out in pocks this evening already.” The lieutenant must have read some of Perrin’s fantasy in his face and he offered a conciliatory smile.

“Well, of course he did,” Perrin gave him The Dinner smile in return. “How fortunate for us.”

“And sir? An Administrative messenger arrived not too long ago bringing word that the guest quarters should be prepared, because Mrs. Versula Thorne is coming to sit with her son until he recovers. Radan had informed Idumea in the same hour that

Thorne became feverish. Sorry.”

Perrin knew his groan was audible, but it was in front of Jon, so it was all right. “Mrs. Thorne’s coming. How fortunate for us,” he repeated, even more dismally.

Offer snorted at his miserable expression. “Sorry again, sir. Is there anything I can do to help?”

Perrin sighed loudly. “No . . . nothing . . . at . . . all.”

“We’ve kept the fort running smoothly in your absence, sir,” Offra said, trying to cheer up his commander. “In fact, I didn’t have much to do up here tonight—”

Perrin looked around at the tidy office. “Take the rest of the evening off, Jon. You’ll likely be pulling a double shift tomorrow to cover for Thorne again, and I really don’t want you falling ill in the meantime. You do *not* want Mrs. Thorne tending to you as well.”

Offra grinned. “No, sir! Thank you, sir. And may I add, I’m sorry to hear about Mrs. Peto? It’s been quite a week that your family’s had to endure, hasn’t it?”

“Indeed, it has,” Perrin sighed, and his eyes rested on the purple and gold banner of Edge, stitched brightly and excessively by Hycymum years ago. Someone had tied a sprig of flowers to the nail from which it hung.

“Zenos did that, after her burial,” said Offra quietly when he noticed where Perrin’s attention was focused. “I hadn’t realized Mrs. Peto made that banner. She was quite . . . the seamstress,” he added tactfully.

Perrin smiled sadly. “She was quite a lot of things, Jon. When I first arrived she wanted to make curtains for the tower windows, and in plaid, of all things. Did you know she sewed all of the tower banners? Even made pink striped ones, just in case I found a need for them.” He chuckled at the memory.

Offra actually sneered. “Pink stripes?”

“Yep! She said she got a great price on the cloth—which she charged to the army—and couldn’t resist. I told Karna to dispose of them, and he hid them deep in the supply building—except for one. He hoisted that ridiculous pink banner in the village green tower to signal the last tower in our first Strongest Soldier Race. I’ll tell you, I was in a *hurry* to get that down! That motivation was the main reason I won.”

Jon laughed. “Maybe we should try to find the pink banners, sir, in honor of her for your next race?”

Perrin smiled. “Not a bad idea. Did you know she also made cake for the races? I always complained because we had to use our wagons and soldiers to cart it all to the village green and set it up so everyone could have ‘refreshments’ at the conclusion of the race. I always told her it wasn’t necessary . . .” His voice faded when he realized that this year there’d be no cake.

And that he’d never thanked her for it.

And that now it was too late.

She was supposed to have lasted until next season, and Perrin had been planning to say a few things to her before then—

He cleared his throat gruffly and stared at the hideous purple banner again which he suddenly realized he loved. “Yes, Hycymum Peto was quite a lot of things.” Blinking wetness out of his eyes, he smiled at his lieutenant, whose own eyes had grown damp. “Good job with the fort, Jon. Thank you for taking care of so many things for me. I truly appreciate it, even if I forget to say so. Good night.”

Early the next morning Mahrree felt strong enough to venture out of bed. Perrin had come home earlier than she expected last night, and now the log-rock-bear snored peacefully next to her.

She unsteadily made her way to the mirror in her room, prepared for the worst. When she focused on herself, she relaxed. While she was covered in small red blisters, she didn’t think the scarring would be too bad. Besides, her husband still looked at her the same way he always did. As long as he didn’t care, she wouldn’t care.

She stumbled back into bed.

Perrin rolled over and opened his eyes. “Are you all right?”

She ran a finger down his face that used to be more scarred than hers. “Yes. It was a relatively good night. All is well.”

Perrin smiled, looking more at ease. “That’s my line! Now I’m supposed to suggest we spend the morning just lazing here in bed. But, as you may not know, we *have* been doing that for the past several mornings. You missed it.”

Mahrree sighed. “Guess I’ll walk down to the amphitheater now and have everyone yell ‘General Shin!’ at me. Get me a uniform.”

Perrin chuckled. “You sound much better. But really, how are

you?”

“It hurts,” she admitted. “My body, my skin, my heart. But they are all right, my parents.” She fought back the tears, not wanting to lose any more water. She learned last night when she thought of her mother that crying stung her pocks. Shem and Jaysy had tried to blot her face with damp clothes as she wept to keep her tears from her blisters. It would have been humorous if it weren’t so pathetic.

“I think I saw them when I was feverish. They were together, and they didn’t want me to come to them.”

Perrin nodded. “I believe it. Twice we thought we were going to lose you.” His voice grew husky. “You wouldn’t cool down. You wouldn’t drink, no matter what we tried.” He pushed a damp lock of hair off her face. “The new surgeon—he transferred here from Vines last week—tried to warn me one night that you wouldn’t make it to the morning. Shem threatened to hit him if he didn’t stop talking. The Cat even got spooked once. He wouldn’t come in here, and kept hissing at nothing.”

“I had no idea,” Mahrree whispered. “I didn’t realize I was that bad. Will you and the children get this?”

“Unsure,” Perrin shrugged. “Some fall to it while others have no problems. You seemed to have got it from your mother. But so far none of us are showing symptoms, so that’s a good sign. However, last night I got a report that one-third of the fort at Rivers is down, and Karna was very bad a few days ago but he’s coming out of it again. But Mahrree, he’s lost forty men so far.”

“Lost? You don’t mean . . .?”

He nodded somberly. “In Quake, Fadh’s lost over thirty, and we haven’t heard from Yordin yet, but it’s just beginning there.”

“How many have you lost?” Mahrree asked, afraid to know.

“I visited our surgery wing last night, and two more had just passed away as quickly as Hycymum. That brings us to up to nine. Captain Thorne is now ill, too, but already broken out in pocks, so he’ll recover,” he added drearily. Then his tone cheered up, just a bit. “He insisted on showing me his pocks, although I don’t know why, and along his just-healed scar he has a few dozen blisters, itching and puss-filled.” He smirked, but tried to cover it.

Mahrree snorted at his failed attempt.

“By the way,” he added, “Versula is on her way here to be with him, and she’s expecting to eat dinner with us when she arrives.”

“What?”

Perrin smiled. "I guess it's too early to tease you, isn't it."

When her breathing became normal again, Mahrree rolled on her back. "I just realized: what if you'd waited on your offensive? Didn't Shem suggest putting it off until Weeding Season?"

Perrin exhaled. "It wouldn't have happened, would it? I didn't realize six weeks ago why it was so important that we attack when we did. I just felt strongly impressed that we should. Had we waited, it could have been disastrous. If the Guardians were still active and found out the soldiers were ill . . . Mahrree, *we* could have been wiped out by *them!* Their explosives, our inability to fight—"

Mahrree groaned at the thought. "The Creator knew what was coming. I'm just grateful you know how to listen."

In the hot afternoon sun Perrin stood in the compound with his arms folded, waiting miserably for the arrival of the black coach.

Next to him Lieutenant Radan was agitated. "Sir, I don't even know what to *say* to her."

"Don't worry," Perrin told him. "She'll say it all."

"So what exactly am I to do with her?"

Perrin turned slightly to him. "Act as her liaison, of course. I've even cleared your schedule. You'll see her to her quarters, escort her to Thorne's, bring her meals—"

"But sir, that sounds like servant's work!"

Perrin smiled slyly. "Officers are supposed to be the servants of the army, Radan. Didn't anyone ever teach you that?"

Radan's confused expression made that answer clear.

"No, of course not. Officers think everyone should be serving them," Perrin said, watching the gates for the inevitable arrival. "But the reality is, we are to serve the citizens, the world—"

The four horses rumbled in, pulling a coach which generated a cloud of dust behind it.

Perrin sighed. "—and to serve the mother of the captain, and the wife of a general. Both of them your *superiors*," he reminded.

Fitting punishment, Perrin thought smugly to himself, for going over Perrin's head to send an urgent message to General and Mrs. Thorne. The next two weeks would be a lesson the overeager lieutenant wouldn't soon forget.

When the coach lurched to a halt, Perrin didn't move but elbowed the lieutenant at his side. "Get the door."

"Bu sir, there's a corporal acting as footman—"

"*Get the door!*"

When Radan swung it open, Versula Thorne stood there in her silk—silk? To her wrists? And dark red? Not cotton in this heat?

The only thing Perrin understood about fashion was that all of it was stupid and made the wearers unnecessarily miserable. Whoever decided the trends in Idumea either must be sadistic or the wealthiest jokester ever.

But there she stood in multiple layers of silk fanning herself so rapidly she could have taken flight. "Oh, Perrin! I've—Wait." She stared at Radan. "You're not the colonel."

Radan offered her his hand. "No, ma'am. I'm Lieutenant Radan, the one who wrote to you about Captain Thorne falling ill? He and I are good friends, ma'am. I'm sure he's mentioned me—"

"No. Never." She looked up and saw someone who did make her smile. "Now, *there* you are, Colonel Shin!" She took Radan's hand only to get down the steps more quickly. "What a horrible ordeal! A terrible drive! I do feel a bit faint . . ."

She tried to fall dramatically into Perrin's arms except that he didn't unfold them. Instead, he used his shoulder to nudge upright again.

"Yes," he said casually, "the drive is a bit long and hot. Radan can show you to your quarters and get you something to drink. He'll be at your disposal while you're at the fort—"

"*Fort Shin*, as it's been renamed," she beamed at him, suddenly quite recovered from her 'horrible ordeal.' "What an honor," she gushed. "You realize no one's ever had a fort named after him?"

She took his arm, even though he hadn't offered it, and turned him to the buildings. "Show me everything, Perrin—and I mean *everything*—about Fort Shin!" She squeezed his bicep and released a giggle that sounded appropriate coming only from girls younger than fourteen years old.

He unhooked her grip from his arm and tilted his head to Radan. "I'm sure you understand, *Mrs. Thorne*, that with the pox outbreak we are short on manpower, and I am needed in about three other places right now. Therefore Radan is to take care of your needs and see you to *your son*."

"Oh, yes!" Versula exclaimed, as if remembering why she'd come

all that way. “How’s our Lemuel?”

“*Your* Lemuel is recovering, slowly. The pox seems to take at least two weeks—”

“How about dinner?” she whispered, taking his arm again and ignoring Radan who stood on her other side, patiently waiting.

“The lieutenant will bring it to you—”

“No, Perrin, I meant you and me—”

“And *my wife* Mahrree? No, I’m sorry. She’s still recuperating. She fell ill last week, lost her mother to it . . . I need to stay by her side.”

Something in Versula’s eyes registered a slight level of panic, as if she were trying to communicate something *else* but it was being missed.

That’s because Perrin was purposely dodging it. He pried her hand, none too gently, from off of his arm and clapped it onto Radan’s.

“Captain Thorne’s expecting you, Mrs. Thorne,” and he strode back to the tower just as sweat began to bead on his forehead.

Chapter 19 ~ “Who will go next?!”

The next three weeks were unlike anything the Shins, Edge, or the world had experienced before, which was why each morning Mahrree forced herself out of bed, a difficult daily ritual.

“I’m healthy enough that I can help,” she reminded her weak muscles. At this point, she wasn’t sure if she felt drained every day because of the pox, the extra work, or because her mother had died. Anyway, lying around didn’t help. Moving, however, did.

This morning Perrin was already up, judging by the sounds coming from the kitchen downstairs. He was trying to make breakfast again which Mahrree wholly appreciated but needed to prevent. In his earnestness to get her strong again, he’d cook more bacon than the entire neighborhood could consume, then wondered why she didn’t finish it all. Peto did his best, but even a growing teenager had his limits.

Mahrree dressed and made her way down the stairs to find Jaytsy putting on a battered straw hat which—may Joriana’s spirit forgive her—a few years ago was a pricey piece of art from the hat district of Idumea.

“I was just on my way out,” Jaytsy told her. “Porridge is ready, but I think Father’s adding sausage to it.”

Oh dear, was what Mahrree was tempted to say, but instead she smiled. “Thank you, all, for helping. I think I can manage from here on out now.”

“Good!” Peto said, coming out of his room. “Let’s just say that Father and Jaytsy don’t have Grandma Peto’s knack for cooking.”

Jaytsy glowered at him. “If Mother would let me have Grandmother’s recipe file, I might!”

“Later, I promise,” Mahrree told her. “I just need to organize it a

bit. With so many loose pages, I'm afraid something will fall out of it if I don't sort them all first."

But Mahrree wasn't worried about losing a recipe. She'd sent Jaytsy to her grandmother's as soon as she was coherent enough to explain where the recipe file was hiding—in a false bottom of Hycyum's underwear drawer. So exhausted was Mahrree that it took her a few minutes to understand why her children thought that description was funny.

Hycyum's recipes were her most prized possession—probably the only thing Mahrree wanted of her mother's, along with a few good serving forks and a wide platter—and Hycyum never wanted anyone else to have her recipes but her family.

And Mahrree knew why. Secured in the middle of them, between some seemingly mundane descriptions of how to use herbs that everyone else would likely skip over, was a fragile, ancient piece of parchment written in a small, careful hand over 130 years ago.

Mahrree couldn't let even her husband or children know she had forbidden documents that were to have been handed over to King Querul, then to be destroyed—accidentally, *of course*—in that great fire. Mahrree had already memorized the document in the middle of the day when everyone was gone, feeling the force of ancestors, and wondering where she should secure it next.

And she really did want to sort the rest of the recipes. Hycyum was a wonderful cook, but why she thought "pork" and "pickles" should be clustered together, Mahrree couldn't fathom.

"There she is, up and about!" Perrin boomed cheerily as he brought a big pot of something steaming from the kitchen and set it on the table.

"My, but you're in a good mood," she grinned. He'd been quite chipper for the last couple of days, ever since Versula Thorne left.

"The message arrived last night; she's arrived in Idumea and therefore we're all safe!" he informed them.

Jaytsy sighed in relief. "So I don't have to worry about running into her at the market again, where she can tell me all about how sitting next to her *dear Lemuel* all day is boring, books were boring, and how she'd still prefer to have my company."

Perrin nodded. "Nor do I have to hear her hint for any more dinner invitations—"

"And I'm *so sorry* I kept having relapses," Mahrree sighed dramatically as her children snorted.

“Oh, yes,” her husband said soberly. “And it was quite convenient that I had to run home to check on you the day she discovered there are a couple of inns in the village that could have fed us—”

“Just the *two of you*,” Mahrree clarified. “I’m sure that’s what she was thinking when she invited *you*.”

“Yes, subtle,” he rolled his eyes. “Eating alone with another woman in public. And guess what just opened up again?”

“The dress shops?” Jaytsy said. “Not that I wished for the owners to get ill, but it was good timing so that Mrs. Thorne couldn’t take me to buy ‘something decent’.”

“It’s because she saw you wearing that in the market.” Mahrree gestured to Jaytsy’s dress, another Idumean one-of-a-kind pale blue linen sewn specifically for Joriana Shin, now with a few mud stains and the sleeves shortened by removing several inches of ruffles.

But since it was created by Kuman, neither Mahrree nor Jaytsy had any qualms about letting it become Jaytsy’s favorite battered work dress. Jaytsy had earlier torn off the ruffles in order to tie up tomato plants in a neighbor’s garden—a phrase Mahrree still wasn’t too sure of, but didn’t feel like showing her ignorance about.

Peto merely shrugged as he peered into the pot. “I don’t know what all of you are going on about. I never saw the woman.” He gave the porridge and sausage mix an experimental sniff and bobbed his head. He’d eat it. He’d eat anything.

“Well, of course you didn’t,” Mahrree said, scooping out the slop for Peto that reminded her of something she used to clean up in his changing cloths. “She had no interest in you, and since none of us have any interest in Idumea, I think we can forget all about Mrs. Versula Thorne.”

Something in Peto’s gray eyes darkened when Mahrree said that none of them had any interest in Idumea, but he dug into his breakfast anyway.

“So where are you off to this morning?” Mahrree asked brightly.

Peto recovered, swallowing down his breakfast. “Rector Yung said a family on the west side needs someone to look after their goats. It seems today I’m learning how to milk them,” he grimaced. “Yung had a lot of other tasks and families needing help on that list of his, but no . . . I’m destined to be a goat milker.”

Jaytsy took her seat next to him. “They have a baby, Peto. She needs the milk. If you want, you can join me in gathering eggs at five different houses, and weeding at the Briters’, and—”

“All right, all right,” he sighed loudly. “Yung’s got a list all ready for me. I don’t need to share in yours.”

Mahrree sighed as well. “It’s become Needing Season this year, instead of Weeding Season. So many people ill, so many needing help . . .”

“And here I thought I was lucky for being immune,” Peto grumbled.

“You are,” Perrin said sternly. “People aren’t just being ill, Peto; they’re dying, too. I have soldiers digging mass graves in the burial grounds to accommodate them all. If this continues we may lose up to ten percent of the village. You can certainly milk a goat or two, and learn a few more tasks.”

“I know,” Peto murmured apologetically. “I was just—”

“—being your usual, obnoxious self, I know,” Perrin said, a bit calmer. “I was like you at your age, and I wish I hadn’t been.”

“Me too,” Mahrree confessed.

Peto looked up at them. “So I’ve inherited this? Thanks. Thanks a lot.”

“And today,” Mahrree announced, “I’ll try to get my mother’s house in order.”

Her husband winced. “That sounds like a lot of work, Mahrree.”

She shook her head. “I already took what I wanted. I was just going to throw open the doors and let the neighborhood have what they wanted.”

“A lot of those old ladies are still sick, though,” Jaytsy pointed out. “I think Grandma Peto infected a third of her friends.”

“She did,” Mahrree agreed sadly. “I’ll check with them to see which ones want her collection of carved painted bugs, who might want her stack of cloth scraps—may be a riot for that—who wants to claim her dish cloths—”

“First best, second best, third best . . .” Peto murmured.

Mahrree exhaled, realizing it did sound like a lot of work.

“Some people sell it all,” Jaytsy suggested.

“But we don’t need to take anyone’s silver,” Mahrree told her. “We have enough. Let others enjoy all the things my mother felt necessary to acquire over the years. I have no problem giving it away.”

“And I thank you,” Perrin said as he served himself breakfast, “that you’re not bringing home her collection of porcelain purple chickens that whistle when you blow into them.”

“We’re all thankful for that!” Peto declared.

Perrin shook his head sadly. "I never had the heart to tell her that chickens don't whistle. And aren't purple." He hesitated and turned to Jaytsy. "They're not, right?"

She giggled. "How is that my parents can be so smart and so ignorant at the same time?"

"I know," Peto mumbled as he swallowed his breakfast. "Chickens whistle all the time. Parents know nothing . . ."

Jaytsy hurried over to the Briters after breakfast to get an early start on thinning the carrots before the day grew too hot; she'd take care of Yung's list of families requesting assistance later.

When she approached the Briters' farm she noticed unusual activity. Mr. Briter was hitching their horses to their wagon, and Mrs. Briter was rushing to put a basket in the back.

Jaytsy broke into a run to reach them. "What's happened? Where are you going?"

Sewzi Briter set down the basket and turned to Jaytsy, distraught. "It's our son," she said tearfully. "We received word late last night that he's been taken with the pox. Mr. Briter's brother and his wife have been tending to him, but Jaytsy, they don't think he's improving." She wiped away a few tears, and Jaytsy put a comforting arm around her.

"I'll pray that he'll be fine," she said. "If my mother can beat it, surely your son can. Just don't worry, Mrs. Briter."

Cambozola Briter smiled at her as he finished adjusting a strap on one of the horses. "That's what I keep telling her, Miss Jaytsy. Maybe she'll believe you."

"I'll take care of the farm while you're gone," Jaytsy promised.

"Oh, you sweet girl." Sewzi shook her head. "But it's impossible for you to do alone. If you could just keep the fields irrigated—it's been so dry lately. And thin out the carrots, and maybe harvest the beans and peas, then . . . the rest can just wait until we return." She looked over at the massive farm and cringed, realizing how overgrown it could become in just a week.

"Don't you worry," Jaytsy assured her. "I'll get some help from the fort—they eat this food, they better help take care of it. And I'll even draw pictures to make sure they pull the right things. What about the cattle?" She hoped they wouldn't ask if her father could assist.

“Spoke to a rancher west of here this morning,” Cambozola told her. “He has some laborers that will tend to them and the chickens.”

Jaytsy nodded. “Then go take care of your son. I’ll take care here.”

“I believe you will!” Sewzi said, and rushed back into the house to get their traveling bag.

Cambozola sidled over to Jaytsy, as if nervous to be near a young woman. “Miss Jaytsy, Sewzi would trust her gardens only to someone whom she feels truly has ‘brown fingers.’ I’ve never seen her put so much faith into someone so young. Thank you. She’d normally never leave her plants in Weeding Season, but after losing my mother last year, and our home in Moorland—” He paused to clear his throat. “We just can’t bear to next lose our only boy,” he whispered. “Too much loss . . .”

Surprised by his soberness, Jaytsy squeezed his arm. “Thank you for your confidence. I promise you’ll both come back to find everything well. And I hope your son will be well, too.”

Cambozola quickly wiped his face and patted Jaytsy awkwardly on her shoulder. “Such a good girl,” he mumbled.

His wife came bounding out the back door, bag in hand, and tears streaking down her face. Jaytsy gave Sewzi one last hug and a brave smile.

“You’ll be back in no time, and he’ll be fine as soon as he sees you again!”

Knock-knock . . . knock-knock-knock.

A trap door. Right below his desk. Perrin could open it, slip down, fall to the ground thirty feet below, but it would be worth a broken leg to avoid saying the words—

“Come in.”

The door opened.

Even with his pocked face Thorne had a way of looking dashing, polished, and completely un-soldier-like. Soldiers, when not on some ridiculous parade, should have a little dirt smudged on their faces, a bit of sweat on their brow, and a scent like horses and work.

But Thorne always had a strangely faint odor of something

purple, like an older woman's hair. Just another thing that was so wrong about the boy.

"Colonel Shin!"

"You're up, I see," Perrin tried to say airily, but it came out as light as an anvil.

Thorne didn't notice. "Yes, sir! My mother says it was touch and go for a while, but here I am. Cheated death, twice in one year."

Perrin's shoulders tensed. Thorne was never in any real danger, but that's not how Versula Thorne chose to see it.

Although things *were* touch and go. Versula always had a way of finding and touching Perrin, and he found ways of quickly going.

And as for cheating death? Death just couldn't bear taking him yet. The Creator didn't have any room for someone like him in Paradise, and the Refuser likely wanted the sniveling boy to torment Perrin for a few more years.

"What can I do for you, Captain?"

"Sir, it's what I can do for you," Thorne leaned on the desk, cautiously. "I overheard—"

It was remarkable how many things he "overheard." He must have had several pairs of ears around the compound.

"—that your daughter is requesting assistance in a nearby field? Some passing soldiers brought in the message that the owners left and the fields need tending to."

Perrin must have been steaming for as quickly as he felt his blood boil and rise.

"I hereby volunteer to help her plant plants! Or whatever."

"Weed," Perrin corrected him.

Thorne squinted. "They plant weeds? Why?"

At any other moment that would have struck him as humorous. But he never felt like smiling when the captain was around.

"They *pull out* the weeds, Captain. They just call it 'weeding' to be brief. Obviously you've never done the job before."

"But I can learn, Colonel. Surely you can see that," he said with his thin smile rooted in place.

"This isn't a time to learn, Captain. We need experienced men who can find and quickly remove the most pernicious weeds, and we can afford to send only two for a couple of hours each day. Besides," Perrin was grateful for the sudden recollection, "the surgeon said that those recovering from the pox should limit their time outdoors. The intense heat and sun would further dehydrate you. Now, we wouldn't

want that to happen, would we?” He put on his own tight smile.

Thorne nodded, disappointed. “I forgot. Sir, would you please tell Miss Jaytsy that I volunteered? That I wanted to assist her?”

Perrin exhaled. “Oh, I’ll tell her, all right.”

When Jaytsy went home for midday meal, she told her mother what happened with the Briters.

“Those poor people,” Mahrree sighed. “I’ll help you with irrigation,” she said, although she wasn’t sure how she could since dealing with the small mob that came to empty her mother’s house that morning had left her needing a nap.

“I’m not sure you should, Mother. You’re rather pale again.”

“Thank you for noticing.”

The door to the washing room opened and Peto came out, his hands rubbed red. “Well I did some chicken coop work this morning after all. It doesn’t seem they could do such *foul* things, but really—don’t let them fool you. They’re much more than just ‘cluck.’” He inspected his finger nails and shuddered. “Please tell me we’re not having scrambled eggs or cold chicken today.”

“Fresh greens, Peto, and barley bread with goat cheese,” Mahrree assured him.

Peto sat down at the table. “I guess I’ll tell you the atrocities of goats *after* we’ve finished eating.”

“So let me guess,” Mahrree sat at the table with him, “added to the list of things you don’t want to be when you grow up, under ‘soldier’ is ‘farmer’?”

“Goat herder, chicken rancher—or whatever they call it—sheep catcher—”

“Shepherd!” Jaytsy giggled.

“Yeah, that,” Peto said, taking a massive bite of bread. “Pig gatherer, cattle chaser, dog grower, horse teacher—”

“I’m seeing a pattern,” Mahrree said.

“I’ll eat it, but I won’t take care of it,” Peto decided.

“Eat dogs and horses, Peto?” Jaytsy cringed.

“I won’t eat them, but I certainly don’t enjoy touching them. I’ll just find me a nice job doing . . .” He scratched his head.

“His handwriting is atrocious,” Mahrree said to her daughter, “so he can’t do anything with scribing or writing. That rules out

quite a few careers.”

“And even though he’s nearly as tall as me now, he’s still as skinny as green bean,” Jaytsy pointed out. “So that rules out anything requiring muscle, like blacksmithing.”

“Carpentry,” Mahrree added.

“Piping—” Jaytsy continued.

“Hey!” Peto exclaimed. “Father said I’m developing muscle!”

“—basket weaving.”

“Oh, ha-ha, Jayts.”

“You could be a teacher, like me and my father,” Mahrree suggested.

“You mean, ‘my father and me,’” said Peto smugly.

“See?” Mahrree beamed. “You love correcting and ridiculing people. You’d be perfect as a teacher of teenage boys.”

Peto and Jaytsy laughed, and Mahrree thought nothing ever sounded so wonderful.

“What’s going on in here?” they heard a deep voice boom from the kitchen. A moment later Perrin came through the door. “Eating? Laughing? Did I authorize this?”

No, Mahrree thought; *Now* everything’s wonderful. “What are you doing home?” she asked him as he dropped his cap on the table.

“Just came by for a moment. Jayts, I got your message from the soldiers you stopped. So the Briters actually left?”

Jaytsy nodded. “They were very concerned about their son. I’ve never seen them so upset.”

Perrin sighed and sat down at the table, taking the bread out of Peto’s hands and ignoring his protests. “They’ve experienced a lot of loss this past year. I can understand their fear.”

“So can you spare a few soldiers to help with the farm?”

“I can give you only two, for a few hours each afternoon,” he said apologetically. “We have so many men down, others are helping with the village . . . thank the Creator we have no Guarders to contend with right now.”

“Indeed,” Mahrree sighed. “I do every day.”

“It should be enough,” Jaytsy said, just a little worried. “I was hoping to keep the weeds from taking over too much. The soldiers can get the larger ones, I suppose.”

“There was a *third* volunteer,” Perrin said, reluctantly. “He overheard somehow.”

Jaytsy swallowed. “Who?”

“Captain Thorne.”

Peto grimaced. “Ew. That’s not what a garden needs—thorns!” He looked at his family, wondering why they weren’t laughing.

His sister and father were studying each other, and Mahrree watched Jaytsy, trying to read her response.

“I agree,” said Perrin. “I don’t think he’s ever set foot on a farm before in his life. Nor will he, if I can help it.”



That evening Mahrree put away a book that had been sitting in Perrin’s study and paused as she looked at the bookshelf. She glanced around, then pulled out her recently inherited, “Embellishments of the Ages,” from her mother. It was one of the few books Hycymum owned, and it was filled with drawings of how to add unnecessary extras to pillows, blankets, clothing, ceilings, walls . . .

Mahrree opened the book and it naturally fell open to parchments she recently secreted there.

The family lines.

Mahrree licked her lips, glanced around again, and sat down in the chair behind Perrin’s work desk.

There were two copies of family lines. One was her mother’s, which had been first written by her great-great-grandmother Kanthi. It was her and her husband Viddrow Eno’s family lines, all the way back to the first families.

Mahrree had made a copy of it herself, back when Peto was a baby, and sighed in delight at the fading original which was now hers to keep secret and safe. Her chest bubbled with heat when she read again the names of Kanthi’s husband Viddrow Eno, and his older brother Barnos Eno who never married. Their parents were Huldah and Boskos Eno. In 200, when the Great War ended and the Guardians made their presence known, the brothers were 25 and 26 years old; Kanthi, a new bride, was 24 when she made the illegal copy of family lines and secured them away on this expensive piece of parchment her husband had brought her.

Mahrree pored over the lines of names and dates which eventually converged again three more generations back—they had been distant cousins—to see that both Kanthi and Viddrow’s first parents were . . . not Guide Hierum and his wife.

Oh, it was vain to wish they were, Mahrree knew, to hope she had a trickle of the Great Guide's blood in her. But maybe one of the other family lines, which records she didn't have, might trace back to them. Still she smiled when she saw the names of Cato and Gaia, one of the first five hundred couples. There were no last names at the beginning, and she wasn't even entirely sure which name was male or female. Yet being able to run her finger lightly over the fading ink of their names—people who knew the Creator personally—filled her with such energy and joy that she didn't dare do it too often.

Below Kanthi's hand was the sloppy but still legible writing of Livia Eno, recording her and her husband Kew's names. Mahrree was intrigued that Livia—Kanthi's daughter-in-law—continued the tradition, and Mahrree wondered if Kew knew about the record his mother and wife were secretly keeping.

Then the handwriting changed again to the flowing loopy style of their daughter, Sakal, Mahrree's grandmother. Maybe her husband Nool Uchben didn't know of this parchment either.

Then, added below, were the names of Hycymum, Cephas, and their daughter Mahrree. She was fairly certain her father knew of the family lines. He would have been most delighted to see it.

Mahrree opened the other copy, recorded in her hand and secreted away in her own recipes shortly after Peto was born. She had moved it to sit next to her mother's after Jaytsy brought her the recipes from Hycymum's house. The lines needed to be together.

Next to Mahrree's name she had added Perrin, his parents Relf and Joriana, Relf's parents Pere and Banu, Joriana's mother Centia, her sister Tabbitt and her husband Hogal Densal, then Pere's parents Ricolfus and Hagnos then . . . the line was dead. So was Joriana's.

Her own father Cephas's line went only back to his parents, and while he had known details about his ancestors' lines that he had shared with Mahrree, no other names were recorded.

But Mahrree had a suspicion. She knew of others in Edge that might be distantly related, and she suspected it was those families that fell ill. Something in their blood, likely.

But Perrin, and even Shem, had something different that preserved their families. If only more people still had recorded lines she could test her theory and might even be able to tell who else would fall ill, which certainly would have been helpful to the village doctors.

However, the fact that she still possessed those family lines—and had made family lines for her husband—was an act that a generation

ago would have been a major crime.

But now, who even remembered they had ancestors? Who still spoke about the first five hundred families, or the Creator who brought them to the world and taught them for three years before leaving them? None of it had been taught in the schools for a decade, and hardly anyone went to Holy Day services. As far as anyone remembered, the world began with the creation of Idumea. Rarely did anyone seem to recall that for six years before that, the world was guided by the Creator himself, then by the Great Guide Hierum.

The world was forgetting its roots, and Mahrree knew enough about plants that when the roots were neglected, the rest of it would die. But it seemed to be a slow, agonizing death.

Mahrree slipped the family lines back securely in the “Embellishments of the Ages,” the only book on the shelf she was sure that Perrin—nor anyone, for that matter—would never touch, and smiled sadly as she replaced it on the shelf.



“Jaytsy? What are you doing here?” Perrin turned from consulting the map of Edge on his office wall.

His daughter shut the door behind her, the weariness in her eyes obvious. “Father, the Briters have been gone for over a week now. I’m getting worried about them.” She bit her lip to keep it from shaking. “I can barely keep up on the weeding and harvesting . . . I don’t want to disappoint them . . . what if something awful happened? The farm’s so big . . .”

Perrin wrapped his arms around her. “Oh, Jayts—”

She melted into his chest and softly cried into his blue jacket. “They should have been back by now! And we have to keep the farm going, or the fort won’t have food—”

“Shhh,” he said as he stroked her dark ponytail. “Don’t fret. I received a message from Yordin at Mountseen just this morning. They’ve quarantined the entire village—no one in or out—for the next few days because the outbreak’s so bad. In fact, the message was written on paper, wrapped around a stone, then thrown at the messenger service’s door just to avoid touching anyone. The Briters are likely fine, just momentarily trapped. They should be able to leave in three days, be back to helping you in four. All

right?"

Jaytsy sniffed and wiped her face. "All right. I can keep it up for four more days."

Four days later, Perrin surprised his family again by walking into the house at midday meal, and Jaytsy felt something black appear in her belly because the expression on his face was grim.

Whatever she, Peto, and Mahrree had been chatting about was immediately forgotten because the heaviness with which he came into the room stifled all conversation.

"Jaytsy," he said somberly, "the Briters' wagon returned, about an hour ago. I just came from their farm."

She didn't know why that made him so gloomy. That was good news! "Whew," she sighed and set down her fork. "I was really beginning to worry about them, and the weeds are starting to—"

He took a step closer. "Jayts—"

She knew that look on his face. "What's wrong?" Then she knew. "Oh, no . . . did they lose their son?"

Perrin shook his head. "Jayts, I'm so sorry, but it was their son I found. It was Cambozola and Sewzi Briter who didn't make it. They arrived in Mountseen to find their son recuperating. Before they could come back, they became ill and passed away as quickly as your grandmother—"

"No!" Jaytsy's fierce whisper cut him off. "No, that's not right. They're so strong!"

Peto regarded his sister with genuine sympathy.

Mahrree put her arms around her daughter.

But Jaytsy hid her face in her hands, feeling betrayed by everything in the world. "It's not right!" came her muffled cry. "It's just not fair! Land tremors, Guarders, Moorland, the pox . . . all my grandparents are dead . . . friends, soldiers, and now the Briters . . . the Briters!" she sobbed. "Who will go next? When will it end?"

Peto looked at his plate and shifted around his food.

Perrin closed his eyes and tried not to make his own count.

Mahrree had no answer for her daughter but patted her as she held her. "Oh, my dear Jaytsy. I'm so, so sorry—"

Jaytsy pushed her chair away from the table and ran to her bedroom, slamming the door.

“Peto,” Perrin said softly, “run over to the fort. Tell them I’m taking the afternoon off. The Briters’ son is going to need a little help.”

Deckett Briter stood in the wide doorway of the barn and looked toward the house. He’d put it off going in there as long as he could. The horses were taken care of, the wagon unloaded, the cows checked on, even each of the chickens caught and inspected.

And even the colonel had been met.

His parents had told him about their first encounter with him. His father summed it up in one word, which was unusually brief for him: terrifying! But when the colonel came by an hour ago he was very friendly, *after* he realized Deckett wasn’t a thief trying to break into the house. When he picked Deckett from the ground and wiped him off, he was quite apologetic.

Deckett wasn’t sure what to say to him. He didn’t know what to say to anyone. He knew no one in Edge, and found the barn and house only because it was across from Fort Shin. He had always planned to come visit them in their new home, but . . .

He thought there was plenty of time.

Slowly Deckett trudged across the back garden to the kitchen door. He opened it but didn’t walk in. Yet he smiled briefly. Definitely his parents’ house. The yellow curtains from the Moorland house hung in the kitchen window here as well.

He stepped into the room and could almost smell his mother’s cooking, could almost hear his father scrubbing up in the wash-room. They had been here just a week before, straightening everything up before leaving to see him, never imagining he’d be the one to see the house next. But the plants withering in the windows were stark reminders that the gardeners who tended them were gone.

He pulled a chair out from the table, the one he always used, and reluctantly sat down. The emptiness of the two chairs across from him carved a long, deep gash in his chest.

A soft knock at the kitchen door startled him. “May I join you?”

Deckett jumped in his seat to see again the colonel standing in the doorway, and he quickly tried to get to his feet.

“No need, no need,” the colonel said as he walked in. “Please

don't get up. I wanted to see how you were doing.”

Deckett sat at attention, pretending he knew what that would look like. “Fine, sir.”

The colonel smiled kindly at him. “No, you're not, son. I know you're not. May I?” he gestured to the chair his father used to sit in.

Deckett considered for a moment before nodding.

The colonel pulled it out reverently. “Whose was this?”

“My father's.”

“He was a good man,” Colonel Shin said, sitting down. “Helped me make a detailed map of Moorland. He was key to our success.”

“Yes, I know. He was very proud, sir—” Deckett's voice cracked.

The colonel had the decency to not look him in the face until he could compose himself again. Then he leaned on the table. “Deckett—that's your name, right? Call me Perrin, by the way. Deckett, more than anyone else, I know what you're feeling.”

Deckett swallowed nervously. “Everyone has heard about *that* too, sir. Sorry about your parents.”

Shin's dark eyes softened even more. “I'm not here as the colonel or as anything else you may have heard about me. I'm here because I know how much you need a brother right now. Losing your parents—and suddenly—is not something you simply bounce back from. I was helped, and now I'd like to try to help you.”

Deckett could no longer look into the penetrating gaze of the colonel, and he wished there was a crumb or something on the swept-clean table for him to examine. “I appreciate that, sir. But I really don't know what to say.”

The colonel patted his hand. “I didn't spend a whole lot of time with your parents, but your father certainly was . . .” He paused, unsure of how to put it tactfully.

Deckett was used to that. “A character?”

The colonel chuckled. “Yes, that's a good way to put it. Why don't you tell me all about Cambazeela.”

“*Cambozola*.”

“Yes, *Cambazoolo*.”

After a couple of hours Jaytsy had no more tears. Exhausted, miserable, and desperate for something to do to ease her dreariness, she finally came out of her bedroom.

Her mother smiled sadly at her. “Your father’s spending the afternoon with him, thinking he can *help* the Briters’ son.” Her forehead wrinkled in concern, but she covered with another smile.

Jaytsy almost smiled back, not because she felt happy in any way, but because Peto had privately pointed out to her that some of their mother’s healing pock marks mimicked a well-known star constellation when she lifted the corners of her mouth. The Squashed Turnip, forever memorialized on their mother’s face.

“This is for the Briters’ son,” Mahrree said, putting a cloth over a large basket. “I thought it would be a good idea if we fed him for a few days. Do you feel up to taking it over? I’ve spent too much time in the sun this morning and I’d rather not go out again.”

Jaytsy numbly made her way over to the table and started to take the basket, but her mother stopped her.

“Somehow, some year, we will all see the reason for this. I promise.” Mahrree hugged her.

Jaytsy nodded, not believing a word of what her mother said, and left with the basket for the Briters’ house.

When she arrived she felt strangely unsure of what do to next. She saw the front door—one that she was sure they never had used and likely didn’t open—and headed for the kitchen door instead. As she passed the window she heard male voices talking quietly and she almost hesitated to knock.

But she did, and a moment later the door opened. Standing there was a young man, maybe twenty-one years old, with brown hair and eyes that were red with grieving.

Jaytsy couldn’t move her feet or find her voice. She wasn’t sure why she felt so bashful. Shyness wasn’t exactly a Shin family trait.

Her father appeared behind the young man. “Ah, Jaytsy. Deckett, this is my daughter Jaytsy, your parents’ Head Weeder, or whatever she’d be called.”

Deckett smiled dimly at her. “My mother mentioned you. Said you had quite the brown fingers. Please come in.”

Jaytsy nodded at the compliment and wondered if she was blushing. By the confused look on her father’s face, she knew she would have to explain the phrase referring to natural gardeners as ‘brown fingered folk’.

She walked into the kitchen and felt it immediately. Or rather, felt the *absence* immediately.

The Briters had quite the presence, and now . . . it was gone.

She glanced at the son they loved so dearly, and the expression

on his face—his not too handsome yet pleasantly rugged face, made even more so by fading pocks—told her he felt the room was a bottomless cavern.

Jaytsy glanced at her father. His eyes were red too, and she worried that she'd interrupted a reverent discussion.

"I just . . . I just came to drop this by. Food. From my mother. She's still a little tired, or she would have come herself. We're all sorry. Very." Jaytsy wondered why it was so hard for her to talk.

Deckett gave her a thankful nod without completely seeing her and set the basket on the table. "Tell her I appreciate it."

"All right, um. I suppose I'll go now." She looked at her father for direction. He nodded his goodbye. "I'll see myself out."

Deckett sat back down at the table across from her father as Jaytsy slid out the door.

She stood on the back step and took a deep breath as something in her chest burned.

Suddenly full of an indefinable energy, Jaytsy marched out to the garden, shooed away the soldier assigned for the afternoon, and started yanking weeds.

Perrin came home a little before dinner time. Jaytsy was in the washing room digging the dirt out from under her nails when she heard her parents' conversation.

"Well?" Mahrree asked.

"Nice boy," Perrin said. "Took him a while to warm up to me—"

"But you're used to that by now, aren't you?"

He chuckled sadly. "We had a good conversation. Solid young man, on the shy side though. He's going to be all right, but he needs some time. I'll try to visit him once a week, and I'll be sure to tell Yung about him. Deckett used to go to the Holy Day meetings in Mountseen, and I think Yung knows that rector."

"What's he going to do about the farm?"

"He's staying," Perrin said with some surprise. "He quit school and decided to finish out his parents' commitment for this year through the harvest."

"Really? They would be proud of him, I'm sure."

"His heart isn't in farming, but he wanted to honor his parents. He really wants to be a rancher. At the university he was helping with

experiments on improving milk and beef yield, but decided he could do some of those experiments himself.” Then Perrin chuckled. “He asked how much I knew about cattle!”

“Just don’t approach the area when he’s working with them,” Mahrree warned him. “You’ll scare them all away!”

“Well I wouldn’t want to do *that*. I already like him too much.”

In the washing room, Jaytsy’s chest burned again.

The next morning Jaytsy set out early for the Briter farm to open the irrigation canal as usual. But noticing that water was already rushing down the rows, she lifted her skirt and ran to the main canal.

He was there.

He didn’t notice her approaching, which gave Jaytsy a moment to evaluate him more fully. She decided that Deckett Briter didn’t seem like someone who’d ever spent the night raiding houses. He was a few inches taller than her, and his hair was a perfect dirt brown. While his face wasn’t as outwardly handsome as Lemuel Thorne’s, his rough features were somehow far more pleasing. His body also wasn’t as proportionately muscled as the captain’s, but his arms and chest seemed to be more than adequate for tackling cattle.

He turned and saw her, his eyes no longer red. They were . . .

Jaytsy gulped.

He smiled slightly. His face would undoubtedly be even more agreeable when the grief eased. Right now his light brown eyes still looked burdened, but a bit hopeful. “You’re here early.”

“I took care of the watering when your parents were away,” she said and took a step closer.

He stood a little taller.

She noticed. “I’m really sorry about them. I was very upset yesterday when my father told me. Your mother taught me a great deal. I guess you could say she was my best friend. And your father was always so kind.”

Deckett stared at the ground. “My mother really liked you. They both mentioned you a few times in their letters. You were the only reason my mother wasn’t terrified of your father.”

Jaytsy managed a chuckle. “My father was having a few

problems when your parents first arrived,” she explained. “They weren’t the only ones to experience him that way. There are still a few people in Edge who run to the other side of the road when they see him coming.”

“I don’t know why anyone’s afraid of him,” Deckett said, still not meeting her eyes. “He couldn’t have been any kinder than if he were my own—”

The sentence didn’t need finishing.

He squatted and inspected an ear forming on a stalk of corn. “Should be a good crop this year. Thank you for your help. With no rain lately, all of this would be wilting by now.”

“I come every day,” Jaytsy told him. “One more week and school usually starts again, but they’re postponing it for another two weeks because of all the illnesses. I’m focusing all my efforts here, so that means I should be able to get caught up in the weeding, as if one can ever get fully caught up in weeding!” For some reason she said all of that very quickly.

Deckett squinted at her, trying to catch up to what she just said. Eventually he nodded. “I’ll be helping now. Looks like you’ve been pretty busy already, so if you have something else you’d rather be doing—”

Jaytsy took another step forward. “No! Not at all! This is what I love to do, really.”

Deckett pursed his mouth as if trying to decide if she was telling the truth. “Well, then. I guess you could start wherever you planned to start this morning. I need to check on a few things, then I suppose I’ll find a patch to work on myself.”

“Should you be doing all of that work? You’ve recently been ill yourself,” Jaytsy reminded him.

He shook his head dismissively. “I’m fine. Always been a fast healer. And I need to work.”

Sensing the conversation was over, Jaytsy nodded and turned, wondering why she felt disappointed.

She didn’t see him again until about an hour before midday meal when she looked up between rows of beans to see him weaving down a row to her.

“At this rate, there’ll be nothing left for me to do.” He smiled, almost genuinely. He seemed a little lighter than before as he crouched to examine a plant, but also a bit paler as the heat of the day touched him.

“If you need to go rest and cool off a bit,” Jaytsy said, sitting back on her knees, “I’m fine here. You don’t want to dehydrate.”

He shook his head. “That wouldn’t be very polite, would it? Leaving you alone?” He watched for her response.

“I find it restful,” Jaytsy confessed. “I get a lot of thinking done in the dirt. And I don’t mind being alone.” Which, while true, was exactly the opposite of what she meant.

“Oh. Well. Then, I guess I’ll go check on the henhouse—”

“NO!” she barked.

Deckett blinked. “Something wrong with the henhouse?”

“I mean, *no*, you can stay,” she said, now more in control of her surprisingly flailing emotions. “If you don’t need to rest inside, then you can . . . rest here in the field.” That didn’t make a whole lot of sense to her, either.

“Sit and watch you weed?” Deckett shook his head. “My mother would be disappointed if I just left a young woman out here to weed by herself.” Blushing, he added, “And resting would just give me too much time to think. No, I’d rather work.”

He got down on his knees in the row next to her.

She grinned at him.

He smiled back shyly and turned to the dirt.

For the next hour they talked about Mahrree’s hatred of weeding, Sewzi’s love of gardens, cattle’s fear of Perrin, and Perrin’s fear of Cambozola. By the time they finished the second full row, Deckett had chuckled three times. Jaytsy kept count. She also noticed that Deckett was not as talkative and lively as his father, but much more pensive and careful like his mother. Fortunately.

At the end of the beans they stood up and looked at the sun.

“Midday meal. I’m ready for it,” Deckett said, arching his back to work out a kink. “Your mother packed me so much food,” he said, a bit timidly. “Would you care to join me?”

Jaytsy bit her lip. “I’m kind of expected at home for . . .” How could she turn down those sad eyes? And he was *all alone*.

Her mother wouldn’t want her to leave him recovering, grieving, and *all alone*, would she? Nor would her father, she was sure.

“Well, my family knows where I am.”

“We’ll eat on the back steps,” he suggested. “In case someone comes looking for you, they can see you.” He flashed her a bashful grin and jogged into the house, leaving Jaytsy at the beginning of the lettuces.

She took several deep breaths and tried to calm her hands that

wanted to shake. Noticing a couple of buckets by the fence along the road, which she'd used a few days ago to gather weeds in, she turned to retrieve them.

She skipped, fully aware that she hadn't skipped since she was seven, to the fence. Once there she saw an ambitious vine growing along the posts threatening to come into the row of corn. Knowing she couldn't allow that to invade the garden, she yanked on it.

That was when the shadow came over her.

"Miss Jaytsy! Out in the fields again, I see."

Jaytsy looked up to see a gray horse, and Lemuel Thorne seated on top of it. He wasn't as pocked as her mother or Deckett, but still looked pale.

Jaytsy felt again the same disappointment—tinged with the tiniest drop of guilt—that she experienced when she heard Thorne was expected to recover. She'd run into him only a couple of times since their incident in the barn, and he hadn't bothered to apologize for trying to ruin her. He certainly didn't look contrite now, either, as he beamed down at her with all the innocence of a mountain lion.

"Captain Thorne. I see that you're recovering. You shouldn't be in the sun too long, though. Not good for your skin. You should probably be heading in right now," she hinted as she stood up with the buckets in hand.

"Nothing could improve me more than seeing you." He smiled broadly, and it struck Jaytsy to be a practiced expression. "And I see you're still concerned for my welfare. That means a lot to me."

Jaytsy ran her previous sentences through her mind to see if that was really what she'd said. She wanted to be cautious with what she said next before Thorne misinterpreted it as a proposal of marriage.

She nodded once, which she assumed would be safe. "Good day, Captain," and she started toward the Briters' house.

"How's the kitten?" he called after her.

Jaytsy stopped. The burning in her chest which she'd felt earlier as she looked at Deckett had now dropped as a nauseating knot into her belly.

She sighed and turned around. "The Cat is very well, thank you. He's very . . . entertaining. Seems to have taken to my father. I'm sorry, I really must go now. And so should you."

Captain Thorne apparently heard what he was hoping to hear. He smiled, tipped his cap, and turned his horse back to the fort.

Lighter now that the shadow was gone, Jaytsy pivoted in time to

see Deckett standing at the open kitchen door. How long he had been watching the two of them, she didn't know, but he stood stiffly, watching Thorne ride off.

"No," Jaytsy whimpered. She didn't know Deckett well enough to interpret the look on his face.

His gaze shifted from the retreating figure over to Jaytsy as she ambled to the house. His eyes looked a little hard.

Jaytsy put on a real smile. "Found the water buckets! I forgot them there the other day. Sorry if you'd been looking for them."

"Is he from the fort?" Deckett nodded to the road.

"Him? Oh, yes. Every uniform is, by the way," she pointed out. "He was asking about the farm. He eats from here, you know. You better get used to the army in your life now, *sir*."

Deckett analyzed her carefully as if looking for something that remained from her talk with the officer.

Jaytsy gave him her brightest face.

He didn't see anything but her smile, so he smiled back. "Well, don't just stand there. I *order* you to get some water! *Please?*"

She grinned and saluted.

When she came home that afternoon from weeding, her mother, going over some papers at the table, looked up at her.

"Missed you at midday meal," she said, giving her daughter a deliberate look.

"Oh. Yes. Sorry about that. Deckett invited me to stay to eat. I thought it would be rude to leave him *all alone*. You sent over so much food, you see, and . . . and . . ." Jaytsy bit her lower lip, hoping she wasn't turning colors.

Mahrree smiled at her and nodded. "As long as you're safe."

Jaytsy smiled back.

"Perfectly!"

Chapter 20 ~ “Tell me about cow eyes.”

Knock-knock . . . knock-knock-knock.

Perrin dropped his quill and held his head in his hands. Couldn't Thorne be one to get the pox twice? There'd been a few cases . . .

He felt cheated as he sighed, “Come in.”

It wasn't fair that Thorne's pocks were fading so quickly. He'd still have the faint scars, but at least those added a hint of ruggedness that the captain was so severely needing.

“I just wanted you to know that I spotted your daughter working in the fields across from the fort. She looked quite well and happy.”

Not because of you, Thorne! Perrin wanted to say, but he wasn't entirely sure why Jaytsy looked happy. “Yes, I'm sure she's just fine. She enjoys farming. Seems to be her calling.”

Thorne frowned. “Calling? Farming?” he scoffed lightly. “Not Miss Jaytsy, sir. Surely not.”

Perrin leaned back in his chair. “Why not? Working the land to produce food for others—what could be more important?”

Thorne chuckled mirthlessly. “Why, lots of things! People who work in the dirt are so . . . dirty.”

“So are men whose hands get stained with blood, Thorne,” said Perrin. “But when our work's done, men are injured or dead. When farmers are done, people live. I find that exceptionally valiant.”

Thorne rolled his eyes. “But that's what uneducated people do, sir! People who can't do anything else stick things in the ground then pull them up again. There's no intelligence or science or thought needed for that. Animals do that.”

Perrin blinked. “Animals . . . *plant* . . . farms?”

Thorne gestured wildly. “In a way squirrels do, but I mean, they *use* animals—”

“So do we. We use animals in our work.”

“But we use horses! They use impotent steers to pull plows. Sir, your daughter is capable of so much more. Surely this is just a passing fancy of hers before she becomes serious about something . . . more serious.”

Perrin folded his arms across his chest. “And what should she become serious about, Captain?”

Perrin could see the answer on his lips. In fact, for just a moment it seemed he would actually break out with, “ME!”

But he didn't. His mouth worked for a few moments, trying to find the right words. “I'm . . . I'm not entirely sure, sir. Perhaps work in a dress shop?”

Now Perrin rolled his eyes. “And that's ‘serious?’ Keep that girl trapped inside, she'll go mad, Captain.” Then, heavily, he added, “Never, *never* keep her trapped.”

It took Thorne a moment to register the colonel's meaning. When he realized it was a reference to the incident in the barns, he actually had the decency to blush. “Understood, sir. I'll be leaving now, unless there was—”

“There's *nothing* else, Thorne.”

The next day Deckett was waiting at the fence when Jaytsy arrived. “I have to take care of the cattle, but I'll be back later to help. Is that all right?”

“Absolutely!” she grinned.

Jaytsy's morning fluctuated between rushing by quickly to dragging on slowly, until Deckett met her in a row to weed for a while before midday meal. As they ate together again, Jaytsy asked about his cattle experiments.

“You really don't want me to talk about that, do you? I can't imagine that'd be interesting to you.”

“All right, I'm not that interested in cows,” she confessed. “Just in what you're doing.” She turned pink.

His face flushed as he examined his hands. “I'm doing on a small scale one of the experiments we were going to try this Raining Season: finding ways to encourage cows to give more milk. We wanted to see if . . . if we talk to the cows—well, if they produce more when they feel *appreciated*,” he finally finished.

Jaytsy stifled a giggle, but not too well.

"I know, I know. My father had the same reaction. But that's why we need to test it," he explained with an embarrassed smile.

"You really like cattle, don't you?"

"You could say that. I know they're not as graceful and beautiful as horses—"

He's the very opposite of Lemuel, Jaytsy's mind wandered. The Anti-Thorne.

"—but there's such an honesty about cattle. A realness." He sighed. "I wish I could explain it. I just *feel* them. Always have." Then he chuckled. "Cow eyes," he murmured.

"Cow eyes?"

He shook his head. "Never mind."

"No, no," Jaytsy elbowed him gently. "Tell me about cow eyes."

"It's . . . it's something I would pull on my mother," he said as his pink went wholly red. "Whenever I wanted something, or was trying to avoid getting into trouble, I would give her what my father called my 'cow eyes'. Melted her every time."

Jaytsy grinned. "Show me?"

"No! You wouldn't appreciate it like she did—"

"Oh, come on. You can't tell me about cow eyes then not show me. Do cow eyes, in honor of your mother."

He squinted at her. "That's really low."

Jaytsy looked down apologetically.

"Effective," he admitted, "but low just the same."

She looked back up at him. "Show me just the same?"

He groaned in embarrassment. "For my mother. I can't believe I'm doing this." He looked down, shook out his shoulders, then lifted his head with the biggest, brownest, sweetest eyes ever.

She burst out laughing.

"Augh, I knew you'd laugh! That's what I get. I knew that was a bad idea." He turned away from her and hid his face in his knees.

"No! It was really sweet."

"Sweet? Oh, that's got to be worse . . ." He moved to get up, but Jaytsy grabbed his arm.

"No, Deck."

He stopped and looked at her hand on his arm.

She looked at it too. "I'm sorry I laughed. I just wasn't expecting . . ." She didn't finish, because she really wasn't sure what she was feeling at the moment, besides his ample arm under her fingers.

He smiled timidly at her. “We need to get back to the farm,” and he patted her hand with his free hand.

The touch was unexpected, startling, yet somehow familiar. And overwhelming.

Jaytsy had always thought it would be a soldier. Likely an officer, but not Lemuel. Maybe someone like Jon Offra, but not as tall. Or as nervous. Or as pale, or hesitant—

All right, someone not even *remotely* like Jon Offra or Lemuel Thorne, but in a uniform. Someone to argue with, like her parents *argued*. Someone to chase up the stairs . . .

Jaytsy forced away the blush that heated her cheeks.

Deckett reddened as his hand stayed on hers, which they both stared at. Their gazes traveled to each other’s faces, which turned shades of purple, and they released each other. Simultaneously and without a word they marched out to the rows of onions.

The next two weeks flew by. They talked each afternoon about everything under the sun as they pulled weeds. Life in Moorland. Life in Mountseen. Life in Edge. Life in Idumea. Life in general. Jaytsy even got him to do cow eyes for her again. And each night she fell asleep giggling at his expression and hugging her pillow.

“There are a few reasons why I like that boy,” Perrin murmured under his breath, but no one was in his office to hear him and he’d shut the door to make sure that he wasn’t disturbed.

He twisted the knobs on his spyglass a little this way, then just a little bit that way . . .

“The first reason is, his last name’s not Thorne.” Perrin tapped the shaft gently and smiled at the result. “The second reason is, he lives . . . right . . . *there*.”

Perrin pulled up a chair and made himself comfortable as he peered into the eyepiece again. “Never takes her into the house, but keeps her out in the open. Very safe. Very manly. Kneels in the dirt close enough for conversation, but not too close as to touch her.”

He twisted a knob slightly again.

“He’s subtle about his feelings for her, although, young Mr. Briter, I can read you like a book . . . from several hundred paces away that is.” He chuckled to himself. “I used to watch your

parents this way when I was a bit more paranoid,” he confessed in a whisper. “But this is a healthy paranoia, and I’m sure you’ll agree once you have a daughter—”

He sat up abruptly, the notion of who the mother of that eventual daughter might be shoving itself in his mind and causing all of his thoughts to stumble. It took him another minute to regain himself, and as he hunched over to watch the weeders in the fort’s farm he considered the prospect.

“She could do much worse,” he mumbled. “And likely . . . not a whole lot better. I never find myself twitching when I have my weekly chat with him.”

Young Mr. Briter was gathering weeds to put in a bucket, and reached past Jaytsy to retrieve what seemed to be a particularly prickly one. He shook his head as she went to pick it up. Perrin read his lips: *Don’t want you to get pricked by a thorn.*

Perrin smiled. “That makes two of us, son—”

“What in the world are you doing?”

The loud voice at the door made Perrin jump and jostle the spyglass. He sighed in exasperation. “Zenos, don’t you ever knock?”

“I did,” Shem chuckled, closing the door behind him. “But whatever captured your attention in the spyglass prevented you from hearing.”

Perrin deliberately turned the angle to point it at the boulder field.

Shem smirked. “What, are Jaytsy and Deckett Briter now heading up to the boulders?”

“That’s not what I was . . . I mean, what I was doing was—”

“If you’re at all curious, I approve of him too.”

Jaytsy was well on her way home that afternoon when she realized she’d left her hat at the Briter farm. She jogged back, picked up Joriana’s hat from the stairs that led to the kitchen, and paused. There was a strange noise coming muffled from behind the barn, but it took her only a moment to identify it. She’d heard it too often over the past year, and there was nothing quite as disconcerting as the sound of a man sobbing, especially when the man wasn’t accustomed to doing it.

Quietly she crept around the barn to see Deckett sitting on the ground, his head on his knees, quivering. He was supposed to be

setting the cheese—

Jaytsy knew what to do, having seen her mother do it many times last year. She sat down next to Deckett, who suddenly stopped. His head came up as she gingerly placed a comforting hand on his back, and he stared at her, startled.

“What are you doing back here?” he asked, wiping his nose on his sleeve and trying to appear as if nothing was wrong.

“I forgot my hat,” Jaytsy said, her eyes brimming with tears to see his still overflowing. “Deck, how often to cry back here, alone?” she asked gently.

He rested his chin on his knees. “I don’t . . . it just . . .” He sighed in surrender. “Not often.” He closed his eyes as a new batch of tears fell from them.

His shoulders heaved and Jaytsy flung her arms around him, hoping to hold him tightly enough to stop his convulsions of grief. Deckett leaned against her, resting his head against her shoulder and letting his tears seep between his fingers.

“I miss them too,” she told him. “I’m sure you loved them much more than I did, but I came to think of them as my aunt and uncle. They were so good to me, and they’ve left such a hole—” She couldn’t say anything more, but sobbed right along with him, aware that some of her tears were sliding on to the back of his head. But that didn’t matter. Nothing mattered except that Deckett didn’t mourn alone and that Jaytsy held him as tightly as she dared.

It was several minutes until their weeping subsided, and Deckett, his head still down on her shoulder, attempted a few words.

“After you left, I headed into the house and . . .” His chin trembled and he held his face with his hands. “I started to call out to my parents to tell them something . . . and I’d forgotten. I’d forgotten they were gone,” his voice quavered. “I’d been working and was happy and . . . What’s wrong with me that I forgot?!”

“You did nothing wrong,” Jaytsy told him, now rocking as she embraced his shoulders. “It’s not as if you actually forgot them being gone, because you still feel them here. They love you so much! They’d be thrilled to know you felt happy again. Deckett, I don’t think they’re really gone. I mean, they’re still around us, in so many ways.”

He shrugged against her, still keeping his face covered.

She squeezed him tighter, forgetting the fact that she’d never done more than touch his hand or arm before. Sometimes a

moment demands a closer presence, and forgives it as well.

With her own tears flowing she said, “Remember earlier today, when we both suddenly remembered the canal water was on, and we got to the onion patch just before it flooded? Deckett, as we were running I thought of your mother. She seemed so close, and maybe it was her who reminded us. They’re still your parents, and they’re still watching and helping. Paradise isn’t far away; it’s here!”

The heaving of his shoulders slowed as he listened to her.

She realized that she was stroking his hair, but it seemed important to do. “My mother lost her father when she was 15, and she told me once that she still hears him from time to time, that when something’s very important he still advises her.”

Deck roughly cleared his throat. “The calf yesterday, the one that wandered? I could have sworn it was my father telling me to check the cattle fence along the forest’s edge. That’s where I found her.”

“I think that was your father too, Deckett,” Jaytsy said, realizing that she was twisting bits of his coarse, shaggy brown hair between her fingers. She subtly slipped them out, and slid her hand back to hold his shoulder. He’d removed his hands from off of his face, and one was now resting lightly on her knee. But still he didn’t look up.

“My hat there,” she nodded to it, dropped on the ground a few feet away from them, “was my grandmother’s. When I stabbed the holes in it to make it less Idumean, I was sure I heard her giggling.”

Something in Deckett’s shoulders relaxed, collapsing him ever so slightly in her direction. She felt his breathing against her throat and she smelled his hair, realizing that his scent was, in its own unique way, a form of earthy-sweet. Mixed with cow. It took all of her effort to keep her chest calm, worried that if it burned any hotter Deckett would feel it emanating from her dress.

“I think you should keep talking to your parents,” Jaytsy said. “Go into the house and tell them what you planned to say. They’ll hear you. They’re still concerned about you and they still love you. Remember what Yung said last Holy Day? That the work of those who go to Paradise is the work of taking care of their descendants who remain here? My father, when he was very bad a few moons ago, called out for his great uncle Hogal,” she told him quietly. “Something had come into the house that night,” she whispered. “Something horrible and black, as if the night had come to life and planned to destroy us all. I hid in my bedroom, hearing my father yelling at it, and he called out for Hogal. He’d died when I was just a toddler, but

Hogal and my father had been very close. Hogal and Tabbitt were why my father came to Edge in the first place.”

She smiled sadly and unconsciously twisted a hank of Deckett’s hair again.

“Not that my father would ever confess it, but I suspect that he wasn’t the best young man. So when he was 18 he spent a season with Hogal and Tabbitt, and I think they straightening him out a bit. Hogal was also his rector here, and when my father needed him . . .” She struggled to get out the next words, “*he came*. The Creator sent Uncle Hogal. I could feel him come into the house, Deckett. Everything got brighter and safer, and my father changed for good.” Now her own chin shook too much for her to continue.

Deckett nodded awkwardly against her shoulder. “Your father’s the one who told me to cry,” he sniffled. “He said tears were fine for a man, and that the only time I should be alarmed is when I no longer feel tears for anything. Or something like that.”

Jaytsy smiled. “I know what you mean. What he means.”

Deckett sat up slowly, and Jaytsy let her hand slide down his back to release him, suddenly feeling uncomfortable. She’d never before realized how much intimacy is created when two people weep together. She suspected Deckett felt it as well, because he moved a bit away from her as he straightened up.

“Thank you,” he mumbled, not daring to look her in the face.

She didn’t look at him either. And even though she wasn’t sure precisely what he was thanking her for, she nodded.

She spied him out of the corner of her eye. “May I ask a question?”

“Sure.”

“What did you want to tell your parents when you went into the house?”

He shrugged. “Can’t remember anymore. Just one of those things that I guess I’ll struggle with for a while, learning how to live without them. I mean, the way I was used to live with them.”

Jaytsy wanted to do nothing more than throw her arms around him again, but still unsure of what to do with the familiarity they’d accidentally created, she instead just patted his hand. “They’re still here,” she whispered. “I need to go home. Will you be all right or would you like me to come back later?”

Still not looking at her, he smiled faintly. “I’ll be fine. I actually feel a lot better now. Glad you forgot your hat and had to come back.” He elbowed her gently, and it felt almost brotherly.

Something in Jaytsy's heart sank, and everything about that moment became immensely awkward. She'd been so forward, so affectionate, so *motherly*—oh, dear . . . Of course he didn't have any other way to respond except with an elbow nudge.

Jaytsy got to her feet, patted him one more time on the shoulder, and said, "See you tomorrow, Deckett," before trotting back home, wiping her face all the way.

It took Deckett several minutes before he pulled himself to his feet. After drying his face with various sleeves and shirt tails, he made his way up the back stairs to the kitchen again.

Just as he had the hour before, he opened the door and called, "Mother, Father?" He smiled tentatively at the silent house, unsure if they were indeed there but feeling a sense of peace nonetheless, so thick it was tangible.

"I just wanted to tell you something . . . I think I found her."

And he wasn't talking about the missing calf.

Jaytsy had gone home that evening sullen and worried, not because of her or Deckett's grief, but because she feared she'd crossed too many lines too quickly and she didn't know how to backtrack to where she'd left off. She decided by morning, as she headed again to the farm, that she'd say nothing of their closeness the day before.

She watched for Deckett's reaction to her when she found him opening the canal. He flashed her a smile. "Before we tackle the potato section, the peppers need harvesting again along with some tomatoes. The assistant cooks from the fort will be here before midday meal to retrieve them. They also wanted some onions, and I'll need to move the cattle to a different pasture. So where do you want to start?"

Jaytsy, in the manner that she inherited from her mother that read too much into a situation, decided that his, *Where do you want to start?* signified asking how she wanted to proceed after yesterday. Later, she realized he probably was just referring to the farm, but she felt safe in saying, "What do *you* think we should do first?"

He shrugged as he turned the spigot to adjust the water flow. "Tomatoes, then peppers and onions. Everything else later."

She mulled that *Everything else later* for hours, sure that he intended a double meaning although she wasn't entirely sure what *everything else* referred to, and when *later* might be.

For the next few weeks they labored side by side, never mentioning the afternoon when they sobbed together, never becoming more intimate than an elbow bump or a hand brush. They weeded and watered and harvested until all too soon there were only two days before school began again and the farm was as finished as it could be.

Much to Jaytsy's displeasure.

Deckett seemed disappointed as well as they stood up before midday meal and looked at the perfectly thinned and weeded rows extending all the way to the northernmost canal before the forest.

"Good work," he said with strained brightness. "I guess . . . there's nothing left for you to do here now that the crops are taking over most of the dirt. It'll take me only an hour or so to pull what the fort wants each day. Then again, in another week there should be some more weeds again. Those will take a couple of hours' work."

"There's the full harvest!" Jaytsy reminded him. "That will take *weeks!*"

"Not for another moon or so," he said dully.

"We could have an early midday meal together," Jaytsy suggested.

"We could."

But even though they ate slowly, too soon that was over as well. Jaytsy stood uncomfortably on the back door steps with him knowing it was time to leave. But because she didn't know when she'd be back, she desperately tried to think of some way to still see—

"Dinner!"

"What?"

"You should come to dinner tonight. My mother's been saying she wanted to invite you over. I guess she talked to you after the congregational meeting last Holy Day and heard some of the things you were making for yourself."

Deckett chuckled softly. "Mothers always think you need something more than meat and potatoes." His chuckle fell away and his face contorted in sorrow which he tried to hide by kicking at some gravel by his feet.

It was the first time in weeks Jaytsy had seen that level of grief in him, and her arms actually rose up in a desire to hug him, but she forced them down. They were in full sight of the main road, after all, and a group of soldiers walked by just a few dozen paces away on their way to patrol the village.

But Jaytsy felt safe in gripping Deckett's arm. "Please join us tonight?"

He looked up hesitantly, quickly wiping his nose with his sleeve. "Only if it's all right with your mother."

"Oh, it will be! I'm sure," she assured him, holding his bicep firmly and not wanting to let it go. "My father missed chatting with you last week and I know he wanted to see you again."

"He's very . . . diligent," Deckett said. Nervously, she noticed.

"Is that all right?"

"Oh, absolutely," he said, a bit more easily. "It's just that sometimes I get the feeling that he's . . . watching me."

Jaytsy giggled. "He does, but don't worry about him. I think he actually likes you!"

Deckett's shoulders relaxed. "And that's good, right?"

"Oh, yes!"

"Jayts," Perrin murmured, "how long are you going to hold on to his arm? He's going to need it back sometime."

He loosened the bolt on the spyglass, realizing that they were about to walk again.

"Farm looks great, guess that means this is the end to weeding for a while? Oh dear . . . maybe she's hoping . . . Deckett, you're right in full view of the main fort road, you know. And me, but we won't get into that. So if you're going to kiss her, then at least make some pretense for taking her to the barn or something . . . Wait. She's leaving. And . . . she doesn't look too happy about that . . . No, wait, she's smiling. I don't get it."

He readjusted the glass. "And Deckett, you're just watching her . . . watching her walk away . . . and . . . suddenly you look nervous. And now you're looking . . . up here!"

Perrin sat back quickly, almost embarrassed.

"You can't see into the windows from where you are. I know—I've checked." He sighted in the young farmer again. Deckett was

still gazing at the fort tower but now massaging his hands anxiously. He clapped them once as if coming to some kind of conclusion and turned to go to the barn.

Perrin sat up again, thoughtful. "I think it's time we had you over for dinner."

"We really shouldn't be doing this," Mahrree murmured later that evening as she and Perrin stood in the kitchen. "I feel guilty, spying like this."

"It's not spying," he whispered back. "Our daughter is on the porch talking to a young man, and we need to make sure everything is . . . fine."

"But they've been saying goodbye for the past 15 minutes, and it's growing quite dark and I think they know we're here—"

"No, they don't," said Perrin confidently.

But Mahrree didn't believe him, and she suspected he was hoping to see something happen.

Deckett had come over for dinner, a bit warily, and had spent the last three hours growing more at ease and less anxious as the evening wore on. He laughed uproariously at Peto, who he clearly thought was the funniest teenager alive—which irked Jaytsy but thoroughly won over Peto. He listened attentively to Perrin's description of the attack of Moorland, commenting occasionally about the structures he remembered, and frequently watched Jaytsy with what Mahrree was sure was bashful adoration.

She couldn't have approved more heartily, especially when Deckett grew teary-eyed that her biscuits tasted just like his mother's had.

And now Jaytsy stood at the back porch door talking with Deckett who held the door open as he stood halfway out of it. They kept finding "Oh-remembers," and "I-forgot-to-tell-you," punctuated with Jaytsy's giggles and Deckett's deeper chuckles.

Perrin kept edging closer to the kitchen door that was open a crack, allowing them glimpses of their daughter and her *friend* on the porch, but Mahrree nudged him backward into the shadows that hid them well.

"I can't hear what he's saying," Perrin murmured in her ear.

"We're not supposed to be hearing. We're just watching," she

whispered back.

“That’s not good enough.”

“They’ll hear you. Be quiet!”

“Just one step closer. It’s darker now. They won’t notice.”

Mahrree sighed and let him noiselessly closer. He really was very good at that, she had to admit. She leaned forward to look at his face in the growing dark, and he was smiling.

“Cows!” he whispered and shook his head.

Mahrree snuck up to him, almost as noiselessly, to listen in.

“I suppose you *could* help,” Deckett was saying. “I hadn’t considered using a female voice.”

“It would be perfect!” Jaytsy squealed. “Divide the cows into three groups. One group hears no voice, the other a man’s voice, the other a woman’s voice.”

Mahrree wondered briefly who the “woman’s voice” would belong to, then winced to realize her daughter was *the woman*.

“I like it,” Deckett said and chuckled. “What if we did an experiment where we said only angry things to the cows, then another where we said only sweet things?”

“Sweet talk a cow?” Jaytsy asked dubiously.

“It’s not as uncommon as you might think. Life for a rancher gets pretty lonely, Jays.”

She giggled.

Perrin groaned quietly.

Mahrree jabbed him in the ribs. “That was funny! Not sappy at all,” she whispered to her husband.

“Please tell me we were never that awkward,” he murmured.

“They’re not awkward. And we were far worse. Don’t you remember, Mr. Icouldloveawomanlikeyou?”

His shoulders shook in a silent laugh as he remembered his first profession of love for her. “But I’ve never kissed a man before!” he whispered, mimicking her panic when he first tried to kiss her.

She clutched his arm and stifled a snort in his shirt sleeve.

“How often would you need me to come by?” they heard Jaytsy ask Deckett.

“Oh, every day after school. Take Holy Day off. We could have your brother come, too. He’s really funny.”

Jaytsy must have been rolling her eyes.

“He could record the results,” Deckett added.

Jaytsy sighed.

“Oh, I *like* this boy!” Perrin whispered to his wife. “Good young man, building in a chaperone.”

“What will we do when the experiments are done?” Jaytsy asked.

“There are always more,” Deckett assured her. “We could try to test why cattle run from your father.”

Jaytsy laughed. “I think it’s because his favorite food is steak. They must see it in his eyes or something.”

“See? We could keep busy until Planting Season comes again next year.”

“So you *are* staying?”

“Where else would I go?”

“Last week you mentioned going back to the university.”

“Oh. Yes. Actually, I seem to have forgotten about that. I could always go the next year I suppose . . .”

“Or you could always just stay here.” Jaytsy leaned further out of the open door.

Deckett took a hesitant step closer. “I could.”

“Because Deck, I don’t know what I’d do if you left,” she whispered, and several paces behind her parents leaned ludicrously to eavesdrop.

“Well Jayts, I don’t know where I’d rather be.”

Mahrree realized she was holding her breath with anticipation for what might come next.

Until she was overwhelmed with guilt.

She stepped back quickly and pulled her husband along.

“Hey!” he snarled in a whisper as she dragged him into the eating room. “What are you doing? I think he was just about to ki—”

“We shouldn’t be spying.”

“I’m her father, I’m *supposed* to be! And it’s not spying!”

Mahrree gave him a stinging look.

Perrin gave it back.

“Think back,” she told him. “Remember how everyone watched us? Remember that last debate? Someone said they’d never had so much fun watching a courtship?”

Perrin’s eyes began to soften, reluctantly. “Yes,” he finally sighed. “But Jaytsy and Deckett didn’t know we were there.”

She squeezed his arm. “I really like him, Perrin. He’s so good for her—I feel it. Jaytsy’s been so happy these past weeks, and she glows when she talks about him. There’s definitely affection between them.”

“But is the affection born out of the shared grief of missing the Briters?” Perrin said. “So when the grief subsides, so does the attachment?”

“I’ve wondered that myself,” Mahrree admitted. “But I don’t think so. They work side by side every day. They’re now managing the entire farm and dairy all by themselves. Obviously they work very well together, which suggests to me an even better chance of them *staying* together.” Something inside of Mahrree grew hot and anxious realizing that maybe—just maybe—this was *it*.

“So he’s grown fond of her because of the way she picks peas.” Perrin raised one eyebrow dubiously.

“Better than the reason for which I grew fond of you—arguing with me.”

He bobbed his head. “But she’s still so young, Mahrree.”

“I know, but only in body,” she assured him. “In mind she’s matured at least a decade since the land tremor.”

“True,” he murmured.

“Perrin, I didn’t think something like would happen for another few years yet, but he’s such a good man. And I don’t want us, or anyone, to mess anything up for them. Even if it means that you back off a bit.”

He nodded grudgingly. “I will . . . stop spying. As much.”

When they heard Jaytsy come through the kitchen to the gathering room, they turned expectantly to her.

“What?” she asked, her eyes darting between the two of them as if worried they may have witnessed something that she didn’t want them to see. There was a slight blush to her cheeks that Mahrree was sure was also on her face after Captain Perrin Shin smashed that first clumsy kiss on her mouth.

“Nothing! Nothing,” Mahrree assured her, unable to keep the corners of her mouth from lifting into a smirk. “So he’s headed home, then?” Her voice was unnaturally high.

Jaytsy smiled back and blushed deeper.

Yep, Mahrree thought. First kiss. She glanced at Perrin who, judging by the slight furrowing of his eyebrows, was looking for evidence of one as well, but wasn’t seeing it yet. Mahrree would fill him in later. Maybe.

“Yes, he’s on his way home,” Jaytsy said, admirably in control of her voice, but not her flushed cheeks. “Thank you for letting him come over. He gets lonely there.”

“He’s welcome here any time, Jayts,” Perrin said. “I like him.”

Whatever resolve Jaytsy had acquired before she faced her parents dissolved at her father’s words. She broke out into a huge grin, glanced at her mother with a look of something like triumph, and rushed to her father and kissed him on the cheek. “Thank you!”

When she ran to her bedroom, Perrin turned to Mahrree. “What was *that* all about?”

Mahrree eyes were wet. She knew exactly what Jaytsy was thinking: whomever her father liked, she was free to love.

“When this is all over, I’ll tell you, Perrin. I don’t want you to mess anything up.”

“So, I was wondering, sirrr,” Radan said to Thorne, “do you think your mother might mention me to your father or grandfather?”

They were walking across the compound before midday meal when Radan blurted the question that made Thorne scowl.

“Because I did do quite a bit for her while she was here. Took her to the market many times, walked her past the Shins’ home—she didn’t believe me that they lived in something so dumpy—and acted as her personal servant for two weeks. Perhaps she may remember me fondly to the generals?”

Thorne sneered. “Why in the world would they care?”

“Because sirrr, you’ve said I should make my name known to those who have influence. There’s no family with more influence than the Cushes and Thornes. Not even the Shins, now. I was . . . I was trying to follow your advice, sirrr,” he finished pathetically.

Thorne sniggered to himself that Radan wasn’t clever enough to not tell the officers he was trying to manipulate what he was doing. That’s when he spied her, walking briskly to the command tower with a pair of boots in her hand. The colonel must have been planning another race and forgot his running boots at home.

He cleared his throat loudly, and Jaytsy Shin stumbled in her gait. She glanced at Lemuel who tipped his cap roguishly to her. She briefly nodded back, never acknowledging Radan, and broke into a jog to the open doors of the command tower.

Thorne chuckled.

“Sirrr,” Radan cleared his throat, “I don’t know why bother.

She's clearly not interested. You could have anyone else."

"Of course I could," Thorne said. "But obviously you don't get it: she's *his* daughter, Radan."

"But she doesn't really seem your type—"

"All girls are the same 'type.' She'll come around soon enough and be mine by . . . The Dinner, next year."

"Really," Radan said, sounding unconvinced. "So why her?"

"There's no other girl with her bloodlines. Imagine: the Shin line mixed with the Thorne and Cush lines? Our son will be the greatest general the world ever saw, under my tutelage."

"So . . ." Radan said hesitantly, "it's only her *blood* you want. Her ability to give you a boy."

"What else is there to want in a girl?"

"I've often wondered that myself," Radan murmured.

"What was that?"

"Nothing, sirrr. Nothing." But Radan wore an enigmatic smile.

Thorne shrugged at it. "She'll present me with the most remarkable son," he said confidently. "Maybe even two. Could always use a spare."

"Oh, no you don't!" Perrin shouted, trying to catch his breath. For once, Jon Offra was faster.

The lieutenant didn't expel any unnecessary energy as he raced past the fort, but he couldn't suppress his grin. He'd finally understood what the colonel had been trying to teach him about lengthening his stride and matching his breathing to his pace. While he was only three paces ahead of his commander, it felt like miles.

"You can't keep it up, Jon!" Shin panted, seemingly right behind his ear.

That sent a chill down the lieutenant's back, but the good kind that kicked up one's speed that extra notch.

Four paces ahead. Now five. They sprinted past the barns and beyond the fort, out toward the canals in the east. The race would be decided by whomever leaped across the canal first, stopping before they hit the slope down to the thick marshes that extended for miles to the sea.

Neither man noticed the audience of several dozen soldiers at the fort, shouting encouragement and cheering to see the thin lieutenant,

who'd bulked up over the past season, finally outpacing their commander. The men flew by so quickly no sounds reached them.

Captain Thorne's glare didn't reach them either. His shoulders tensed, his eye twitched, and he folded his arms in defiance as he watched the race that occurred several times a week now.

But neither of the men, with sweat streaming down their faces, thought for one moment about Captain Thorne. All they saw was the blur in the distance that would soon be the canal. Clearing it accurately would be even more important right now since it was full and running swift.

Offra saw the distant goal and felt his chest swell with pride. Then his chest began to tighten, as if ready to split his flesh. The colonel was right; he couldn't keep up the pace. Every muscle suddenly protested his speed—

The colonel's panting was right next to him. Not bothering to waste any energy gloating, Shin raced alongside, his eyes focused solely on the end in front of them.

Offra flagged, a cramp developing, and he fell back—

"Oh, no you don't!" the colonel shouted for the second time. "Stay with me, Jon! Look beyond the goal. Run to the marshes. Stay with me, son!"

Offra didn't expect his eyes to fill suddenly with salty water. He thought maybe it was sweat dripping into his eyes, but a stinging around his tear ducts told him otherwise.

The colonel had called him "son."

No one had ever called him "son." Not even his father before he died when Jon was twelve.

"Stay with me!" the colonel gasped, somehow finding the strength to turn his gait into a sprint for the last one hundred paces.

Jon wasn't about to let him finish the race alone. Ignoring the pain and cramps, he pushed until he found himself matching the colonel's pace.

"Yes!" he gasped in surprised joy.

It didn't last.

"Noooo!" Both men cried as they reached the edge of the canal—

It took the officers about fifteen seconds to realize that they were flailing chest deep in cold water.

"Did it suddenly get wider?" Shin gasped, wiping his face and grabbing an exposed root along the bank side to keep upright in the current. "I'm sure it got wider!"

Offra shook his head and shivered. When he looked downstream for a way to climb out, he groaned. “There, sir. *That’s* where we usually jump the canal! The narrower section.”

To his surprise, the colonel laughed. “It is! How’d we miss it?”

Offra dared to smile back. “I guess I was so focused on beating you, I just . . .” he shrugged.

“So which of us won?”

Offra shrugged again.

“Judging by the splash—” An unexpected voice carried over to them, belonging to Sergeant Major Zenos who was accompanied by ten new recruits all on horseback, and all of them sniggering.

“—I would say it was a fair tie. So, am I to expect swimming on the next Strongest Soldier Race?” He was uncoiling a length of rope from his saddle, readying to toss it to the two wet officers.

Colonel Shin glared good-naturedly as he caught the rope and automatically handed it over to Offra. “Just get us out, Zenos!”

Ten minutes later the two drenched men, grinning sheepishly, slogged back into the compound of the fort to a variety of stares and snickers from soldiers trying not to show disrespect.

But Captain Thorne was appalled. “Sir! What happened? Offra, what’d you do to the colonel?” He stood in front of the command tower doors, his hands on his waist.

The colonel laughed lightly and put a hand on Offra’s shoulder. “Relax, Captain. We did this to ourselves. Just missed the mark. Quite refreshing, actually. Offra, go change and get back up to the tower. Captain, don’t you have something you should be doing?”

Thorne knew all kinds of things he should be doing; firstly, he would have made sure the colonel wasn’t shamed and humiliated in front of his men.

But all he said was, “I’m doing all I can to serve you, sir.”

He didn’t understand the scowl of the colonel. Even though he’d sidled as much as he could to be under his wing, there was so much about Perrin Shin he just didn’t get. But he would, when he was his son-in-law. And then he’d get the rest of the world.

But for now, he headed to the barracks for a surprise inspection, fuming. Why did Shin bother with Offra? That insignificant—

Thorne stopped dead in his tracks, a most revolting thought

occurring to him as he remembered the words of his mother: Jaytsy will feel obliged to love the man her father most approves of.

Thorne clenched his fist.

It was Offra!

He was trying to impress the colonel to get to his daughter! But Offra was so hopelessly incompetent, so completely wrong for Jaytsy. He had no army heritage, no family—weren't his parents dead?—and no ability to become more than a second-rate officer.

Lemuel turned to the officer's quarters and noticed the door to Offra's room had just shut. Thorne pounded on the door.

"Yes?" he heard Offra's muffled voice. "Enter?"

Thorne opened the door and did his best to smile.

Offra squinted nervously, stopping in mid-motion to remove his white undershirt.

"Just seeing if you need any assistance, Offra?"

"To change my clothes?"

Lemuel realized it sounded stupid too. "I wanted to apologize to you for snapping out there. I was just surprised."

Offra's eyes grew bigger. "That's quite all right, sir. No offense taken." He pulled off the wet shirt and dropped it on the ground. "Good thing my washing was finished yesterday," he chuckled tensely. "Everything should dry soon in this heat." He looked at Thorne to see if he was going to watch him remove his trousers.

"I, uh, was just wondering . . ." Thorne tried to find the best way to bring it up, "how often you and the colonel run?"

Offra sat on his bed to pull off his boots. They made a squishing sound as he yanked one off, and water poured out on the wooden floor. Offra smiled uncomfortably at it. "Several times a week, sir. Long run once a week."

Thorne nodded slowly, shifting his own boot slightly to keep it from the growing puddle on the ground. "And do you ever run by the colonel's house?"

Offra shrugged as he removed the other sloshing boot. "I suppose we do. We run past every house in Edge."

Thorne stepped back to avoid being touched by the new splash of water. "So you're familiar with the colonel's home, then?"

Offra sighed. "Sure," he said. "Captain, I'm not sure where this is going—"

"You really don't, do you?" Thorne squinted. "Let's keep it that way."

And he walked out of the room, leaving a baffled Offra.

Chapter 21 ~ “It was an ambush! Look at us!”

A week later Colonel Shin stood in front of his soldiers gathered in the training arena. There was another duty ahead of them, not as deadly as Moorland to be sure, but fearsome in its own way.

“Men,” he announced loudly, as if he needed to draw their attention even though they were already watching him intently.

Captain Thorne had told them there was yet another difficult task, and that had all of the soldiers wondering. Since the Guardians had been wiped out several moons ago, the world had been silent . . . except for the trouble caused by many teenagers who seemingly had nothing else to do since they had no Guardians to steal for anymore. So for some reason roving bands of boys had found it entertaining to scatter livestock and spend their nights removing wheels off of wagons. Fortunately the same boys were also stupid, and left those wagon wheels on the front doorsteps of girls they liked so it was relatively easy for Mahrree, Peto, and Jaytsy to suggest to Perrin who was at fault based on who they had heard was trying to impress someone else. As a result, Perrin now had a list of teenage boys who needed some rehabilitation.

That’s where the soldiers came in.

“As you know,” he said as he slowly paced in front of them, “we still have a problem with the youth of Edge. We also have a problem with the fact that many Edgers passed away this year because of the pox. And we have an additional issue that many of them planted gardens and crops intended to fill our storehouses, which gardens and crops are now *not* being tended to.”

Perrin noticed his soldiers squirming, worried that he was about to recruit them to be farmers.

“Soldiers, not only does Edge have this situation, but the entire world. The Administrator of Security has embraced this plan of every village in the world raising extra to store against difficult years.”

He didn’t go on to tell them that the document so thoroughly created by Lieutenant Offra explaining the idea and sent to Giyak, on Perrin’s recommendation, was accepted by Idumea but not acknowledged. Instead, the initiative for storehouses came solely from Giyak’s office.

When Perrin broke the news to Offra, who was likely hoping for a promotion for his work—as if anyone would be allowed in Fort Shin to be promoted to the same level of Thorne—the modest lieutenant merely nodded that it was all right.

But Perrin had told him a few weeks ago, “It’s more than all right, Jon. What we’ve established here is an excellent idea. But now that Idumea has its hands on it, they’ll mess it up somehow—mark my words. And when they do, the blame will go straight back to Giyak and the Administrators, not to us here at Edge.”

Offra had smiled at that, and he was smiling again now at the back of the training arena because he knew what was coming next.

“So men, while Idumea has recently sent me a decree that we are to demand that the citizens help with the care of the extra plantings—”

Actually, Idumea was demanding forced labor—at point of sword, if necessary—to take care of the crops.

Perrin’s gaze fell upon Lieutenant Offra again who, for once, wasn’t trying to look shorter than he was. He was beaming back at Perrin because when he read the report from Idumea, he recognized the wisdom of his commander.

“Sir!” he had exclaimed, “you’re right! Can you imagine if we had taken all the credit for the idea? Right now we’d be having to take all the blame, too, for people being forced to weed and harvest. But sir, how did you know?”

“Seriously, Jon? You thought the government would do this *right*? Tell me the last thing they did really right.”

When Offra didn’t have a ready answer, Perrin pointed at him. “Remember this moment when you first realized that the government can’t properly take care of people. In fact, that’s never been their responsibility. They’re supposed to keep our borders safe so that we can live as we wish. It’s our responsibility—yours and mine and Zenos’s and everyone else’s—to take care of each other.”

To that, Offra fired off the snappiest salute Perrin had ever seen. He looked like he was about to do it again, too, as Perrin continued his speech to the soldiers.

“Men, I don’t want you forcing the good and law-abiding citizens of Edge into taking care of their neighbor’s storehouse crops. Instead, Offra and I have developed one plan to solve all problems: we have a number of teenage boys with too much time on their hands. Starting this afternoon we’re taking those boys and we will let *them* do a bit of weeding and harvesting and working for the village.”

Perrin hadn’t expected his soldiers to laugh and cheer, and he watched Offra as the reticent soldier guffawed at the enthusiastic response. Lieutenant Radan was also smiling, but as Perrin’s gaze traveled to the side of the room to Captain Thorne, he was scowling.

When Perrin told him of the plan yesterday, the captain was completely astonished.

“But . . . but this is not an approved method of using the soldiers, sir!” It was rare nowadays that Thorne countered Perrin, too eager to try to stay on his good side. But every now and then the books he had so dutifully memorized burbled out of him.

“Aren’t we supposed to be keeping the village secure?” Perrin had reminded him.

“Well, yes, sir, but—”

“And don’t the teenagers of Edge pose a security threat?”

“Well, naturally, but—”

“And isn’t filling our storehouses another security concern?”

“Well, there’s a case to be made that—”

“And how many more ‘wells’ do you plan to dig, Captain?”

That threw Thorne completely off course, allowing Perrin to walk away from him before the captain could protest.

When the soldiers quieted their cheering, Perrin continued. “Men, Offra has a chart prepared and posted, and there you will see what supervising duties you have over the next couple of weeks. You will go out in force accompanying our bored little boys, surrounding them in the fields, and making sure they do their duty for once. Captain Thorne will lead the first group today, and thirty of you will assist him. I promise that all of you will have an opportunity to sun yourselves as you *guard* our laborers. Dismissed!”

Mahrree normally wasn't one for sneaking around, but so curious to see if Perrin could really get some of her students to work, she made an exception. About the time she knew Captain Thorne would be leading out a group of twenty of Edge's youth to a large garden on the west side, Mahrree slipped out of her house and followed from a safe distance.

She noticed that the soldiers seemed to enjoy their task of keeping the boys paired up and marching in parade behind Thorne, but Mahrree could hear the annoyance of the captain when he ordered the boys to get down on their knees among the plants.

Mahrree slipped behind a large bush next to the now-empty house to which the garden was attached and settled in for the show.

As the soldiers formed a perimeter around the field where the teenagers reluctantly placed themselves, Thorne began pacing and shooting menacing glares while a sergeant explained which green things were vegetables and which green things were weeds that needed extracting.

With rapt fascination Mahrree watched as the boys reluctantly began to pull out weeds and toss them any which way. A few times some began to complain loudly, until Thorne marched over and shouted in their ears that it was this or incarceration. Mahrree didn't think his strong-armed approach was *entirely* what her husband was expecting when he wanted the boys "rehabilitated."

There's discipline, Mahrree knew, and then there's abuse. The first works while the second never does. And some people, like Lemuel Thorne, had no idea there was even a difference.

Mahrree began to notice something. She was too far away to see clearly, but it was obvious to her that the boys were sending some kind of silent messages, probably a system they worked out when they were still employed by the Guarders.

Mahrree bit her lip in anticipation, sure that the boys were thick in planning with their subtle gestures. But Thorne was too busy practicing an elongated stride that looked as if he was avoiding stepping into manure to notice.

Mahrree wondered how she could send Thorne a warning, but then—

One boy coughed.

At that, each young man yanked tomatoes off the vines they were

weeding and pelted the soldiers with red, orange, and green projectiles. Mahrree knew she shouldn't laugh, but she couldn't help it once she realized the main target was Captain Thorne. She covered her mouth and collapsed in a fit of shaking behind the shrub.

But it wasn't as if anyone would have heard her; the soldiers exclaimed so loudly nothing else could be heard, except for the gleeful laughter of the boys as they fled in every direction. Two rushed so closely past Mahrree that they nearly tripped over her boots which stuck out a bit.

By the time Mahrree composed herself enough to peer out from behind the bush not a single teenager remained. Behind her, the sound of a horse trotting to the scene caused her to cower even further behind the bush, especially when she heard the booming voice.

“Captain! Exactly what just happened here?”

“Colonel Shin!” Thorne panted, shocked, angry, and now a bit panicked as an orange smudge dribbled down his face. “Sir, they surprised us! It was an ambush! Look at us!”

Mahrree kept her hand firmly over her mouth as she heard, “Oh, I *see* you all right. All of you. Please, do tell me,” Perrin said in his most condescending tone, “what mortal threat is there associated with lobbed tomatoes? What terror of vegetables is there that would cause each of these men to NOT pursue their responsibilities?”

Thorne's mouth worked up and down lamely, searching for a response. The soldiers looked at each other sheepishly, realizing not one of them had chased the teenagers.

Mahrree could barely contain her snorting.

“We . . . we . . .” Thorne stammered, “Look at our uniforms! They all need to be cleaned now!”

Perrin rolled his eyes. “Oh, they're *vegetables*, Captain! And you not only let the work force escape but you also allowed them to destroy a few bushelfuls that someday we may desperately need. Now, there should not be a single one of you standing here, but you should all be **RUNNING IN PURSUIT!**”

No one can stay standing when Colonel Shin used that tone and volume. Captain Thorne actually jumped as he took off in a mad dash in a direction he hoped some teenager had run. Even Mahrree felt the need to hop up and help, but she stayed as small as she could behind the shrub as the soldiers sprinted away.

Perrin sat alone on his horse quietly grumbling at the empty

garden until he said, "You can come out now. Mahrree?"

Stunned, Mahrree slipped out from behind the shrub. "How did you know I was there?"

"I can feel you in the air," he waved vaguely. "Well? How did your students do?"

"Quite well," she said with perfect sobriety. "One hit Thorne squarely in the face with a tomato. Excellent aim."

They both glanced around to make sure no one was around, then they snorted in laughter.

"We're terrible!" Mahrree exclaimed as she wiped away a tear. "We shouldn't be laughing."

"He deserved it, I'm sure!" Perrin said. "If I were an artist, tonight I would draw his expression complete with the tomato sliding into his ear."

"Oh, stop it!" she chuckled, although mentally she pictured the drawing of the pathetic captain hanging in a prominent spot in Perrin's office at home where he could admire it. "Don't you need to be finding some lost boys?"

He shrugged. "I know where they hide in the marshes—down the slope a ways from the canal—so I'll just swing by there in an hour with a fresh pack of soldiers who aren't afraid of tomatoes. In the meantime, do you want a ride back home?"

Mahrree eyed his horse for the day, a white stallion who was clearly suffering from the heat. "I don't think that poor animal deserves any more weight. He's already . . . foamy."

Perrin sighed. "Frothing. Yes. The sergeant in charge of the stables thought he'd be a good match for me, but he looks stronger than he is. Maybe it's the weather."

"Maybe you should be giving *him* a ride back to the fort. I'm fine walking."

"You realize you've never ridden with me?"

"There's a reason for that!" she declared. "Why would I want to get up on an animal like that? Well, *that* one doesn't look too dangerous. More like a melting snow bank right now. But in general, why?" She looked up at him flirtatiously as she headed for home.

He swung his horse around to accompany her. "Oh, come on. Every female dreams of being rescued by a dashing officer on horseback. Doesn't she?"

"And what would you be rescuing me from? And on that?"

"Someday, though, you'll want to ride with me."

“That will be a very unusual day, I promise!”

“All right then. Guess I getter go round up some ridiculous young men and see if they found our lost boys yet.”

He’d tipped his cap formally to her and kicked his heels into the weary animal. Mahrree grinned as she watched him growing smaller in the distance, eventually sighing to herself in delight.

A week later she thought about him again, riding off on that dissolving horse, and sighed in pleasure.

Then again, it was so easy to get lost in an afternoon daydream when she had a pile of papers to grade. School had started again, and it was clear that her students were as distracted in their writing as she was in her grading it.

But, tragically, there were fewer students this year. Three boys had died due to the pox, along with their families.

Indeed, the final tally of dead was staggering. Over ten percent of the population throughout the world—just like in Edge—and twenty percent in some villages, had succumbed. And every fort needed to recruit more men to fill the ranks of those who died.

Perrin confided to Mahrree last night that he wasn’t entirely sure why, though. “There’s still no evidence of a Guarder presence. We can at least *shrink* the size of the army safely, and that would also reduce taxes and put more silver back into the world’s pockets. That would be the humane thing to do right now.”

“But Perrin,” Mahrree said, “since when are the Administrators interested in returning anything back to the world?”

He grunted. “Of course. Why relinquish so great a hold? Remember when they first put commanders in ultimate control over the villages? It was supposed to be a temporary measure.”

“Well,” Mahrree began philosophically, “that was about fourteen years ago now, and since the world has been in existence for 336 years, I suppose fourteen years *is* relatively temporary—”

He squinted at her. “With that kind of reasoning, you could be an Administrator, you know that?”

Her mouth dropped open in feigned horror. “I think that’s the most awful thing you’ve ever said to me!”

Mahrree chuckled again at that conversation and looked down at the penmanship that appeared more like weevil trails on the

page.

“Ugh,” she pulled a face. “Even with an extra long Weeding Season break I still can’t bring myself to correct this! Not as if any of those boys did their share of the work.”

Well, a couple finally had. Instead of Captain Thorne leading out the workers, it was Shem and Lieutenant Offra who, while they both maintained a firm hand with the boys, also knew enough to make the weeding into a competition. Rehabilitation didn’t have to mean drudgery, after all. Another week or so, the farms would all be taken care of and the boys would have paid off their debt to society.

And, not coincidentally, most of the trouble makers had been working so hard during the days that they were simply too tired at night to make any more trouble.

She stared again at the scrawled pages before her trying to rehabilitate the fragmented sentences, and was struck by a thought.

“Wait a minute—everything’s back to normal!” she marveled out loud. “When did that happen?”

Yes, everything was blessedly, boringly normal for the first time in a year and a half.

“I don’t believe it!” she laughed.

The kitchen door slammed shut. “Don’t believe what?” Perrin called as he came into the eating room and looked down at her work. “Someone wrote a good paper? Well, obviously not that one, Or . . . no, no that one, either. Did a muddy worm crawl across that paper, or is that supposed to be someone’s handwriting?”

Mahrree chuckled. “I was just realizing that everything has gone back to normal, and I simply couldn’t believe it.”

“It’s *almost* normal,” he said with a familiar glint in his eye. He took off his cap and bent down to kiss her—

But a sudden knocking at the front door stopped their kiss.

Perrin groaned, kissed her quickly anyway, and headed to the front door. When he opened it he faced the chief of enforcement.

Mahrree still wondered how the young man, barely thirty, earned that appointment. Physically, he wasn’t anything intimidating. While of average height, his body was on the floppy, rather jiggly side. Nor did he come across as anything confident, as the vigorous massaging of his felt hat demonstrated. It likely wouldn’t fit properly by the time he left. And he wasn’t exceptionally bright, either. While not one of her past students, Mahrree knew him in school and was struck by the fact that he always seemed to be about two steps behind everyone

else, in comprehension, in awareness, even in walking. However, he performed better than average on the Administrators' tests, and somehow getting the right numbers counteracted the logic that he wasn't up to the job.

He did know, nevertheless, how to find the colonel so there were points in his favor.

"Colonel, sorry to interrupt you at home, but I saw that you were returning, so that perhaps this would be a—"

"Come on in, Barnie," Perrin said patiently.

Mahrree hid her smirk. The poor man dithered even more than Beneff had. And he seemed to be the worst around Colonel Shin.

Chief Barnie waved awkwardly over at Mahrree as he came in to the gathering room.

"Colonel, I need some advice," he said as he sat down on the edge of the sofa. He slapped his hands together worriedly, crushing his hat. "The magistrate said he couldn't find anything in the record books, I have nothing in our law guides, and I thought maybe there was some kind of army precedent—"

"For what, Chief?" Perrin asked good-naturedly. He was used to the younger man dancing around his main point until he felt confident enough to stomp on it. During their first conversation—which took five minutes to get the point, after different sidetracks about the weather, the latest entertainment, and the issue of whether beef was tastier than veal—Perrin had learned to cut off the chief as quickly as possible. Direct questions usually forced the poor man to his point sooner.

"The farms, Colonel!"

The *other* problem with Barnie was that when he felt the penetrating stare of the colonel he often got to his point *too* quickly, leaving Perrin trying to figure out what conversational ground he had leaped over in his hurry.

Mahrree looked down at her papers to keep from chuckling.

"The farms, as in . . . ?" Perrin tried to backtrack him a little.

"People taking them over!"

"Who's taking them over?"

"Those working them, of course!"

From the corner of her eye Mahrree observed her husband rubbing his chin as he always did when he was looking for patience stored in his square jaw line. And to his credit, he always found some. "Let's narrow this down even more, *son*—"

Oh, it was really bad when Perrin had to revert to calling Barnie

“son” in that tone of voice.

“—so you went to someone’s house, right?”

Barnie nodded eagerly.

“Who’s house?”

“The Planatards. On the east side? That was when—”

Perrin held up his hand. “The Planatards all passed away?”

“I know!” Barnie nearly shouted.

Perrin held his hand a tad closer to Barnie’s mouth. The chief stared at it and pressed his lips closed. “So someone was working on their farm?”

“The Meesemen. Had their two daughters weeding the berries, but that’s not all.”

Perrin put down his hand and nodded to the chief to continue.

“They moved in!”

“The Meesemens into the Planatards’ house?”

“Yes! Said it was bigger than their house!”

Perrin brow furrowed. “Did you talk to them about this?”

“Of course! Said it’s not right, them taking over the house and the field, but they said they were working it, so why not—”

Perrin held up his hand again, but the chief wasn’t looking at him as he gestured wildly with his hat in hand.

“—So I said, but it’s not yours, and they said no one owns it now, so it’s ours, and I said that they already had a farm, but they said not as big as this one, so I said who will have your old farm, and they said they’d have both! Well then I said, what if they have relatives that want to come claim the farm, and they said, well maybe their entire family died, and why would they want a farm in Edge anyway, and they wanted it so they just took it! Just like that! I mean, Colonel, what do we do now? It’s not exactly theft, but it’s not exactly honest. Is it?”

“No, Barnie,” Perrin patted him on the back. “It’s not. Let me mull over the problem and I’ll have a solution in the morning.”

After the chief left, Mahrree said, “I didn’t have a chance to tell you yet, but when I went to the market this afternoon I noticed the family that usually runs the bakery was also manning the basket stand nearby.”

Perrin rubbed his forehead. “Shem told me there were reports of goats and hens disappearing from the back garden of someone’s house. Those reporting the loss were ones that were about to claim those animals themselves.”

Mahrree sighed. "On my way home I saw a young couple carrying furniture out of a house whose residents died."

Perrin groaned. "Is everyone claiming the dead's possessions?"

"Apparently. I guess the thieving of the boys is as contagious as the pox. Maybe people think it doesn't matter if the immediately families aren't around to complain."

"This is getting out of hand," he fumed. "Yes, there are animals and goods available, but it shouldn't be for the swiftest hands! Where do people get the idea that they can just take something?"

"What are you going to do?"

"Magistrate Wibble has been eager to do something in public ever since the memorial service in Planting Season. He wants to lead? Then he's going to lead this village!"

"Lead them the way *you* think they should be lead?" Mahrree guessed.

"Well, of course. Tomorrow night no entertainments but a mandatory meeting. This 'reallocation of goods' ends now!"

Chapter 22 ~ “You aren’t people, you’re vultures!”

It was the 1st Day of Harvest 336 when Perrin sat on the platform again. It had been nearly five moons since he was there for the memorial service when it seemed the entire world chanted “General Shin.”

But tonight there was a different feel in the amphitheater, much like the times he’d caught a thieving boy, forced him into a chair, and set in to yelling at him about his duty and responsibility to the world. It never worked. The boys would glare up at him with hardened eyes. Perrin had always been amazed that so few parents were upset with their children’s thieving, but now he understood why as he stared at Edge.

The majority of Edge stared back at him, suspecting that he was about to ruin their fun and profit.

It didn’t help matters much that Wibble was completely massacring the very carefully worded speech Perrin had prepared for him. How in the world did Wibble become magistrate anyway?

In the *most* accommodating way possible Wibble was trying to *suggest* to Edgers that *perhaps* the residents should consider the feelings of the relatives that may still be around, and that *maybe* messages could be sent to all parts of the world looking for relatives, and *then, if* no one responded, then *perhaps* auctions could be held, or *maybe* even some of the properties *donated* to less fortunate families, or to some of the refugees from Moorland who still didn’t have places of their own . . .

That’s when the crowd grew ugly. Perrin could feel the tension growing in the amphitheater and wished he’d had more than fifty

soldiers stationed for security. Many in the audience rose to their feet, shouting.

“Wibble, are you telling us we don’t deserve what we get?”

“Why should I give up something I’ve worked for?”

“Moorland survivors? Just how much longer are we supposed to tolerate them? Let them go somewhere else!”

“This is unfair!”

Colonel Shin had tried to stay squarely in his seat like an appropriate authority, but his shock at their reaction wouldn’t let him. He shifted in his chair, trying not to leap to his feet.

His plan was perfectly reasonable. That Wibble presented it so ineptly certainly didn’t help the mood of the crowd, which was more ravenous than Perrin anticipated. The magistrate cowered under the weight of all the protests, sent a look of appeal to Colonel Shin, and Perrin was on his feet in an instant.

If he worried about another General Shin rally erupting, he didn’t need to. While most of the villagers silenced and sat down at the sight of the colonel, several men continued to stand, their arms folded in challenge.

Perrin waited ten long, agonizing seconds before speaking. “Almost a year and a half ago I saw this village pool together all their resources to save each others’ lives. Each of your homes, barns and shops were damaged. Each of your families faced food shortages. But each of you made sure no one suffered. We all lost weight last year, but as I look around I don’t see anyone starving today.”

A few snickers rippled through the crowd as Colonel Shin’s eyes paused on rotund Mr. Trum. He was one of the few who continued to stand, his folded arms resting on his great belly. He likely had many plans that Colonel Shin just may see fit to destroy, and he wasn’t about to let that happen.

“Just this morning I read a report about how much property had been ‘acquired’ during the past few nights. I’m sure those things weren’t taken by our *precious sons*, which leads me to believe that someone else is picking up where the boys and the Guarders have left off!”

A few people squirmed in their seats, but not as many seemed to feel as guilty as the colonel had hoped.

“I have also read a report about how many lands, houses, and shops have been snatched from the dead!” His voice boomed across the amphitheater.

A couple of the standing men sat down. A few still remained, including Trum.

Perrin took a few deep breaths to regain his composure. “I can’t help but wonder, why? Our crops will be excellent this year. We’ll have more than we expected to store. The herds have rebounded, trade’s come back, the shops are rebuilt, and people are buying goods. We have no more threat of attack from the Guardians, thievery is down, or it *was*—” an irritated edge entered to his tone. He shook his head in disappointment. “I’ve lived here for seventeen years now, and I’d predict that this will be one of our most prosperous years. Yet that’s not good enough for you.”

A small smile emerged above the multiple chins of Mr. Trum. “Colonel!” he called out. “It *is* a prosperous year and getting better. Why let others’ properties go to waste?”

“I’m not suggesting they go to waste, Trum. I’m suggesting we distribute them more fairly, more equitably,” Perrin clarified. “Many in Edge are struggling to get by. Not everyone’s well off. This is an excellent opportunity to balance some of that. I’m suggesting giving the properties—once we have no relatives wanting to claim them—to those in greatest need.”

Another man stood up. “My two daughters just spent their entire Weeding Season break taking care of our neighbors’ farm. Now you’re telling me we’re not entitled to it? After all their labor?”

Perrin squinted at him. “Two laborers for three weeks’ time? Those wages wouldn’t be near enough to purchase *any* land. I had no idea property values had plummeted so drastically.”

Nervous chuckles scattered through the amphitheater.

But the man wasn’t finished. “We buried the family, too!”

“Then took their animals as thanks?”

A woman in another part of the amphitheater, petite yet livid, stood up and pointed at the man. “You know full well that hog was supposed to go to us! *She* had wanted me to have it!”

The first man pointed at her. “The hog? What had you ever done to deserve that hog? *He* told me how he bought it, raised it, fed it—He was my friend, and his hog belongs to me!”

“You have three hogs already!” the woman shrieked. “We have only two! The colonel says it’s be to fair, and that isn’t fair!”

Before Perrin could explain that wasn’t what he meant at all, the first man’s wife stood up, her face red with rage. “You *sow*!” she bellowed at the petite woman.

Perrin recoiled. The only “sows” he knew of were questionable women that hung around the northeast entrance of the fort. Never had he heard that word used *that way* in mixed company, and certainly not out of the mouth of the cobbler’s wife.

The hog-wanting woman’s husband now joined his wife and pointed at the first man. “Put a muzzle on your own sow and give us back our hog like the colonel ordered!”

Perrin staggered, but no one noticed. It was the makings of a fight, and no Edger wanted to miss out on it as the amphitheater erupted in an explosion of noise and shouting.

Perrin threw up his hands in disgust but the only one who saw him was Mahrree on the front bench, her head slowly shaking in amazement. On either side of her Jaytsy and Peto stared, stunned.

Magistrate Wibble, who’d been wringing his hands, turned to the colonel in desperation. Wibble was all about *cooperation*, as his campaign speeches declared, and—like all good politicians—he didn’t have the first idea of how to establish that.

The colonel sighed and did the only thing he knew how to deal with out-of-control people. He drew Relf’s sword.

He had intended to bang it on the wooden platform to draw everyone’s attention and have the smith fix the damage to the tip later. But the movement of his arm and the clanging of the sword as it left the sheath was an ominous enough noise that everyone noticed it.

A terrified hush filled the area and everyone sat down, trying to look like as small a target as possible. Even Trum shrank on his bench, reducing him to the size of only two men.

Perrin was tempted to replace the sword in his sheath, but the effect was too powerful to dismiss. Perhaps it was good that the village, while loyal and grateful, had also been terrified of him.

“Enough!” he roared.

The crowd surrounding him inched back even more.

“What’s happened to you? All of you? You just buried your friends and now you’re fighting over their possessions? You aren’t people, you’re vultures! Did they die fast enough for you?”

“Colonel!” Mr. Trum was on his feet again, a brave act for such a large target. “Colonel,” he said more calmly, with a touch of nervousness as the colonel firmed his grip on the sword’s hilt. “No one’s trying to take away the significance of their deaths. We’ve all lost friends, and even some family. But they’d want us to continue, don’t you think? They’d want others to have access to all

they had. We've suffered greatly this year and a half. We could share stories about it all evening! This is a way of giving some of that back."

"*Giving?*" Perrin scoffed. "Who's doing the giving? No one. You're just *taking!* The Creator expects more from you."

Mr. Trum rolled his eyes and held out his hand dramatically. "Colonel, Colonel, with all due respect—"

Perrin braced for anything. When someone begins, *With all due respect*, it meant no respect was about to follow.

"—as much as I appreciate that we have a leader that still thinks about the Creator, how can you be sure this is what He expects? Maybe this is His payment to us for making us suffer?"

Perrin wished he was closer to Trum. He was sure the man couldn't feel the full fury of his gaze from the middle of the amphitheater. "You really think, Trum, that the Creator's going to *kill off* part of our population so you can have more? You have the largest fields around, the biggest herds, and now I understand you're taking over your neighbor's tannery? Quite a corner on the leather market you'll have, won't you? You haven't suffered at all, Trum, for all the years I've known you. Why do you deserve more?"

Trum was unmoved. "Colonel, Colonel," he said in a sickly sweet tone. "Where did Nature's Laws come from?"

Perrin wasn't expecting that odd question. He squinted. "The Creator."

"And, dear Colonel," the syrupy tone continued, "why did only certain families die? I have a theory: Nature's Laws."

"Nature's Laws," Perrin repeated dubiously.

"Nature eliminates those who are not as fit or capable of life. Entire families died because Nature no longer had room for them," Trum reasoned. "And if the Creator made those laws, then the Creator must have willed them to die, so that we can have their goods. We are those that are stronger and fitter for this world. I'm sorry there are those who have less, but we must consider, Colonel, that Nature doesn't prefer them, either. Perhaps their poverty is Nature's way of eliminating them, too."

"Perhaps their poverty is the result of others' greed and selfishness," Perrin countered.

Trum remained unmoved, the insinuation bouncing off his belly.

Bewildered that Trum couldn't see his part in any of this, Perrin continued. "With that reasoning, then you could argue that the land

tremor was Nature's way of eliminating *all* of Edge. That's what Nicko Mal thought; he was ready to let this village die like Moorland. But if Nature wanted all of Edge eliminated, then why are you still here?"

"Because of you, *dear Colonel!*" Trum simpered sarcastically as he spread open his arms. "That's what you want to hear, isn't it? Edge is here because of your rescue?"

Perrin didn't move a muscle, except for a small one near the back of his jaw.

No one else dared move either. The crowd shifted their gaze nervously from Shin to Trum to Shin again—and to his sword—waiting for a response.

But Perrin was too incensed to trust anything that would come out of his mouth at that moment.

Trum folded his arms defiantly again. "Well Colonel, not all of us would have perished. Some of us have more ability than others to survive. Perhaps you saved those who Nature didn't want saved at all, so Nature came back in the form of the pox to claim those that were too weak. Nature always wins."

Perrin took a step toward the edge of the platform. "You have 'more ability' to survive Nature's attacks? If Nature sent a bear to chase after the two of us, I'll give you one guess which of us 'Nature' would devour, Trum!"

Trum squirmed. The small movement was accentuated through his layers, causing a rippling affect that normally would have been quite humorous. But no one in the amphitheater saw anything amusing about the first debate that platform had seen in over a decade.

"Nature has its own ways of being selective," Perrin insisted when Trum didn't respond. "It doesn't need you to accelerate the process. The Creator *allows* Nature's Laws to unfold. But many of those laws are intended for animals to follow, not people! We are to rise above the basic laws and live a higher law. Yes, the world's unfair, Nature's unfair, because the Creator is allowing us the opportunity to resolve that, as part of our Test. We can *choose* to bring balance. We can choose to fix those inequalities.

"I'm not here to force anyone—" he didn't realize he was gesturing with his sword until Mahrree told him later, "—but I am here to ask you to think of the needs of others. I believe the Creator intends for us to use our surplus to help those in need. He's giving us an opportunity to do something good for others, not take a

reward just for surviving.”

He pivoted to address the entire crowd surrounding him. “All of you received others’ surplus last year. I have the records to prove it. All of you have been beggars waiting in line for the emergency stores from Idumea. Now *you* have the surplus, so give it to those who need it.”

“Who is to say how much is surplus, Shin?” Trum demanded, causing Perrin to spin around to face his section of the amphitheater again. “If we have another year like last, I’ll need all my resources to make it through! I decide for myself what my family doesn’t need. So far, I don’t think we have enough.”

A few brave voices chorused, “Hear, hear!”

Someone else called out, “Well if Trum doesn’t think he has enough, I certainly don’t either.”

A louder chorus of “Hear, hear!” rippled among the villagers.

“How much did you *need* to survive last year?” Perrin called over the din.

The people quieted.

“We lived for weeks off of dry bread, shriveled apples, and bits of meat I chose not to identify. But we survived.”

“And I never want to live like that again!” someone shouted.

“I’m not saying you will,” Perrin said. “We have far more than that, but some still don’t. Already your lives are better, so choose to make others’ lives better as well.”

“To a vote!” someone near the back began the chant. “To a vote!”

Trum sneered in challenge at the colonel and punched the air above him. “To a vote! To a vote!”

By the fifth cry, the entire amphitheater was demanding a vote.

Perrin sighed.

It was now beyond his influence. He motioned to the magistrate with his sword. With irritated emphasis, he sheathed his weapon and marched over to his seat to stand by it, his arms folded.

Wibble tried to clear his throat over the noise, but the call for a vote echoed even louder. Wibble looked to the colonel who merely held up his hands and sat down in his chair, shaking his head.

Local votes were to be overseen by the magistrates. Only if the voting ran contrary to Administrators’ decrees could he intervene.

But Perrin didn’t want to. In fact, he wanted nothing more to do with Edgers. He regretted ever wielding his sword in defense of any of them. For seventeen years he sacrificed his life for their safety, on

too many occasions. Because of these people he lost sleep, lost time with his wife and children, lost his savings to pay off their expenses, lost his parents and, for a time, even lost his mind.

All for *them*.

Yet when presented with the possibility of an extra hog, or another bushel of corn, or someone's abandoned shop, they couldn't imagine sacrificing anything at all, for anyone.

They were as bad as Idumea.

Perrin hated Idumea.

He looked dully over at Mahrree on the front bench, and she stared back at him, shaking her head in disbelief.

He nodded at her once in agreement.

His children on either side of her looked around dumbfounded.

Finally the crowd began to silence itself.

"We have a call for a vote," Wibble tried to sound as loud as the colonel. "Do we have a spokesman to articulate the nature of the vote?"

"Let Trum speak!" called someone. Several voices seconded.

Trum waved in acknowledgement and made his way up to the platform with a small grin on his face as others patted him on the back. He was wheezing as he reached the top stair and wisely didn't look at the colonel. If he had, he most likely would have withered to the size of a regular man under the glare.

Trum gestured with his thick hands clubbing the air. "I propose we vote on the ownership of the properties left by those who died," he announced. "All property currently in possession of others stays in that possession. All other properties not yet claimed will be done so by those living in closest proximity to the deceased."

The people cheered in agreement.

Perrin leaped from his chair, ran toward the back of the platform and jumped off, taking the stairs in two large steps. He landed right in front of a very startled Chief Barnie and grabbed his arms.

"Get your men out there, *now!* To all the abandoned homes not yet claimed."

"Why?" Barnie asked, his eyes hazy as he tried to catch up to the conclusion the colonel had already reached. For a chief of enforcement, he wasn't very swift on his feet and was even slower in his brain. "They haven't even voted on anything yet—"

"But they *will*," Perrin shook his arms to jostle some sense into him, "and when they do, what's going to happen next?"

The chief tried to puzzle it out, but two of his officers nodded

as their faces went pale, a bit quicker on the uptake.

They heard the call for a vote come from the magistrate. “All in favor?”

“Chief, NOW! To the abandoned properties!”

Barnie nodded obediently and turned to his six men that were behind him, already heading out the back doors.

A loud chorus of “Favor!” cried out over their heads.

Perrin sat down in resignation on the steps of the platform.

“Any opposed?” shouted Wibble.

Perrin leaned forward and held his head in his hands.

A few timid voices called, “Opposed!”

“Then those in favor have—”

But the magistrate’s voice was drowned in the thunder of thousands of Edgers in a mad dash to be the first to leave the amphitheater by any exit. A few screams suggested someone had been hurt, but the flurry of people didn’t slow. A few even came over the platform and raced down the back stairs past the form of the colonel still hunched on the steps.

Perrin began to rock slowly back and forth. “Animals,” he whispered. “Just a bunch of *stupid* animals.” He noticed a blue uniform rush up to him, and he looked up at the owner of it.

“Sir,” Lieutenant Offra panted, “what do you want us to do? Head out to the properties as well?”

Perrin shook his head and stood up. “Jon, I don’t want any of my men mixed up in this mess. Tell your soldiers to patrol the roads, protect those who are innocent—especially children and those from Moorland—but do *not* get involved. We’re done sacrificing for this village.”

Mahrree gripped the arms of her children, not worried that they’d join the stampede but to make sure they didn’t get accidentally swept up in the current.

“This is madness! At least we already gave my mother’s house to that family from Moorland.”

Peto turned. “Wow—I’ve never seen this place empty so fast.”

“We need to get out of here,” Jaytsy said, wringing her hands.

“I want you two to head straight home,” Mahrree told them, “and secure the doors and windows with the iron rods.”

“Why?” Jaytsy asked worriedly.

“Precautionary,” Mahrree assured them. “But if someone doesn’t get a piece of property they think is owed to them, they just may come seeking revenge on the colonel’s house.”

“What about you?” Peto said.

“I’m going up to the fort to watch what’s going on from the tower, then I’ll get me an escort home. I’m going to find your father so you two head home!”

Jaytsy and Peto nodded and jogged to an exit.

“Peto,” Jaytsy panted as they reached the village green where they could break into a run. Well, as much of a run as Jaytsy’s skirt would allow. “We’re not going home. We’re heading to Deckett’s.”

“Why?”

“Did you hear what they were saying? About those from Moorland?”

“I heard a bit,” Peto said as he cleared a small bush his sister had to go around. He slowed to let her catch up. “Something about them not deserving—oh. I see.”

“Exactly. Stupid skirts,” she muttered as she tried to find a better way to hold them up. “Deck doesn’t know about any of this, especially that those from Moorland may be targeted. Augh!” she cried as her hem caught on a sticky shrub. “Peto, warn him! I’ll catch up.”

“Are you sure?” he called as he jogged backward. “We’re supposed to stay together—”

She yanked until her hem ripped. It was another Joriana-Kuman-Idumea dress, so it didn’t matter. “Just go! Warn him!”

By the time she made it to the Briter-fort farm, Deckett and Peto were securing the last of Deckett’s milk cows in the barn, so Jaytsy rounded up the stray chickens. Eventually all of the animals were locked up—except for the stubborn bull who was destined for the butchers and the soldiers’ table next week anyway. Deckett reluctantly picked up a pitchfork, sighed, and placed himself in front of the latched barn doors.

Peto retrieved a hatchet from the wood pile and took his position next to Deckett, while Jaytsy gaped at them.

“You’re not seriously going to use those, are you?”

“Of course not!” said Peto, insulted. “But as I’ve heard Uncle Shem tell the soldiers before, it’s the appearance of things. If you look threatening, danger often won’t give you a second glance.”

“I hope that’s true,” Deckett said, a bit unsteadily.

Jaytsy looked around for a makeshift weapon and decided on a fallen tree branch, which she swung experimentally.

Deckett’s eyes bulged. “And what do you intend to do?”

“Help you,” she said. “I’ve learned a few things over the years,” and she thrust and swiped with the branch.

Deckett shuddered and firmed his grip on his pitchfork. “No one would really attack all the way up here, would they? I mean, I’m right across from the fort! They’d have to be stupid—”

“Most of Edge is stupid right now,” Peto told him. “Trust me.”

Jaytsy nodded and was about to add her opinion, but voices coming up the road clamped her mouth shut.

Peto’s eyes grew large when he heard them too. Even though the barn was well off the main road, some voices just carry.

Peto held out his arm to push Deckett back against the wide barn doors, and he and Jaytsy also pressed themselves against the wood, trying to blend in to the faded gray.

“—and Offra,” they heard Colonel Shin say as he strode briskly to the fort, “I want four guards over here at the Briter farm. This is, after all, our farm, our cattle, our chickens, our produce, and our farmer in charge of it all. No one’s to touch him or anything else.”

Between Peto and Jaytsy, Deckett sagged in relief.

“Of course, sir,” Offra said. “I’ll get some men down here within the next few minutes.

Colonel Shin, flanked by half a dozen soldiers and now in view of his frozen children, pulled his wife alongside who struggled gamely to keep up with their rapid pace.

“And send down two more soldiers as well,” Shin said as they hurried up the road, “to escort my children home and to stay posted at my house.”

Jaytsy’s mouth dropped open, and Peto, scoffing loudly, broke formation. Swinging his hatchet in dismay, he called, “All right—how’d you know we were here?”

Their father stopped and turned to the three poorly-hidden defenders.

Mahrree stared in surprise. “What in the world are you doing up here? I told you to go home and bar the windows and doors!”

While the other soldiers tried not to chortle, Perrin nodded for them to continue on to the fort, and Offra broke into a jog to get the six soldiers.

The Shins ducked between the railings of the fence that ran the perimeter of the farm and picked their way through the cucumbers.

“For starters, none of you would make very good Guardians,” Perrin told them as he gingerly tried not to step on anything green. “You’re supposed to blend into your surroundings. Against that gray, the three of you stick out like weeds in dirty snow.”

Jaytsy frowned at her yellow and green dress while Peto and Deckett nodded feebly at each other’s tan shirts.

“And second,” Perrin continued, his voice gentler as he came to the barn, “I would have been disappointed if you *hadn’t* come here. Proper help is on the way, Mr. Briter.”

“Thank you, sir,” Deckett sighed, loosening his grip on the pitchfork.

Perrin tilted his head at it. “Good choice of a weapon, though, Deckett. Peto, never use a hatchet. You throw it at someone and miss, then you’ve just given the enemy a new weapon. Jaytsy, you could likely do some damage with that branch, but it looks rather brittle, so one hit is all you’d get before it broke. But Deckett, take a look at this.” He stepped back, drew his father’s sword, and Mahrree took a few protective steps out of the way.

As Deckett’s eyes bulged again, Perrin held the gleaming sword out in front of him, pointed at the young farmer’s chest. “See how long my reach is?”

Deckett swallowed and squeaked out a, “Yes, sir?”

Jaytsy squeezed his arm. “I doubt he’s trying to run you through tonight.”

“No, I’m not. Now your turn,” Perrin beckoned. “Hold out the pitchfork. No, don’t choke up on it. Slide your hands down . . . a bit more. Now, aim it right here,” and he gestured to his belly.

Shaking, but trying hard not to as he felt Jaytsy watching him, Deckett held out the pitchfork parallel to the ground. The four rusty-sharp tines were only inches away from the colonel’s stomach.

“Look at that, Deckett,” Perrin said cheerfully, which, considering their positions, seemed to Deckett completely inappropriate. “Your reach is longer than mine. Do you realize what that means?”

“No, sir, and I really don’t want to—”

“It means you have the advantage, and four sharp points instead of my just one. Think of the kind of damage you can do puncturing my lungs or gouging my gut.”

“Do I have to, sir? Think about the damage?”

Perrin chuckled and sheathed his sword again.

Deckett promptly put the tines of his pitchfork in the air.

“Deckett,” Perrin said, taking the tool out of his hands, “I’m afraid you do. First lesson in defense, since the road’s still quiet.”

Jaytsy and Mahrree exchanged a quick smile.

Peto squatted, grinning that he wasn’t being lectured for once.

“Now when you hold out the fork, lead with this hand,” Perrin repositioned Deckett’s unsteady grip, “and stabilize with this hand. Then you can thrust, like this. That’s right, son. Now—”

But Jaytsy didn’t hear anything else, because her mind was repeating what she just heard her father call Deckett: “son.”

He rarely called anyone “son.” Not with *that* tone of voice.

She clenched her hands into fists to keep them from shaking in too much joy. All she could think as she watched her father explain why stabbing in the chest likely will get the tines stuck in the victim’s ribs, and watched Deckett grow gray at the thought, was, *Father called him “son.”*

It was only a moment later that six soldiers arrived at the farm, jogging carefully through the plants to reach the barn.

Perrin nodded to Deckett that the lesson was over. “Maybe you want to help guard the house?”

Deckett shook his head. “No, sir. The structure’s not important. They can take whatever if they happened to come up here. The animals are what we’ll defend. All that I care about is alive.”

Jaytsy beamed with pride, and when she turned to look at her father, she noticed he was watching her and smiling faintly.

He turned back to Deckett. “Well said, son.”

Jaytsy was sure her chest would overheat at any moment.

Perrin pointed to two sergeants. “I want you to escort my daughter and son home, then stay posted at my house. I doubt anything will happen, but remember: we’re protecting the innocents. Protect those who don’t want any part of this.”

Mahrree kissed her children quickly, and Jaytsy sent one last look back to Deckett as she started for home.

He nodded once to her, adjusted his grip on the pitchfork as Colonel Shin had showed him, and rooted himself before the doors of his barn.

A minute later, as they headed again for the fort, Mahrree squeezed Perrin's arm. "You really don't think Deckett could ever use that pitchfork on another human, do you?"

"Of course not," he said. "There isn't a drop of soldiering blood in that man."

Mahrree smiled as they entered the compound. "You sound a bit pleased by that."

He bobbed his head back and forth, which was his usual reaction when he didn't want to articulate his agreement.

"So I'm guessing," Mahrree continued, "that you went through that little lesson on how farm implements can cause injury or death because you were stalling until the soldiers arrived?"

"Once again you show the insight that very few officers possess. None of those three had any hope of holding anyone off, nor do I think they'll have to, either."

"But it was nice to see them try," Mahrree said as they started up the stairs to the tower.

"Now I'm questioning your insight, because Mahrree, it's not," he said darkly. "Not *nice* to see them holding weapons at all."

"You're right," she murmured apologetically. "That was a stupid thing to say."

Chapter 23 ~ “The most harmful sentences begin with, *‘I deserve . . .’*”

Shem and one-fourth of the army rode their fastest to the blazing fire. It was the first but likely not the last. Already he had passed several villagers with torches running to another abandoned house, and had dispatched one of his sergeants and ten to monitor the situation. Behind him were three more sergeants with their tens, and they joined Captain Thorne with his twenty, already calling for fire wagons.

“Disregard that order!” Sergeant Major Zenos yelled.

Thorne, on his feet with his sword drawn, spun to face him. “What?! Zenos, that barn will burn to the ground!”

“Let it,” Shem said, dismounting and drawing his weapon. “It’s a hay fire and impossible to extinguish. Besides, you heard Colonel Shin’s orders: defend only the innocent, stay out of the fights!”

Thorne gestured furiously to the fire behind him. “Even if the fights start a fire?”

“Especially. If you see livestock in danger, or people who need help getting out the way, then by all means help! Otherwise, we stay out of it.”

“I don’t think so, Sergeant,” Thorne announced and turned on his heel.

Until Zenos shouted, “Thorne! About face!”

Habit made Thorne spin around, and when he realized he’d automatically obeyed the sergeant major he glowered.

Zenos pointed with his sword. “Thorne, you will do exactly as Colonel Shin has commanded. And you will notice that we have

swords drawn. Thorne, what does that dictate about the situation?”

Thorne swallowed as if gagging on something nasty, and glanced around at the enlisted men who watched the officer closely. “Means battle situation.”

“Battle situation . . .” Zenos repeated and tilted his head waiting for Thorne to finish properly.

Thorne’s jaw shifted. “Battle situation . . . *sir*.”

“That’s right,” Zenos said, smiling inwardly at how much pain Lemuel’s eyes registered as protocol required that he direct that *sir* to Shem. “Since I’m on the field in the *battle situation*, and I’ve been serving longer than any man besides Colonel Shin, I am in command—here and now—and I will enforce every order of Colonel Shin. Is that clear, *soldier*?”

Thorne’s knuckles turned white as he gripped his hilt. But no matter how enraged he was, there was no other response than, “Yes . . . *sir*.” There were far too many witnesses.

Zenos nodded once. To a sergeant of one group of ten he said, “Head to the southwest section. There are at least two houses empty there. Protect the innocent, stay out of the fighting.”

“Yes, *sir*!” The sergeant grinned broadly and took off with his soldiers in pursuit, but not without first sending the captain a filthy look.

Zenos pretended not to notice as he gave directions to the other sergeants and their tens, and finally turned to a steaming Thorne.

“Keep your twenty in the area, Captain,” Zenos used his most commanding tone. “This is a central location, and you can send out soldiers in twos and fours as needed. Protect the innocent—”

“We know, we know!” Thorne seethed.

Shem arched an admonishing eyebrow at the captain. He folded his arms, a rather difficult thing to do while holding one’s sword, but Shem wasn’t going to sheath it for anything. Not so much that he needed it to defend himself, but because he didn’t want there to be any question that this was not a battle situation. In fact, Shem had practiced holding his sword and folding his arms just for such an occasion. Yes, he knew he had odd hobbies.

“Thorne, I’m *so glad* that you know. Now, I will be surveying the village and reassigning soldiers as needed. Shin’s agreed to send one hundred to help—”

“Why not the entire army?” Thorne demanded. “We could—”

“—Get into a whole lotta trouble we don’t want, Thorne!” Shem countered, with additional layers of meaning on top. “Now, as I

was saying,” he did his best to leer at the insubordinate captain while ignoring the encouraging grins of his fellow enlisted men behind the hated officer, “I will reassign soldiers as needed, so make sure you’re aware of where yours are at all times, should I need a few.”

Grumbling under his breath Thorne turned to leave, but Shem grabbed his arm and snapped him back. To Thorne’s affronted expression, Shem said, “I didn’t hear your response, soldier!”

Behind Thorne a few enlisted men punched the air in fiendish pleasure, because they knew what Thorne would have to say next.

Captain Thorne squinted, livid, before saying, “Yes . . . *sir*.”

Zenos gave him his most generous smile, as if releasing a school boy who’d finally learned his lesson. “Off you go then, Thorne!”

As Shem sheathed his weapon—only for the moment while he mounted his horse again—Thorne murmured, “Slagging Zenos!” as he stormed off, without any semblance of a salute.

The sound of twenty enlisted men sucking their breath through their teeth slowed down his stalking, momentarily.

But Zenos only called, “I heard that. And I’ll remember it, Thorne. I’ll remember.”

Accompanied by two privates, Shem rode off to the east where he knew a large home would be the site of contention. He wasn’t surprised but disappointed when he found a raging argument between two families.

Obediently the six soldiers there guarded a nearby house sheltering residents from Moorland while they watched the feud.

Shem reined his horse to a stop several paces away from the screaming neighbors, and they all turned to him first with annoyance, then with hope for allegiance.

“Sergeant Zenos, explain to these imbeciles how *we’re* the closer neighbor! I walked out the distance myself!” one man insisted.

His neighbor scoffed. “Oh yeah? What’s his first name—”

Shem drew his sword, the antidote to all arguments. The Edgers stared anxiously at him. “Nope,” he said simply. “I’m not going to argue for either of you. But I will tell you to let that little girl get out and stand over there by my soldiers so she’s safe from whatever stupid thing you’re all about to do next.”

The mother harrumphed, but the girl, about eleven years old, gratefully skitted away to the soldiers posted at the other house.

“Thank you! Not like I want to take care of even more sheep.”

Shem smiled sadly and was about to say something more to the

adults shouting again about who should claim the former shepherd's home, when a movement behind it caught his eye. He nodded to the privates to remain there, and he wheeled his horse around and kicked it to trot around the sheepfold where several dozen animals bleated at him. The movement he noticed wasn't wild dogs, but something even more menacing; thieves of the two-legged kind.

He wasn't surprised, but again disappointed. While two families bickered in the front, another family was raiding the house from behind. Shem saw a boy of about seven come running out of the back of the house, grinning and cradling an iron pot containing several silver utensils. His younger brother burst out as well, triumphantly displaying a—

Shem blinked to make sure he saw it correctly in the dim light. Yes, it was an old chicken carcass, likely the dead owner's last meal some weeks ago. Still his parents cheered his efforts, until they noticed the sergeant major glaring at them.

The father stood tall and defiant. "No one wants these, Zenos."

Shem scoffed at that. "Not the carcass, no. But someone would want the other boy's haul, and you've taught them to steal—"

"We've taught our sons how to get what we deserve!" the father countered.

"Yes," Shem said steadily, "I can think of all kinds of things you deserve right now, but instead I'll advise you to get those boys inside where it's safe! And in your OWN house!"

The man smiled slyly at him. "I don't want this house. I've got everything I need." He took the carcass from his little boy and tossed it over to a milk cart. But it wasn't hauling milk and cheese tonight; it was loaded with all kinds of shiny baubles, proudly topped with a chicken skeleton.

Shem gritted his teeth and stared hard at the young father. Years ago they had suspected him as one of the first to go raiding for the Guarders. While they caught Poe Hili with embarrassing frequency, Shem could never catch up to his older partner in crime, who now patted his mule to pull the overloaded cart. His wife slipped her hand into his and sent a challenging look to the sergeant major.

Shem clenched the reins in his hands. The next generation of bandits had been born that night, tutored by their parents.

"We were at the amphitheater, Zenos," the thief-turned-milkman-turned-back-to-thief told him. "There's nothing you can do to

us, and you know it too.”

Shem bit back his frustration as he watched the young family slink away into the night. Years ago he’d drawn conclusions that he now realized he needed to revisit. He’d charitably thought, when they first started nabbing teenagers, that the boys were simply bored and looking for an adventure. It wasn’t as if they were *bad*, just *boys*. That’s why the Guarders had so much success with them.

But maybe that wasn’t it at all. Shem knew, better than most, that people had many different sides. Usually only one or two are presented to the public, and friends assume they see the truth. Yet in the corners of each soul resided facets that most people kept under control; tendencies toward violence, or abuse, or deceit, or selfishness, or lust—shoved down deep to keep them from surfacing.

But now Shem considered that some people kept those facets down only until the right situation presented itself. Maybe people truly were more bad than good, waiting for the opportune time to give in to their urges. And now, they were teaching their children how to lead double lives as well.

Shem wheeled his horse around abruptly, because he knew he was the worst example of them all.

Later that night a sullen Colonel Shin sat in the forward office and stared out the wide windows. On top of the desk was a stack of notes being added to every few minutes by soldiers, such as Lieutenant Jon Offra, currently bounding up the tower stairs.

“What now, Offra?” Perrin asked as patiently as he could.

“Captain Thorne again, sir,” said Offra apologetically. “He’s requesting once again that you send more soldiers—”

“And I’m saying once again, *no*. Has Zenos requested more?”

“No sir,” Offra smiled. “The commander in the field of battle has not seen a need for more guards for the innocent. He claims that everything we can control is under control.”

Perrin smirked back. “Then I second Zenos’s judgment; tell Thorne that. Also tell him that he can inform Bernie and Wibble and every other fool out there that we didn’t make this problem, nor will we resolve it. And be careful, Lieutenant,” Perrin added. “You’re the best training partner I’ve had and the Strongest Soldier Race is just a few weeks away.”

“And you’re ready for it, sir!” Offra headed down the stairs, passing a sergeant who came up, waving a note.

“Colonel, another house.” He handed the note to the corporal recording them at the other end of the desk.

Perrin stood up for a better view of the expanse of black, punctured by orange glows. “Over there, right?” he gestured to a section in the southwest. “Where exactly is it?”

“On 12th road, number 562.”

Perrin growled. “One that we helped rebuild, right?”

The sergeant growled back. “I made the doors myself, sir.”

“And what are those doors doing right now, Sergeant?”

“Burning, sir.”

Perrin rubbed his forehead. “Stupid. That makes what now, Corporal?” Although he could count the fires, some had already extinguished themselves.

The corporal looked down at his master list. “Thirteen, sir. Thirteen houses on fire, seven barns burning, four shops—wait, that’s six—”

“Enough, enough. Thank you.” He turned back to the sergeant. “They’re just letting it burn?”

“That’s what Zenos suggested. It was abandoned anyway.”

Perrin nodded. “Good. Remind everyone to keep their distance.”

“Thank you, Colonel. Appreciated, sir.” The sergeant saluted before heading back down the stairs in a quick jog.

Perrin turned back to the window to count the fires. Every tower, their own signal fires burning and the long orange banners hoisted at the tops, were calling for help. The soldiers manning them had been blowing their horns, the four-short pattern requesting assistance, until Perrin sent word for them to shove the horns in the corner for the night; some people were trying to sleep.

He’d sent help, along with Sergeant Major Zenos whom he thought would be more objective and compassionate. Perrin didn’t believe there were more than a dozen innocents in Edge tonight, and as raw and rough as his nerves were, he’d likely start a few fires himself just by snapping his fingers.

Shem was a far calmer, wiser man to put in charge. And the moment Captain Thorne declared it to be a battle situation—likely hoping to earn yet another shiny medal from his grandfather for leadership—Perrin knew that even the darkest situations had golden linings: Thorne had inadvertently put Shem in command

over him.

That was the only thing that put a dim smile on Perrin's face that night while Edge kicked and screamed and grabbed, trying to establish just who was the "closest friend or neighbor."

Mahrree had left a short time ago, accompanied by four soldiers. She'd been listening to the reports coming in and watching the turmoil from the windows. Her words still echoed in his mind.

"I've lived here my entire life. But tonight, for the first time in forty-five years, I'm ashamed to say I'm Edgy!" She was reading a note about two men who fought over a horse. Both had pulled out their knives and clumsily lunged at each other. A third neighbor, watching their attempts, made off with the horse when the two men stumbled and plunged their knives into various body parts.

While they were sloppy, they were also effective. One had already died from a punctured lung, and his former friend was bleeding so profusely from his neck that the doctor didn't think he would make it to morning.

"Perrin, who *are* these people? None of them match the memories I have of them."

Perrin agreed. At first he was ashamed of them, then embarrassed for the village he had claimed as his own. But now he was furious. They were destroying houses they had helped build together and stealing goods that none of them needed.

Shem had come up a while ago to bring a report while Mahrree was there, and he told them that he watched two older women fighting over the most hideous hat in the world. The news he delivered after that, though, left Perrin nearly speechless.

"There's a new problem, Colonel. It seems that many Edgers realized that their neighbors didn't die, so they don't have claim over anyone's property. Therefore they've taken up looting houses anyway. It's mostly in the south, but I'm sure within the hour someone in the north will get the same bright idea."

"They're . . . they're . . ."

"Yep. Just taking what they want from the houses of the living. Hey, they want it, they're entitled to it!"

That's when Perrin insisted Mahrree go home, with additional reinforcements. While Deckett may not have felt his house was worth protecting, there were a few things in Perrin's that he didn't want touched.

He now looked out the window in the direction of their home, then

at the Briter farm. There was a fire just one road away, and he prayed silently again that none would come any closer.

Several hours later, well past midnight, the reports finally slowed then stopped. Perrin posted himself at the compound's gates to greet his soldiers as they trudged back in for what remained of the night.

"Good work, men. Thank you. Well done. Get to bed now," Perrin said as they plodded past him and he patted a few on the back. "Shower first, if you want. You all deserve to sleep in a bit in the morning, don't you think? Wake-up call will be postponed by one hour. Maybe even two."

That elicited a few exhausted cheers.

At the very end of the soldiers was Sergeant Major Zenos who assured a sooty Captain Thorne that he would make the final report to the colonel.

"Absolutely, Captain," Perrin said with as much finality as he could generate.

But Thorne didn't take the hint. "Sir," he said, "I could've contained a few of those situations. I must protest that I was not given sufficient power to—"

"No, Thorne," Perrin sighed. "No amount of power would have brought any of this to a safe and lasting resolution. Indeed, a show of force on our part would have increased the violence—"

"I believe you're wrong, sir," he said, with more gumption than he'd shown in several moons.

But before he could explain why, Perrin folded his arms. "Thorne, no one out there would have listened to a word you said. They already made their minds up—"

"But we could have made wiser decisions! We could have been fairer—"

"There was nothing fair about *any* of this, Thorne!" Perrin exploded, too tired to pretend that the inanity of the night hadn't got to him. "I presented a fair proposal, they rejected it—"

"Well, it *was* a majority rule, Colonel—" Thorne started with the sticky insinuation that if the majority of villagers wanting something, it automatically was right.

Perrin never fell for that bullying tactic. "Mob rule, you mean."

"Well then if you didn't approve of it, you should have overturned it, sir!" Thorne threw his hands in the air. "That's the power you have as commander—total control!"

"It was an uncontrollable situation, Captain!" Perrin gestured

wildly back, regretting later that he didn't smack the captain accidentally. "When the majority of people choose foolishly, then it's best to take a step back so as to not get dragged down with them."

"No! That's not our job!" Thorne insisted. "You and I have higher sensibilities, enlightened minds, and we're required to force the people to a better resolution—"

It must have been Perrin's slacked jaw and astonished expression that caused Captain Thorne to stumble in his speech.

Perrin put his hands on his waist. "*Force* the people? To a resolution *you* think acceptable, no doubt. Thorne, do you have any idea what happens then?"

"You truly get lasting peace!"

"You truly get lasting rebellion, Captain!"

"Respectfully, sir, I disagree," and Thorne marched off into the compound.

Next to Perrin, Shem let out a low whistle. "I hope I'm long gone if he ever makes it to general," he murmured as they watched the captain elbow his way through enlisted men to get to the showers.

"I'm never sure which captain's going to show up each day," Perrin murmured back. "The adulator or the underminer. He must get dizzy with how often he vacillates between the two."

"Did he actually claim that he has higher sensibilities?"

"Yes," Perrin sighed in worry. "And an enlightened mind. He said the same about me. However," and a corner of his mouth went up into the smallest of smiles, "I noticed that he ignored you completely in that assessment. Did you annoy him at all this evening?"

"Me? Of course not. I was my usual charming self," Shem sniffed. "Even when I reminded him in front of twenty enlisted men that I was the acting commander, I was entirely pleasant."

Perrin snorted, grateful it was dark enough that the last soldiers in the compound couldn't see his grin. "Come on, Zenos. We have reports to finish."

A few minutes later they slumped into chairs in Perrin's office, since "reports to finish" was code for, "Find a better place to talk."

"What a senseless night," Shem said, putting up a boot casually on the command desk. "After eight hours it appears the village has finally given up. Chief Barnie's worried about the morning, though, but I can't imagine there's anything left unclaimed." He shook his head. "Perrin, this was one of the strangest nights I've ever experienced. I didn't even know who the enemy was most of the time."

“We are our own enemies,” Perrin sighed back and started to straighten the stack of reports on his desk. He gave up and dropped them in frustration. “Shem, I feel like I don’t even *know* these people anymore. What happened to them?”

Shem pondered that. “I’ve been asking myself the same question. People I’ve seen laughing and working together for years were shouting and threatening each other with pitchforks and broomsticks over a bridle. But I’ve come to a conclusion. They can endure Guarder attacks, land tremors, destruction, imminent starvation, illness, and even the death of loved ones, but they can’t handle prosperity. Perhaps, Perrin, wealth is the greatest trial of them all.”

Perrin nodded. “Tonight I decided the most harmful sentences begin with, ‘I deserve.’ The other day I was reading *The Writings* and came across the passage that describes the Last Day. You know the part, where it talks about the destroyer taking out those who come against the people of the Creator?”

“I do.”

“Well, I sat thinking about that, wondering what the destroyer would be—”

Shem smiled slightly. “Yes, *you* would.”

Perrin ignored that. “Would it be an animal, or a person, or maybe even an illness, like the pox? But today I had another thought. Maybe it’s all of *us*. Maybe the true destroyer will be jealousy, because we kill each other over little things we think we deserve, destroying ourselves.”

“Interesting theory,” Shem said. “So how do we avoid being among the jealous ones who destroy each other?”

Perrin exhaled. “That’s the other thing I’ve been wondering about. How do I not get sucked into the same attitude?”

Shem didn’t answer him but smiled, almost knowingly.

They sat in silence for a few moments, until Perrin broke it with, “Did you ever read Terryp’s stories when you were a boy?”

Shem frowned briefly, wondering why the sudden change in topic. “Yes. I think my father still has my copy in his attic.”

“Ever wonder what a wapiti looks like? For real?”

Shem smiled, bemused. “For real?”

“They’re real, Shem. They have to be,” Perrin whispered longingly. “Why would someone take all that time to carve them at the ruins if they weren’t real?”

Shem shrugged. “I don’t know. But I highly doubt people rode

them. Those long antlers would knock them off. I think Terryp made that part up, for the story. And who ever tried to ride a large deer around here?"

"For steering," Perrin said, staring off into a corner, but seeing much further away. He had an odd, faint smile on his face as he held up his hands and guided something unseen. "Figured it out when I was young. The antlers were for steering the wapiti."

Shem sat back, realizing that tonight Perrin wanted to be as far away from Edge as possible. Terryp's western ruins was about as far as he could get.

"Did I ever tell you they named neighborhoods in Idumea after those animals?" Perrin said, still with an airy tone. "Wapiti Way—as if anyone would even recognize that a wapiti was in their way—and Elephant Elms, although those elms would never get as big as an elephant—"

"*Those* you could ride, I'd bet," Shem said. "If they were real . . . which you also seem to believe."

Perrin nodded slowly. "And Zebra Ezstates, with a z in estates." He scoffed lightly. "Such magnificent animals zebras must be, yet have only too-big houses named after them and with bad spelling to boot."

"You sound like you believe they're all alive and out there somewhere, Perrin."

"They are," Perrin breathed. "They have to be. Zebras." He finally met Shem's eyes in the glow of the single candle. "I've never told anyone this before, but I was looking for zebras."

Shem blinked. "Recently?"

"No, when I first came to Edge and went into the forests. This may sound silly but I thought, what better animal for the Guardians to ride than a striped horse? It would blend in perfectly with the shadows."

"Did you see any?"

Perrin shook his head. "Knew I probably wouldn't." He gazed out the dark window. "Just . . . hoping, you know? That all of the stories might be real? Just some evidence."

"What color of stripes should zebras have?"

"Black and white," Perrin declared. "Mahree thinks brown, but she had no appreciation for horses," he chuckled sadly. "Black and white, Shem. Out there. Somewhere. There *has* to be more than just this, isn't there?"

Again Shem smiled, almost knowingly. "Likely very far away, but of course, Perrin," he said in the tones of a man telling his dying best

friend that sure, he'd retrieve for him one of the moons. "Of course there is."

Mahrree sat at the eating table with six candles in front of her, because on a night like tonight she hungered for light as she waited for Perrin to come home.

Jaytsy and Peto had gone to sleep some time ago, but Mahrree was reading the words of Guide Hierum, recorded before he was attacked and killed by the founders of Idumea. Tonight his reminder of how they spent their first six years of existence on that world was even more poignant and timely.

I warn you now that we cannot continue in the ways we are now. Our lives and existence on this world are not forever. An end will come.

In the arguing among our people I see the seeds of antipathy and apathy that will grow to destroy the world we are striving so hard to create. We're drifting from the structure the Creator left us, and if we continue on this path our descendants will not be found faithful at the Last Day when the test ends. What we do today affects our children and their children. For their sakes, we can't continue down this way you are planning. I know your secrets, and they will destroy us all. I beg you to abandon this!

You know as well as I do that the Last Day will find each one of us either facing the reward of Paradise to enjoy the company of our family and friends for the next one thousand years and beyond, or the misery of the Dark Deserts to endure the torture of knowing we failed to do His will.

When that Last Day comes, no one knows but our Creator, and its arrival will surprise those that fight against the Creator's people.

On that day, do not be one of those surprised to find yourself on the wrong side.

On that day, do not find yourself with a blade in hand ready to charge your brother or sister.

On that day, be one of the many standing with the guide, having seen the signs, and recognizing what is coming.

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.

Be among those faithful to the Creator!

Be among those standing firm for what you know, having not so quickly forgotten His words to us!

Be among those who see the marvelous deliverance from the enemy the Creator will send us! For He will send deliverance before He sends destruction to those who fight Him!

Don't destroy His structure for our survival. What you're planning to do will ruin—

And there it ended, his words and his life, as he tried to tell them they had to live as one big family or they'd destroy each other.

Just as they were tonight.

"We've forgotten," Mahrree whispered miserably. "The world is just too loud, and The Writings too still and quiet. The world forces its way; the Creator never forces His will." She rested her chin on her hand in defeat. "You saw how they responded to Perrin's suggestion of giving the surplus to those in need," Mahrree said to the dark. "Suddenly everyone became 'needy'! Are we ever satisfied?"

She reread the words of the next guide, Clewus.

The entire world was given to us freely from the Creator. He doesn't want us to hoard and sell His gifts; He wants us to share all things freely, with whomever has a need. There will always be enough, and even more to spare. No one should be in want. This compulsion to take and then force others to hand over shiny bits of metal—that's the power of the Refuser, his method of putting all of us in bondage to each other. Can't you see?

It was truly ludicrous.

"No one will be lastingly happy with yet another plow, or an additional bale of hay, especially if it cost a friendship or a life. Why do friends come to blows over an ugly hat?"

She felt the cosmos shrug along with her.

“Is there anyone in the world that’s sane?” she whispered. “Shem, certainly. And Rector Yung. But anyone else in the world who realizes we’ve been doing it all wrong?”

There were times the cosmos seemed to wink at her with the notion that there was nothing else for her to know. At least, not *yet*.

Mahrree looked out the dark window. “They’re just like animals,” she decided. “No. *Worse* than animals. We may no longer debate but we’ve retained our ability to rationalize away logic and compassion. We can be so great, or be so terrible. It seems we’re content to just be terrible.”



A few nights later Perrin was up again past midnight, but not because of another bad dream. This time it was because of a good one, of his own making.

The idea had been growing in him for over a year now, but since Edge’s temper tantrum three days ago—where more than forty properties changed hands, two dozen more were burned to the ground, five people died, and Edge had divided itself into too many factions of former friends and neighbors who now hated each other that he lost count—he was nearly jumping out of his skin at the thought of what he could do next. An hour each night for a few weeks ought to do it.

So, once he was sure Mahrree was dozing deeply—she didn’t think she snored, and he’d never tell her that she did because it was always a reliable signal for him—he slipped out of bed and crept down the stairs. He made his way to his study and shut the door noiselessly. Before he lit a candle, he made sure the curtains were closed completely. He didn’t want any light leaking out, or any worried soldier or nosy neighbor peeking in.

Once he lit the candle, it dimly illuminated his shelf of books and ignored awards. Nearly vibrating with excitement, he carefully pulled from the top shelf a roll of parchments.

He set them on his desk and grinned.

Chapter 24 ~ “We will accept no less than a two week stay.”

Harvest Festival was uncomfortable that year.

Even though six weeks had passed since the riot that divided the village, Mahrree noticed that the market which was normally crammed with happy people preparing for the feast was now uncommonly quiet. People still shopped, but they snatched up items and headed away before accidentally bumping into someone they now hated. While the usual games and events were planned, they were sparsely attended since no one wanted to risk coming face to face with an enemy.

Some people were still upset with Magistrate Wibble and Chief Barnie, a few with Trum, and even a couple with Colonel Shin. There was enough antagonism to throw around liberally, with no one taking blame for their own behaviors.

The Strongest Soldier Race was run without any notice to the village, so only soldiers and the Shins witnessed it. Even though Perrin lost to Shem by a couple of seconds, it was still his victory because he took an unscheduled detour through Trum’s new cattle pen.

Trum had his laborers had hastily put it together, connecting two properties that he now claimed and spanning a road that had been there for a hundred years. Mahrree had never seen Lieutenant Offra laugh before, but he did so almost uncontrollably as he told her about Colonel Shin leaping over the fence which terrified three hundred head of cattle. Within moments the stampede began, easily tearing through the makeshift pen. Mahrree had been waiting along the route to cheer on her husband, but she had to first see the mess he created. She arrived at the empty fields to watch a cloud of dust making its

way to Moorland. Trum shouted and wailed and begged his neighbors and workers to round up his cattle running west, but no one was too eager to help. Many of his neighbors had been hoping to claim those animals and lands themselves, and when his laborers heard they weren't going to be paid extra, they dawdled in saddling up their horses.

The glare Trum shot at Mahrree only made her grin, and she and Offra laughed all the way back to the village green to see the end of the race. Even Shem had to admit that had Perrin not taken that quarter mile detour off of Brillen's route he would have easily won.

However, Perrin feigned surprise to hear that he had strayed from the route Karna had set, and blinked in believable innocence when Chief Barnie told him Trum wanted to press charges.

"But all I did was run along a road that's been there longer than I have. How about this: tell Trum I'll personally go round up his cattle."

Trum didn't take him up on the offer, nor was there any law in the books that he could throw at Perrin about running on roads.

Trum never did recover all of his lost cattle, but Perrin told Mahrree he'd noticed some of the herds west of Edge seemingly a bit fuller than they had been. Apparently there was no deadline on appropriating the goods of the dead.

When the Raining Season rolled around that year, Mahrree hoped that the cold would bring down the heated lingering resentment in Edge. Some tensions *were* beginning to ease. Some people even smiled back at her at the market. But most Edgers were keeping to their homes now that the snows had come. In what condition they would emerge in the new year was a mystery, like planting an unfamiliar seed and hoping that whatever blooms later was worth the space and water given it.

But a knock at the front door on the afternoon of the 43rd Day of Raining Season reminded Mahrree there were no more predictable seasons. There stood an official messenger from Idumea. That the messenger came to the house, and not the fort, gave Mahrree a hint of what it was about.

She opened and read the message.

Then she said, "Hmmm."

She put on her thick cloak and walked in the falling snow to the fort, into the reception area of the command tower, and up the stairs.

Shem, consulting the map on the wall, looked at her in surprise.

She raised her eyebrows briefly.

He gave her a complicated look back.

She held her hands up in surrender. "That's all I know, Shem. Don't confuse me. Is he in?"

Shem grinned. "Yes." He knocked on the wall behind him in a pattern that apparently signaled, *Your wife's here*.

"Really? Send her in," Perrin called.

When Mahrree walked in he raised his eyebrows at her in concern. She gave him a unconvincing smile and held up the message.

"How's it phrased?" he asked.

She opened it up. "'Colonel Shin, Mrs. Shin, Miss Jaytsy, and Mr. Peto are *expected* to join the Cush family blah, blah, blah . . . for The Dinner. The Cush family would be most pleased if the Shin family agrees to *reside* at the High General's mansion during their visit.' And Mrs. Cush added, 'We will accept no less than a two week stay. And bring that sweet, handsome Uncle Shem of yours.'"

"Hmm," was all Perrin said.

"That was my response too. They've given us a full three moons' warning. I mean, *preparation time*."

A voice from the outer office called, "I'm not going."

"If I'm going, you're going, Zenos," Perrin yelled back. "Even though it'll have been almost two years, I don't think they'll let me back in Idumea without my escort."

The door swung open and there stood Shem with a mischievous smile. "We *could* really have some fun there, you know."

"I'm done having fun, Shem."

"Good. So am I," and he slammed the door.

"We don't have to send a response for some time," Perrin said quietly to his wife. "We can ignore it for a while, can't we?"

Knock-knock . . . knock-knock-knock.

Perrin had heard that knock so many times each week he thought at some point it would stop causing him to cringe. Or at least stop the twitching near his eye.

But no.

Some part of his body always involuntarily spasmed when that third knock hit the door, followed by the last two signaling the arrival

of the biggest pain in his . . . life. Aside from the occasional moments when Thorne's true personality burst out to confront Perrin, he was usually a compliant, eager-to-please officer.

Which made Perrin want to kick him.

"Come in." Sometimes it was so hard to get those words out.

The door opened and there he stood with what he likely thought was his most handsome grin, but he used it on the wrong person.

"Sir, I noticed Mrs. Shin was here this afternoon?"

"Yes . . ."

"She was holding an official parchment?"

"Tell me, Thorne—do you enjoy noticing *everything*?"

His jaw worked up and down for a moment. "Why, yes . . . isn't that my job?"

"I don't know," Perrin said coldly. "Is it?"

Thorne glanced around the office, searching for an answer. Finally his eyes rested again on Perrin, and he pointed at him in the same manner the cheese hugglers do when they're convinced they're being had.

"Ha-ha," the captain produced a grin. "It is, isn't it? As second in command—"

Now Perrin glanced around the office. "Thorne, just who are you trying to remind of that fact? Is there anyone in this room who doesn't know that?"

Thorne pulled his finger back. "Uh, no sir? I just, just—"

"You came in here for a reason, Captain?"

His tense smile returned. "Yes. Yes! I'm assuming Mrs. Shin was here because she received the invitation?"

Perrin's shoulders went rigid. "Invitation."

"To The Dinner, of course!" Thorne grinned so dazzlingly that Perrin clenched his fist under the desk. More of those teeth begged—*begged*—to be knocked out.

"Ample warning," was all Perrin replied.

"So . . . can I tell my grandmother to expect you? You can choose the rooms you wish to occupy while you're there."

Perrin reclinched his fist. "Mrs. Shin will send our family's response when a decision has been made, Captain. You need not worry yourself about women's duties."

Thorne blinked. "But if I can render *any* service, sir—"

It was the insincerity. Perrin stared deep into the captain's blue eyes, but Thorne had built an impenetrable wall there which blocked a variety of truths which Perrin would likely find most

repulsive. Some men had a little to hide. This boy hid his entire world.

“If there’s nothing else, Captain, I’m about to go out on rounds.” It was a bit early yet, but no sense in procrastinating.

Thorne stepped reluctantly away from the door. He must have had something more to say. “Uh, no sir—”

Perrin pushed past him and jogged down the stairs.

Thorne sighed and stared longingly at the colonel’s desk.

Jaytsy headed home from the market one afternoon, her breath forming fog and her basket heavy with the last of the year’s apples and some still-warm sweet breads. The heat coming up through the cloth protecting them was deliciously warm on her gloved hands.

“On such a cold day, would you accept someone walking you home?”

She shivered when she heard the voice next to her ear, but it wasn’t because of cold.

“Of course, Captain Thorne.” A part of her was startled that he still existed. She hadn’t even thought of him for many moons. But that was partly because everything about him was all wrong. His eyes reminded her of ice, his blonde hair the bales of hay in *that barn*. And always there was that odd scent of lavender.

“Thank you,” she said curtly as she took his arm. She felt him flex his muscles in his sleeve and she wished she had a pin to poke them with.

“Did you hear about the invitation?” he said amiably.

“To your grandparents’ dinner? Yes, it came about a week ago.”

“I’m looking forward to it. My family is too. I think they’re hoping for another show to be put on by your father,” Thorne chuckled stiffly. “I wonder what he’ll come up with this year! Last year was, well, a little dull by comparison to that baby incident. He really seems to enjoy babies—”

“Oh, Captain—” Jaytsy cut him off before he could suggest anything else about babies.

“Lemuel,” he reminded her.

She suppressed a groan. “Lemuel, we haven’t decided if we’re going.”

“Oh, but you have to come!”

“Lemuel, it’s just that . . . I don’t think . . .” She faltered until she

came up with, “My father still has some memories of Idumea that I’m not sure he’ll ever get over. He’s come so far this past year, and we’d hate for anything to happen to him. It’d be terrible for him to go to that mansion now and, well, you can imagine. It certainly wouldn’t be dull, I could promise that!”

Lemuel worked that over for a second before declaring it, “Funny,” faster than he ever had before. “Jayts—”

She winced at his shortening her name like that. Only her family, Uncle Shem, and now Deckett—or rather, Deck—called her that.

“—can I share something with you? I really want your father to go. My grandfather’s health has been failing, and my father is . . .” Thorne sighed and sounded genuinely concerned. “I’m not so sure that my father is *up to replacing him*.”

Jaytsy watched him from the corner of her eye and noticed his jaw moving, looking for the right words.

“He can be difficult,” Lemuel finally said. “I believe Colonel Shin would be a far better High General. He needs to be there at The Dinner so that everyone can see him as we see him now. He’s just the right . . .” He shook his head, unsure of how to phrase it.

Jaytsy let out a breath that hung in the cold air while her insides squirmed. “I really don’t know, Lemuel—”

He stopped walking. Taking Jaytsy’s hand, the captain looked around and found a wide tree off the side of the road. He pulled her over to the meager shelter of it, out of the traffic of the dozen or so people on their way to the market.

Gripping her arms, he looked fervently into her eyes. “Miss Jaytsy—*Jayts*—then you come with me! Please, to Idumea.”

Jaytsy’s mouth dropped open. “Just . . . just . . .”

“Yes, just you and me! We could take the fort coach and talk all the way there. We’ll stay with my grandparents at the mansion, tour Idumea, and see the plays. I heard the one about your father is quite good. They keep extending its run, and they’d give us the best seats in the theater, I’m sure. There’s so much you didn’t get to see two years ago. Let me show it all to you! My mother could take you shopping. I know that’s what girls love to do,” he said as if he’d uncovered some mystical secret. “You could buy the newest dresses, shoes, hats . . . anything you want. It’s all yours!”

Jaytsy couldn’t speak. She could only stare at him as he beamed at her and his brilliant idea.

He had no idea what girls loved. At least not *this* girl. He had a

narrow view of women and applied it lazily to her. Nearly two years ago she'd enjoyed shopping with her grandmother, but since then the world had changed around her. Even Edge had shifted, and pushed her in new directions as well. She didn't even care that she wore her grandmother's flowered dresses *after* Harvest Season.

And no men she cared about were interested in fashion or the theater. It was all fake and contrived, and unappealing.

But she knew what she *did* love, and it was glorious to no longer worry about the world's opinions. She loved real things. Dirt on her hands and under her fingernails. Flicking insects off the corn. Filling wagons with potatoes. Braiding the greens of onions together. Measuring milk yields. Churning butter. Sampling cheeses. Looking into cows' eyes.

Cow eyes.

Lemuel shook her a little by the arms. "Are you all right?"

"Yes," she finally muttered.

"Yes, you'll come with me?"

"No!" she nearly shouted. "I meant, yes, *I'm all right*. But Lemuel . . . I need to talk to my parents about this." That was a safe excuse to buy her time.

"Of course. Naturally." Lemuel lost a bit of his earnestness. "Maybe you can convince them they should all come. Please try, Jaytsy. Promise me? And consider us? Much could happen on a trip like this." He licked his lips hungrily.

That was *exactly* what she worried about. Much *could* happen alone with him in a carriage for days. She felt the urge to kick him for his presumption. Of course he wanted her alone in a carriage for days. No room for her to fight and run, no Shem to threaten him . . .

"I will speak to my parents, Captain Thorne," she said firmly. "That's all I can promise right now. I need to go home. My mother's expecting me."

"Of course." He smiled and began to lean toward her.

Jaytsy wasn't about to be nauseated again by an unwanted kiss. She dodged out of the way, and in two quick steps she was back on the side of the road heading home at her fastest walk.

Thorne jogged to catch up to her and let escape an awkward chuckle. Without a word she took his arm again out of politeness, although she wasn't sure why—it wasn't as if he had been insinuating anything *polite*—and he patted her hand. It was the longest three blocks she'd ever walked.

When she dropped the basket of food in the kitchen a few minutes later, she told her mother, “We have a problem. Lemuel Thorne walked me home. He wants me to go to Idumea.”

Mahrree shook her head as she put another dish in the wash basin. “Now they’ve got him pressuring us, and they barely sent the invitation—”

“Mother, you don’t understand. He wants *me* to go to Idumea. With him. *Alone*.”

Jaytsy had never seen a mother bear before. But she’d heard stories about what they look like when someone steps between them and their cubs. Mahrree Shin must have worn the exact same look.

“WHO DOES HE THINK HE IS?” she bellowed.

Jaytsy put a finger in her ear and wiggled it dramatically. “A little louder, Mother, and he can probably hear you. He’s on his way to the fort now—”

Mahrree threw down her washing cloth and started for the door.

Jaytsy leaped in front of her. “No! Mother! Stay! Stop!”

Mahrree stopped reluctantly and put her hands on her hips. “How dare he assume he can take my daughter, *alone*, to Idumea!”

Jaytsy took her mother’s shoulders and gently steered her back into the kitchen. “So I’m guessing the answer is no? I was really hoping you’d say yes—”

Mahrree’s mouth fell open.

Jaytsy shook her head. “I’m joking, only joking!”

“You have just as bad timing as your father!” Mahrree sat down resolutely on a chair, but she eyed the door with some level of planning in her furious eyes. “What did you say to him?”

Jaytsy moved to block her mother’s view of the door and to keep her from rushing up to the fort with the butcher knife lying on the work table. “He wants us to go because he thinks Father needs to make a good impression. Sounds like he’s not too fond of his own father and doesn’t have much confidence in him as a future High General. But if you don’t want to go, he said he’ll just take me. I told him I’d talk to you. So I’m talking.”

“And I’m NOT agreeing!” Mahrree was nearly purple.

“I knew you wouldn’t.” She sat next to Mahrree and put a heavy hand on her leg to keep her in the chair. Jaytsy thought briefly what her mother’s reaction would have been had she known what Thorne tried to do to her nine moons ago in the barn. She pictured bits of Lemuel Thorne scattered over several square miles of

Idumea.

“Jaytsy, I thought he had forgotten about you since The Dinner two years ago. He hasn’t tried courting you or anything. But I guess he was just waiting.” Mahrree paused before asking, “It’s really none of my business but . . . well, yes it is! You are my daughter after all—do you have any feelings for him?”

Jaytsy laughed softly. “Only the worst, Mother.”

Mahrree sighed. “That’s what I thought, but I figured I better ask.” She paused again, some of her fury draining away. “So, speaking of young men, when does Deck come back from Mountseen?”

“Any day now, I suppose. He didn’t think his aunt and uncle would want him to stay away from his cows too long, but he was hoping to fix up their house a bit. They had problems with their windows leaking, and he wanted to spend some time with his cousin Atlee. They used to be as close as brothers in Moorland.”

“He’s such a good boy. Man. Umm—”

Jaytsy leaned against her mother. “I’ll agree with that.”

That evening Perrin sent Mahrree a message with a corporal that he wouldn’t be home for dinner, and it wasn’t until nearly bed time that he came through the door.

Mahrree was waiting for him on the sofa—Jaytsy and Peto already in their rooms for the night—antsy to tell him about Jaytsy’s run-in with Lemuel Thorne.

“Everything all right at the fort?”

“What? Oh, yes. Well, I wasn’t at the fort, really, for much of the time,” he said distractedly as he came into the gathering room, his face suspiciously cheerful.

“So where were you?”

“Doesn’t matter,” he brushed it off. “You look concerned.”

“I am. Perrin, we have a problem. Thorne wants to take Jaytsy to Idumea for The Dinner, even if we don’t go! *Alone!*”

For the past several hours she had been anticipating his response. When Colonel Perrin Shin was enraged—at others, not at his family or during a nightmare—it was a powerfully terrifying thing, and also a bit thrilling, she had to admit.

She’d pictured him roaring, marching to the eating table, retrieving

the long knife he stashed in the secret drawer—the sword would be too obvious, he'd decide—and charging up to the fort.

She would have to stop him at that point, since there really wasn't any basis for killing Captain Thorne just because he had inappropriate plans.

But once again all of her imagining and speculating as to how Perrin would react to someone wanting to take his daughter was all for naught.

He just smiled at his wife. "I don't think we have a problem."
That was it.

Not even a "He wants to do what?!" to begin his tirade, which didn't occur. He just blinked several times and grinned.

"How can you say that?" she wailed. Just when she wanted him to lose his temper, he wouldn't!

He looked around to make sure the bedroom doors were closed, and turned back to his wife, his eyes nearly on fire with excitement. "Time for you to learn some more of my and Shem's signals."

Jaytsy woke up extra early the next morning, the 51st Day of Raining Season. The sun wouldn't be up for a while, but her father had knocked on her door late last night as he was going to bed. He told her that he noticed Deckett had come back, so he had stopped to check on him. Since it was so late, Deck didn't want to come by the house and bother Jaytsy, but she would have stayed up all night to see him, had he asked. He wanted her to drop by to see him on her way to school, if she had the time.

She'd laughed at that. She'd give him all her time. Her final year of school wasn't important anyway. She'd already passed the Final Administrative Competency Test last year with the highest marks, and just went for something to do since she wasn't old enough for any women's college.

When Jaytsy went to the washroom she was surprised to see her parents already up, and both wearing slightly unnatural smiles.

"Why are you up so early?"

They shrugged in unison.

"Felt like getting up early," Mahrree said. "Needed to catch up on some grading."

"Me too," her father added lamely.

Her mother gave him a look that Jaytsy couldn't define. It must have been one of Shem and Father's silly codes. Jaytsy couldn't understand why she encouraged their behavior by learning their game. Most of the time they looked like they were trying to wriggle itches off their faces.

When she came out of the washroom a few minutes later, her father snatched some of her mother's papers and began reading them. Jaytsy just shook her head on her way to her bedroom and came back out in her thickest woolen dress and warm cloak.

"Going somewhere this early?" her mother asked, her voice a little high.

"Yes, remember? I was going to check on . . . Deck's oldest cow. She seemed a little down lately. I think she misses him."

Mahrree's smile twisted. "Yes, yes. Deckett is most likely still asleep since he got in so late, so she doesn't know he's back. You go talk to that *cow*. Cheer her up."

Perrin coughed into his mug and Mahrree slapped him on the back. A loud knock at the back door surprised Jaytsy.

But Perrin stood up automatically, almost as if he was expecting it, and headed for the kitchen.

"Why, Deckett Briter! What a surprise. Yes, of course Jaytsy's up. I think she was on her way to see your old cow."

Jaytsy ran to the kitchen door and clenched her fists to keep from throwing her arms around Deck in front of her father. Five days had felt like five years.

Deck beamed at her. "Care to take a walk?"

The thought of taking a walk in the freezing cold of the dark early morning didn't strike her as an unusual request at all. "Of course!" She gave her father a quick goodbye kiss on the cheek. "I'll be back before school, Mother."

"Give my regards to the cow," she called back.

Mahrree heard the door close and Perrin came back to the table. He sat down across from his wife with a spark in his eyes, and leaned in.

She leaned toward him as well, expecting one of his morning 'greetings.'

She was not, however, expecting what he said next, in his low,

dreamy voice, just as she began to pucker.

“So, how long do you think it’ll be until I get to start calling you grandmother?”

Jaytsy came home an hour later marching through the back door while holding firmly on to Deck’s hand—the rest of him following happily—and stopped at the table in the eating room where her parents still sat.

Peto looked up from his breakfast and groggily stared at them.

Beaming, Jaytsy shook Deck’s hand, as if some kind of signal.

Deckett cleared his throat. “Colonel Shin, Mrs. Shin? Jaytsy would like to tell you something,” and he smiled at Perrin.

Jaytsy gave Deckett the briefest of looks—apparently that wasn’t what they had rehearsed—before turning to her parents.

Their odd smiles from earlier were magnified on their faces. Mahrree squirmed with anticipation until she bounced in her chair.

Jaytsy’s mouth dropped open. “You already *know!* How could you already know? I just found out myself!”

“Know what?” Peto asked.

Deck glared, actually glared, at his future father-in-law. “Colonel Shin, you said last night you wouldn’t say a word.”

Perrin held up his hands. “I swear, I didn’t *say a word.*”

“Jaytsy, just say it!” Mahrree nearly screamed, her hands squeezing her cheeks in anticipation.

“We want to get married!” Jaytsy yelled.

“What!” Peto hollered. “Why?”

Mahrree was already on her feet rushing over to them. She couldn’t wait to hug her future son-in-law, who looked stunned as he put his arms around her and sent Perrin a look that said, *Help?*

Perrin laughed and went to hug his daughter instead.

But Peto just sat there, rubbing his eyes.

“That is, Father, if it’s all right with you and Mother?” Jaytsy remembered to say as she pulled out of his hug. “I mean, I’m not yet seventeen—”

Perrin kissed her on the cheek. “I told Deckett last night when we discussed this that I thought it’s an excellent idea. I’m sure your mother is happy as well.”

Mahrree finally released Deck. “Absolutely!”

“I told you they’d be all right with it,” Deck said shyly to Jaytsy. She gave him a quick kiss on the lips and they both blushed.

That was too much for Peto. “Ah, no, NO! Come on! Deck, we were having fun. Even with her around. Why go and ruin it? I’m going back to bed,” and he started for his bedroom.

Deck chuckled. “I’m not ruining anything, Peto. How can becoming your brother ruin things?”

Peto stopped and sighed loudly. “Can you be my brother without kissing her in front of me?”

“I kind of like it. Sorry.”

Peto exhaled in resignation and held out his hand to Deck. “Whatever. Welcome to the family.”

Deck shook his hand and pulled him in for a hug.

“Don’t kiss me!” Peto yelled.

“Don’t worry!” Deck yelled back.

“Well at least someone’s surprised,” Jaytsy said, a little glumly, as her parents laughed.

Mahrree elbowed Perrin—he *had* spilled all the beans last night without saying a word—and he sent an apologetic glance to Jaytsy.

She brightened. “Uncle Shem! He doesn’t know! *Right?*” she glared at her father.

He shook his head.

“Deck, let’s go find him!”

“No, Jaysy,” Perrin told her. “He’s been out all night training new recruits. Let him sleep. But I have an idea,” he smiled slyly. “We’ll invite him over for dinner so you can surprise him.”

“If you can keep it a secret, Colonel,” Deck teased.

Perrin pointed at him. “We have to stop that ‘colonel’ nonsense right now, *Mr. Briter*. My wife called my father General for as long as she knew him.”

“*Almost* as long,” Mahrree said.

Perrin gave her a questioning look, but she waved him off. “Anyway,” he continued, “I never cared for that. I’m not your colonel. Nor,” he said gently, “could I ever replace your father. I told you this before, but now I mean it: you’ll have to call me Perrin.”

Deckett cringed. “That may take me a while, sir. But I’ll try.”

“And no ‘sir’. And I’ll try to not to say anything to Shem.”

Mahrree had been bouncing in place for several minutes. “Do you have a date picked?”

Deck and Jaytsy looked at each other. “Day after my birthday,

when I'm officially independent and seventeen," Jaytsy said. "The 47th Day of Planting Season, 337."

Mahrree sighed in relief. "Do you know what day that is?" she murmured loudly to Perrin.

"I do," said Deckett, with uncharacteristic hotness. "And that captain can dance alone that night!"

"Deckett, Jaytsy," Perrin said fighting down a mischievous grin as he thought about Lemuel Thorne looking vainly for Jaytsy at The Dinner when she was at her wedding instead, "perhaps we keep this news just to the family. Considering Thorne and everything—"

"We already talked about that too," Jaytsy said. "We thought about getting married in Mountseen. Deck's old rector moved there, and his aunt and uncle and cousin are there. And since you're allowed to travel again, Father . . ."

"We could use the fort for the dinner," Mahrree suggested. "I already know how to organize it! It'll be nice organizing a dinner for uniforms again." She didn't add, *Instead of feeding Edge*.

Perrin grinned at her. "And why do I have the feeling there may be more uniforms in Mountseen than in Idumea that night?"

Knock-knock . . . knock-knock-knock.

Perrin really shouldn't sigh so loudly, he knew. Someone might hear him.

Then again, maybe *someone* would and get the hint.

"Come in."

The door opened and there was the toothy grin. "Sir, I just wanted to make sure that midday meal was satisfactory to you."

Perrin sat back. "Midday meal, Thorne?"

"Yes, sir," the captain stepped in. "I know you usually bring something from home. Mrs. Shin must be an excellent cook—"

Perrin's chest began to puff up with another exasperated sigh.

"—but I noticed that today you ate in the mess hall."

"I did."

"With Lieutenant Offra and some other soldiers, sir?"

"Yes." He slowly let out the breath or he would have exploded.

"So . . ." Thorne was hedging to know what they were talking about, but Perrin wasn't about to bore him with his conversation

with the young men about how to build their stamina. “You see,” Thorne continued when Perrin was silent, “we recently acquired a new supplier of beef—not Trum—and knowing how much you enjoy steak, I was hoping you found the beef to your satisfaction.”

“I had the leftover chicken stew.”

“Of course you would,” Thorne simpered. “Leaving the fresher meal to the men—”

“I *like* the chicken stew, Thorne, now *without* mushrooms.”

“Good, good! An army is only as happy as its stomach!”

“Came up with that all on your own, did you, Captain?”

Thorne swallowed. “Uh, yes sir? About the chicken . . . we’ve used the same chicken supplier for several years now, and—”

Perrin leaned forward and took up his quill again to suggest, *I’m ready to get back to work, aren’t you?* “The chicken supplier is fine. And the men seem to be enjoying the beef. If there’s nothing else?”

Thorne shook his head. “Just making sure you’re completely satisfied, sir. That’s why I’m here.”

He shut the door behind him and Perrin exhaled.

“Of course that’s why you’re here. At least I’m satisfied *you’re* not about to become my son-in-law.”

And for the first time after a Thorney visit, Perrin chuckled.

Last night poor Deckett Briter had been more nervous than any man should have to be. He’d asked Perrin to sit down at the kitchen table, then paced around it. Because his hands didn’t know what to do without a hoe or an udder in them, they were everywhere gesturing stiffly, hiding themselves in Deckett’s pockets, and fumbling with his buttons.

“Sir, I need to speak to you about something very important. Rather, an important situation, I suppose . . .”

It always took him a few minutes to relax around Perrin. Until then Deckett treated his sentences like an indecisive farmer, cutting off bits here, pulling out something then burying it away again, and throwing weedy words everywhere.

Perrin settled in for the show.

“You see, sir . . . colonel, sir,” he said, even though Perrin reminded him yet again to call him by his first name, “I spoke to my uncle about this . . . Your daughter is an amazing young woman, who I respect greatly, and I believe we’ve formed a bit of a . . . I realize that I’m not exactly what you would have imagined for your daughter—”

Perrin had smiled at that. “You’re absolutely right.” But he stopped when he saw Deckett growing paler.

“Yes, sir. And I know I’m not as smart as she is . . . Did she tell you I had to take the Final Administrators’ exam twice to get into the university at Mountseen?”

“Deckett, you know how I feel about those exams. They don’t measure a person’s true worth—”

But Deckett had a speech prepared, and for a man not normally of many words, he had a lot he wanted to get out.

“I never could have got in to the University of Idumea like you. I’m not much of a speaker or talker or whatever, like you or Mrs. Shin.”

Or your father, thank the Creator, Perrin thought briefly.

“So I never could have been a debator, even if it was still allowed. And I’m not as clever with politics and, and, and stuff like that, or know as many people like you do, because when I listen to all of you talk at dinner, sometimes I get a bit lost. And I’ve heard that girls tend to prefer someone like their fathers, but I’m not as brave as you, because I’m not aggressive at all. I can’t even butcher the animals I raise, and honestly, sir, sometimes the chickens intimidate me—”

“Deck,” Perrin tried to interrupt, but the young man was as unstoppable as a stampede, so Perrin simply watched with amused sympathy.

“I’m a cattle man, and becoming a farmer man—actually, that would be just a farmer, I guess, and I’m certainly not soldier material, sir, because I like to create life, not destroy it. No offense, sir, I realize you actually defend life, but even you told me once that you feel more like a destroyer. But sir, I want to assure you that—”

“Deck!” Perrin said, standing up to catch him as he paced around the table yet again. “You don’t need to keep listing for me all your very admirable traits. I’m already sold on you.”

“You’re what?” Deck said, blinking to wake his brain out of his speech to focus on what Perrin was saying.

“Deck, believe me: I don’t want Jaytsy interested in a soldier. I want her to be happy, and honestly, son, I’ve never seen her happier than since she met you. So if all of this *isn’t* about you wanting to ask her to marry you, you better think again because I won’t tolerate you breaking her heart. Instead, you’ll become the 52nd man whose life I end.”

Deck collapsed on the table at that point, and Perrin spent the next half hour patting him on the back and getting him water and helping him slow his breathing, feeling a bit guilty that Deckett still wasn't sure when Colonel Shin was just playing with him.

Eventually he was able to say, "Sir, may I have your permission to ask Jaytsy to marry me?" while his head rested on the table with a wet cloth on his neck which Perrin had placed there.

"What an excellent idea! But I have one condition: you have to call me Perrin," he said, unable to resist teasing him once more.

"I'm trying to, sir. *Perrin.*"

"Excellent, Mr. Briter. Well done, son."

That evening Shem was already seated with the family to dinner when Deckett came boldly through the kitchen door without knocking. He cuffed Shem playfully on the shoulder and casually sat down by Jaytsy without even an apology for his lateness.

Shem gave him a reproving look which Deckett ignored.

Over the past five moons Deck had become as common a fixture in the Shin household as Shem, but usually he was more reserved, respectful, and nervous, as a courting young man should be.

But not tonight, and Shem watched him warily.

With a twinkle in his eye, Deckett pointed to the plate of bread. "Perrin, could you hand that to me?"

Shem's eyebrows rose at his overly casual tone, and shifted his gaze to Perrin to watch his response.

Perrin didn't look at Shem. Curiously, *no one* in the family seemed to be meeting his gaze.

"Of course, Deck," Perrin said easily. "Anything else?"

"No, but Mahrree, could you pass the soup?"

Shem dropped his fork in astonishment. Now that was *completely* inappropriate, calling Mrs. Shin by her first name?

But Mahrree only nodded, seemingly biting her tongue, and gave Deckett the bowl.

Realizing neither Perrin nor Mahrree would meet his questioning look, Shem next sent Peto a demanding frown.

Peto frowned back as if to say, *Something wrong?*

To his right Shem noticed Deck elbowing Jaytsy, who stared hard at her plate.

“And how about something from you?” Deckett said, with a quaver in his voice that immediately put Shem on guard.

Jaytsy’s head popped up. “How about this?” and she kissed Deck full on the mouth.

“Whoa!” Shem’s eyes bulged nearly out of his head. He banged the table in Yordin fashion, sending all of the dishes clattering. “What’s going on here?” He snatched up his fork again and aimed it at Deckett. “PERRIN! If *you* don’t do something, *I will!*”

“What, Shem?” Perrin said coolly, taking a bite of bread. “Do you have a problem with my future son-in-law?”

Shem sat motionless for at least ten seconds, his jaw sagging.

The family watched him in eager expectation. *Now* all eyes were on him.

He turned slowly to Jaytsy and Deck, who were fully red.

Jaytsy, grinning, nodded.

Shem couldn’t help it. Great big tears rolled down his face as he realized that Jaytsy would be marrying the kindest, gentlest young man he had ever met.

And *not* Lemuel Thorne.

He stood up, came behind Jaytsy and Deck, and hugged them, chairs and all.

“Am I invited?” he asked, his voice growing husky.

“Of course! Uncle Shem, are you all right?” Jaytsy said as Shem pulled away and dabbed at his eyes.

He stood up and cleared his throat. “Yes, yes! I’m just so, so . . . surprised. I couldn’t be happier.” He punched Deck in the shoulder to show how happy he was and kissed Jaytsy on the forehead.

Deck winced as he rubbed his shoulder. “Thanks, Uncle Shem.”

Shem shook his head. “I’m an uncle again.” He sighed as he sat down and stared at the couple. “That’s just wonderful! Our little Jaytsy.” He couldn’t control his chin wobbling as he choked out, “Even little Jaytsy, whose cloths I changed and who used to suck her thumb, is getting married before I am.”

“Ah, Shem,” Peto said, scooping up some soup. “I promise I won’t get married before you. How’s that?”

“Not at all comforting, Peto.”

It was late at night by the time Perrin was able to slip into his office

at home. Part of the problem was that he was battling his wife.

Maybe it was a bit dramatic to cast it in that light, but that's how he felt as he tried to shut the door on Mahrree who kept tossing more ideas at him through the gap while Jaytsy took notes.

"Yes, yes, yes. I'll take care of the letter to the Mountseen Briters. I'll be charming and welcoming, Mahrree, don't worry. And I'll write to Yordin. No, I'm sure it won't be a problem using the fort for the dinner. Move your foot, Mahrree. No, I'm not writing to the Fadhs and Karnas yet—it's too early! I sincerely doubt they're going to Idumea for The Dinner. All right, fine—I'll send them brief messages in the morning telling them to keep the date open, so if you'd just let me shut the—Yes, I'll remind them all to be discreet. No, the Thornes won't find out. Look, I'm going to pinch your fingers in the door . . . Quit planning the dinner already! Get some sleep, Jayts. The entire wedding doesn't have to be figured out tonight!"

He latched the door before Mahrree or Jaytsy could barge in. Peto, the night owl, had gone to bed two hours ago.

Perrin pulled out his best ink and newest quills, setting them precisely on his desk, but not for writing letters. He rubbed his hands together before retrieving a roll of parchment, resting horizontally on the shelf and looking like nothing too interesting.

Filled with renewing energy—and now working against a deadline to create the best secret wedding present ever—he silently unrolled the parchments.

He spent the next hour or so illuminated only by one candle, poring over his work with painstaking care. He stopped working before he became too sleepy, because he didn't want to risk making any mistakes.

This one had to be perfect too, just like the others

Chapter 25 ~ “Like everyone else, I fell for the stories.”

A couple of moons later, on the 37th Day of the new year 337, once again two men sat in the dark office of an unlit building.

“I think you will find all of this most intriguing,” said Mal, eyeing his new partner and making mental notes of his every reaction.

For the past year Mal had grown bored with the world, and it was time to make it interesting again. Brisack was gone, but Mal’s heart had never felt stronger, so it was time to get it pumping again. Too long had the chair across from him remained unoccupied.

“I’m already very impressed,” said the second, younger man.

While he was short and a bit on the stocky side with thinning hair, he had sufficiently beady eyes that no one thought to cross him. He was a perfect badger; on first glance one might think it a soft, furry little animal, but quickly one realizes it’s the most vicious oversized rodent ever to terrorize the world.

Mal regretted that it took him so long to recognize the potential.

“I’ve admired your work for years, Chairman, yet never knew whose work it was. I suspected the directions originated in the hierarchy, but I never dared believe it was so high. You are to be commended, sir.”

Mal nodded at the acceptable response. “I’ve worked hard over the years to keep my involvement unknown. Your predecessor said it was *interference*, but because of his poorly executed ‘interference’ he’s no longer here to criticize. I certainly can’t leave everything to chance. There must be control in every situation.”

The second man nodded. “Of course, sir.”

The Chairman smiled, satisfied that his new partner was already

seeing things his way. “A suitable and contributing colleague is most important to this work. I’ve been watching you for some time, and I was quite pleased with how your office handled that ridiculous ‘Midnight Ride of Perrin Shin’ play that ran for too long.”

“Why, thank you, sir,” Administrator Genev simpered. “Sometimes people simply need to understand the facts *more correctly*. It’s unfortunate that so much of the world labored under the impression that the rescue mission was the idea of General and Colonel Shin. My alterations to the play remedied that, and now the world understands that the Shins were working directly under the Administrators’ orders. The rescue of Edge was not their idea; it was yours.”

Mal nodded. “Yes, very well done. Nearly as clever as your recommendations on how to deal with the Moorland incident.”

Genev offered what he thought was a demur smile. “Again, I thank you, Chairman. Truly, had the garrison suspected what was happening in Moorland, they would have originated the plan that Colonel Shin implemented. He simply anticipated their desires, but the influencing factors of the raid itself, along with its immense success, came directly from the garrison and Idumea. However, for Shin’s small part in carrying out his orders well, the fort was renamed for him and he was released from his probation.”

Mal chuckled. “Brilliant. Absolutely brilliant.”

“We need the world to believe that Shin is acting—and always has been acting—in the Administrators’ behalf.” Genev blinked obsequiously. “To let the citizens believe there is any discordance is to allow them to lend their loyalties to him instead of the Administrators.”

“And a division of loyalty is not what we need,” Mal said.

Genev emitted a noise that barely fit the definition of chuckle. “You don’t need to tell me that, Chairman. That’s my department, after all. I’ve already added dozens of files to what Gadiman left, and I’m sure you’ve seen the reports on those I’ve had brought into Idumea for sedition. Granted, it’s not as many as Gadiman brought in, but it seems the world has become less . . . feisty over the years.” He sounded disappointed by that. “In almost every account they’ve accepted your rule and control quite thoroughly.”

Mal smiled faintly. Genev was bored as well. The perfect companion.

“Except,” Mal said slowly, “*someone* in the world has chosen to suddenly throw the past into our faces again.”

Genev sat up eagerly. “Oh, yes!” he snarled in glee. “If only we

knew *who*—”

“I assume that in time your office will figure that out, and you can deal with their disloyalty,” Mal assured him. “In the meantime, we need a strategy for dealing with this development.”

Genev nodded thoughtfully. “First we need to ascertain if the map truly is Terry’s lost map.”

“It’s not,” Mal said. “It’s a forgery. A copy.”

Genev squinted. “Are you sure?”

“Almost completely. I had some historians look at it and they say the ink is too fresh and dark, and the parchment doesn’t appear to be old enough.”

Genev shrugged. “Well, then. That’s that. Nothing more needs to be done—”

Mal held up his finger. “Oh, but there does. Think about this: whoever makes one copy can make *several* copies.”

“Yes,” slowly said the Administrator of Loyalty as if following the logic, but the blank look in his eyes indicated he was lost.

Mall took a patient breath. “This copy was sent to me. More copies may be sent elsewhere to others who may be curious or quietly rebellious. The entire world has been gripped with land lust, Administrator. We’ve had reports for several moons now about citizens stealing the land of the dead, and in many cases, the land of those still living. It’s whetted their appetite for even more. This map in the hands of the wrong people? We could have a major loss of containment. If people go searching for Terry’s western lands on their own, there go all of our test subjects.”

Genev nodded, a bit slower than Brisack would have. “Naturally, sir. This means, of course, that we need to be in control of what happens next with the map. How many know of its existence?”

“Besides you and me, a few other Administrators at best. But as I said, I don’t know if other copies have already been sent out. We need to make the first move, and quickly.”

“Yes, we do,” Genev said, his eyes shifting in thought.

Brisack never appeared so overtly worried, Mal thought to himself. But it’s better to have such a transparent companion.

“How many people in the world even remember Terry?” Genev wondered. “The schools stopped teaching him and his findings over 15 years ago. That’s nearly a generation.”

Mal nodded. “And how many of their parents and grandparents remember him? Or his travels with King Querul the First’s soldiers

past the western deserts? Or his fantastical stories about the origins of the world? I suspect their memories are fuzzy and incomplete. We can manipulate that.”

Genev raised an eyebrow. “I saw the Administrator of Culture leaving your office earlier this evening. Was he there because—”

“Because the world is going to want to remember who Terryp was, once this business of his discovered map gets out,” Mal said. “The Administrator and his staff will provide that ‘memory,’ as well as a *more correct* evaluation of Terryp, his mental stability, and his findings.”

“Crafted just right,” Genev began to smile, “Terryp can be completely discredited.”

“But that won’t work with the entire population,” Mal sighed. “There are many in my generation who still think of him fondly. We can easily sway the younger who have no lingering memories and never played ‘Find missing Terryp’ in their schoolyards. But the older generation, with its propensity to remember everything far better than it ever was, will be a harder sell.”

“I also saw the Administrator of Science leaving your office?” Genev hinted.

“Yes,” Mal sighed more dismally. “We have to send out an expedition. We’re going to prove, once and for all, the truth about Terryp’s western lands beyond the desert.”

Genev’s jaw dropped. “You can’t be serious! Who would volunteer for such a dangerous mission and subject themselves to the same torments that affected Terryp so that he went insane—”

Genev stopped when he saw the slight smile on Mal’s face.

“I fell for it,” Genev whispered. “Like everyone else, I fell for the stories.”

Mal’s smile began to widen. “It won’t be that difficult, you see. Even you still believe what you were told. Genev,” the Chairman sat back in his chair, “did you know that the first three Queruls kept servants?”

Genev shrugged. “Every king needs servants—”

“No, not like that. I mean, *kept servants*. For years. They never left the compound.”

Genev’s raised eyebrows told Mal this was news to him.

“When I first took over this mansion 20 years ago I made a thorough inspection of it. I knew the first Queruls were ruthless but brilliant in their own ways. They also would have been arrogant enough

to keep records of their triumphs. And they did.” Mal smiled smugly. “I found crates of documents hidden behind a false wall dating back to Querul the First. I had never before realized he was such a skilled researcher in his own right; he began his experiment on containment at the beginning of the Great War in 195. He started with eight servants and kept them confined to this compound. Ever wonder why the grounds are surrounded by a stone wall twice as tall as a man?”

“Not to keep the enemies out?”

“No—to keep his servants *in*. Oh, he told them he had it constructed for safety, but his personal writings said it was to test a theory. He told his servants that they were like family to him, and he’d hate for them to be witness to the devastation that was occurring in Idumea with raids from outlying villages. They believed him. Every horror imaginable, he imagined and shared with them. Soon they were too terrified to even consider approaching the walls, sure that a stray arrow would come over the top and hit them. They found arrows many mornings in the compound, evidence of battles that raged around the mansion. Or so they surmised.”

Genev was breathless.

Mal smiled at his stunned response. “After five years Querul’s servants had no desire to leave the mansion grounds. Only their small corner of the world was safe, obviously.

“But whenever Querul thought his servants’ belief was waning, he’d drop more evidence over the stone walls, usually in the form of dead bodies desecrated in torturous ways. Even a few children’s corpses were tossed over, to demonstrate that no one was immune from the fighting surrounding the Idumea. He traumatized them into believing nowhere was safe.”

“But,” Genev finally spoke, “fighting never reached the heart of Idumea. The edges, yes, but the army always kept it out of the center of the city.”

“Now, how would Querul’s servants ever know about that?”

Genev blinked. “They wouldn’t! If their only source of information was Querul the First, then—”

“Precisely. He even had some of his soldiers run around the compound a couple of times a year, screeching and shouting. He achieved complete control over the knowledge and thoughts of his servants. So widely successful was he that he took the next step: he began to use the same methods over the world. First he

controlled what they knew and eliminated that which was counter to his agenda. That was when he established neighborhood schools, an idea which we've expanded. Querul also gathered all of the family lines and with them, much of the history concerning the first families. Telling everyone he was to compile it all in one shared book, to be distributed freely throughout the world, was what convinced everyone to give up their most prized documents.

"He also found and collected records written by the first families, the guides, and even the one who claimed he was the Creator. And Querul discovered documents containing descriptions of terrain and the geography of this entire sphere, details about the stars, movements of the sea, descriptions of phenomena such as storm patterns and even what happens when a volcano erupts.

"It became clear to Querul that much of this information had been passed down orally from parent to child, since parchment was so expensive and rarely used for any writings except the most important details, as those documents represented. Without that knowledge being recorded, it would eventually be forgotten.

"But Querul had worried that if somehow all of those bits and pieces were ever compiled together, it would represent a vast wealth of knowledge. And if the populace had all that knowledge, nothing could restrain them from leaving Idumea and its surroundings. They would know enough to break free."

Genev slowly shook his head in amazement. "So the fire . . . the fire that consumed all those writings in the stone vault . . . Querul did that intentionally, didn't he?"

"Oh, yes," Mal nodded in appreciation. "Of course he played it up as if it were a great tragedy, but it was all part of his design. He had many plans for the world and for his own wealth. But if a people aren't contained, their skills, knowledge, and labor can't be capitalized upon by the most powerful in the world.

"So Querul traumatized the world, similarly as he had done to his servants. He embarked on controlling their knowledge and terrifying them from ever leaving. He sent out Terry to gather information about the western lands, fully intending to discredit him when he returned. Terry lent him a hand in that. So inspired and enthused about what he discovered, he came back quite mad. Terry found all kinds of ruins, etchings in stone in other forms of writings, carved illustrations of animals no one had ever seen—it was quite simple to demonstrate the western lands were poisoned and empty for a reason. Look

how maddened Terryp was once he returned!”

“Genius!” Genev breathed.

“Querul was,” Mal sighed, almost in envy. “But someone saw through his tactic: the last guide, Pax. He confronted Querul, told him it was all lies, and that he would expose his deceit to the world. That’s when Querul sent him out to discover new lands for himself. He gave Pax supplies and even his own personal guards, with explicit directions for those guards to kill the meddling old man who claimed he was inspired by the Creator. A few weeks later Querul’s guards returned to him with blood on their hands and a promise that Guide Pax was no longer a threat.”

Genev squinted. “Yes, I’ve heard that before. But Querul had those guards executed—”

Mal chuckled in appreciation. “Yes, that’s what he told the world. He feigned fury that his guards killed the revered guide, the man that was to find new homes for those still troubling the world with violence. But the only one who troubled Querul at that time was old Pax. Querul paid off those guards quite handsomely for a job well done, and they each left Idumea with new names and identities.”

“But . . . but thousands still tried to leave Idumea and the world,” Genev said, struggling to reconcile what he thought he knew with what he knew now.

Education can so easily unseat one’s confidence about the truth of the world, Mal noted privately. Obviously he’d been doing it right all these years.

“Yes, some people tried to run away,” Mal nodded. “They were either loyal to Pax, or were still trying to disrupt the harmony Querul was creating. He let them go for a time, watching where they ran as they left for the forests. Querul turned that to his favor: in essence, *he* created the first Guarders. As people fled he quietly sent his soldiers to slaughter them. But publicly, Querul let the world believe most of them escaped and that they continued to torment the world out of vengeance.”

“So were there any that actually made it to the forests?”

Mal shrugged. “Querul thought so, but how could they survive in such a hostile environment? He doubted any made it for long. In my twenty years of doing this, none of my men have reported seeing anyone else.”

“And just how reliable are your men, sir?” Genev ventured.

“Reliable enough,” Mal insisted.

Genev nodded once back. “Remarkable. I never realized how shrewd Querul the First was.”

“Nor did I, until I found the crate,” Mal agreed. “Then I was wise enough to burn all of his writings so no one else would ever know. Rather made me sad,” he said wistfully. “Makes me wonder if my successor will do the same to all of my research, that no one would ever know the extent of my intellect . . . I suppose I should just never die, then.”

Genev started to smile, until he realized Mal was serious.

“Genev,” the Chairman said with a faraway look in his eyes, “I think I know who sent that map.”

“Who, sir?”

“Someone who had access to it, before the fire. Querul stored many of the records here in the mansion, then moved them to the old garrison. Twice the documents and maps had to be moved. And who do you think may have helped in that?”

Genev shrugged.

“The servants.”

“Oh, sir, where are they now?”

Mal sighed. “Never been able to find out. They were in this mansion for nearly fifty years. Three generations, thirty-three people in all, by the time of Querul the Fourth.”

“The Stupid,” interjected Genev.

“Indeed. The Fourth was convinced by new High General Pere Shin that the servants had been contacted by the Guardians and were plotting against his family. So Querul released them and Shin relocated them somewhere in the east, maybe Coast or Winds. That Shin didn’t keep very good records,” Mal added in irritation, “and my examination of all the garrison files didn’t reveal much, except that he arranged for some people to teach them the ways of the world. The pathetic servants didn’t even know how to read! If they had any brains at all they changed their names and left for other villages. They’d be untrackable by now. All of them are likely dead, but if one of them saw Terryp’s map so many years ago, and stole it—”

“—maybe it was kept in their family all this time,” Genev suggested, “handed down from parent to child, waiting for the opportune moment to reveal it.”

Mal nodded. “Such as at a time like this, when the world becomes hungry for land and wants to escape the safe compound in which they’ve thrived for so many years.”

“What really would be the problem with letting perhaps 10 percent of the population leave?” Genev wondered. “It would give everyone the room they’re wanting, fighting would go down—”

Mal stared at him. “I heard you’ve made a great deal of renovations to your new mansion.”

Genev frowned at the abrupt change of topic, but went along with it. “Gadiman used only a small section of the servants’ quarters. He didn’t open the doors to the north wing for years! I’ve had to hire a dozen more laborers to restore and maintain it—”

“And how is all of that work being paid for?” Mal said.

Genev faltered for a moment. “I thought . . . I thought it was covered in the Administrator Needs clause of my contract.”

“It is. Now, my dear Administrator, where do the funds come from? Our needs are very great, because we in the government give so much to the world that the world needs to give back to us even more.”

“Uh . . . taxation?” Genev ventured.

“Yes, and if our revenue goes down by 10 percent because that many citizens leave, there also go all of your renovations, along with your pay increase and your eight weeks of paid leave—”

“We have to re-contain the world!” Genev burst out. “We can’t afford to lose anyone!”

Mal noticed it frequently took Administrators some time to realize that taxes—*their income*—actually came from real, everyday people. As senseless and bothersome as they usually were, the government really did *need* its citizenry.

“Yes,” Mal intoned, “I believe I made the point for containment some time ago. That’s why we’re not going to ignore this map, Administrator. That’s why we’re sending out our own expedition. We’ll only have to remind the world about the dangers of Terryp’s land and even those in my generation will shrink back in fear.”

“So when the expedition returns with new findings . . .?”

“They’ll be influenced by the Administrators over Culture and Science who, while not knowing nearly as much as you and me, do understand the need for containment, and those findings will be of such a nature that we should be able to keep the world confined here for another 137 years.” Mal clasped his hands on his lap.

Genev shook his head in admiration. “Absolutely stunning! Here I was thinking this would be disastrous, but no . . .” His eyes lit up with a new idea. “Chairman, so *much* could come from something like this. Kill two falcons with one cat?”

Mal frowned. "Just what are you getting at, Genev?"

"You brought me here to deal with another problem, did you not? I've spent several weeks reading all about a certain colonel in the northernmost edge of the world."

Mal couldn't help but lick his lips. "How will Perrin play into this?"

Genev chuckled in his indefinable way. "Years ago he annoyed you, remember? Back in Command School he even challenged you in front of the entire class insisting that your definition of a person as an animal was wrong."

"He did," Mal said steadily, waiting for the rest.

"I read your notes from that time. Shin declared that the Creator made men and women higher than animals, and because of that they are capable of looking evil in the eye and facing it."

Mal made a fist. "And?"

"Sir, hasn't he done precisely that?"

"What do you mean?"

"All I mean is, Shin *recovered*. Where so many other men perished, according to Dr. Brisack's findings, Shin overcame his trauma. And then he went on to organize the northern armies and completely wipe out the Guardians."

"Not completely," Mal whispered. "I'm sure there are still a few communicators—"

"Who have sent how many communications in the past year?"

"None," Mal confessed. "But we still have one very persistent general."

Genev nodded, partially in sympathy. "We can begin to build the Guardians back up again, sir. From your notes, it seems it takes about a year and a half to recruit and train as many as we would need—"

"Yes, yes," Mal groaned. "And we will, we will. As soon as this issue with Terryp's map is resolved," he reminded. "And Shin?"

"Sir, it's been my experience that people gain a great deal of comfort from that which they believe in. They even imagine they receive some kind of power from it. I interrogated a woman not long ago who clutched a zucchini she believed talked to her."

"Obviously she was delusional."

"I agree," Genev said. "All of us, to some extent, are delusional in what we believe. You and I, only very slightly. My zucchini woman, quite heavily. And those who believe in the Creator?"

"The most delusional of all," Mal said, his tone developing a

lighter quality. “Which would make Shin—”

“We can’t prove he’s insane,” Genev said, reining in the Chairman’s eagerness. “But what *would* compromise him is if he recognized that delusional quality all by himself. If he’s presented with evidence that runs contrary to all he’s ever believed—”

Mal looked up at the ceiling. “YES! He’d destroy himself!”

Genev smiled. “And many others. More than once his soldiers have reported hearing him mention the Creator. I received a report that he even told them at Moorland that the Creator was ‘pleased’ with their efforts there.”

Mal closed his eyes and chuckled. “Oh, was I correct in choosing you! That’s precisely what I’ve needed—new ideas to torment Perrin Shin. We don’t even need Guardians!”

“Oh, sir—but we do,” Genev said earnestly. “We must begin recruiting as soon as possible. Within a year and half we’ll need them.”

Mal narrowed his eyes. “And why is that?”

“What’s the point of an army if there’s no one to fight? Wasn’t that one of your early personal essays?”

“Just how much reading of my works have you done, Administrator?”

Genev shrugged. “All of it?”

Mal raised his eyebrows. “I don’t know whether to be flattered or suspicious.”

“I believe it’s good to be a little of both,” Genev suggested.

“So what will we do with Guardians if Perrin Shin is already a broken man?”

“We’ll break him—and another—even more. We can’t assume Shin will be completely devastated to realize the Creator was nothing more than someone’s imagination. We need to have another plan to continue his destruction.”

Mal clasped his hands together again. “So tell me: how will you devastate him, *and another?*”

His new colleague smiled primly. “Has there ever been a High General who made it to retirement age?”

“No, and I have a feeling you’re about to suggest the current one won’t make it either.”

The Administrator of Loyalty held out his hands. “It’s just that you are getting on in years, and I’d hate for you to have to wait an *unnaturally* long time to continue your observations. Especially when the High General has such an eager and well-trained

Advisor. Cush is already failing. His ultimate demise could be subtle and appear natural, by Thorne's hands."

Mal's eyebrows rose. "My, my that *is* progressive. Then he'll have the High General position for his efforts, I assume?"

Genev smiled and folded his arms. "Qayin will *think* all of his efforts are for one purpose, but that's when the long lost son will make his return."

"As much as I would love to see Thorne *not* receive the position, I'm not sure that you understand," said the Chairman carefully, "how involved Qayin is. There have been promises made—"

"Oh, I do understand. I've done all the reading, remember?" said Genev. "One of your earliest studies was 'Discomfort breeds growth.' I'd like to witness that. So we'll create 'discomfort.' Qayin Thorne seems far too eager to call the shots, and far less willing to follow the orders. This isn't his experiment now, is it? We'll help him remember that fact. Despite all of his efforts and assistance, he's merely a player, isn't that so?"

Mal chuckled. "I'd love to see General Thorne to do some 'growing' as well. But consider this—there's the possibility Shin may turn down the appointment to High General. He's never been fond of Idumea."

"Oh, he'll come all right," Genev said confidently. "Because I suspect he'd follow his wife to the ends of the world, or in this case, to the *very center* of it."

"His wife?" said Mal, surprised. "How will she play into this?"

"Gadiman left an enormous amount of files brimming with allegations and suspicions. The thickest file of all belongs to a Mrs. Mahrree Peto Shin. All that's needed is a few more pages, and *Administrator Genev*," he said smugly, "can require her to come to Idumea to make a full accounting of her years of sedition."

The Chairman let out a low whistle. "I've seen that file. She's never done anything more than say a few things and write a few letters, unfortunately. The rest was Gadiman's paranoid suppositions. Not enough to twist into full sedition. And we don't have laws against someone's words and ideas."

"Not yet," Genev said with a hint of planning.

Mal rubbed his chin. "Would take quite a bit of doing . . . there are a few Administrators who would be difficult to convince to pass such a law . . . But maybe," he said, leaning forward, "maybe we just need the *threat*, not the actual laws. You mentioned thickening her file—"

how will you do that?”

“I have an idea or two of how to gather evidence of her threat to the world. It’ll likely take a few seasons, but nothing too long,” Genev assured him. “Of course, we’ll agree to drop the sedition charges as long as she promises to behave herself in the future and support her husband as the new High General. Then we’ll have them both under our influence here in Idumea. They’ll be too intimidated to make a wrong move against the Administrators, and that’s when we can try some truly probing experiments. Stabbing a caged animal is quite entertaining.”

“Then what of General Thorne?” said Mal with a knowing smile.

Genev chuckled, or so Mal assumed the sound was meant to be. “Wouldn’t that be the problem of the new High General Shin? Perhaps that should be the first question we test: what will Qayin Thorne do once he’s cast aside? What happens when two male bears fight for the same territory?”

Mal clapped his hands. “YES! I can hardly wait! Get me some parchment, I need to be writing all of this down . . .”

Chapter 26 ~ “But what do you know how to use, a pitchfork?”

Almost two weeks later, on the 49th Day of Planting Season, 337, Shem sat down in the big chair behind Colonel Shin’s desk with a satisfied sigh. He could see why Thorne snuck over to sit in it whenever the colonel was away. With the lieutenants out on evening patrols—even in the cold of middle Planting Season the boys were active again rearranging people’s livestock—and Thorne not yet returned from The Dinner in Idumea, Sergeant Major Zenos was in charge. He smirked as he looked around the office, appearing larger when lit by the lanterns.

But the notion of control was all an illusion. The big desk, the power—all of it meant responsibility. The desk was filled with paperwork and forms. It equaled drudgery, and why anyone would want possession of it for long, Shem couldn’t understand. He was glad it was his only temporarily.

Except for the contents of one thin drawer. It contained a sealed envelope with his name on it. He slid open the drawer to see if it was still there, and felt his heart drop.

It was.

The Death Drawer—as it was irreverently referred to by those who knew of it—held contents for only Shem Zenos.

Perrin had showed it to him nearly two years ago when they came back from Idumea. He could still hear his friend’s insistence.

“Promise me, Shem. Promise me you’ll do exactly what that letter says.”

Shem had fingered the sealed envelope anxiously. “It’d be easier to promise if you’d tell me what it said.”

Perrin had flashed him The Dinner smile. “Doesn’t work that way,

Shem. It won't be unpleasant, I assure you. I just need your word to make me feel better, then we'll never speak of this again. In fact, I'll let you burn it the day I retire from the army."

Shem had smiled reluctantly. That likely wouldn't be for decades. "All right, Perrin. I promise I'll carry out your last request. Now promise me something."

"All right," he'd said slowly.

"Don't die!"

Shem smiled now to remember how Perrin had laughed. Then right after that the crate arrived with his father's sword, and Perrin didn't laugh again for almost another year.

But now, yet another year later, the world was right again. Better than right, he grinned as he slid shut the drawer. He leaned back in the chair and started to lift a boot to place on top of the desk when he heard footsteps coming up the stairs. He quickly put down his foot and resumed a more commanding position.

A soldier came to the open door. "Sir? Captain Thorne's on his way. He just rode into the stables."

"Thank you, Staff Sergeant. You and the sergeant out there know what to do."

"Yes, sir," he saluted, closed the door, and Shem heard him take a chair in the outer office. He chose those men—strapping, experienced, and fearless—specifically for tonight.

Shem pulled out some paperwork and tried to concentrate on catching up from being away for three days, but he couldn't. He was sure the captain would be bounding upstairs in just a few minutes, and then Shem would give him The News.

No one wanted to let Deck do it, even though he was determined. During the wedding dinner his intentions became known when Roarin' Yordin laughingly asked what Thorne thought of the marriage. There were nearly as many uniforms in Mountseen as there were down in Idumea that night. The tables set up on the dirt floor in the training arena of the fort may not have been as elegant as the mansion, but the large room was filled with as much noise, food, and probably much more laughter.

And no dancing. Colonel's orders.

"Thorne doesn't know about the wedding," Perrin had told Yordin. "Hardly anyone in Edge and no one in Idumea knows."

"So how are you going to break it to him?" Lieutenant Colonel Yordin asked Perrin.

"He's not," Deckett said firmly. "I'm going to talk to him when

we get back. It's my wedding, my wife, my responsibility."

Yordin shook his head. "It will also be your burial. Next week in Edge. My schedule can't accommodate that, Mr. Briter." The slap shook most of the dishes on the long table.

"He's right, Deckett," said Colonel Karna. "Don't make Jaytsy a widow before she's eighteen."

Deckett was insulted. "I can take care of this!"

Lieutenant Colonel Fadh leaned over to him from his seat at the table. "You don't understand men like Thorne. Or men like his father. Captain Thorne knows how to use a sword, and quite well. But what do you know how to use, a pitchfork?"

Deckett didn't appreciate the sniggers of the officers, and Shem was glad that he didn't brag that he'd had a lesson in using a pitchfork. Perrin had confided to Shem that his future son-in-law was quite useless as a soldier, but one of his many redeeming qualities was that knew how to raise an amazingly juicy and tender steak.

At least Perrin didn't laugh. He didn't even smile. "Deck, I appreciate your desire to handle Lemuel Thorne," Perrin told him. "But he's not as stable as you. He won't just talk. He has an impulsiveness that's dangerous."

Jaytsy fidgeted in worry next to her new husband.

Deck covered his bride's hand with his. "I know all about Thorne's impulsiveness, sir. That's why I want to take care of him."

"No!" Perrin said so decisively that Deckett shrank back a little.

Rector Yung, who had traveled down to witness the wedding, leaned over from his seat further along the table. "Deckett, listen to the officers. They know a bit more about the captain than you do."

Deck's rector, sitting next to Yung, nodded in agreement.

But Deck's Uncle Holling, his Aunt Lila, and cousin Atlee looked nervously—as they had all day—at the men in dress uniforms bedecked with medals and patches and sharpened blades.

"I want the job to tell Thorne!" Yordin grinned and slapped. "I've got a sword, and I'd love to see the look on his face when—"

"I'll do it," Shem had interrupted. "Thorne and I have an *understanding*."

Jaytsy and Deck nodded at Shem.

So did Perrin.

Mahrree eyed the three of them, sensing that she was missing something.

"Besides," Shem added, "the colonel won't let me stay in

Mountseen longer than tomorrow. He thinks someone will take over the fort if one of us isn't there."

Yordin pointed a teasing finger to Colonel Shin. "He's just upset about being the only one not promoted. I told you, Shin, I'm still working on making you a general. Why do you think we all boycotted The Dinner, even after our *special* invitations?"

Mrs. Yordin whispered loudly across the table to Mahrree. "Because Gari's afraid to dance!"

"Because you knew you'd eat better here, Eltana," Colonel Shin replied, winking at Mrs. Yordin.

Gari Yordin gave his wife an irate elbow nudge, but his eyes were smiling.

"Besides," Perrin had said, "it'll be good for Captain Thorne to take all the praise for last year's offensive. Give him some confidence. Help cushion the blow to come."

Shem now sat in the command office staring at the same piece of paper he pulled out five minutes ago, wondering how that 'blow' would be taken. A variety of scenarios played through his mind, and a variety of responses as well. All of them ended with someone being carried to the surgeon's. That's why he needed the strongest sergeants of the fort waiting outside.

Boots trotting up the stairs had a familiar gait to them. He took a deep breath when he heard the—

Knock-knock . . . knock-knock-knock.

Perrin was right; the rhythm was all wrong, as well as the implication that it was *him* and that the person sitting behind the desk should be thrilled that he was banging in such a clumsy stagger on his door.

"Come in," he did his best impression of Perrin.

"Colonel! I'm back, and I saw your light on—" the door opened. "What are *you* doing there?"

Shem spread his hands out in front of him and put on a big smile. "Being in charge until you return, of course! Have a good time in Idumea, Captain?"

Lemuel Thorne walked into the office and came up to the desk, clearly not pleased to see Shem. "Yes," he said shortly. "Where's the colonel?"

Shem gestured for Thorne to sit down in the chair.

Thorne's brow furrowed in worry.

Shem shook his head then gestured again to the chair. "He's out on a trip with the family."

“He actually *went* somewhere? He said he never likes to leave the fort. Where’d he go?” Thorne slowly sat down.

“Mountseen. Yordin’s been wanting him to come down for some time now and . . .”

Shem stopped.

He had to be honest. As much as he despised Lemuel he still found himself pitying him just a bit. He was still young, still inexperienced, and still hopeful.

Also still a presumptuous idiot and a loathsome oaf, but *still*.

Shem sighed and leaned forward on the desk in what he hoped was a kindly manner. “Captain—*Lemuel*—the Shin family went to Mountseen for . . . Jaytsy’s wedding. She married Deckett Briter two days ago. He has family there and . . .” When he saw Thorne’s reaction, the words just came out. “Boy, I’m sorry.”

The color had drained out of Lemuel’s face. He looked as if he was going to be sick and his chest heaved up and down. “Briter?”

“He has the fort farm.” Shem gestured to the window. “His parents died from the pox, and he came and took it over during Weeding Season last year.”

Judging by the stunned look on his face Thorne obviously had no idea there had been anyone else but him. “Jaytsy married . . . *a mere farmer?* What did he do to her?!” He leaped to his feet. “Why such the rush? What’d he do?”

Shem stood up and gently pushed Thorne back down. “Sit down, sit down. Deckett didn’t do anything to her. He’s not that *kind of a man*.” Shem’s meaning was very clear, and he challenged Thorne to meet his eyes.

Thorne refused but stared at a corner, his jaw clenching.

“There was nothing sudden about the wedding,” Shem told him. “It’s been planned for almost three moons. They’d been courting since Weeding Season when she was working on the farm. Lemuel, I’m sorry, but Jaytsy loves him. Somehow you’re going to have to deal with that and find a way to let her go.”

Thorne’s chin began to tremble and he shifted in the chair as if the seat were suddenly infested with biting ants. “That’s not what was supposed to happen!” he yelled. Something came unhinged in the captain, and he jumped to his feet again, blindly swinging his fist.

Shem had expected this and already dodged out of the way so that Thorne’s fist connected with the wall behind him, embedding itself in the splintered wood. The captain yelled a complete list of swear

words, a few of which, Shem concluded, must have been new that he picked up in Idumea.

Sure that Thorne's situation was not about to let him deliver any new punches, Shem shook his head in sympathy as Lemuel writhed in pain.

He opened the door. "Staff Sergeant, would you please go get Dr. Frenulum? Captain Thorne is not well. Again."

As the sergeant ran down the stairs, sheathing the sword he wasn't going to need, Shem regarded Thorne with genuine pity. He gently tried to extract the now bleeding fist from the wall that refused to release it, grateful it was the wood that caught it and not his face.

"Boy," he said to Thorne, who was panting in pain, "first thirty stitches, then the pox, and now a . . . yes, I pretty sure it's broken, a broken hand to accompany your broken heart. I thought when the new year started a few weeks ago that it might be a little easier on you, but I guess it isn't."

When Thorne's eyes opened in the morning he knew exactly where he was: the surgery wing.

He might as well have had all of his belongings moved from his quarters considering how often he found himself there.

He glanced down at his right hand, wrapped extensively with bandages and strips of wood to keep it immobile, and cursed quietly that he didn't use his left hand instead to try to hit Zenos. Writing back to Idumea was now going to be painful, in many aspects. The familiar dizzy buzz of the sedation was wearing off, allowing him to fully appreciate the aching of his hand.

The surgeon noticed he had awakened and came over to him. "Whenever you feel up to it, Captain Thorne, you may leave," Frenulum told him. "No reason to keep you here longer than you wish. Just take it slow for a time. That hand will need to heal for at least six weeks."

Thorne immediately got off the cot, ignored the swooning of his head, and staggered past the surgeon. He forced himself upright and strode to his quarters in the next building, pretending that his hand didn't throb as if it were twice as big as it should be.

He slammed the door to his room and sat down hard on his bed.

On his desk waited two files he'd brought from Idumea: one thin, the other thick. He took a few deep breaths to try to clear his foggy mind, then reached over and grasped the files with his left hand. He dropped them on the bed and opened the thinner file. He immediately closed it in disgust and threw it in the cold fireplace to burn later.

No need for notes from his mother now on how to court Jaytsy Shin. *Briter*. No wonder none of them were "up to the journey" to Idumea for The Dinner.

It didn't make any sense. He'd done everything right, too! He'd become so close to the colonel he was practically living under his arm. He'd said all the right words to Jaytsy, gave her some time as she requested, then offered her the most unrejectable invitation, which she still rejected. It was baffling! How could she pass up such a specimen of perfected manhood for a mere *farmer*?! She was denying her bloodlines, allowing her impeccable traits to be mingled with a man who worked in dirt. Why?

He pulled over the larger file and read the name on top. Lemuel hadn't seen it before, but now . . . of course. It was finally making sense.

He opened the cover and skimmed the pages that didn't interest him four days ago when they were handed to him. There were notes dating from several years. Lemuel felt slightly sick to his stomach, but he didn't know if it was because of the sedation, the throbbing of his hand, or the words in the file. Maybe all three.

Leaning against his pillow, he wondered again why no one had recognized it. Even his Grandmother Cush had bravely laughed at Qayin just a few days ago when he was on one of his typical rants against Perrin Shin. Lemuel had tried to think of ways to defend his colonel. Having been with him for almost two years, Lemuel could see qualities in Colonel Shin that were lacking in his father and grandfather. Hearing his father go on irately about Colonel Shin tore at Lemuel's gut. But he didn't know how to defend Shin without having his father considering him a traitor. It didn't matter they were all in the same army.

His grandmother had finally spoken up. "Now Qayin, don't go placing all the blame on Perrin that they didn't come to The Dinner," she had said with a casual wave and a forced chuckle. "It wasn't *his* handwriting on the message that came from Edge. It was *hers*. Someday you'll understand. A man may look at the scenery, but it's his wife who tells him what he sees. No married man ever has as much

power as he thinks he does.”

That didn't necessarily apply to Qayin and Versula Thorne, but it certainly seemed to in other marriages.

Lemuel looked again at the name on the cover of the file, written in Gadiman's hand, with notes underneath from Genev, and considered more recent events.

How she showed up at the camp the morning after the offensive.

How Perrin was so angry that he pulled her into the forest. As Fadh had helped Lemuel out of the tent, he saw them disappear into the trees, so desperate the colonel was to get his wife out of the way.

Yet still she stayed.

And there were incidents nearly every day.

Perrin always had time to see her when she came to the office, even after he had turned away others.

He never wanted to be late for dinner, sometimes leaving before all the business was finished, promising to do it in the morning.

If she could influence even the way he worked when she wasn't around, what kind of control did she maintain over him at home?

Lemuel shook his head in sympathy.

What kind of a man could Shin be without her manipulation? And how much did she sway Jaytsy? He'd seen his mother and grandmother nattering. They could talk each other out of, and into, anything. How could Jaytsy *not* have wanted him? Easily: her mother's coercion.

Lemuel ran his uninjured hand over the file with a new determination and purpose. In a way he felt he had dodged yet another sword plunge by not marrying into that family. What would it have been like with her as his mother-in-law?

No.

No, he would free them, especially Perrin Shin. That's how he'd repay him. Help him see just how blinded and controlled he was all these years—release him to finally become the man he always should have been.

And when Perrin became High General Shin, Lemuel Thorne would, out of gratitude, be appointed as the youngest advising general in Idumea's history.

And then, some day, High General himself.

It would still work.

He smiled at the thick file. When Administrator Genev gave him the record several days ago, it was with a specific charge: “The

colonel may be the Administrators' eyes and ears, but you are *my* personal eyes and ears in Edge. Find out the truth, and we can bring Colonel Shin home to Idumea where he belongs. He's not the real problem. It's always been her. This is will be the greatest challenge of your young career. Should you succeed here, many more opportunities will open up for you—situations and knowledge that you have no idea about. This is your first and most important test. It's up to you to deliver us Mahrree Peto Shin.”

“And you will have her,” Thorne promised the file.

Chapter 27 ~ “How many women— *girls*—had an old historian as their childhood hero?”

Mahrree’s eyes opened early in the morning and she thought,
It’s Weeding Season, and today they’re leaving!

She wasn’t thinking about her daughter, although after six weeks of marriage Jaytsy had finally moved the last of her things over to her new home at the Briter farm. Mahrree was startled at her mixed feelings about that. As happy as she was to see her daughter blissfully married, removing her things a little each day had been like peeling off a scab from a wound that would never heal.

Her daughter had left her.

True, it was just down the road, and she still saw her every day, but it wasn’t the same. It would *never* be the same, ever again. Mahrree hadn’t expected to feel such a sense of loss when she, Perrin, and Peto rode home from Mountseen, Jaytsy already off starting her new life with her husband.

Jaytsy didn’t seem to feel any of it, though. Her giggling actually increased, and the way she looked at Deck, and the way he blushed back—well, Mahrree knew it was the very best thing that could happen for both of them.

But still Mahrree felt better two weeks after the wedding when she found Jaytsy in her old bedroom, weeping.

“You moved Grandmother Peto’s shelves into here?”

“Well, yes, Jayts. To give us more room around the table.”

“But this was MY room.”

“Yes, Jaytsy, it *was*. Now you have a whole house—”

“But this was MY room!”

That's when Mahrree realized her daughter felt the loss too. They cried together for a few minutes, then laughed about how silly it all was and picked up another crate of her books to carry down the road.

Perrin had tried to understand what they were experiencing, but didn't get it. "They're both here as much as they always were!"

Peto thought the newlyweds were gooey and ridiculous whenever they came for dinner and fed each other from their plates. But then again, that's because he was sixteen and utterly uninterested in the opposite sex. But he was still interested in kickball, unfortunately. For Peto's birthday yesterday they broke down and gave him a new leather ball. Since he was finally the height of Jaytsy, and still growing and adding a bit of Perrin-like bulk, Mahrree worried that the professional recruiters who came around each year would regard her son with renewed interest for teams in Idumea.

But for now she didn't worry about that, because her mind all night had been focused solely on one fantastic possibility that may eventually take shape since *they were leaving this morning*—

She giggled again in anticipation.

"What?" a groggy voice said next to her.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to wake you," she chuckled. "Go back to sleep."

"Is she here again?" he mumbled.

Mahrree laughed out loud. "No, she's not here again, and neither is he! It was only once that Jaytsy came over this early in the morning. Now go back to sleep."

"Well, you just never know. She may be in a panic about something again. Deck might have another headache."

"Oh, come now. You were worried about him too."

"I was worried about my back. That boy weighs more than he looks like he would. Some son-in-law he turned out to be," Perrin grumbled into this pillow. "Married for only a few weeks, gets himself kicked unconscious by a bull. How can he take care of his bride when he's out cold?"

"Bah!" Mahrree scoffed. "He's the best son-in-law in the world! Sweet, funny, adoring, and never complains about her cooking."

"That's because they're always having dinner here. She may have a knack for growing food but not for cooking it."

Mahrree poked him. "They're here for dinner maybe three times a week, that's all. You're certainly a grump today. And *you're* one to talk about taking care of new wives. When we were married for less

than a season you left me for days to chase Guardians in the forest with no word as to what happened to you. At least Jaysy knew her husband was on the ground in the barn.”

“And the next morning he was sleeping peacefully in bed and she thought something was wrong with him,” he muttered.

Mahrree rolled her eyes. “She wouldn’t have been worried if you and Shem hadn’t told her that if she couldn’t wake him up something could be wrong.”

“Dying men don’t snore, Mahrree.”

“You don’t have to tell me that. My, but you’re a bear this morning. Just how late did you get to bed last night?”

He growled. “Don’t know. It wasn’t *last night* anymore, though.”

“So do you think they’re off yet?”

“With any luck. The plan was for the expedition to leave before dawn, but they have some men more skittish than squirrels. They’ll probably postpone again, but I can’t imagine what else they could possibly need. We went through their list at least a dozen times,” he grouched. “I left the duty up to Thorne to get them on the road. Told him they better be gone by the time I got to the fort or I’d make him join the expedition.”

Mahrree laughed. “Ooh, then I hope they haven’t left yet! Maybe you should get dressed and run up there, right now. We could get rid of Thorne for nine moons.”

Perrin finally laughed and rolled on to his back. “I just want them to go already.”

“I’ll admit I’m so excited!” she squealed like a nine-year-old. “I can’t believe the Administrators are finally doing this. It’s about time. This land grab fever has struck the whole world. How long do you think they had that map?”

“The expedition leader told me it arrived at Chairman Mal’s office right before The Dinner, so at least six weeks,” he said, his eyes still closed. “The Administrators thought about presenting it at The Dinner, but some of them were too nervous about it. That’s why they waited another two weeks before they revealed they had it. Apparently they were arguing about what to do with it all that time. If there wasn’t this crazed demand for more land, I doubt the Administrators would have moved so quickly to form the expedition. The sooner we find new places to settle, the sooner we establish peace in the villages again. Some were seeing more violence than they ever did when the Guardians were still active.”

“The timing for the map to appear couldn’t have been better,” Mahrree said. “With the weather warming back up, I was sure everyone’s tempers would too. At least with the thought of new territory no one’s fighting lately. They’re content with waiting to see just how much greener the fields are on the other side of the desert. Then they’ll start fighting again over who gets to claim that.” She sighed, long and heavy.

Perrin opened his eyes and braced himself, suspecting what was coming next.

“I’m still not happy with you, you know,” she told him. “Why didn’t you let me see the map? You could have got permission, I know it.”

He rolled on his side and supported his head with his hand. “You would’ve had to come to my office.”

“Yes, I do that all the time.”

“People would’ve seen you.”

“So?”

“I have my pride to maintain.”

She squinted at him. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Do you remember what happened in Idumea on the campus when you saw that statue that was ‘made by the hands that shook the hand of Terryp’?”

She rolled on to her side and matched his pose. “What’s your point?”

“I don’t need any of my officers or the expedition leaders seeing my wife fawn all over some *copy* of Terryp’s ancient map. You would have started drooling and crying over it at the same time, I’m sure of it. That’s all I need to get around—the colonel’s wife in love with a dead historian.”

Mahrree chuckled. “I’m not in love with Terryp, I love the *idea* of Terryp. Of what he did. Surely you understand the distinction. I’m completely in love with you.”

He sighed skeptically. “So why are you still pestering me about seeing the map?”

“Because I love hearing you sigh. Besides, are you sure it was a copy? I mean, their last expert was you, after all.”

“You doubt me?”

“No, it’s just that you’re not much of an expert, really.”

He shrugged. “I’m the only one they knew with a collection of old maps. I compared the copy of the map to what I have. While it was

created on older parchment, the quality was the same as the maps I have from 40 years ago. It couldn't have been 130 years old. Besides, whoever sent that map would have been smart enough to not send the Administrators the original. And the Administrators knew it was a copy as well. That's why they organized the expedition to find head west so quickly. They knew they couldn't ignore it because other copies could be sent all over the world until someone finally did something about them."

Mahrree rolled on to her back and looked at the ceiling. "I wonder who it was. I wonder what else they have! And where did they get the map in the first place? It was supposed to have been destroyed in that fire along with the family lines. Oh Perrin, what else might have survived? And where was it? Where's it *now*?"

"Well, I found my maps at the old garrison," he offered. "My father said no one wanted them since they were making new ones. I know the kings had kept some documents there, near where my father had his storage room."

"Hmm," Mahrree mused. "If he were still with us I would have guessed it was Relf. Maybe it was a soldier, one that was going through the debris after the land tremor. They pulled out all kinds of documents."

"I considered that too," Perrin nodded. "Seems most logical. Then again, someone could've found it in an attic, or maybe it was held by someone who took it before the king could destroy it. A servant, a soldier . . . maybe a historian. Maybe their families held it all these years, passing it down through the generations, waiting for someone to feel the need to know what Terryp found. Who knows. Too many hands may have held it in the past 130 years to track where it is now."

"But it gives me so much hope! What else is hiding out there, waiting to be found?" She sighed longingly. "I can't believe Shem turned them down. If I were single and 37, I would have jumped at the opportunity to go on the expedition. Oh, if only I were a man!"

Perrin jabbed her in the ribs.

She turned to him.

He held up his hand in questioning.

She chuckled as she pushed it down. "You know what I mean. I wouldn't want to be anywhere than right by your side, and as a woman. It's just the idea of it all. And Shem said no?"

"He said he just didn't have the desire to go."

“How could he not want to go?” she nearly wailed.

Perrin sighed again.

She looked at him again.

“You’re the oddest woman I’ve ever known,” he declared.

She laughed. “Why?”

“How many women—*girls*—had an old historian as their childhood hero? I thought girls liked stories about the king’s daughter being rescued by a captain or whatever.”

She rolled to face him again. “What’s to admire about that? It was obvious none of the stories were true! Those girls were so helpless. And the kings suddenly had *all* these daughters?”

“Mahree, you know as well as I do the kings had children everywhere. Remember my parents’ mansion? The purpose of it?”

“I mean aside from that,” she waved off the memory that the High General’s mansion was built to house King Oren’s mistress and his two illegitimate sons who could never claim the throne. “Really, who would believe that some Querul’s daughter—and no one ever knows if it was the First, Second, Third, or Fourth’s—whose *golden hair* was too long for her to run safely from the Guardians, would be rescued by a captain on a large black horse who suddenly appeared at the right time? And what does he do then? Any logical soldier would have taken his long knife and cut off that stupid braid, but no. The captain ties it carefully around her body, then lifts her on to her horse while the Guardians watch in respect of the action, and then he rides off with her?”

She rolled her eyes.

“So stupid, even to a seven-year-old. And the captains always have big black horses.” She laughed. “Just like your new horse. Now, Colonel, why is that?”

“Gari Yordin knows I like big black horses,” Perrin defended with a scoff. “It’s not like I’m going to turn down a gift like that. He had it brought up from the Stables at Pools two weeks before Jaytsy’s wedding, just waiting for me to come down. Said the owner’s son Roak chose him especially for me and accompanied him all the way there. All I sent him was one short thank you letter, and Roak chooses for me the strongest, fastest horse ever bred. How am I supposed to say no to all that planning and effort? Besides, Clark is the best animal I’ve ever had.”

“And what’s with that name? *Clark*. That’s not a proper name.”

“Better than his mother’s name—Pusheron. Seems that mare could

continue for a distance and at a speed no one imagined such an enormous creature could. Still, Push-Her-On? The names some people come up with—”

“Why didn’t you just keep the name Yordin and Roak gave him?”

“Mahrree, you know full well I can’t ride a horse named The General. And Gari thought he was so clever, too. ‘Go get The General!’ Very funny.”

“Well it’s better than Clark,” Mahrree tried not to giggle.

“He likes the name,” Perrin defended, trying to hide his smile. “He’s already responding to it. You know, woman, were you that king’s daughter no captain would have rescued you. They would have just listened to you for a minute and said, ‘Turn her over to the Guards. She’ll drive them mad.’”

She giggled and kissed him.

“Look, ‘clark’ is the sound of the horses’ hooves on the cobblestone,” he explained.

“No it’s not. It’s much more of a clip-clopping sound.”

“Clip-clopping? And how would you know? You’ve never been on a horse.”

“I have too. A couple of times your soldiers gave me rides, years ago. *You*, however, have never rescued me on Clark. Clark, clark, clark, clark. I’m sorry—I’m just not hearing it.”

“I seem to remember offering to give you a ride once or twice. But it’s not hard to see why I’ve never rescued you, Mrs. Shin.”

“Because I never needed your rescuing. Because I never intend to be one of those silly women that say, ‘Help me, Captain! On your clark-clark!’”

He shook his head at her and tried not to smile. “You really want to go west, don’t you?”

She sighed. “No. Yes. I don’t know.”

“I have a plan. Don’t give me that look until you hear it,” he chuckled and pushed a lock of hair off her face. “How about when we celebrate our twentieth wedding anniversary in two years we do something different. It seems to be tradition that men take their wives east to Waves, but that sounds dull. Just watching the sea go back and forth?”

Mahrree bit her lip in anticipation. “I agree. Go on . . .”

“What if we, Mrs. Shin, went *west* instead? By that time the expedition will be back with updated maps, the news must have been good—how dare they return otherwise?—and you and I will

spend the Weeding Season in two years exploring the ruins ourselves.”

“Oh, don’t tease me like that.”

“I’m not teasing.”

“You’re serious?”

“I’m always serious,” he teased.

She sat up. “Have I told you today that you are the most perfect man in the world, and that I love and adore you more than words can say?”

He grinned. “Then maybe I better make sure that expedition is finally on its way.”

Mahrree had a difficult time concentrating at school that day. Her mind was heading west with the thirty scientists, assistants to the Administrators, and soldiers set to explore Terryp’s land.

Even if her mind wasn’t miles away, it was still getting harder to teach her students what the Department of Instruction insisted upon. Mahrree realized some time ago that she was now the only teacher not enamored with the government’s control of education, likely because the rest of Edge’s teachers had gone through the Department of Instruction’s very thorough training, and were wholly converted to the notion that government knows best. But each year the curriculum was more lifeless, and she could hardly blame her students for staring listlessly at the large slate board.

Only a third of her students were there that morning. Some were taking the Final Administrative Competency Test. Mahrree thought it was ironic that the first letters formed the word FACT, because very few useful ones would be found on it. That’s where Peto was, hoping to prove he didn’t need another year of schooling.

But he’d pass easily. His teachers, like all the others, had taught only what the test would cover. And over the years the test questions had become so simplified and leading that Mahrree thought a sheep had a fair shot at passing it if only it could hold a quill to mark the ‘yes’ and ‘no’ boxes.

Besides, only the top ten percent of students would be offered the chance to go to a university, and that was her goal for Peto: to be something more than just another worker drone for the Administrators earning them more gold. The government didn’t want an

intelligent population, just an obedient one. When too many people become independent thinkers, the elite has no more sway over them. You can't manipulate people who know how to think for themselves. No wonder they did away with debating so many years ago.

Another few of her students were out on 'farm need,' but the notes they wrote for each other pretending to be each other's fathers had far too many spelling mistakes to be believable.

But with fewer students today she hoped she might actually make some progress with her "special cases" since there were only a dozen in the room: the perfect size for a class.

Still, Mahrree struggled nearly as much as her students did to care, counting down the days—no, hours—until the Weeding Season break. She ploddingly wrote down dates on the slate board that no one, not even her, would feel the need to remember after the—

"Mrs. Shin, is this going to be on the End of Year test?"

Mahrree sighed. Oh to have a student ask just one truly interesting question! But those days were long gone, and the schools had bored out of children their natural desire to learn by age eight.

Before she turned around to face the teenagers, Mahrree made sure her teacher expression was fixed and ready.

"Chommy, I know that was you, because that's the only question you ever ask. And since it's the only question you ever ask, you know the answer I always give."

The boy on the back row sighed. "I know. 'It doesn't matter, does it? Because all learning is important.'"

"Oh good, I was hoping you would pick something up this year. You now know how to mimic me."

"Nah, that's Lannard's hobby," Chommy punched the shoulder of his friend next to him.

Lannard, engrossed with his packet of matches, was sniffing the sulfur tops. "What?" he said automatically, his head popping up. "The answer's four."

Mahrree congratulated herself for not rolling her eyes and gestured for him to, once again, put away the matches.

Chommy shook his head as the rest of the class snickered. "Lannard," he said in a loud whisper, "she didn't ask a question. And just because your answer of 'three' yesterday was wrong, there's no reason to believe 'four' will be correct today."

Mahrree nodded once to Chommy for saying exactly what she was about to. Like it or not, he was better at copying her than

Lannard was who considered himself to be the class comedian. It was all the slow-witted boy had going for him, and Mahrree wasn't about to yank that away from him, as unfunny as Lannard was.

"Seriously though, Mrs. Shin. And I'm not trying to be difficult," Chommy insisted as Lannard dutifully tucked the matches into his shirt pocket where he'd extract them again in a few minutes. "Well, not this time. But why, oh *why*, must I know the year the Administrative Chairman first came to power? I mean, it's not like I'm going to be invited to some party where I have to write on a message 'Congratulations on being in power for nineteen—'"

"It will be twenty-one," Mahrree corrected, pointing to the date on the board as a few boys sniggered.

"—*twenty-one* years.' I'm going to be a tanner. Why do I have to know this stuff?"

Well, Mahrree considered, it *was* a question. Not a very compelling one, but a question nonetheless.

And she was going to run with it.

"Tell me, Chommy, why do *you* think the Administrators want you to know this?"

"Because they're stupid old men trying to ruin my day!"

The boys laughed their agreement.

Mahrree knew she shouldn't smile. She'd lose all credibility if she did, but she couldn't help it. Not only did she smile, she found herself chuckling.

"Ha!" another boy pointed at her. "She agrees!"

Mahrree shook her head. "No I don't. He just said it so . . . all right." She waited until their laughter began to die down before she said over the last of it, "I'm going to tell you something you may not know."

They hushed. Since it didn't sound as if it'd be on the test, what she was about to tell them might actually be worth listening to.

She paused for another three seconds because she knew how to work a crowd as well as her husband. When they were absolutely still with anticipation, she whispered, "I've *met* the Administrators! All of them."

"No!"

"Seriously?"

"And they're a bunch of stupid old men, aren't they?"

Mahrree pointed at Chommy. "Careful, now," she said in a stern voice she used only rarely. Keeping a more light-hearted tone in her

class also kept the boys more often in the classroom. For some, she suspected her class was the only place where they had actual discussions with an adult. “You *do* remember who my husband is, right? Eyes and ears?”

“Ankles, spleen, elbows . . . *whatever*.” Chommy rolled his eyes again.

“But Mrs. Shin, you really met them? What was it like?” asked another boy.

She wasn’t about to ignore the rarely-seen glimmer of curiosity in her students’ eyes. Forget memorizing dates for the test.

“Actually, it was terrifying,” she admitted. “This was right after the land tremor when we were in Idumea. I had to be presented to them in their large Conference Room. There was a huge, highly polished table—” she gestured the size and shape, “—where all of them sat around with their stiff red coats and frilly white shirts, and Chairman Mal sat at the head so he could stare directly at whoever came in.” She folded her hands and furrowed her eyebrows in a sinister manner.

Several boys snickered.

“And you were scared speechless, right?” asked Lannard with a mischievous grin. For once he was paying attention.

“Actually, no, Lannard. I found a few things to say.”

“Of course you would, Mrs. Shin,” Chommy said. “And you told them to let us either learn something useful, or let us leave.”

Oh, how she wished she could have said that! If the boys didn’t care about a subject, spending hour after hour on it didn’t suddenly change that, or force it into their minds. *Nothing* could be forced into a mind and compelled to stay there.

But for some reason the Department believed all students should learn the exact same way and at the exact same time, demonstrating that none of them knew the first thing about children.

For a few the education system worked fine, Mahrree grudgingly had to concede, and delivered enough acceptable results that the Administrators were satisfied. Someone at the Department of Instruction was probably waiting for the rest of the students to finally fall in step with the thirty percent who did all right under the currently rigid system.

Otherwise students either sat listlessly or fidgeted nonstop, just waiting until the long day was over. But occasionally—rarely—a moment came around when a student brought up a topic he

actually cared about. And suddenly, Mahrree remembered why she used to love teaching.

She eyed Chommy in appreciation, and he fidgeted.

“Uh-oh, Chommy,” Lannard whispered loudly. “I sense a departure from lesson plan, and it’s heading straight for you.”

Several boys chuckled.

“You’re right,” Mahrree said. “And no, this won’t be on the Administrators’ test. Tell me, Chommy, honestly—why do you think the Administrators want you to know these dates? No silly answers. Give me something ‘useful’.”

Chommy sat back in his chair, his sixteen-year-old legs pushing beyond the confines of his desk to stretch out into the aisle. No matter how far apart Mahrree set up the desks, the boys always had their legs in the aisles within kicking distance of each other. If she were down to one boy, he would fill the entire room. “Because they think the dates are important.”

“Important to . . . ?” she pressed.

“Important to . . . to them?”

“If they are important to them, why should some tanner-to-be in Edge worry about them?”

“That’s what I’ve been asking!”

“And now I want you to answer it!” Mahrree said. “Come on, why?”

He wasn’t used to coming up with answers that hadn’t already been supplied to him. “I don’t know why.”

“Guess. Take a shot. Let that arrow fly. See what you hit. Or miss. Just *try!*”

Chommy thought for a few silent, tension-filled moments, and Mahrree begged internally that he wouldn’t give up and say he didn’t know. He had to know *something* on his own, and he needed to discover that right now. Mahrree frequently suspected many of the boys were far brighter than they let on, but performed poorly because, like her, they were happier hiding in her classroom where no one expected much from them.

But she always expected something. She couldn’t help not have hope for them.

“Because . . . they want a tanner in Edge to know,” he stumbled. “It’s important so that I always remember who they are and how long they’ve been there.”

He was on the cusp of something he’d never approached before,

and Mahrree could see in his eyes that he was worried about being there.

So in her best encouraging, pleading manner she said, “Why?”

He started to sigh in frustration, but then stopped. With squinting eyes and a decidedly cynical tone he said, “Because a tanner in Edge needs to know so that he . . . knows who to obey? And why?”

Mahrree felt a smile creep around her mouth. “And why should *you* know why you need to obey *them*?”

“To remember, I guess.”

“Remember what?”

“How bad it was under the kings, how much better it is under the Administrators?”

Mahrree nodded. “Not bad, Chommy. That just may be *one* of the right answers. And there are often many correct answers.”

Chommy sat back, a tad pleased with himself. “But is it, Mrs. Shin? I mean, is life *really* better?”

This was one of the things Mahrree loved about teaching: the rare moments when a student dares to wonder. The best learning happened when the students asked the questions, not the teachers.

It was also at these moments that she panicked, because sometimes the questions caught her by surprise. But it was the good kind of panic that lets you remember you’re alive, like being chased by a dog you know you can outrun, but it terrifies you just the same. It feels great when you finally reach home, or see the dog suddenly yanked back by its leash and you gloat at it triumphantly.

But first you have to *run*.

She always had a ready answer. “Chommy, what do *you* think?”

It was the best stalling question she’d ever come up with. She could think while the student stumbled around for an answer himself. Already she could see the little wheels in Chommy’s mind spinning, trying to connect to find an answer.

A light came on in his eyes. “I don’t know *what* to think, Mrs. Shin, because they never tell us what life was like before.”

Mahrree moaned inwardly. When did Chommy get so insightful?

“Hey,” said Lannard, “he’s right! When at any time in this past year have we learned about life under the kings? We hear how bad it was, but I want to know just *how* bad. Details! Give me details!”

Mahrree suppressed a smile at his imitation of her when she

criticized their essays. Several other boys chimed in their opinions. Mahrree let them go for a moment to let them get it out of their systems. And also to buy herself a little more time.

But even the laziest youth of Edge deserved honest answers.

Mahrree held up her hands in surrender. "You're right, you're right. We haven't talked about that this year. Do you know why?"

"Because it's not on the test?" asked a boy on the front row.

She pointed to him. "Exactly! Still want to know what life was like under the kings?"

"Well, is should still matter, shouldn't it? What life was like? Wouldn't we be even more loyal if we knew?" he wondered.

Mahrree marveled. Why didn't they show this much passion when they discussed the life cycle of a worm?

"Again, you're right. It does matter. In fact . . ." She put a finger on her lips.

The boys moaned and pulled out their slates. They knew what that look meant.

She smiled. "No writing, I promise. But . . . exploring!"

"Sorry, Mrs. Shin. I was too young to go exploring on the expedition. I tried," Lannard said, shrugging in disappointment.

"We all appreciate your trying to leave us, Lannard. That would have meant no one's trousers' legs would have mysteriously caught on fire anymore this year," she said with a slight glare.

He squirmed and guiltily patted his shirt pocket where his matches waited for him.

"No," Mahrree continued, "what I mean is, I want you to explore your parents' or grandparents' past. The Administrator over Science has sent out a delegation of thirty men to explore Terryp's past, so we should too. I want each of you to ask your parents what life was like under the kings. Bring me your answers tomorrow for us to *discuss*, and I'll not make you write it up as your next week's writing assignment.

"But," she paused to let her students' cheers die down, "if you don't bring me proof that you talked to your parents, you all *will* write about it. And remember, I'm an old woman and I know very well what life was like under the kings. I'll know if you're making things up!"

Perrin reined Clark to a stop just under the shade of a large maple tree. The horse obediently halted, even a moment before Perrin pulled on the reins as if reading his mind. Perrin would have smiled at the stallion's instincts, but his concentration was too focused on the large group of travelers moving at a painstaking pace. The forty horses, some pack mules, and a three dozen men slowly made their way on the other side of Moorland, purposely avoiding the dead village by a quarter mile. Although Perrin was on the other side of the ruins next to the tree line of the forest and out of sight, he could still make out the expedition party by the huge cloud of dust they created, likely from dragging their heels.

"They should be halfway to Scrub by now," he told Clark. "If it were me on that expedition, we'd already be passing Sands." He smiled at the prospect. "What do you think, Clark? Ready to go exploring in a year or two? Know of a mellow mare we could set Mahrree on?"

He chuckled to himself, picturing her balancing unsteadily on the back of a beast she was terrified of. Her eyes would likely be as large as the poor horse's.

"Well, we've got some time to find her the right animal, don't we now?"

Clark snuffed in agreement.

"Ever done a desert?" he asked his mount. "No, of course you haven't. No one has. Not even the best and brightest cowards chosen for this expedition. They probably would have talked Shem *out* of going with them. He's far too brave for them. Oh, Clark—they better draw the correct conclusions," he sighed wistfully. "They better see what they're supposed to see at the ruins. It's all on that map. If I could see it, surely they will too. If they don't—"

He grumbled in anticipatory frustration. He couldn't bear to think of the expedition returning next year with the news that the ruins were a dangerous place. He had far too many plans already in mind, and he wasn't about to let them be foiled by some timid idiots.

"Well, if they don't reach the correct conclusion, maybe we'll just have to do something about that." He patted his horse's neck and realized how calmly Clark stood for such a large and vibrant stallion.

"Interesting . . ."

He glanced to his right, to the densely wooded forest that last year held a host of Guarders, now all dead. It was peaceful and

inviting, as the trees always were to him. That didn't bother him, just intrigued him.

"You're not in the least bit skittish to be here, are you?" he asked Clark. Several horses he had gone through over the years would develop the sudden need to trample something when he neared the darkened trees, but not Clark. He merely glanced over to the pines and twitched his ears as if to ask, *Want to head in there? I'm game.*

"Don't tempt me, Clark. Come along. We need to finish our survey of Moorland."

He gently nudged the horse, and Clark immediately set off for the ruins as if knowing the way. Perrin sent someone to check on Moorland at irregular intervals each week, just to make sure no one else was trying to set up an explosives shop, as if anything remained that could be usable.

But every once in a while Perrin set out alone just to see it again and to prove to himself that it was still conquered. That knowledge helped him sleep better at night.

Of course Shem didn't like that idea that Perrin went by himself. The last time he snuck away from the fort, Shem caught up to him and accompanied him on his rounds of the charred buildings, the large crater, and the blackened fields now beginning to sprout new growth. Nature recovers quickly. Perrin envied it sometimes.

But today he made sure Shem was busy before he set out, and didn't tell anyone where he was going. Deep down his training told him that going alone was dangerous, but in each man there's still a rebellious teenager that jumps up and begs to be indulged once in a while. This was it.

He didn't get too close to Moorland itself. With the rock foundations and first floors of all the structures now tumbled down, it was easy to see through the remains of the small village, still dead and abandoned.

He tipped the reins to the side to nudge Clark in another direction, but instead the horse hesitated, then did a quick sideways step.

Perrin looked down to see that Clark had deliberately avoided stepping on a large, gnawed-on bone. Perrin gulped. Likely human, likely dug up by some wolves, likely left here for a snack later.

Clark merely continued steadily on his way, and Perrin once again patted the horse's neck. The creature was smarter than the majority of his new recruits.

Satisfied that Moorland was still just a memory, he clucked Clark

to return to the shade of the trees. The black horse blended in perfectly with the woods. Perrin always enjoyed riding in the shadows at the edge where he could hear the forest calling him.

They hadn't traveled more than a hundred paces or so when Clark sidestepped again, this time slightly agitated. His ears twitched and he snorted in concern.

"Whoa," Perrin said unnecessarily, for Clark had already stopped as if hoping his rider would notice what he did. "What is it, Clark?" he whispered. "What do you smell?"

Perrin peered into the woods but all he could see were thick young pines, dense scrubby brush, dead logs, fallen branches, and absolute quiet. Still, he wasn't about to doubt Clark, whose nostrils were flaring as if he smelled something absolutely foul. Perrin found himself subtly sniffing the air but didn't catch a whiff of sulfur or anything else alarming.

Yet . . . there *was* something. Something he could feel, as if another set of eyes were watching him closely. Without moving his head he shifted his gaze upward into the tops of the trees. Seeing nothing unusual, his eyes traveled down again to look in the direction Clark was staring and now stomping in annoyance.

"I know," Perrin whispered soothingly. "I feel it too. I just can't see it. But it's there." The thought filled him with dread.

Someone was still alive. Maybe many "someones."

It had been too much to expect that all of the Guardians would vanish and no one would ever return. When he'd told Mahrree of his hope last year, he'd been riding high on sheer enthusiasm of his success. But after only a few days he had the nagging feeling that it was all too good to be true. There had to be a few remaining, and therefore a purpose for forts, according to the garrison.

Perrin knew that coming alone to inspect Moorland wasn't the safest or smartest thing to do. But he wasn't helpless. Far from it.

"Did you hear me?" he announced loudly to the forest. "I know you're there! You may think you're unnoticeable, but obviously we noticed. And you see me here patrolling Moorland and you know why, don't you? I don't take anything for granted!"

He continued to stare, as did Clark, at whatever it was making its presence in the trees. Or bushes. Or fallen logs. Perhaps there were still Guardians, but they were gutless. He was the easiest target in the world right then, and he must have been the Guardians' most wanted man. If ever there was a time to take revenge it was right now, and he waited with his hand twitching on the hilt of Relf

Shin's sword.

But for some inexplicable reason they didn't take the opportunity. Maybe it was just one sole survivor, or two, that were maybe lost but certainly not about to take action. That was what Perrin was hoping: that they'd never dare to take action again.

After another full minute he squinted into the stillness. "I'll never stop keeping the world secure from you," he promised.

He prodded Clark who, after snorting his disdain to the trees, promptly turned and trotted away from the forest.

Only after the sound of horses hooves died away did a clump of shrubbery collapse into an unconscious heap.

Two more heavy clusters of leaves dropped from nearby trees and rushed over to the fallen foliage.

"He's already coming around," said one bunch of leaves to the other. He pulled off his concealing hat for a clearer look at their companion.

The second man had already pulled away part of the collection of branches that created the shrub disguise.

The shrub opened his eyes slowly at first, then they flashed in panic.

"Shh," one of the men patted him. "He's gone. Stay down until you can focus properly. You passed out."

"That's what happens when you lock your legs and don't breathe for five minutes," said the other man.

The shrub-man exhaled and rubbed his eyes with a green gloved hand. "That was the most terrifying moment I've ever had!"

The first leaf man chuckled. "I have to admit, as initiations go that was probably the most intense any new recruit has experienced."

The second man nodded. "Most of us were initiated by what we refer to as the 'trial by fire' last year, when Moorland burned and the flames traveled to the forest. But to be stared down like that? All I can say is, Welcome to the corps!"

Shrub-man nodded once. "So was that *him*?"

"That was him, all right," the first man said, helping the shrub-man sit up slowly. "No one else does 'glaring' quite like a Shin."

"What was he doing this far east?"

"Inspections, like a thorough commander should conduct."

Shrub-man exhaled again.

“So what did he say there at the last?” the second man asked. “I couldn’t quite hear all of the speech.”

Shrub-man rubbed his head which still pounded from its impact with the ground. “He said something like, ‘I’ll never stop keeping the world safe from you.’”

The first man looked at the second and nodded. “Sounds like something he’d say. Except that he got it all mixed up.”

The lanky sixteen-year-old with wavy brown hair leaned against the fence railing and watched the gray stallion. Up close it was even more impressive—the perfect blend, bred for strength and speed. He longed to hop the fence and run a hand down the withers. If this were any other property he would have already been at the horse’s side. But even he knew the importance of not violating the fort’s boundaries without permission or an escort.

At least, not in daylight.

He felt a presence right behind him.

“If you think he looks good now, you should see him at a full run.”

“Sir!” the young man jumped, startled. “I’m sorry, I know I’m a little early—”

“It’s all right. ‘On time’ is already ten minutes late,” the officer said, putting a hand on the young man’s shoulder. “Lannard, it was, right?”

“Yes, sir, Captain.”

Captain Thorne smiled thinly. “Well, Lannard, are you ready for your first assignment?”

Lannard delivered a nervous smile and a sloppy salute.

Thorne winced as he turned to lean against the fence. “We’ll work on that. Another year yet before you can be a soldier. You just may need that much time to improve that salute. So, in the meantime, there he is: Streak. He just doesn’t get as much exercise as he deserves. I have to spend so much time in the office now.”

“I understand sir. It’s my good fortune. I’m well aware of that,” Lannard said, looking longingly at the stallion.

“Well, I don’t know if it makes up for not going on the expedition, but yes, it was fortunate we met. I could tell you’re a potential

horse man.”

“Oh, yes sir! My father keeps cattle, but I don’t see the appeal.”

Thorne sighed in appreciation. “Indeed. Why would you be drawn to *cattle* . . .” He bristled at the recent memory of Briter out in his fields grouping the clumsy animals for some odd experiment involving cheering and applause.

“. . . when I could be caring instead for a stallion?” Lannard said, nodding at the horse. “My thoughts exactly, sir.”

Even a sixteen-year-old can see the logic in that, Lemuel thought. But it just proved another one of his father’s theories: men are far more logical than girls.

“So Lannard, your schedule in school: when do you usually leave?”

“You mean, what time am I *supposed* to leave, or what time do I *actually* leave?” Lannard asked with a twinkle in his eye.

Thorne shook his head. “I can’t have you breaking any rules, or I can’t have you working for me. Education is important.”

“Yes, sir.” Lannard’s eyes shifted oddly, as if he tried to keep them from rolling but they wanted to anyway. “I’m usually allowed to leave school by three, unless Mrs. Shin needs to have another one of her talks with me.”

Thorne’s body stiffened in an effort to control his breathing.

Lannard wasn’t the only one experiencing good fortune today.

“Mrs. Shin is your teacher?” He tried to keep his voice natural although the words wanted to come out in an ecstatic shout.

“Yes sir,” he said dully. “I had her last year, this year, and I’m doomed to have her next year, unless I ‘improve my behavior,’” he said, impersonating the director of Edge schools quite accurately.

The effect was lost on Thorne, who had never met Mr. Hegek. “I take it you don’t enjoy Mrs. Shin?”

Lannard shrugged. “She’s all right, I suppose. Sir, I *really* don’t need any of this getting back to the colonel,” he said with a meaningful sidelong glance. “My older brother used to be one of his ‘special cases.’ I don’t need that kind of attention.”

“Don’t worry. I don’t think you need *his* attention,” Thorne assured him. “I’m curious, what kinds of things does she teach? What subjects?”

“She gets to teach them all. But she really loves history and current events. She’s been going on about that expedition for weeks, ever since they announced it.”

Thorne squinted. "I didn't realize that was going to be on the test this year."

"Oh, it's not. But she doesn't believe in just teaching what's on the test. She says we need to learn everything we can. Do you realize how much 'everything' is? It's like . . . *every* thing! She's insane." Lannard felt it safe to roll his eyes now.

Thorne nodded thoughtfully. "Like what? What's something she's insisting on teaching?"

"You really don't want to know, Captain."

"Oh, I think I do, Lannard. Come on. Let's go get Streak saddled up and you can tell me some of the tortures of being an upper school student. It's been a couple of years since I've been there, but I'm sure I could top whatever you have to say."

"Captain, I hear a challenge! All right, then," Lannard rubbed his hands together as they walked to Thorne's personal tackle shed. "Tomorrow's assignment is about the kings, and what life was like under their rule. I'm supposed to ask my parents about what they remember, then we're going to compare it to what life is like now. And it's not even going to be on the test."

A smile grew on Captain Thorne's face. This boy certainly didn't need Colonel Shin's personalized attention.

Only Captain Thorne's.

"Lannard, I can't tell you how *glad* I am we met."

That evening a new piece of paper with the date, 2nd Day of Weeding Season, 337, was placed in a thick file. For weeks Captain Thorne had been looking for ways to fulfill the request of Administrator Genev, but nothing had come to mind. Until now.

Under the date were the words, "*MPS deliberately ignores Department of Instructions' mandated lesson plans. Encouraging students to discover differences in life between under rule of the kings and under rule of the Administrators. Information known NOT to be on the end of Yearly Official Uniform Department of Instruction Exam.*"

Lemuel looked at the note for a moment and snickered. If you took the first letters of each of the words from the title of the test, it spelled YOU DIE.

Suddenly, everything became very easy in his life.

Knock-knock . . . knock-knock-knock.

Oh, if only he hadn't got the expedition out on time, Perrin sighed to himself. But here he was, knocking on the door in a rhythm that, if Perrin were ever to hear it in a musical piece, would likely make him want to break the musician's arm.

"Come in."

Thorne opened the door but he wasn't smiling. In fact, today there was a determined look that Perrin hadn't seen since the captain first arrived at the fort. It was solid and hot and, for once, honest.

"Sir, I found a young man who'll be exercising my horse Streak."

"Fine," Perrin said. He didn't care, but for some odd reason Thorne always felt the need to tell him every little thing he did. He was a three-year-old, hungry for assurance that he was perfect and the favorite.

"I just wanted you to know. I have everything under control."

Perrin leaned back in his chair. "That's quite a claim, Captain. No one can ever have everything under control. Control is an illusion."

Thorne's piercing gaze sharpened even more. "Oh, I don't think so, Colonel. I'll prove that to you. And you will be most impressed and astonished, sir. I promise you that."

Perrin sighed at the captain's enigmatic response. "Thorne, I don't really enjoy being astonished. Not a lot of good comes when something is 'astonishing.' Just so you know."

"You will this time, sir," Thorne said evenly.

There was no sign of the captain's normal simpering, but a clear resolve that made the hairs on the back of Perrin's neck stand on end.

Captain Thorne had a new strategy, but for what?

"I promise you, sir—this time, you'll be impressed."

After he shut the door, Perrin exhaled. "And I *really* hate being impressed."

Lannard was a few minutes late the next day, and ran panting to the tackle shed to find Captain Thorne already taking the saddle off the post.

“I’m sorry, sir. I was held back for a time because . . . well, I’m here now.”

Thorne hefted the saddle on Streak’s blanketed back. “What were you held back for, Lannard? I really should know.”

Lannard shifted uncomfortably. “For saying some words that Mrs. Shin finds ‘inappropriate.’”

“Hmm,” Thorne said slightly disappointed. “So she kept you after as punishment?”

“I had to write alternatives on the board. Safe words that wouldn’t offend ‘nice young women,’ ” Lannard bobbed his head in irritation.

Thorne smirked as he crouched to tighten the clasp around Streak’s belly. “Don’t care too much about impressing nice young women yet?”

“Show me one, and I’ll have plenty of ways to impress her.” He wagged his eyebrows and made a suggestive movement.

Thorne chuckled without any humor. “Doesn’t always work the way you plan it, Lannard.”

“Well if she’s isn’t impressed with me, why would I want her?”

Thorne stood up and put his hand on the saddle. “That’s an insightful comment, Lannard. With such intelligence, I don’t understand why you struggle so much in school.”

Lannard turned pink. He took the reins of Streak and rubbed his nose. “Where to today, sir?”

“Take him to the western edge of the village and let him go at a full run for about a mile through the farms and back.”

Lannard began to grin. “If I took him a little farther, I could run him all the way to Moorland and back, sir.”

“I want him exercised, not exhausted!” Thorne snapped. “Besides, Moorland is still off limits.”

“I don’t know why,” Lannard frowned. “It’s dead, isn’t it? If I can’t see the western ruins, I could at least see the Moorland ruins.”

Thorne shook his head. “The Moorland ruins are . . . eerie. It’s deathly quiet and empty. When the wind blows, some men claim to hear shrieks and wails. I’ve never heard that, of course, but the place *feels* haunted. I’ve seen soldiers arrive, look down, see a bone with the flesh and muscle burned off, and turn and run all the way back to the fort. You really don’t want to see that.”

But Lannard’s eyes lit up when the captain said ‘burned.’

“Honestly, sir, I don’t think I would be spooked.”

“If you’re serious about that, then I’ll take you on holiday at the end of this week. I was going to take a few new recruits over there in the morning, and you can come along. But I’m riding Streak,” Thorne said. Then he added with a grimace, “Maybe Colonel Shin’s *Clark* needs exercising.”

While it was an admirable horse, the Stables at Pools had been a rival to Thorne’s grandfather’s stables for years. The presence of an animal from there, and named Clark of all things, was an added insult.

“Captain, that would be great! Thank you!”

“But first,” Thorne held up his hand, “first you tell me what you did in school today.”

Lannard rolled his eyes. “Oh, I get it. This is one of those ‘mentor moments,’ isn’t it? ‘I’m interested in your well-being, son. Let’s talk.’”

Thorne’s face froze at Lannard’s cadence and delivery of that line. “You know who you sounded like just then?”

Lannard beamed. “Yes, I do. I’ve been working on my Colonel Shin impersonation for a while now. That’s the way he always started with my older brother when he put him in chains and walked him to incarceration. I’m sure you hear him a lot more than I do. Do you have any suggestions?”

“Yes, don’t do that anywhere near Colonel Shin. He doesn’t have the same sense of humor I do. Do you, uh,” Thorne hesitated, “do you impersonate *Mrs. Shin*?”

“Not yet, but I’m working on it. I’ve only got the rhythm of a few of her catch phrases down so far. ‘Details! Give me details!’ and ‘You shouldn’t *care* what’s on the test!’ I’m still trying to figure out how to do her voice.”

Thorne nodded. “How did your homework assignment go today—the differences between the time of the kings and now?” he said as casually as he dared.

Lannard sighed. “Actually, it was pretty interesting, I hate to admit it. When I asked my grandfather about the differences, he had to think about it. Usually he rambles on for hours, but it took him a while to come with something. He said taxes now were more stable, but a bit higher, but Guarder activity has been a lot worse during the past twenty years as if the Guarders weren’t as afraid of the Administrators. Of course there’s been nothing for the past year since Moorland, but you know that. The entertainments are better now, though. But he didn’t know if education was any better. He thought that maybe it had

gotten worse. And the Administrators have just as many laws and rules as the kings.”

Thorne sifted through the information. “So what conclusions did the class come to?”

“Well, we’re not allowed to *debate*,” Lannard raised his eyebrows at the captain, “but we do all the time anyway. Of course Mrs. Shin says its mostly bickering rather than debating, but we decided that things were *different* under the Administrators but not better. Mrs. Shin told us what school used to be like, just before we all started schooling. Can you imagine being in school for only *three hours* a day? I could *like* school that way! That’s when I said life had definitely NOT improved under the Administrators!” Lannard started to laugh but suddenly remembered who he was talking to. He choked on the words that he had already let escape.

The captain stared at him.

Lannard swallowed hard. “Um, I didn’t mean that . . . what I *mean* is, uh—”

Captain Thorne shook his head. “Don’t worry, I’m not the eyes and ears of the Administrators. And I don’t talk to them unless I have to, so calm down. What did Mrs. Shin say when you declared that the Administrators were no better than the kings?” The captain put on his best friendly face while his mind prepared to take the most extensive and careful mental notes ever.

Lannard shifted nervously, having expected some kind of reprimand. He seemed a little off balance, but saw the captain’s thin smile and hesitantly gave him one back. “She said something like I was obviously capable of independent thought, and she wanted me to do more of that kind of thinking.”

A grin spread across Thorne’s face that wasn’t entirely pleasant. He clapped a hand on teen’s shoulder. “And I agree with her. You nurture that ‘independent thinking.’ It sounds like you have just the right teacher to help you do that.”

Lannard relaxed a little, still uneasy. “If you say so, sir.” He took the reins. “I’ll be back in an hour.”

“Make it two, Lannard. You’ve earned some fun.”

3rd Day of Weeding Season, 337.

When student declared life under the Administrators is no better

than life under the kings, MPS encouraged him to keep up his independent thinking. Did nothing to dissuade student to think otherwise, nor reinforced a sense of loyalty to the Administrators.

Lemuel smiled. It was too easy. Just too easy.

The next day Lannard stood at attention, or at least a relatively close approximation of it, as Captain Thorne walked from the main gates of the fort to the adjoining pasture. Thorne noticed the boy trying to watch him without appearing to be watching him. He definitely needed more practice.

“Lannard, you look . . . uncomfortable,” the captain said as he approached him. “Something wrong?”

“No, sir!”

Thorne paused. “That’s all you have to say today?”

“Yes, sir!”

Thorne scratched his chin. “Lannard, what do you know?”

“Explanation, sir?”

“The only time a talkative man stops talking is when he finally has something interesting to share. Out with it, boy.”

Lannard squirmed. “I don’t want to offend, sir!”

Thorne scoffed. “I’m not easily offended, Lannard. Come on, what’s with you today? You were far easier yesterday.”

“I didn’t know who you were yesterday, sir!”

“Who I am . . . ? Oh. You mean, who my father is?”

“And your grandfather, sir!”

Thorne nodded. It was only a matter of time before Lannard put it together. “Who told you?”

“My grandfather, sir! When I told him who I was working for, he said you were the grandson of the High General, sir, and, um, that’s a little . . . um,” Lannard’s voice started getting higher.

Thorne smiled thinly. “It’s not *anything*, Lannard.”

“But what I say, sir, may get back to the High General and to the Chairman and the Administrators,” his voice croaked, “who are celebrating twenty glorious years in power, sir! Almost twenty-one!”

Thorne barked half a laugh. “You really think I write letters to my father and grandfather about the conversations I have with my hired hand? You think they care about the opinions of a sixteen-year-old boy *in Edge* of all places? Lannard, you give yourself too much credit.

And too much worry. And stop with that ridiculous stance already!”

Lannard tried to relax to a more normal posture, appearing instead like a caught fish flopping in different ways to achieve a “casual” position.

“That’s sort of better.” Feeling some sympathy, he took Lannard by the shoulders and shook him a little. “It’s just *me*, remember?” He practiced his best smile.

It was almost good enough.

“Yes, sir,” Lannard said, a little more comfortably.

“Hey,” Thorne shook him again. “We’re . . . friends,” he stumbled momentarily on the word as if it were one that rarely crossed his lips. “Right? Right? Who else but a friend would sneak you over to Moorland when you’re not a soldier?”

Lannard finally smiled. “Yes, sir.”

“Good. Now don’t let the thought that someday *I’m* going to be High General distress you in any way.”

Lannard’s eyes flared in alarm.

“You don’t have much of a sense of humor, do you Lannard?”

Lannard considered the comment. “I don’t know that *anyone* has ever said that to me before, sir.”

Thorne shrugged. “So, you know the routine. You get to ride, but first you tell me what you learned in school today.”

Lannard smiled easily as he followed Captain Thorne into the shed. “Today was pretty dull until in science we got into a debate—

discussion . . . *bickering* session about the origin of the universe. You know the explosion theory? Well Mrs. Shin has her own theories.”

“Tell me all of them, Lannard.”

Chapter 28 ~ “It’s not that simple, Yung!”

On the 15th Day of Harvest Season, 337, Perrin took the long way home through Deckett’s farm. He breathed in the cool air and smiled.

This was the way life should be, he thought. Perfect temperature, beautiful season, with a feeling in the air that everything was in harmony with the world. If only days like this could last forever.

And, he quickly reminded himself—because if he didn’t acknowledge the blessings he knew he didn’t deserve them—it had felt like a “small forever” that everything had been ideal. For the past six moons his life had been *perfect*. Just no other word for it.

Jaytsy was living happily down the road with a young man Perrin had to admit was as close to perfect as a father could wish for his daughter.

Peto, while no longer around as much as Perrin wanted—at least he wasn’t redistributing livestock during the night—had just received excellent marks on his Final Administrative Competency Test and could go to any university and study any subject in another year.

The world was calm—for now—eagerly awaiting the news from the expedition about vast new lands they could acquire and develop. Guarder activity was nonexistent, and Moorland remained uninhabited.

The fort was in excellent shape and Thorne stayed well out of his way, except to alternate between flattering him with weak compliments and remind him of proper procedures. But even he was tolerable.

Perrin’s recruitment quota was easily met, thanks to the tireless efforts of Shem who kept him on his toes in the tower during the days,

and kept him laughing in his gathering room during the evenings. In a few weeks they'd be running their annual Strongest Soldier Race, and already Shem had started the taunting. Having beaten Perrin in the last three races, he was feeling overconfident.

Perrin, on the other hand, was just feeling over. He hadn't told Shem yet, but the fifteenth race was going to be his last. It was time to let someone younger take on the sergeant major. There were plenty of soldiers, especially Offra, wanting the chance.

Perrin didn't like to admit it, but it was creeping up on him. At least it was moving slowly, but he knew it was there: age. After the race he would turn forty-six.

He was on a slide to fifty.

He felt it when he moved, his muscles and joints responding just a bit slower than he wished. He saw it when he shaved his chin smooth each morning where gray hairs—no, white: they had the nerve to be *white!*—were sprouting in his beard. And also disturbingly on his eyebrows, but he yanked those out.

He could still beat the vast majority of the soldiers in speed and skill, but Shem had caught up to him. If Perrin were a more prideful man, that would have bothered him. But he wasn't, so it didn't.

He couldn't have been prouder of Sergeant Major Zenos. That Shem exceeded Perrin in many ways as a soldier was the ultimate compliment. Occasionally Perrin regretted that he hadn't pushed Shem to attend Command School. With his charisma, passion, and insight, Zenos would have been a fantastic general. As officers together, they could have done great things in Idumea.

Perrin didn't mind passing along the title of Strongest Soldier to his best friend. After fourteen races Perrin still had more wins than losses, and he doubted Shem could ever surpass his win record before he reached Perrin's age and felt the years dragging on him as well. That would mean that Perrin would still have more overall wins than Shem.

All right, maybe he was a *bit* prideful.

Still, he had the most wonderful wife in the world that made his perfection complete. And he could easily outrun her.

As he slowly walked through the crops that flourished around him, he shook his head in admiration. He'd never paid much attention to the rhythms of the weather and the progress of the plants until his daughter's livelihood began to depend upon it. Now he felt as proud of this farm as if he were the one running it. He mentally added 'farmer' to the list of alternatives to being High

General. The list he began two and half years ago in Idumea had never been erased from his mind. Periodically he pulled it out, reminding himself that his future wasn't set in stone.

But there was another part of him that still revisited the memory of the chant of "General Shin" and smiled at it. He wasn't *entirely* against the idea. In many scenarios it could work, quite well.

It was the unknown variables that troubled him. He often felt his life was a complicated math problem where he'd been given only a few numbers with the rest to follow at a later date. He'd stare at the equation, anticipating what the missing digits may be, wondering when the final solution would reveal itself.

He'd already decided he'd never be the Advisor to General Thorne. And should he become the High General, he'd never have Thorne as his Advisor. Brillen Karna would be a far better choice since he knew Perrin so well. Graeson Fadh would be steady and insightful, and Gari Yordin would be most entertaining.

But Thorne would never stand for any of them usurping his position, at least not without an open battle. And Perrin could never allow that, either.

There were too many possible solutions, and none of them felt quite right.

Perrin shrugged off the problem, shoving it far back in the corner of his mind as he usually did, but also knowing exactly where to extract it again should another unknown of the equation suddenly appear.

Because something more pressing was directly before him.

He'd been sent a message from Jaytsy that there was a surprise in her barn, and she wanted him to be the first to know. He meandered through the corn now taller than him, breaking off an ear and snacking on it along the way. It was the fort's crop anyway, he reasoned. He *should* check it.

He stepped over the large pumpkins and thought briefly how well a catapult could toss those, if they still had catapults. He passed the second crop of green beans and wondered how his daughter could abide eating them straight off the plants.

Last week she had stood in the field nibbling them, one after another. "They just taste so *green!* I don't know why, but they're so good this year!"

He could barely tolerate beans boiled for five minutes and drenched in butter and pepper. But as he watched her down three

plants' worth, an idea flashed briefly across his mind. Time would tell soon enough.

He made his way through the rows of perfectly straight and tall carrots, and frowned at a rabbit nibbling on the greens.

"The Cat would take care of you, if only he'd stay over here!" Perrin shooed it away by tossing the now-empty cob at it. He walked over to the barn and pushed open the door.

"Hello? Jays? Deck?"

"Over here, Perrin," Deckett called from an unseen stall.

"This is a strange place to keep a surprise," Perrin answered as he sidestepped a nervous cow to get to the corner of the barn. He turned into the stall.

"Oh. I see. Well," was all he could think of saying. "Whose fault is it?"

Jaysy laughed from her spot in the scattered hay. "Take a look for yourself. Six kittens, all mostly black!" She held up a tiny ball of fur. "Now can you see the wisdom of leaving The Cat at *your* house? He loves you most, anyway."

Perrin crouched in front of the calico licking another fluff of fur that was stretching next to her. "I didn't even know you had a barn cat, Deck."

"Neither did I until this morning," Deck chuckled. "I came in here and heard all this mewling. And I want you to know, Perrin, I hold *you* responsible."

"Me? I never saw her before! I mean—"

His daughter and son-in-law burst out laughing.

Perrin groaned. "You know what I mean," he chuckled.

Jaysy handed him a sleeping kitten. "Look at the markings on this one—exactly like The Cat."

Perrin's large hand could have closed over the tiny kitten completely. He held it up for examination, slowly stroking its little head, its ears and eyes not yet open.

"So small," he whispered in amazement.

A sniffing sound caused him to shift his gaze to his daughter.

Her chin was trembling and a tear was threatening to escape her eyes. "Oh Father, you're so *cute!* With that tiny little baby animal and . . ." She sniffed again, picked up another kitten, and rubbed it against her face. "Ooh, so cute."

Perrin looked over at Deckett.

Deck was watching his wife with a slightly disturbed demeanor. He glanced at his father-in-law for an explanation.

He didn't get any. Yet.

"Jayts," Deck said gently. "Did you need to check on dinner?"

"What? Oh, yes. I almost forgot! Here Deck," she said, standing up and holding out the kitten. "This one feels a little cold. Can you do something for it?"

Deck took the kitten from her hand.

She started to leave but paused as her husband cupped the kitten to warm it. "Oh, you're even *cuter* holding that baby kitten! You're so *sweet!*" She squealed, gave him a quick kiss and wiped away a tear. "I hope you don't mind beans for dinner again, Deck. We have such a good crop this year." She rushed out of the barn.

Perrin analyzed his son-in-law's face as Deck stared at the kitten.

First Deck's eyes narrowed, then his nose twitched, and his mouth scrunched. He looked over at the kitten in Perrin's hands, then finally up at Perrin's face.

Perrin gave him a small smile and a wink.

Deck swallowed. "Green beans for every meal and crying over kittens weren't on your list, Perrin."

Perrin chuckled. "But using the word 'cute' *was*, on the very top. And 'sweet'! Everyone woman is different, Deck. You let me know when I can officially congratulate you. I recommend you give it a little time, though, maybe to the end of the season, just to make sure. But send Jaytsy to talk to her mother in the meantime. Mahrree might be able to keep this quiet."

Deck nodded slowly. His smile grew into a broad grin.

Perrin matched it.

"Middle of Planting Season next year," Deck said. "That's my guess. Wow. I hope you won't be too busy, Perrin. I think I might need some extra help. Kind of bad timing for a farmer."

"There's never a good time to have a baby, but it always has a way of working out. I'm an expert at changing cloths, Deck. I'll teach you everything I know." He slapped Deck happily on the back.

Deck stared dreamily at the kitten. "I really hope she is."

Perfect life, Perrin sighed to himself.

Eventually he said, "I should be heading home, Deck. Mahrree worries when I'm late." He stroked the tiny kitten again, not making any movements to leave.

"I'm sure you'll be back after dinner once Mahrree hears about these," Deck chuckled. "Now, what was the name Shem told me . . . oh, yes. *Grandpy*. Put that fist away, you can't hit me! We're holding

kittens!”

In her kitchen Jaytsy downed another handful of raw green beans. At some point someone was going to notice, she giggled to herself. But maybe not for a while. The nausea she felt in the mornings was relatively easy to ignore, and she wasn't as tired as she expected she would be. Certainly not the way her mother had told her she'd been when she was expecting her and Peto.

Her mother who would be a *grandmother*.

Jaytsy bit her lip in anticipation and patted her still-flat belly. “Just our secret for now, little one. But tonight your father’s going to get a surprise! Bigger than your grandfather’s. Did you hear what I said?” she said, tears brimming in her eyes. “Your ‘father’? ‘Grandfather’? Oh, I wished you could have seen them holding those kittens!”

She grabbed another handful of beans and blew her nose into a cloth.

Mahrree knew the look on her husband’s face when he came home that evening, but she could tell he was trying to hide it. She hadn’t seen that expression for many years, but some looks you just don’t forget. She sighed in contentment.

Middle of Planting Season. That’s what she guessed a couple of days ago.

“You’re home a little late.” She kissed him. “Everything all right?”

“Yes, I stopped by Deck and Jaytsy’s. They had something they wanted to show me.”

“Oh?”

“Yes, it appears that for the brief time The Cat was living there he was *busy*.”

Mahrree smiled, confused. “Busy? How?”

“Kitten busy. Six of them.”

“Really? Oh, we have to go after dinner to see them.”

“But not with Peto. I know him; he’d bring them all home.”

Mahrree laughed. “I was just thinking the other morning how

quiet and peaceful this past Weeding Season was. Finally a normal year again! No terrible news, no disturbances, nothing to worry us. So naturally, I started to worry. When Harvest began, I started to get nervous, wondering what was coming. Surely our restful season couldn't continue. Well if the *big event* in our life is just kittens, that's wonderful! Nothing *more* than that, that's just fine. The only one who has been 'busy' plotting, or anticipating, or up to something, I suppose, has been The Cat."

For the past minute she studied her husband's face. Until he started trying to teach her Shem and his hobby, she didn't watch his every facial twitch too closely. But now the tiny muscles around his mouth were quivering like mad, holding back something he suspected.

She had never realized before how easy it could be to torment him. He was nearly bursting with something that he really couldn't share.

She smiled sweetly at him. "Isn't monotony blissful?" she said. "I predict a *full year* with *nothing* exciting happening. I know—one year from now, the 48th Day of Harvest, 338, let's review and see if my prediction was correct."

Pain.

That's what it was.

Absolute pain in trying to reveal nothing with his face. It was delicious.

But Mahrree wasn't nearly as good at this as he was. She snorted.

He pointed at her, his eyes flashing. "What do you know?!"

"Nothing!" she snorted again. "I know nothing at all!" She started to laugh.

"And I know nothing either!" he declared and caught her in a big hug. "Neither does Deck suspect anything. The poor girl. I think she may be the only one who really 'knows' nothing at all!"

Peto heard his parents laughing as he came up to the back door. When he walked into the kitchen they were hugging and wiping away tears as they tried to catch their breath.

He sighed. "What now?"

"Kittens!" they both told him, and started laughing again.

In a small way Peto did want to know why his parents were laughing and crying about *kittens*. But instead he shook his head and stomped past them to his room. Sometimes they were so . . .

Well, take right now. Sometimes getting a straight answer out of them aggravatingly impossible. And getting them to understand anything was just a fruitless.

But tomorrow might change all of that. Passing the Final Test was the first step. And since he couldn't enroll in any university until he was seventeen, he had all year to ready himself. In the meantime, his parents had been giving him ideas about his future.

"With such a high Final Test score," Mahrree said proudly the other night at dinner, "he could become a doctor, or a fort surgeon."

"He'd have to go to Idumea to finish that training," Perrin had said, clearly not pleased with the option. "He could start studying at Mountseen and maybe finish elsewhere, like at Waves or Midplain, and become a scientist."

"True," Mahrree said. "Or even a historian, or a university professor."

"Or maybe," Peto had interrupted them, "you could ask ME what I want to do."

They had both turned to him in surprise. "But we're just letting you know what your options are, son. We're not making any decisions. You could do anything in the world. You're one of the few who still gets to decide his own future," Mahrree reminded him.

"That's right, and there's only one thing I want to become right now, and you both know it," he declared.

"Not as a profession, son," Perrin had scowled. "You could do that for fun on the side, and still go to the university."

"I'll go in a few years—I promise. Just let me do what I want to do now."

They had shaken their heads at him in disappointment.

He had left the table in frustration.

But tomorrow the main scout for the Idumean United team would be coming all the way to Edge. And he wanted to meet Peto Shin. Tomorrow he might finally have his future decided.

And his father's.

Peto changed into his work clothes but paused when something in his wardrobe caught his eye. He stared at the corner of the parchment envelope. Taking it would make things a lot easier, but his grandfather had been adamant: share it with no one else.

Eventually he shut the doors and headed for the table where his parents were sitting down to dinner.

"Rector Yung wanted my help to pick the last peaches," Peto

said as picked up a slab of bread and piled on it mashed potatoes, a hunk of beef, then poured gravy carefully over the top of it, licking the spills off his fingers.

Mahrree grimaced. "At least use a plate! Just sit down with us for five minutes, and—"

"I'll be back later to finish off what you two don't eat. The sun's going down soon, and Yung was pretty insistent."

"No, he's not," Mahrree said, "but I am!"

Perrin patted her shoulder. "It's better this way. We can go to Deck and Jaytsy's *by ourselves*."

Peto didn't know why that sounded as if he was speaking in code, nor did he care as he took a large bite of his dinner. "Can't pick peaches in the dark. See you later," and he was out the door.

Halfway to Rector Yung's he finished his dinner on the go, and soon was licking his fingers to knock on the door.

"Peto! To what do I owe the honor of your visit?" Yung smiled.

Peto walked into the sparse sitting room, a tad guiltily. "I, uh, told my parents that you needed help picking peaches, so . . ."

Yung was a quick one. Already he was taking up a cracked bowl from his tiny table, filled with peaches. "Peto, *pick one*."

"Why, thank you, Rector," Peto grinned in feigned sincerity, taking a peach from the bowl he helped fill a few weeks ago. Now that he was an honest man again, he could explain why he was there.

"You see—" he garbled as he took a big bite, peach juice dribbling down his chin.

Yung handed him a napkin as Peto sat down in the ancient stuffed chair that creaked faintly.

"—tomorrow's a pretty big day for me, Rector."

"Is it, now?"

"There's a kickball recruiter coming from Idumea to evaluate some of us. I've got an appointment tomorrow with my future!"

Yung squatted in front of Peto, watching nothing, but intently. "These teams—they play in Idumea?"

"Primarily, yes," Peto took another bite. "They travel around, too, but all are based in Idumea and Pools."

"I see . . . I see," Yung said, lost in thought. "And why have you come to me?"

“Well, I’m going to need your help with a couple of things.”

“And what are those things?”

“One’s called Perrin,” Peto said, slurping up the juice, “and the other’s called Mahrree.”

“Hmm,” Yung said, his voice strangely far away.

“You see, if I get selected—and I’m sure I will,” he added modestly, “I get to start next Planting Season. But my parents won’t want me to go alone, nor will they want to go *with* me, so . . .”

Yung looked up at his eager face.

“I need you to help me convince them this is a good idea.”

Yung sighed. “But I don’t think it is, Peto.”

Peto’s shoulders dropped. “Why not? Rector, it’s crucial that—” He realized there was no way he could explain to Rector Yung that his grandfather had a recurring dream about his son becoming the greatest general in the world. Grandfather had been specific about that, to not share that dream with anyone except his wife.

His very distant, very far, *far* away into the future wife.

But he could say a little bit, right? “My grandfather really wanted my father to become a general, Rector—” which was true and everyone knew that, “—and I’m trying to help my father realize that . . . destiny.”

Yung tilted his head. “Destiny?”

Peto exhaled. “You know what I mean.”

“Destiny,” Yung whispered, lost in contemplation. Lifting his head again, he said, “What do you know of your father’s destiny?”

Peto squirmed. “Rector, that’s kind of personal, don’t you think?”

“Oh, indeed I do. But you want my very personal help, so I must ask very personal questions.”

Peto could sense he was falling into a trap, but he wasn’t sure in which direction he should go to avoid it.

“Please, Rector. I’m not asking this for myself. I know it seems selfish to want to play for the professional teams, but it’s really to help my father, and to fulfill what my grandfather asked me to do.”

Yung nodded. “I have no doubt, my dear Peto, that you are sincere and honest in all that you intend. You are an exceptional young man—”

“But?” Peto said, feeling antsy.

Yung cocked his head. “*But* I don’t believe you understand *quite* everything your grandfather may have intended.”

Peto groaned. “No, no, no, it’s you who don’t understand, but I

need you to trust me—”

When Yung interrupted him, it was with a still, calm voice that somehow cut Peto through his core. “No, my dear boy—it is you who do not understand the destiny of Perrin Shin. You must not go to Idumea. In fact, I will do all that I can to stand in your way.”

Peto was at first taken aback, then furious. “What? Stand in my way? What . . . what . . .” He gestured wildly to the ceiling. “I’ve helped you with that orchard and we’ve talked and I thought you were my friend and willing to help me and—”

“Oh, but I am your friend, and I’m helping you in ways you cannot understand yet—”

“Augh!” Peto exclaimed, leaping to his feet. “It’s not that simple, Yung!”

“I agree,” he said kindly. “It’s not. Not in the least bit, no, not simple whatsoever—”

Peto wasn’t listening but storming around the small sitting area that used to belong to his great, great Uncle Hogal and Aunt Tabbith. *They* would have understood, he was sure. Yung just didn’t want to lose his free laborer. Who else would chop his wood and tend to his peach trees if Peto went to Idumea?

“Look,” Peto tried again, “he’s going to become a general—”

The expectant expression on Yung’s face seemed almost to agree with Peto.

“—and there’s no other way but if he goes to Idumea. He’ll go for his son, I know it! Oh, I wish I could explain it all to you.” Peto gripped his head and continued to pace around the small man.

Yung watched him attentively, craning his neck to keep his eyes on the frustrated teenager. “And how I wish I could explain it to you, too, my boy.”

Peto stopped and dropped his hands to his side. “Please, Rector Yung. My father can handle going back down there. He’s strong and ready, and I made promises.”

Yung stood up and smiled. “Look how much you’ve grown this last year,” he said, reaching up to pat his shoulder. “More than a full head taller than me now. We used to be the same height. My, have you grown—”

“Is there a point to this, Rector?” Peto was out of patience.

“And so much like your father, too,” Yung said. “So determined, and a bit on the impatient side. My point is, you still have some growing to do, Peto. In your heart and in your mind.”

Peto rolled his eyes as dramatically as he knew how. “So you’re not going to help me get my parents to Idumea?”

Yung’s wrinkled face broke into a pleasant smile that reduced his already narrow eyes into mere slits. “Not one bit, my dear friend. I’ll fight you every step of the way if I must.”

Peto stormed out of the house, not bothering to say goodbye.

He missed hearing Rector Yung say, “Because it’s not simple at all, my dear boy. Oh, not simple in any sort of way . . .”

Peto stood in the changing room of the arena in Edge wearing only his thin undershirt and shorts, because he was the only one asked to stay longer. The other young men had already been dismissed. That had to be a good sign, he decided, although he was being treated like a horse at an auction.

The scout inspected him up and down. He squeezed Peto’s calf muscle and nodded in approval, then poked his thigh which was as hard as a rock. Satisfied, he thumped Peto’s tight belly.

“I have to admit,” he said as he walked around Peto who stood at attention, “when I learned who your father was, I thought there was no way you could be a good player if you were anything as large as him. But you’re not. You’re the perfect shape for a ball player—lean, tight, not too broad. And on the field no one today had better ball handling skills or was faster on his feet. If you were as bulky as your father you’d be useless except as a goal tender. But that’s not what you want to be, is it?”

“No sir!” Peto mentally thanked his maternal grandfather, wherever he might be, for having more dominant traits than his father. His face may be the copy of Colonel Shin, but his brown hair, pale eyes, and body shape came from a school teacher.

The scout chuckled. “At ease, *soldier*. I was player, just like you. No need for ‘sir’-ing me. I’ll be honest with you, Mr. Shin, you’re a good candidate. Tryouts are at the beginning of Weeding Season next year, and men start coming in Planting to practice.” He folded his arms and grinned. “You are officially invited to come to Idumea!”

“Thank you, sir!” Peto exhaled. “You won’t be disappointed, I promise!”

“Oh, I’m sure I won’t. Do you have a way to come down?”

“Uh . . . working on it.”

The scout smiled. “We have plenty of time yet. I’m sure we can work something out.” He glanced around before saying in a low voice, “A lot of boys *say* they’re going to the university, and tell their parents they want to head to Idumea early to get a feel for the city. Those that make the team simply never start school. Those who don’t instead go to school for a while until they do make the team. Then they drop out of the university.”

Peto’s eyes brightened. “Do you have any players that do both? Study *and* play at the same time?”

“Not successfully. You’re still young, Peto. The university can wait. And once you start those command classes—”

Peto shook his head emphatically. “I’m not going to Command School. Just the university.”

The scout stepped back in surprise. “Seriously? I thought with a name like Shin there was no other possibility than—”

Peto held up his hands. “I don’t want to be an officer. Never have.”

“Not that I would want to either,” the scout said, “but I’m curious—why not?”

“Would *you* like to go to Command School as the son of Perrin Shin? The grandson of Relf Shin? The great grandson of Pere Shin?”

The scout shook his head in sympathy. “No. No, I wouldn’t. I see your point.”

“Exactly! Tell me, how could I possibly live up to whatever expectations anyone would have of me? No one will be able to top my father’s accomplishments, so I won’t even bother—to try. I mean, true—he jumps into his trousers with both legs at the same time like every other man, but still . . .”

The scout squinted, his face reflecting the puzzled wondering if he had been dressing incorrectly his entire life. He blinked it away. “So what do you want to study?”

“I don’t know. My mother wants me to be a fort surgeon. If I’m not a soldier, at least I can patch them up, I suppose—”

The scout nodded. “You could do that for us as well. You could become a team surgeon.”

Team surgeon?

Team surgeon . . .

A memory surfaced in Peto’s mind. He remembered getting lost in the fort once when he was little. Apparently it happened several times when his father showed off his little boy and set him down thinking

he wouldn't toddle off *again*. Once, when Peto was about three or four, he had made his way into the soldier's quarters and became disoriented in the rows of bunks and trunks and hallways and windows. He didn't panic, but he couldn't remember which way was out to the mess hall, his real destination. He still remembered the relief and excitement that swept over him when he turned another confusing corner and crashed right into Uncle Shem's legs. When Shem picked him up and carried him out of the maze, Peto felt as if everything in his life was perfect again.

Team surgeon.

The same feeling came over him again. The maze of his future suddenly became a straight and perfect path that led all the way to Idumea, with his parents in tow.

A smile formed on Peto's face and expanded into a grin. "A team surgeon."

"Oh, yeah," the scout nodded. "You know how many injuries we have each season? You'd be busier than any fort doctor. Plus you get to sit on the sidelines of every game. Your on-field career will last five years, if you're lucky. Usually a permanent injury ends your playing, but then you need to do something else with the rest of your life. You can't have my job—I plan to be a scout until I die. But we could use a surgeon."

Peto clapped his hands. "I've found my way to Idumea, sir! And I'll make the team, I promise you that."

A few minutes later, Peto, fully dressed and leaving the arena changing room, rode an enthusiastic wave that distracted him from noticing anything else, including the blue uniform standing in a shadow next to the exit.

"Where do you think you're going, Peto?"

Peto stopped and turned to the voice, the wave crashing down around him.

"Uncle Shem! What are you doing here?" But he already knew.

"I want to know where you're going," Shem said genially as he put his arm around Peto's shoulders, walked him out the door and across the field.

"I'm going home," Peto said evasively.

"I mean after that."

Peto gave him a sidelong glance. "Then I'm going to bed."

Shem shook his head. "I know what you're planning, Peto."

"Rector Yung's supposed to keep things in confidence!" he fumed. "He must have told you last night about—"

“I haven’t spoken to Yung in about three days, Peto.”

“So then how did you . . . Wait,” Peto glared. “How long have you been here?”

“Too long. Looked like a meat market in there, with those scouts poking as if you’re a potential steak. Worse than the exam we give to new recruits.”

“Don’t exaggerate, Shem,” Peto snapped, feeling as if the entire world was out to undermine him. “Look, I’ve got it all figured out. Everyone will be happy. I can go to the university *and* be on the team—”

“Are you going to tell your parents about the team, or the university?”

“They don’t need to know about the team yet,” said Peto firmly. “They’ve never seen that as a real profession.”

“It’s not,” Shem agreed. “In five years your body is used up. I heard the scout.”

“So are a lot of soldiers’ bodies, Shem. I’ve seen them,” Peto pointed out. “Very few make it as long as you and Father.”

Shem bobbed his head. “That’s true. But you’re deceiving your parents by not telling them that first you’re going to play.”

“You don’t know that,” Peto said, wishing Shem didn’t have such a firm grip on his shoulder. “I don’t even know that. I’m still working on it. I have to make the team first.”

“He won’t let you go, you know. Not to Idumea.” Shem held him tighter.

Peto stiffened. “Yes he will. He has to. He has to go there, too.”

Shem looked at him askance. “Why do you say that?”

“Never mind.” Peto rubbed his forehead. “Look, I know what I’m doing. Just let me try to pursue my dream.”

Shem stopped suddenly and Peto walked right out of his grip.

While he realized this was his opportunity to run, Peto was too intrigued as to why Shem halted. He turned to face him.

Shem, seemingly rooted to the ground in the middle of the grassy playing field, reached and caught Peto’s shoulders again.

The intensity of the expression on his face made Peto gasp. Shem’s eyes were deep and penetrating, digging straight into Peto’s soul, and Peto felt himself shrink a little under his sharp gaze. Shem wasn’t angry or frightening, just profoundly earnest. Shem to the power of ten.

“Peto, I have to tell you. I don’t know why, but I simply must.”

His tone had a quality Peto had never heard before, almost as if he spoke with another man's voice, and that voice carried the message straight to Peto's heart and nailed it in place.

"I'm not able to take another step," Shem said, as if under the control of someone else, "unless I make this very clear: Peto, you *must not* play in Idumea. And your father must not go to Idumea either. The plans the Creator has for you and Perrin lie elsewhere."

"What?!" Now Peto was sure that Yung was in on this somehow. "Where?"

"I can't tell you."

"You can't, or you *won't*?" Peto's voice choked and his chest burned. He wanted to be furious at Shem, but instead found his thoughts filled oddly with his Grandfather Shin, among other confusing things. "Does this have anything to do with Terryp's land? The expedition hasn't returned yet, but when they do?"

Shem closed his eyes as if in deep concentration. After a moment he opened them and slowly shook his head. "I can't tell you. Not yet. Peto, don't pursue Idumea. You could be very successful there, but that's not the Creator's plan for you."

Peto pulled away from Shem's grip and sat down hard on the grass. What kind of trick was this? And who was Shem to tell Peto what he should and shouldn't do! What would Shem know of the Creator's plans for—

The instant he thought those words he felt a presence—familiar and powerful—that told him, *Just listen*.

Listen to Shem Zenos destroy all his plans?

"Shem!" he roared angrily to his lap. "Why? No. No—just *stay out of it*. Ah, you just don't understand!"

Shem crouched on the grass by Peto. "What don't I understand? The dreams of a sixteen-year-old? The hope of glory on the field?" He sounded more like himself. "Trust me, Peto. I do understand."

Peto shook his head. He wasn't just a self-centered ball player. "It's more than just that. It's . . . oh, forget it."

"What?" Shem said earnestly. "Help me understand."

Peto sighed. "I can't! I'm not supposed to."

Then he felt it, very distinctly. The presence at his side became stronger, more defined.

And then he knew.

It was his grandfather Relf, right there on the other side of Shem. If Peto reached out he could have touched him, or the essence of what Relf Shin was now. Peto couldn't understand why

he was there. Trying to tell him to ignore Shem? To go to Idumea anyway? To make his father follow him to be High General?

No . . . no, it wasn't that.

Refusing to look up, Peto felt lost in a maze again as he yanked up a fistful of grass.

Grandfather, I'm no good at this! he cried out in his mind. *I don't know what you want me to do! Why are you here?*

"Peto," Shem's voice came calmly next to his ear. "You're not supposed to . . . not supposed to tell me? Or . . ."

Peto felt Shem sit down in the grass next to him.

"Oh Peto, I understand. I really do. Actually, I don't understand it *all*, but enough. It's Relf, isn't it?"

Peto's head jerked up to stare at Shem.

"I've felt him before, Peto. I've even *seen* him before. Not just at the fort, but in Idumea, after he passed away."

"Wh—. H—."

"At his burial. That evening I got to know him better than I ever had," Shem said matter-of-factly, as if he communicated with dead people all the time.

Peto's eyes bulged. "Uh . . ."

Shem nodded. "He was trying to reach your father that night. So was your grandmother. They didn't have much success at the time, so they tried through me instead."

Peto stared at him, dumbfounded. Just when you think you know a man, you discover he's on speaking terms with your dead grandparents.

Shem took Peto's stunned silence as a signal to continue. "He's right here, isn't he? Peto, your grandfather is proud of your determination to keep your promises. But there are other ways. This isn't it. He wants you to wait. He knows more now than he did when he first spoke to you about it, but more can't be revealed; it's too soon. You need to have faith in Relf, trust his knowledge, and just *wait*."

Peto shook his head to try to settle the words in some kind of recognizable order. "Wait?"

Shem smiled and put his hand on Peto's face. Peto almost recoiled, but didn't. It was the exact movement his grandfather made just after he entrusted the envelope to his care.

"Just wait, Peto." The voice was back. "You have a future that today you could never imagine."

Peto closed his eyes. *Now* he recognized the voice. He hadn't heard

it in two and a half years, and he hadn't expected to hear it again until he died.

Near his heart, Peto felt a patch of heat appear, taking whatever remaining breath he had away. Slowly the warmth dissipated.

Shem's hand slid off of Peto's face to rest heavily on his shoulder; another classic Relf Shin movement.

Peto wiped away a few tears that for some reason had filled his eyes. The presence of Relf Shin faded, and Shem's hand came off of Peto's shoulder. After a long minute Peto opened his eyes and looked at Uncle Shem.

He'd hoped he'd feel that same sense of rescue that he'd felt as a small child, but he was still in the maze. At least he wasn't alone.

Shem, looking rather drained, attempted a weak smile. "Did you understand all of that?"

Peto nodded, not sure of the condition of his voice.

"Someday, when the time's right, will you explain to me what just happened here?"

Peto smiled faintly. "Yeah. Relf wants us to wait, though."

"I caught that part."

The two of them sat there silently, meditatively, in the grass.

Until a thought hit Peto, and he buried his head in his hands. "But now what? I'm no closer to figuring out my future. Shem, it's not fair. You know how easy it is for girls? Jaytsy had no worries. She just sat around and waited until some man fell in love with her and married her."

"Actually, Peto," Shem said with a sad chuckle, "it was a *little* more complicated than that."

Peto waved that off. "That whole Thorne wanting to take her to Idumea thing—that was nothing. Not like this. My parents have tried every title on me in the past few weeks, just to see what sounds best. Doctor Shin. Professor Shin. Rector Shin. Old Goat Milker Shin—"

"Old Goat Milker?"

"I threw that one in, just to watch their reaction. It was pretty good. You would've appreciated it."

"I kind of like the sound of Rector Shin myself. Rector Yung is becoming Rector *Old*."

Peto chuckled. "So why don't you become Rector Zenos? I don't know of a man more open to inspiration than you." The last ten minutes still sat on top of Peto, pressing him into the grass with sobering reality. "Really, Uncle Shem. No one more than you."

Shem gently elbowed him. “You wait for your calling, Peto. My calling was to be a soldier for your father. Your calling will come to you as well.”

“My calling?” He remembered vaguely his father saying that to him as well, the night they left Idumea. The fact that he had never again thought of those words twanged his conscience.

“You’ll feel it someday, Peto. Not just as a ‘Gee, I’d love to play kickball for the next five years’ kind of feeling, but a drive, a *need* to do something for the world and the Creator. Most people don’t wait for it. They just jump into the most convenient job that presents itself. But if you ask—and wait—you will eventually feel something deep and clear that demands that you act upon it. You have a calling.”

“I suppose I do,” Peto sighed. “So what do I do in the meantime?”

“Well,” Shem rubbed his chin. “Keep going to school, just to stay sharp. Keep practicing, just to stay sharp, and . . .”

“Wait,” Peto finished for him. “I have to admit, I don’t exactly enjoy waiting.”

Shem’s face fell. “I recommend you get used to it now. Nothing happens when you think it should. There are a lot of things I’ve been waiting for, for a long time now.” He looked up to the mountains, his eyes clouded. “The Creator has His reasons, and we just have to trust them.”

Shem shook out his shoulders, put on his familiar smile, and elbowed his nephew again. “Come on. You need to get home and I’ve got a shift coming up. Going to be another long night for your Uncle Shem.”

The forest was very active that night, but no soldiers knew it. Men, horses, and even two women in dark clothing filled a section of the trees north and east of the fort, waiting.

Shem had scheduled the soldiers to patrol in the west.

The deep canal, which normally ran from the river to the few farms on the east side of Edge leading up to where the murky swamps began, was empty of water, as it usually was in the Harvest Season.

But there was still a steady trickle in it heading north.

Mahrree opened the door when she heard the knocking. “Thank goodness you got here so quickly . . . oh. Rector Yung! I was expecting the piping man.”

“Oh dear,” Yung said. “A clog?”

“A burst!” Mahrree sighed. “The side of my yard is now a mud bath, in case you know of any dry, hot pigs?”

Yung chuckled. “I wished I could help, but actually I was hoping to catch Peto home.”

“He’s off again,” Mahrree sighed. “Kickball. Although for the past couple of days his heart doesn’t seem to be in at as much.”

“Oh really?” Yung seemed unusually interested in that.

“Yes, I’m not sure why, but whatever has changed in him has certainly made him quieter. Honestly, Rector,” Mahrree lowered her voice, “I’m worried about him. He won’t tell me what’s going on.”

To her surprise, Yung chuckled. “A teenage boy not telling his mother what’s going on? Mrs. Shin, that’s pretty typical.”

“Yes, but my daughter—”

“Is a female. There tends to be a difference, you know.”

Mahrree had to smile at that. “So I shouldn’t worry?”

“Mrs. Shin, I believe you have far less to worry about now than you did a few days ago.”

Mahrree sighed. “If you say so.”

“I wanted to give him this,” Yung said, holding up a small bag.

Mahrree felt the contents through the cotton as she took it. “Feels like . . . rocks?”

“Pits,” Yung clarified. “From peaches, to be specific. I thought he might find it interesting to plant a few, see what comes up? Your garden seems to have a bit of room.”

Mahrree nearly laughed. A bit of room? She hadn’t seen the gravely soil in over a decade, so overrun by unidentifiable foliage that her daughter didn’t know where to start fixing it.

“I’ll give him the bag, Rector. Thank you.”

“Remind him, however, to not plant the pits anywhere near the new piping that may go in. The roots will get all tangled in it.”

Mahrree frowned. “But the piping is down at least two feet.”

Yung tilted his head, amazed. “You really know *nothing* of gardening, do you Mrs. Shin? Peto will know what to do with them.”

Knock-knock . . . knock-knock-knock.

There were very few things that could wipe the guarded smile from Perrin's face that day. The notion that in a couple of seasons he might be cradling a newborn again—his own grandchild—had filled him with an emotion the past week that he would almost dare label as giddy. As ridiculous as it might seem, as un-soldier-like as it would sound should he ever admit it, he really loved nothing more than squishy cheeks.

But the knock erased his smile for a moment, until Perrin remembered it wasn't *his* child.

"Come in."

Thorne opened the door, and behind him stood three villagers with stern expressions. "Sir, we have a problem with a property line—"

"No," Perrin interrupted him, "we don't. Maybe some villagers do, or Chief Bernie does, but we at the fort have no property line disputes."

The men behind Thorne immediately began to argue that point, but Thorne held up his hand which then became a fist.

Impressively, the men immediately silenced.

He turned back to Colonel Shin with a determined gaze. "Sir. The problem arose back when the pox eliminated the original owners of the property. The line was in dispute at the time, and the issue has arisen again. To avoid violence—"

"You shouldn't have brought them here," Shin said with a glare just as penetrating. "The three of you, take your complaint out of my office. We have, as I'm sure you well know, something called a chain of command. I am at the very end of that chain. Begin at front of it. May I recommend Rector Yung? He's probably the most insightful and fair-minded man in the village. Allow him to mediate your problem. If you still find yourselves in disagreement, then visit Chief Bernie. If he can't resolve your issue, take it to Magistrate Wibble. Still no satisfying result, then you may SCHEDULE my time in order to come speak to me. Is that understood?"

Thorne's glare increased by a few degrees. "Yung? The old rector?" he scoffed. "Rectors are naïve and simplistic."

"Rector Yung," Perrin said steadily, "can see into the heart of a problem far faster, and can make the correct judgment far better than any man or woman in this village, myself included. And that, I suspect, is why these men do *not* want to consult with him. He will see

right through whomever is attempting to deceive.”

At that, the three villagers huffed and harrumphed and guffawed, and abruptly turned to stomp down the stairs of the command tower.

Perrin smiled smugly.

But Thorne was seething. “Sir, you could have resolved that in five minutes—”

“No, I couldn’t. It would’ve taken them five minutes just to decide who should speak first. And I don’t have five minutes today, Thorne. You know that. For some reason the garrison feels they need a full accounting of every last weapon in the fort, and the inventory sent to them written in my own hand in triplicate. That’s why I sent you out on the village patrol today, and didn’t go out myself. I didn’t want you to bring back trivial problems.”

“That was hardly trivial!” Thorne insisted. “The way we handle the small problems reflects on how well we handle the big ones. If the village sees that we’re ready to step in and—”

“And handle *every* little issue? Every *trivial* problem? Then they’ll never do anything for themselves again! That’s precisely what the governing body should NOT do—manage every detail of their lives. We are not their meddling grandmothers; we exist to keep them safe so they can make their own decisions, resolve their own problems, and live their own lives as their conscience dictates. We are NOT to become that conscience.”

“Why not? Colonel, if they’re incapable of making intelligent choices—”

“They can’t learn to make those choices if they aren’t given the opportunity, Thorne. Give them the opportunity to learn.”

“And fail?”

“Failure is part of learning, Captain. It’s not to be shunned—it’s to be embraced and learned from. Would you really want someone making all your decisions for you?”

“No! But I’m not like *them*. Neither of us is. We are superior in training, education, and intelligence. They *need* us to guide and direct them. They simply aren’t capable of it—”

“HO!” Perrin howled, finally reaching his tipping point. “Who are you to judge who’s capable and who isn’t?”

“These make me worthy of judging!” The captain slapped the Administrative patches on his chest, and Perrin wished the upright sword on the little pine tree patch would have stabbed Thorne’s finger. “These say I’m in control and I make the decisions.”

Perrin took a deep breath and slowly shook his head. “You’re willing to dismiss the advice of a wise, selfless rector in order to put all your faith in a committee of men who are more motivated by their large houses, stashes of gold, and lust for status? Captain Thorne, you have no idea who’s superior, do you?”

Thorne’s jaw slacked. “Colonel Shin, are you stating that the Administrators are not deserving of their positions and power?”

Perrin folded his arms. “Yes. And I’m also saying you should listen to little old rectors every now and then.”

A soft throat-clearing sound came from behind the captain.

Thorne stepped aside and pivoted to see where the noise came from.

Mahrree bit her lip nervously. “If this isn’t a good time—”

“No, it isn’t!” Thorne snapped at her. “The colonel is so exceptionally busy that—”

“He can spare five minutes for his wife, Captain! You are dismissed.”

If a look could draw down thunder from a clear blue sky, that one from Thorne would have rattled the entire village. His jaw worked back and forth for a moment before he turned to Mahrree with an expression that startled Perrin. Why Lemuel regarded innocent, sweet Mahrree Shin with such animosity, Perrin couldn’t understand.

But he would never forget it.

With a quiet growl, Thorne turned on his heel and thumped loudly down the stairs.

Mahrree exhaled and looked at her husband with wide eyes. “What was *that* all about?”

He gestured for her to shut the door. When she did so, he said quietly, “I’m sure the soldiers in the outer office are wondering the same thing.”

“You’re right—he really has turned rancid. Mushroom pudding is now more lethal than that blob I grew many years ago.”

She went to sit on a chair, but her husband shook his head and pointed to his lap.

She giggled softly. “What if someone caught us doing this?” she asked as she made herself comfortable.

“My chair. I get to do whatever I want on it. If I don’t want to be disturbed, I just don’t say ‘Come in’,” and he kissed her.

“By the way,” he mumbled after a while, “why did you come by?”

“Just to see if a grandpy can kiss as good as my husband,” she

murmured back. "I suppose he can . . ."

Perrin groaned and pulled away. "Not Grandpy! Anything but that."

Mahrree giggled again and snuggled into his neck. "Actually, I just came by to tell you the estimate for the burst piping under the house. The pipe maker said it will be close to forty slips of silver, depending on how much he has to replace. He can get working on it this afternoon."

Perrin sighed. "Do we really need water?"

"Yes. And even more, we need the waste water piped away from the house to the waste canals."

"I suppose we do. Tell him to go ahead. And then see if Peto wants to be apprenticed to him. Forty slips of silver? Now that's a profitable career."

Mahrree kissed him again and got off his lap. "I think my five minutes are up."

"Oh, if only it were *ten*," he said with a suggestive eyebrow waggle, and held his hands out at the long, wide desk.

Mahrree blushed. "Then you could never again look at your desk without smirking. Try explaining *that* to Captain Thorne."

"You're probably right," he chuckled. "And Thorne can't seem to understand anything anymore."

Lemuel Thorne huffed across the compound to the western gates where he watched the three villagers argue their way to Edge. Where they were going, the captain didn't know or care. But if any violence ensued, it would be the colonel's fault. Yet he wouldn't realize that. Colonel Shin was so blinded he saw nothing clearly anymore.

She'd done it again! Showed up unscheduled, looked at her husband with kitten-eyes, and he melted into a puddle of uselessness. The control she had over him was astonishing. On many occasions Thorne wanted to bring the poor colonel's attention to the fact that he was being manipulated, but he knew the timing wasn't right.

Until then, the file on the egregious behavior of his wife was thickening every week, and within another season or two, the pile of evidence would be overwhelming.

Then Colonel Shin would see.

So would Administrator Genev.
And then the whole world.
And it would be Lemuel Thorne who delivered the world's greatest traitor to Idumea.
That had to be a one way trip to becoming High General.

That evening after dinner Mahrree remembered the bag of pits. When she gave them to Peto he actually scowled at the contents.

"What's this supposed to mean?"

Mahrree shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe Yung thought you'd like to plant a few? But not near the trenches where the pipers are digging, apparently," she added, a bit mystified.

Peto's fist clamped around the bag. "But what does this *mean*?"

Yung tied up meanings around everything, so much so that Peto now looked at innocuous objects and thought, *How would Rector Yung turn this into a Holy Day lesson?* He didn't know if he should be alarmed or impressed that he came up with a couple of sermons related to the dung wagon that he passed on his way home.

And now he'd been given peach pits.

As a rector, Yung was the equivalent of Hycymum Peto as a cook: a steak wasn't just for eating; it was for spicing and presenting into something far more than you expected it should be.

It was the same with everything that Rector Yung handed you; it always had another layer. That old peach orchard he helped Yung revive last year wasn't just about peaches; it was to teach Peto about rescuing his father, although Peto was sure he missed a few key points here and there. Anyway, they worked hard, brought back the orchard that no one had much hope for, and got a handful of good peaches, then Perrin Shin was better and this harvest they gathered several baskets full which Yung gave away for free at the market, annoying the fruit sellers, and now Yung was giving him . . . the pits.

There was a meaning in there, somewhere.

Mahrree watched as her son studied the pits with too much worry. "All he said was that you'd know what to do with them."

He closed his fist over the bag. "But how do I know *what* to do with them?" he said enigmatically, and a bit annoyed, as he trudged off to his bedroom

Chapter 29 ~ “They’re back! The Expedition!”

Something Jaytsy had to learn during the past Raining Season was a new sense of balance: in walking, in sleeping, and in negotiating the ladders in the barns. And now that it was the 2nd Day of Planting Season of the new year 338, she was determined to master the skill of getting down and up again out of the dirt. Her expanding belly always led the way, often into ways she didn’t want to go.

Although her mother insisted, along with the new midwife from Orchards, that she was not large for an expecting woman, Jaytsy felt positively enormous. Her brother gasping dramatically at her profile and holding his mouth in mock horror whenever he saw her didn’t help. And when her father told her, thinking that he was helpful, to wait for another two moons to see just how large she *could* get before she birthed the baby, she was nearly in tears.

Only Deck, when he kissed her belly and sighed in pleasure, could convince her it really was beautiful.

Her greatest amusement, though, was Shem. The baby always seemed to be the most active when he visited, and whenever Jaytsy put his hand on her belly to feel it kicking and rolling, Great-Uncle-to-be Shem always teared up.

Perrin had given him a new name: Crybaby.

Shem deserved it for calling him Grandpy.

When Planting Season arrived Jaytsy was determined to get in as much of this year’s crops in as she could before the baby came. She knew she’d be of little use from the middle to the end of the season, except to sit under a tree nursing the newborn and cheering

on her husband. Although Deck told her to not worry—Perrin already had soldiers lined up to help—Jaytsy still felt a duty to their farm.

That’s why her mother found her one morning in the middle of a field crawling along the cold damp dirt and dropping peas.

“Jaytsy! You’ll ruin your back that way,” her mother called as she trotted up the row. “Let me do that for you.”

Jaytsy shook her head. “No, Mother. If you plant these seeds upside down, we’ll only have roots coming up and we’ll have to dig in the ground to extract the peas.”

Mahrree narrowed her eyes at Jaytsy. “You said that was true only of the bulbs.”

“There’s so much you just don’t know, Mother,” Jaytsy said with feigned sadness. “For someone supposedly *so smart*—”

Mahrree smiled. “Not about everything, I know. But I do know this: if you hurt your back now, birthing will be that much harder.”

“I feel wonderful, Mother,” she said, continuing to drop the shriveled peas. “I wouldn’t do this if I didn’t. It makes me feel better, anyway, contributing to the farm.”

“Oh, you contribute plenty. You’ll be contributing a new farm hand soon! Come now. Teach me what to do.” Mahrree kneeled down in a row next to her. “I’ve got this week off of school, so I best start being useful.”

“You seriously want to do this, Mother? Get dirt on your hands?”

“Of course,” Mahrree said cheerily, but Jaytsy recognized The Dinner smile.

“How about you go gather the eggs instead? That’s harder for me to do, bending down and rooting through the straw.”

“Are you sure? I really want to help you—”

“Then gather the eggs! The fort cook will be down for them by midday meal, and Deck’s busy checking on the cows. Looks like a few of them will be birthing at the same time I am.”

Mahrree chuckled. “Poor Deckett. Life’s just bursting out all around him, isn’t it?”

Jaytsy pushed up on to her knees. “Remember how almost two years ago I complained about how many people had died around us? And now, well . . .” her voice wavered. She’d gone all Raining Season without crying, but now that she was getting closer to the baby coming, the tears were closer as well.

Her mother smiled sympathetically. “I know exactly what you mean. When the Briters passed away, I never would have imagined

that almost two years later you'd be planting their fields while carrying their grandchild."

"All right, now stop!" Jaytsy said, wiping away a tear and laughing. "I'm a bit overemotional as it is, I don't need you adding to it. Get the eggs."

"Your farm, you're in charge." Mahrree got to her feet, looking relieved. A movement down the field caught her eye. "Perrin?"

Jaytsy turned as well. Her father was running toward them awkwardly, trying to keep within the long rows.

"Perrin! What's wrong?" Mahrree called to him.

"They're back! The expedition!" he panted and stopped in front of them.

"And?" Mahrree nearly screamed.

"I don't know! They were sighted south of Moorland on a fast pace to Idumea. Some of the soldiers I sent to check on the ruins saw them passing."

Mahrree stomped her foot. "They didn't find out anything from them?"

Perrin smiled. "That's exactly what I yelled at them. Apparently they have news about Terryp's land and they're in a hurry to deliver it."

"So what might that mean?" Jaytsy asked, struggling to get up.

Her father scooped her up and placed her on her feet. "Still not as heavy as your mother was. You have time," he assured her. "What does it mean? I really don't know. I have half a mind to catch up to them to find out."

"So go!" Mahrree said. "Saddle up and catch up to them!"

Perrin shook his head. "They're miles away by now. Even with Clark the only way I could catch them would be to get horses from the messenger stations, and I have a feeling those poor men have very long memories."

Mahrree squirmed. "Then I'll go! I'm light enough."

Her daughter and husband burst out laughing.

"Fine, fine," Mahrree sighed, trying to hide her smile. "We'll send Peto."

Perrin pushed a stray lock of hair off her face. "Mahrree, we just have to be patient. I'm sure there'll be news soon. The only reason I can imagine for them moving in such a hurry is to deliver their news to the Administrators quickly. If it were bad news, they'd be taking their time, right?"

"You may have a point. I'll bet that's the real reason The Dinner

was postponed. Not because Cush is still ill but because they want to turn The Dinner in some grand celebration about what they found in Terry's land."

"Give them three or four days. Then we'll know something, I'm sure."

"Three or four days? Perrin, I don't know if I can handle waiting that long!"

"You've waited nearly a year, you can wait some more."

Knock-knock . . . knock-knock-knock.

The knocking was even in his dreams, the ones he still occasionally had. He knew he'd never fully be rid of the images, but at least now he could control them, even continue sleeping through them once he ordered them away. Always the same thing happened; the Guardians returned, streaming toward his house in massive numbers.

But they always stopped and knocked on the door.

Five times.

Thorne's knock.

Perrin rubbed his eyes and looked up as if he could see through the ceiling and to the seat of the Creator.

"How much longer do I get the privilege of being his commander?" he whispered to the cosmos. "Just so I know? I'm not complaining, I'm just curious."

When no answer came, Perrin sighed and said, "Come in."

"Just wondering if you heard the news, Colonel?" Thorne swung open the door. "That the expedition was sighted?"

"I heard, Captain. And how's your grandfather?"

Thorne shrugged. "You know as much as I do, sir. Still ailing. That's why they've postponed The Dinner."

Perrin nodded once. "Anything else, Thorne?"

"Did you look over my proposal for the new training regime? I really don't see any need to continue Zenos's late night forest tours, since the Guardians are obviously gone—"

Perrin sat back and folded his hands in his lap. "As much as I want to believe that, I've realized that I can't. Because how many times over the past 137 years have the Guardians been 'gone'?"

Thorne furrowed his eyebrows. "Sir?"

"How many times, Captain? How often did we think they had

retreated to wherever they live, or quit their attacks, only to show up again one day raiding an unsuspecting village?”

Thorne pursed his lips. “Many times, I suppose.”

“Nineteen,” Perrin said. “I counted once. If they did it nineteen times, they’ll likely do it twenty. I won’t be the village that’s ‘unsuspecting.’ We’ll continue Zenos’s training, which has been the best the world has ever seen, and if I choose to implement changes, I’ll be sure to let Zenos—and you—know about it.”

Uncharacteristically, Thorne took a step closer to the desk. “Sir, I think you’re making a mistake. Perhaps your judgment has been hampered by influences in your past, and if you’d only listen—”

Perrin was holding up his hand, and Thorne was staring at it, finding himself suddenly tongue-tied.

“Let me get this straight,” he said coldly. “I’ve been hampered by *influences* in my past? My judgment is *impaired*?”

Thorne didn’t shrink back or even look apologetic. “One of my duties as your second in command is to tell you what you may not want to hear—”

“Since when?”

“Since always, Colonel!” Thorne snapped. “Some commanders refer to their second in command as their ‘second minds’! And I’m advising you now, as I’m supposed to, that you’re clinging to the old ways because you’re comfortable with them. But the world is changing, Colonel. And we must change with it, or be devoured by it. I agree that the Guardians may return, but they’ll find a new way to make their presence known. We must be prepared for different contingencies.”

That Perrin controlled of his fury for so long truly impressed him. He wished Mahrree had been there to see this. “Thorne, I read your proposal,” he said between his gritted teeth. “I agree with you that when the Guardians return it’ll likely be in a way none of us expect. However, your suggestion to train soldiers in confronting citizens, patting them down for weapons, and escorting them back to their homes for additional inspections makes you sound more paranoid than I was at my very worst!”

“*Paranoid*?” hissed Thorne. He was exceptionally brave today.

Perrin was beginning to be impressed and astonished.

He really hated that.

“Sir, paranoia is what makes a great leader!” Thorne declared, leaning on the desk. “Never fully trusting your subordinates, never fully believing your enlisted men, and never fully having faith in

those who *claim to love you*. One of the many things I've learned from you is that a bit of cynicism is most healthy for the life of a commander, Colonel!"

"Well then," Perrin said with his own piercing glare, "you seem to have become *very healthy* in the past few seasons, haven't you? I can't help but wonder, why?"

"I'm simply maturing, sir," Thorne said, standing up and straightening his jacket.

Perrin wondered if the captain had blinked at all in the past five minutes.

"The longer I serve, the more I see, and the more I recognize how blinded people can be. It's my duty to remove those dark coverings that keep men like you from seeing the truth!"

"And what makes you so sure *you* know the truth, Captain?" Perrin challenged.

"I know how to *see*, sir. I have no claims of affection or emotion that cloud my perceptions of the truth."

"Fascinating," Perrin said. "Several times you've mentioned love, affection and the like as if those are bad things. As if you believe they—"

"Destroy one's ability to see the truth, yes!" Thorne insisted.

"My, my," said Perrin, slightly amused. "Not only have you become healthier, you've become more obnoxious."

Thorne stood taller. "Someday you'll understand, sir. You'll see that I'm doing this for you. You *will* be impressed. And astonished. And then, you'll wonder what to do next. When that day comes, realize that I'm here to guide you. I'm here *for you*, Colonel Shin." He nodded once and left the office.

Perrin let out a low whistle once he was sure the captain wasn't at the door listening.

"Here for me? My, my, Captain Thorne. Sounds like you have *plans*."

He looked up at the ceiling again.

"So I ask again, how much longer?"

Thorne cracked his neck as he strode to the stables. Soldiers parted for him to pass as they always did—the sure sign of respect and fear. He reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out the parchment

message, wrapped several times and sealed with the largest amount of wax he dared apply. He stopped in front of the messenger's horse just as the corporal was about to mount it.

"One more for the pack, Corporal," Thorne said crisply as he handed it to the soldier.

The young man glanced at the addressee name on the outside before he placed it in the pack.

"No one asked you to read the name, soldier!" Thorne snapped. "You get that pack to Idumea as swiftly as you always do, and let nothing detain you. Understood?"

The corporal saluted. "I've never let you down, sir. All of your messages reach Idumea, sir. *All* of them."

Thorne stepped back to let the messenger begin his long ride eighty miles to the south. He folded his arms and scowled.

There had never been a message sent to the Administrative Headquarters quite like *this* one.

Lannard had been most fruitful the past two seasons, even bringing Thorne notes about what his teacher said. Together they'd roll their eyes at her assertions, then Thorne would take the notes and gingerly pocket them. Many copies had been sent in the past three seasons, with messages of praise coming back from Idumea.

And now the file was thick. Bulging, even. Genev had requested one more update, and Thorne watched it ride away: the final report of so many discussions and thinly veiled debates that she allowed her students to carry out, bits here and there that, like snowflakes, individually would have been nothing. But all of it packed together created one massive, icy snowball, dangerous and painful.

Now it was up to Administrator Genev to hurl it.

Peto jogged over to Rector Yung's house after helping Deckett move hay for the cows, and found the old man outside inspecting his herbs. He smiled when he saw Peto.

"Did you hear the news?" Peto called.

"About?"

"The expedition! It's back and headed to Idumea. My father saw them going by this morning."

"Well!" Yung said, getting to his feet. "That is something, isn't it. News should be coming soon, then, I suspect."

“And now I’ve finally figured it out,” Peto announced.

Yung frowned. “Figured out what, son?”

“The peach pits! The ones you gave me last Harvest? You told my mother I’d know what to do with them, and for the past five moons I’ve been trying to understand what you meant.”

Yung looked truly lost. “What I meant?” He leaned on a short shovel.

Peto was all energy. “You meant that *they* are my future, didn’t you? Not kickball, but maybe growing trees? Apparently Tabbitt Densal really liked trees so maybe somewhere it’s in my blood, but I was thinking, an orchard? I don’t know, that seems kind of dull, and I know that’s an immature attitude, but then today it hit me: the ruins! They’re going to need orchards there, aren’t they? And that’s what you meant by the pits, right? To take them on an adventure to the ruins and plant an orchard and find my future there!” Peto beamed at the rector who still wore a puzzled expression.

After an awkward and silent moment, Yung said, “Oh, *the peach pits!* The ones I dropped off at your house when the pipers were replacing that burst pipe, right?”

Peto’s enthusiasm dimmed. “Well, yeah. You told my mother, ‘Peto will know what to do with them.’”

Yung smiled apologetically. “I said that because it was clear your mother had no idea as how to plant peach pits. Peto, sometimes a peach pit is just a peach pit . . . a means to getting more peaches, which you seem to love. I thought you’d plant them around your house.”

“That’s it?!”

Yung bobbed his head back and forth. “Well . . . yes.”

Peto’s shoulders sagged. “So you don’t think I should go to the ruins or anything to plant them?”

The old man shrugged. “Well, I don’t see any harm if you want to, but it’s certainly not any of my business—”

“I don’t believe this!” Peto threw his arms in the air and clomped around the garden. “For moons I’ve been trying to understand the meaning of the peach pits, and here you tell me they’re only for growing more peaches? For crying out loud!” he exclaimed as he started for the road. “The pits are only for getting more peaches—”

“*Unless,*” and once again Yung’s quiet calm voice cut through Peto’s complaining and pierced his heart, “unless the Creator wanted you to get something more out of them.”

Peto spun around to face the rector who was already busily hoeing around his basil. “What’s *that* supposed to mean?”

Yung shrugged again. “I suppose that would be between you and the Creator.” He glanced up at Peto, nodded once, and went into his home, leaving Peto gaped mouth and even more confused.

Mahrree always thought of herself as a patient woman. But during the next few days she began to wonder if all people who thought themselves patient were really fooling themselves as she was. The fact that there was no school to occupy her mind didn’t help much.

The week did allow her, however, to work in the Briters’ farm with a clear view of the message towers and the fort. If anything interesting was going to happen, she had a front row seat.

Then again, that front row seat was making her a little bit crazy. Every time she heard hoof beats she’d look up from whatever patch of dirt she was watering, or run from the henhouse to see who was going to the fort. And considering how often horses came and went, she was spending more time spying on nobody interesting than she was helping the Briters.

Twice that week she noticed Lannard exercising Thorne’s horse, with his unkempt hair flowing behind him like a ragged flag. She had to smile at him. Lannard had done quite well this year, and likely would be moved out of her ‘special’ class next season. His scores on the Mid-Year Department of Instruction Exam—and Mahrree thought it funny that the first letters of those words spelled out MY DIE, since many of the boys complained how taking it “killed” them—were nearly the highest in the school.

She’d noticed that he’d been taking thorough notes, and Offra told her once that he overheard Thorne asking Lannard for details about what they discussed in class.

Last week, after she received the form from Idumea with the boys’ scores, Mahrree unexpectedly met Thorne at the tower. Even though the scowling demeanor of the captain always made her uncomfortable, she made a point of mentioning to him that she was grateful for his interest in Lannard.

When she told him how his concern had made Lannard a more attentive student over the past year, Thorne’s features had

contorted into such an odd smile that Mahrree thought his entire face would rearrange itself.

All he said in response was, "I was most fortunate to find him."

His response solidified Mahrree's evaluation of Lemuel Thorne: most definitely peculiar.

Over the past couple of seasons she had frequently noticed the captain, and got the impression that he was *watching* her. She would have chalked it up to paranoid imagination, except that she usually never imagined those kinds of things.

And usually Mahrree didn't think of Thorne, especially on days like today when her mind wandered all over the place, and a little too late she remembered to turn off the spigot that now flooded her buckets with frigid water.

"I'm supposed to be watering . . . seedlings?"

She spied Peto carrying another bale of hay to the barn, and smiled that sometime in the past two seasons he'd found his muscles. He'd never be as brawny as Perrin had become baling hay, but the boy's build was finally looking like a man's. He nodded over to Mahrree before he entered the barn.

So often Mahrree felt as if she knew only half of her son. She was grateful he wasn't as distant or unruly as her students, but Peto didn't share much with his family beyond his humor and teasing.

Perrin said that was a *man thing*. Especially a *son thing*. "Trust me, Mahrree. I rarely told my mother anything at that age. And I turned out all right."

"Only because your father sent you to the Densals when you were eighteen."

"That's why we have Shem. And Rector Yung. They can straighten him out for us if he gets too obnoxious."

Whenever Mahrree looked in Peto's eyes there seemed to be a great deal going on in them, yet none of it was coming out. He spoke to her, but only in teasing, and he gave her quick hugs when he was sure no one was looking.

Still, Mahrree worried that she was running out of time. Some universities would begin in less than half a year, and her son would be gone. So desperate was she with wanting to hear something from Peto about his future that she had even told him she could help try to convince Perrin to let him go to Idumea if he wanted.

But he had shaken his head, kissed her on the cheek, and said, "I just need to wait."

She wished she knew what that meant, and hoped he had someone nudging him the correct directions, as her father had frequently nudged her. In so many ways Peto was like his Grandfather Cephas. He was larger in build, thanks to Perrin, yet his eyes and hair reminded Mahrree of a man she hadn't seen since she was fifteen.

But the rest of Peto was pure Perrin, from his winks, to his laugh, to his features, to his voice, to his forehead rubbing when he was frustrated. If her son was physically the combination of her two favorite men, maybe the rest of him was as well. She just needed to—as he reminded her—wait.

Mahrree really hated waiting.

It had now been four days since the expedition returned to Idumea, Mahrree grumbled to herself as she emptied the last bucket on what she hoped was a row Jaytsy had already planted. Some news of any kind should have reached them by now.

She trudged over to the canal and turned the handle to flood another section of farm—she was quite certain young Mrs. Briter had told her to water that area—when she heard yet another horse racing up the cobblestones. She almost didn't bother to look up because it was early enough in the morning that the shifts were changing, and horses were traveling—

The rider on this one, however, was wearing red.

An Administrative messenger, in a hurry.

With her fists clenched by her face in excitement, she glanced at the tower by her house and saw a blue banner. Usually the banners came down once the messengers reached the fort road, but this one stayed up.

Mahrree began to bounce, partly to keep warm in the cool air, partly to see if anyone else would be coming. The thundering noise alone told Mahrree that what was rambling up the road was big, important, and from Idumea.

She wasn't disappointed. Only a few moments later two large black coaches sped up the road and into the compound of the fort.

“Yes!” Mahrree cried and threw her fists in the air. “FINALLY!”

A couple of soldiers walking along the road looked over and offered her uncomfortable smiles.

Mahrree bit her lip and said, “*Yes*, it's *finally* a beautiful day, isn't boys?”

They nodded obligingly and gave her the casual salute that the

soldiers frequently sent the wife of their commander.

Mahrree giggled, picked up her skirt, and went running to the barn. The 6th Day of Planting Season, 338 would be unforgettable!

As she made her way to the barn she even composed her first song, a rather tuneless ditty that she sang under her breath and went something like, “Terryp, Terryp, Terryp! We’re coming, coming, coming! Tee-hee, tee-hee, tee-hee!”

She burst through the barn doors, sending a handful of chickens squawking and flapping, and startling her children and son-in-law who were busy with the morning chores.

“A messenger and two coaches! Just went up the road!”

Her three children stopped and looked at each other.

“Yes?” Deck asked Mahrree, leaning on his pitchfork.

“You silly boy, don’t you know what that means?”

“Another proclamation, law, or tax?” Peto suggested, matching Deck’s pose on his own pitchfork.

“No!”

“Oh, I know,” Jaytsy said with a twinkle in her eye as she covered a crate full of butter with a cloth. “It means that Father has been promoted and you’re all moving to Idumea tomorrow.”

“Now, stop it!” Mahrree stomped her foot.

“Oooh, you got a foot stomp, Jayts. Good job!” Peto nodded.

“You have to know just how far to push her, Peto,” Jaytsy told him instructively. “Next I’m going for an arm-folding.”

“And you got it, Jayts,” Deck nudged her. “Without even trying.”

“Deckett,” Mahrree said impatiently, “don’t let them drag you into this. I still like *you*, but that can change.”

Peto shook his head. “I’m feeling left out. Deck got a threat. I’ve got nothing right now. I must be losing my touch. Mother, can I go out stealing chickens tonight? I’ll bring them right over here, I promise.”

“Will the three of you be serious for once!” Mahrree nearly shouted.

“Ah, well done, Peto,” Jaytsy said. “You got her yelling, *and* at all three of us. No, little brother, you haven’t lost your touch.”

Peto stood straighter to remind Jaytsy he was now a full two inches taller than her.

Mahrree finally shook her head, trying not to smile.

Deck pointed at her. “I see it. Around the edges. Just can’t stay mad at us, can you?”

“Do NONE of you care about the expedition’s findings?!”

“Apparently not as much as you, Mother,” Jaytsy laughed. “I’m interested but not *maniacal*.”

“I am NOT maniacal!” Mahrree insisted.

“And I’m not emotional!” Jaytsy countered.

“And I’ve never stolen a cow!” Peto added.

Everyone looked at him.

He put on a ponderous face. “Wait—did I miss what we’re doing? Hmm, let me think . . .”

Mahrree threw her hands up in the air. “Enough of you! I’m going to see your father. He’ll care—”

“No, you’re not,” a voice said behind her in the doorway.

Mahrree spun around to face Shem.

“Not that he doesn’t care, but there’s a great deal of information pouring into the fort right now. Perrin sent me down to tell you not to come up.” Then, noticing that Mahrree was eyeing the gap in the doorway, Shem closed it behind him. “When he saw the coaches arriving, he wanted to make sure you stayed put.”

Mahrree gripped Shem’s arms. “What’s going on up there?”

“Calm down, calm down. For a non-maniacal woman you’re a little crazy right now. I know what’s still hiding in bottom drawer of your dresser,” he whispered loudly in her ear with a wink to her children. “Don’t make me pull out that bottle of sedation and use it on you.”

Mahrree held up her hands in surrender, took a few deep breaths, and produced The Dinner smile. “Shem,” she said in her best sing-song voice. “What is going on up there?”

“I honestly don’t know. It’s highly top secret, for the commander’s eyes only. The Administrators’ messenger even booted out Captain Thorne,” Shem said with no small satisfaction. “But I *do* know there will be a presentation tonight, mandatory for the entire village, about the findings. Soldiers are putting up the notices right now. All entertainments for the evening are cancelled.”

“That is serious,” Deck nodded.

“May cause a riot,” Peto agreed.

“Shem, what did he look like, when he sent you here?” Mahrree asked.

“Who, Perrin?”

“Of course, Perrin!” she shouted. She held up her hands and tried her compose herself again. “I mean, what kind of *look* did he give you? Any clues?”

Shem shook his head. “No clues. No look.”

“Oh, come now! There’s always a ‘look.’”

“Not today.”

“How can that be?”

“Because he had nothing to give me yet!”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes!” Shem was growing exasperated. “He gave me the ‘I don’t have anything to give you’ look,”

“So he *did* give you a look!”

Shem grumbled. “Peto, go get the sedation . . .”

Chapter 30 ~ “Mother! Sit DOWN!”

Mahrree had endured long days before: the first Guarder attack when Perrin didn't come home for days; when Perrin left for Idumea after his parents' death without a word to anyone . . .

She started to see a pattern. The longest days were when her husband was away and she didn't know what he knew.

Just like today.

Shem was only joking about the bottle—mostly. Her family tried to keep her occupied, and Shem promised he'd send word as soon as he knew something, but no more information came that morning or that tedious afternoon when she pretended to mend socks for the Briters. Mahrree wolfed down dinner and washed the dishes, some even twice just for good measure, waiting until it was finally time for them to go to the amphitheater.

Jaytsy, Deckett, Peto and Mahrree left with time to spare and planned to get a spot on the front row, but the amphitheater was almost filled when they arrived half an hour early. Apparently everyone was eager for the news.

The talk about moving to new lands in the west had accelerated in the last few days once word reached Edge that the expedition had returned. Mahrree had no desire to leave her house, but her twentieth wedding anniversary was in a little over a year, and she and her husband had their own expedition to plan.

Mahrree sat down with Peto, Jaytsy and Deckett on a bench in the middle of the amphitheater, much to Mahrree's disappointment, and listened to the excited conversation around them.

“I'm already looking for buyers for my house . . .”

“I wonder when we can officially go. I won't bother with planting this season if I won't be here to harvest it . . .”

“Will everyone get maps, or just those leaving?”

“Does anyone know how long it will take to get there?”

“I’ll bet the ruins are gone.”

“I heard they saw new animals. I wonder what kind?”

Mahrree watched the raised platform most of the time, waiting to see when the empty chairs up there would be filled, and by whom. A table was also erected, and several soldiers placed large bags on it. When they laid down the bags Mahrree could see they were filled with paper.

Enough for each family, Mahrree considered. They had to be maps! Idumea would’ve had enough time to make woodcuts of the region and stamp out enough for every household. She was tempted to sneak up there and take a few, as if none of the several thousand people seated around her would have noticed, when a movement to the right caught her eye.

The crowd hushed as several men approach the podium. She didn’t recognize any of them except for Perrin. The colonel followed behind the men in the official red uniforms of the Administrators’ assistants and aides.

Mahrree tried to read his mood by his step, but because the men in front of him walked slowly, Mahrree couldn’t pick up anything from his gait.

Look at me, she thought. Look at me! Perrin! Over here!

But he only stared blankly ahead, waiting for the other men to take their seats. Finally he sat down in the last chair, crossed his legs, and folded his arms. His eyes searched the audience until he found his family.

Then he focused on Mahrree.

Nothing. Absolutely nothing.

She gave him her best pleading face.

Nothing.

Peto nudged her. “So what’s he saying?”

“Nothing!” Mahrree wailed softly.

Jaytsy giggled. “He’s better at this game than you are, Mother. His face is like stone.”

“I’ve seen him sit that way before, Mahrree. It’s his, ‘Nope, you’re getting nothing out of me’ position.” Deck grinned. “He sat like that when I asked him what he got me for my birthday.”

Mahrree growled under her breath and stared back at her husband. She gave him a flirty wink, just to see if she could break his

concentration. He gazed at her for another moment with no reaction before looking away to the audience.

Oh, Mahrree thought with a pout, he is good.

The audience murmured as a thin man with a pointy nose and pinprick eyes got up, moved around papers on the table, then turned back to his seat for an additional stack of notes. It seemed to Mahrree that he was deliberately slow.

Growing agitated, Mahrree repositioned herself.

Perrin still refused to look at her.

Finally the man stood up at the table and cleared his voice.

“Good evening citizens of Edge. My name is Mr. Kori. I am an aide to the Administrator of Science, and I come this evening to bring you the findings of the recent expedition to the western lands as revealed by a map recently uncovered and supposedly belonging to the historian Terryp.”

“We know this already,” Mahrree grumbled.

Peto and Jaytsy, sitting on either side of her, simultaneously elbowed their mother.

Perrin saw the movement and shifted his gaze to them, remaining completely stony faced.

Mahrree wagged her eyebrows suggestively at him.

He looked away.

Mr. Kori pulled out his notes and began in a loud and official tone. “We have, thanks to the expedition and its findings, puzzled out the origin of our life.”

“Origin of life?” Mahrree blurted. Only her family noticed because the same refrain was being repeated all over the amphitheater. “What about Terryp’s lands?” Mahrree demanded with the rest of the crowd. “When did origin of life suddenly become an issue?”

“Mother, shhh!” Jaytsy said. She should have shushed everyone. The entire amphitheater was spouting like an impatient steam vent.

Mr. Kori’s voice rose above them. “We proudly present here today the findings of the last excursion to the Cursed Lands. We are calling the ruins this new name because it is what they are: Cursed.” He didn’t pause to listen to any response but continued reading from his notes.

But Mahrree’s mind had stuck on *cursed*.

No . . . no, that wasn’t right.

Oddly, a feeling—or rather a memory—was rising in her mind and filling it. She couldn’t quite define it, but she would very soon.

It was something about trees—

Shouts of protests woke Mahrree out of her momentary stupor, and Kori's unrelenting voice droned on loudly.

"We have concluded that the Cursed Lands were indeed once populated, but not by a peoples foreign to us as we have always believed. They were, in fact, peopled by our ancestors."

Yes! The memory in Mahrree's mind cried out. *Yes, that's right!*

This elicited some gasps from the crowd, but Mr. Kori continued. "Something happened to the land, either illness or plague or disaster or a combination, to cause the people to leave. Those who survived were approximately one thousand. They traveled for days and came to this land which was covered with fertile soil deposited from the volcano that lies under Mt. Deceit."

Wait a minute, Mahrree's thoughts churned. The memory began to shout, *Wait a minute—that's not quite right . . .*

"These ancestors of ours, to keep their descendants from exploring the Cursed Lands, developed a new writing, a new language, and a new mythology to keep their children contented here." Never once did he takes his eyes off of his notes. "Their leader named himself The Creator and was the mastermind of this effort until his untimely death three years after their move."

The Creator? Dead?

Mahrree looked around her frantically. Her children were dumbfounded, her neighbors were stunned, and her husband on the podium showed nothing at all.

"It is our desire to keep the wish of our ancestors and to not expand to the west. The evidence shows the land will not support life. Going to the Cursed Lands," and for a moment he looked up, "will only be going to our deaths. You must all stay in your villages and expand in other ways—"

"NO!" Mahrree cried. It was a lie! Every bit of her knew it.

But no one heard her outcry, because the crowd had also exploded into a loud variety of responses.

"Expand how? Upwards? That's ridiculous!"

"We don't care! We're still going!"

Rising over all the protests was a dull roar, growing angry and threatening violence.

Colonel Shin still remained motionless.

Mahrree searched his eyes for something, anything, but he blocked her out.

Kori put an end to outrage in a voice louder than anyone could imagine the slender man could possess. “We therefore declare this matter of Terryp’s map, the ruins, the Cursed Lands, and the origin of our people resolved, and any further discussion unnecessary. The debate is officially closed!”

Mahrree grew cold and hot at the same time.

“The debate is *closed*?” she seethed.

“Uh-oh.” Peto looked behind his mother to his sister.

Her eyes were wide staring back at him. She cocked her head toward Mahrree who seemed to be steaming.

Peto put a hand on his mother’s arm, but she pushed him away. Not this time. She would not be quieted.

Deck now leaned back and looked at Peto.

Peto shook his head and shrugged. He was about to put his hand on his mother’s arm again when he realized she was no longer there.

Mahrree was on her feet, breathing deeply.

The roar of angry crowd dissipated as everyone turned to see what Mahrree Shin would do next.

“Mother!” Peto whispered in panic. “Sit DOWN!”

Perrin stared at his wife, his eyes large and brimming with urgent signals now.

But Mahrree didn’t notice him. She had eyes only for the Administrators’ lackey.

“Mr. Kori!” she bellowed her loudest. “The debate is NOT closed!” She quickly pushed past Jaytsy and pulled out of Deck’s too-late grasp at her arm.

Mr. Kori’s eyebrows rose slightly as he watched with detached interest her progress along the crowded row.

“I refuse to accept that!” she yelled, stumbling over people in her dogged effort to reach the aisle. “How can you . . . excuse me, so sorry. Mr. Kori, how can you suggest . . . well, move the bag when you see someone coming! . . . Mr. Kori!” Mahrree exclaimed as she finally reached the aisle. She stood as tall as she could, smoothed her dress, and took her stance. Every inch of her small frame told her what she needed to do.

After nineteen years, she was going to return to the platform.

“How can you possibly proclaim the debate is closed on anything? Everything, and I mean *everything*, is still up for debate. The sky is NOT always blue in Edge. Just look at it now—it’s darkening to black!”

Mr. Kori's calm composure only infuriated Mahrree. "How quaint," he remarked as if looking over an antiquated specimen. "You want to challenge the greatest minds in science with your little home-spun ideas?"

She wasn't going to be demeaned. "Yes, and with my belief in The Writings, and with all that we've taught our children over the past 338 years! Tonight you've changed everything we've ever known. And with evidence so new and fresh we haven't have time to test it!"

"Now I've read The Writings too," said Mr. Kori, with more than a hint of condescension. "They were a *nice* guide to help people along until they could help themselves. But now we know much more than we did three hundred years ago. We've matured past such stories. I'm not saying that you can't keep believing them. What I'm saying is we now have something new which I'll attest is better. We have the combined knowledge and wisdom of those who have studied this world for many years. And it's those same great minds who have come to the conclusions of our origins. The expedition to the ruins was, as *you* might say, providential." He smiled as if nothing more could be added.

Mahrree saw her angle. "Ah," she said, slowly making her way to down the aisle. "So new information is better? New ideas are to be embraced without being tested?"

Mr. Kori kept his grip on the table, his smile fading as he realized she wasn't giving up yet. "Not all new ideas, of course not. But when something has been studied extensively by the greatest minds, the conclusion is inevitable." His expression grew brittle.

Mahrree smiled sweetly. "But the expedition returned only days ago. How 'extensively' can something be studied in only *days*?"

"The greatest minds were with them! They've spent nine moons working on this during the expedition."

Mahrree nodded slowly, sure that they did little exploring but lots of posturing.

"I have a relatively good mind," she said as she approached the platform. "Yet I'm not yet convinced of your findings, and I'm sure most of those here aren't convinced either. But we're willing to learn, and if you're willing to discuss—"

Kori's brittle composure began to crack as Mahrree, now at the base of the platform, threatened to place a foot on the first step.

"Madam, there comes a time *to accept* what you do not know or cannot understand."

Mahrree's eyebrows rose at that. "How do you know I can't understand?" She took the first step.

"You believe too much in the mythology created by our ancestors, it's clear," he sneered. "You profess a belief in The Writings."

"And you believe too little in it," said Mahrree, taking another step.

Kori shifted his grip. "Madam, I don't believe in The Writings at all," he snapped. "Simple stories from a simpler time."

There were audible gasps in the audience, but not as many as Mahrree had hoped.

"Then let's discuss the ruins! Tell us what the expedition found," she pleaded. Another step. "We must discuss *something*."

Kori's knuckles, gripping the podium, turned white. "There is no room for debate—"

"Sure there is!" She gestured to the open space next to him. "Right there." Over the snickers of the audience, she continued, "When we close the debate, we close our minds and unnecessarily limit our possibilities. All our opportunities to grow, to expand, to explore?" She waved to the crowd. "How can you take that away from them? Let them go anyway! Let them be responsible for their choices and the risks."

"We can't allow *anyone* to leave the world!" Kori insisted. "We'll send soldiers to guard the access points if necessary, to keep this people safe."

"What if we don't believe the so-called Cursed Lands are actually cursed?" Mahrree said, still slowly ascending.

"They are! Our expedition suffered all kinds of hardships, and every man who entered the ruins experienced shaking, heart palpitations, difficulty in breathing—"

Mahrree tilted her head. "Sounds like a serious case of cowardice, mixed with homesickness—"

"It wasn't! There was also ample evidence that the pox originated from the ruins!"

Mahrree raised her eyebrows and hesitated on the stairs. "Oh really? What kind of evidence? Did they find little pocks lying all over the ground?"

"Evidence that you certainly couldn't understand, but must accept!"

Mahrree's patience with the man's disdain was waning. "I, for one, will not accept that. I *cannot* accept that. What if I don't *want* you to keep me safe? Why's that the Administrators' responsibility

anyway? If I want to leave, I should be able to. I won't ask anyone for help or rescue. But if you really want me to stay," she said, her tone growing frosty, "you must *prove* to me the conclusions are correct."

Another step.

"MADAM!" Kori boomed. "You would do well to realize that the debate . . . is . . . over." He emphasized each word with what he likely thought was intimidating rage. "You're expected, as is everyone in this village," he glanced around, "to accept the results. It's not the news we hoped for, I agree. The impact upon those lands by our ancestors was worse than we could've imagined. We cannot allow anyone there because the land needs to heal from the misuse of our ancestors and others who may have been there before."

"Others?" Mahrree said with a hint of a smile.

Kori took a deep breath. "Yes, there may have been others besides our ancestors. The expedition found evidence of many different peoples." He didn't seem to want to say the words, but it was better than illegally debating the vexing woman creeping up the stairs. "They gathered samples of more than forty different styles of writing, which suggests this world has been populated for over one hundred thousand years."

Now the gasps came, loud and from all over the amphitheater.

Mahrree paused on the steps. Over forty civilizations?

Oh Terryp! she thought, Is this what excited you so much that they thought you were mad? So many different peoples!

Mahrree took another step with so much energy she was surprised she didn't fly. "Mr. Kori! This is fascinating! Let's discuss this. I have a theory. None of those were our ancestors, but *other* groups of peoples brought here by the Creator to also test their wills in the Plan, as stated in The Writings."

Another step.

"The Writings have told us we're not the only ones, nor are we the last. So what if others were brought here—forty groups so far—and each lived out there time for the Plan? What if each group was here for, say, five hundred years? That would mean this world has seen civilizations for maybe . . . twenty thousand years, not one hundred thousand.

"Or," she continued enthusiastically taking another step, "what if some of those groups developed *more* than one writing system? What if one civilization had multiple languages? Why, then the time of their

existences could be very different than either of our two theories! Maybe there was only one group before us, but with forty different ways of writing?”

Kori spluttered and stammered.

Mahrree was a flooding river of ideas, as she always was when she was on the platform. “And how can we be so sure a disaster destroyed them? What if their End to The Test came? Their Last Days? Did the expedition find any bones or remains? Any grave markers for millions of suddenly dead people? I doubt it. So what if those who came before us are just *gone*?”

“And I’ve also wondered why had no other civilizations settled here, in Idumea and Edge and the other villages? Why did the others before us not take advantage of the fertile grounds here given to us by Mt. Deceit? I imagine a volcano’s eruption may be a fearsome thing to witness, but if it’s all just smoke and ash then a great abundance of black soil as we have been taught by your good scientists—” Mahrree was sure to give him a genuine smile when she said that, “—why did no one else live here? Could it be there are some things we still don’t understand about how this world works? I mean, consider—”

“We know ENOUGH!” Kori bellowed, fully expecting his wrath to blow her off the platform. His complexion had turned from pink to bright red as Mahrree had plowed on.

But she didn’t move. “Oh Mr. Kori,” she said fervently, “how can we *ever* claim to know enough?”

“*You* need no more! I have here copies of the findings to be distributed to every family, and you *will* read the conclusions and worry no more about theories. You’ll all stay here where it’s safe, where we can protect you, and you must not risk leaving.”

Mahrree’s patience was spent. “Why?” she demanded.

Then a thought struck her so forcefully it nearly *did* blow her off the platform. It hit her stomach with a raw punch while the rest of her body filled with angry heat.

“The barn!” she gasped.

Only Kori and the others on the podium could hear her.

“This world . . . our whole world . . . this is the *barn*, and you won’t let anyone out,” she murmured.

Kori slowly shook his head at what he clearly believed was an insane woman.

“Perrin wasn’t the only injured falcon,” Mahrree’s chest began to heave. “It’s *all* of us, isn’t it? Just like Queruls’ servants, kept

confined, all to be tormented by the cat . . .” Her voice grew louder. “It’s all of us. HERE! The truth is, if you let us leave the world, we leave the *barn*. But you can’t let us do that, because then there’ll be nothing left for the cats to torment—”

Kori’s face paled and his eyes showed genuine worry. “Sir, will you do something about this woman?” he said loudly to his side.

Mahrree barely registered what he said, her mind spinning and reeling. “No! You can’t keep us all trapped!”

All of Edge was around her, and they deserved to know. The whole world had to be told the truth she’d finally found!

“*It’s all a lie!*” Mahrree bellowed as she spun.

But she found herself staring into a blue chest covered in medals and ribbons. It effectively muffled her words and stopped her cold.

“General, it’s about time!” Kori exclaimed. “Will you escort this woman off the platform—immediately!”

“Sit down,” said the uniform’s voice, thick and cold as a blizzard.

Mahrree stood rooted in place, stunned to be looking directly at the general’s name patch.

It didn’t say THORNE.

It said SHIN.

There was a pin—an outline of a prowling mountain lion—above the name patch that wasn’t there this morning when Perrin kissed her goodbye.

The new symbol of the generals.

General Perrin Shin.

Had she been able to focus anywhere beyond the body in front of her, she would have thousands of gasps of “*General Shin?*”

She might have heard her daughter whimpering, “Father, no! Deck, do something!”

She may have even heard her son, as he shook his head, mumbling, “No. No, this isn’t right. No . . . Shem, where are you? This isn’t right . . .”

But all she heard was, “Say no more and sit down, *NOW!*” The general ordered in a tone she’d never heard before.

“Per—” she started, but she couldn’t finish. This wasn’t her husband. This man . . . who was he? Rage filled her, and she wasn’t about to move for him or anyone—

The general put a firm hand on her shoulder, pivoted her bodily by pinching a nerve, and pushed her toward the stairs.

The audience watched breathlessly.

Mahrree fumed, angrily shrugged off his painful grip and marched back down the stairs, with the blizzard following her.

This is wrong, this is wrong, this is wrong—

She halted halfway down the steps, her breath catching.

Captain Thorne stood at the bottom of the stairs with his sword drawn and ready.

She couldn't even think a prayer.

"Mrs. Shin," Thorne sneered. "I'll see you to your seat."

"That won't be necessary," said the cold voice behind her.

Momentarily Mahrree was trapped, but quickly decided that she wanted to get away from the uniform behind her more than she wanted to avoid the one before her. She marched defiantly down the stairs, pushed past Captain Thorne and walked to her row, the captain following close behind.

Every Edger watched her in shocked silence, and this time no one impeded her progress to her spot in the middle of the row.

Captain Thorne remained in the center aisle, his sword still drawn and his glare focused on Mahrree, while General Shin strode back up the podium stairs to stand by Kori.

This is wrong, this is wrong! Mahrree's mind screamed as she sat down hard, her eyes shooting daggers at the general who didn't defend her but instead ordered her to sit down.

Jaytsy and Peto each gripped her arms to keep her in place.

General Shin stood slightly in front of Kori, as if to shield him, and Mahrree felt a wave of nausea to accompany her anger.

She'd seen him do that before once, years ago. It was their fifth debate, and he stood in front of her to shield her from the rowdy crowd.

Now he shielded the Administrators.

Perrin was gone, nowhere in that large body, those dark empty eyes, or that emotionless face at the front of the podium. The general was fully in command.

Kori, with a tight and triumphant smile, addressed the astonished audience. "Documents detailing the findings of the expedition, our understanding of the origins of the ruins, and an explanation about the so-called 'Creator' will be available for each family to review. We'll be distributing them outside the amphitheater."

Several soldiers retrieved the bags of papers from the platform that were obviously not maps, and headed for the exits.

Mahrree continued to stare at the general, oblivious to her daughter's silent weeping or her son's head shaking. Her son-in-

law, with his arm around his wife, looked at each member of the family trying to sort out what he could do.

And the general stared out at the crowd.

Kori continued. "We're still looking at alternatives to expanding our lands to accommodate the desire for increased living space. But no one will ever be going to Terry's land. This is all. You may now return home."

It wasn't a suggestion, but no one seemed to be able to move.

Until General Shin shifted his stance slightly, and that was all that was needed.

As one body, the crowd nervously came to their feet and obediently began to file out. But the air was thick with heated tension and unspoken frustration.

Mahrree refused to budge, even though her children had released her. All she could do was stare at the platform where all thought had died. And her marriage.

Earlier that day she had decided that the 6th Day of Planting Season would be a significant date. But, she remembered now, it already was. It was nineteen years ago that she'd first stepped on to the platform to take on the new captain to debate the color of the sky. That sky was now completely black.

And tonight, that same man whom she thought had only improved in stature, rank, and the amount of gray speckling his black hair, forced her off the platform.

She was really beginning to hate Planting Season.

Mahrree heard the quiet sobbing next to her. She barely had enough control to look askance.

Jaytsy was shaking as Deck held her. Down the row at the center aisle Captain Thorne still stood about twenty paces away, sword at the ready, and studying Jaytsy intently. Peto got up, walked past Jaytsy and Deckett, and stood in front of them to block Thorne's view.

Thorne glared at him.

Peto firmed his stance and folded his arms.

Mahrree blinked back the first tears that stung her eyes. Peto stood in the same way his father had. He was now the shield, the very best of the men Mahrree loved most.

Had loved.

"What's wrong with him?" Jaytsy whimpered. "Did you see his face? Deck, he can't be general now! He's supposed to be here and be the grandpy! They can't go to Idumea!"

Deck kissed her forehead as he cradled her. “Just don’t worry about it right now. We’ll figure all of this out later. This was just . . . don’t worry, Jayts.”

Peto turned slightly to his family. “It’s *not* right,” he whispered fiercely. “This isn’t the way it’s supposed to happen. I can feel it. Don’t worry Jayts. It’s not going to happen!”

“It already has,” Mahrree said dully. “Everything we believe and cherish has just been declared to be a made-up story. And the defender of the so-called truth is General Perrin Shin. Dear Creator—who I still believe in—how did we get here?”

None of her children knew how to answer her.

Peto, still facing Thorne who was now motioning for another soldier to join him, searched the quickly exiting crowd. “Where’s Shem? He always shows up . . .”

Deck looked around as well. “I think we could all use a little Shem right now.”

“He won’t be here,” Jaytsy whimpered. “If Thorne’s here—” she whispered his name, “—then Shem would be left in charge of the fort. He doesn’t know anything that’s happened!”

Deck spied a dozen soldiers gradually converging around them. “Mahrree, I think you’ve made a few people uncomfortable.”

“That’s why the Creator gave me this mouth and put me in this world!” Mahrree fumed. “Making people comfortable is the work of the Refuser!”

Peto pivoted again to place himself directly between Thorne and his family.

The captain, finished with the soldier who rushed off, turned back to Peto with an ugly smile.

But Mahrree gazed only on the platform and sat defiant and firm. General Shin was speaking to a man in a red suit who gestured toward Mahrree. The general nodded, then, without even so much as a glance to his family, strode to the back of the platform.

Mahrree felt the need to hit someone. Preferably someone in a uniform.



General Shin trotted down the stairs, doing his best to ignore the oak tree. The one she kicked nineteen years ago. The one he tried to remove. The one he recently promised to sneak her back

to some evening and . . .

But the oak loomed in front of him, refusing to be ignored. Still, he gave it only passing notice.

He marched behind the amphitheater, scattering the citizens who were dutifully waiting in line for their documents. The general was like an inverse tornado, creating a large perimeter around him no one wanted to be near.

The same words ran through his mind, over and over, as he plowed through the green. Genev's assistant had been very clear, telling him what needed to be done with someone like Mrs. Shin.

Years ago Hogal Densal had cautioned his nephew about her, that she had the potential to become something quite menacing. For years he'd ignored the warning, or chuckled about that evaluation.

But there was nothing funny about her outburst tonight. She'd fulfilled her destiny.

General Shin felt the words in every step he took.

Most dangerous woman in the world?

This is the end.

Chapter 31 ~ “It’s time that front garden was tended to!”

The middle-aged woman sat stunned on the front row. She could hardly bring herself to move, but that’s not how she felt initially.

Just fifteen minutes before she’d been anxiously squirming, eager to bolt out of the amphitheater and tell everyone what they were saying.

But she couldn’t, because then she would have missed everything *else*. She had a duty to perform.

Her main obligation had been to be a midwife for the colonel’s daughter, and she’d met the young mother-to-be last week. But she also had another duty should the opportunity arise: be a reporter.

Oh they had trained her and all, certainly not anticipating she’d ever actually *use* that training. They expected her to be in Edge for three moons at the most, until all seemed well with Mrs. Briter and her baby. But things come up, and just in case something interesting occurred, she could report a few things back to them as well.

But Mrs. Braxhicks was sure no one expected anything like this!

She certainly didn’t when she heard the buzz in the village about the mandatory meeting and the rumor that there was news about Terryp’s land. Mrs. Braxhicks knew she had to be there, front and center, to make a report later to her husband and the others in the woods, in case Shem Zenos couldn’t.

But even though she got there an hour early front and center was already taken, and she had to be satisfied with front and behind the speakers a bit on the backward curve of the amphitheater. At first she was quite put out with that arrangement, until she realized

it put her—*providentially*, as that boorish Idumean had sneered—in a position to watch Mrs. Shin. She knew her ability to read lips would come in handy, although she could still hear Mrs. Shin’s murmuring at the end.

At first she didn’t know who this remarkably brave yet stupid woman was who leaped to her feet. Before she could ask anyone around her, the audience was tittering, “Mrs. Shin? What’s Mrs. Shin doing?”

That’s when Mrs. Braxhicks sat up even taller, trying to see over the platform to watch the small woman’s attempted debate. When Mrs. Shin began up the stairs, Mrs. Braxhicks found her fists clenched by her face in dread and worry, but also in pride for the woman. Then, as she faced Mr. Kori, something astonishing rushed across Mrs. Shin’s face. Mrs. Braxhicks noticed, probably as well as General Shin did: the sudden change of expression, the widening of the eyes as she began to murmur, and then she said the words that made Mrs. Braxhicks’s mouth drop open.

“Just like Queruls’ servants . . .”

How in the world did Mrs. Shin know about Queruls’ servants?!

A moment later she realized, of course, how ridiculous to not remember, that her grandfather-in-law was the man who freed them. But wasn’t all of that meant to be kept secret?

Then Mrs. Shin started on about the barn, and falcons, and everyone being trapped . . . and that’s when Mrs. Braxhicks knew everything was about to change.

In a way she was glad it was Mrs. Shin who stood up, because Mrs. Braxhicks was so irate that she was about to leap to her own feet, although she knew that would have been the very worst thing in the world for her to do. Many years ago her aunt, a midwife in Idumea, had dared to speak up, then found herself being questioned by Administrator Gadiman himself, and so she made a mad dash for the seclusion of the trees. Several moons later the Administrator of Family Life released a study explaining how having more than two children made a woman insane, and it would have been laughable if it hadn’t been so finite. There was a lot of speculation about how much her aunt had influenced the creation of that study, and several debates as to whether things had gone too far, but Hifadhi had put an end to all of that by saying that what was done, was done, and all that anyone could do moving forward was to remain very quiet and very anonymous.

Shem Zenos had failed at that, miserably, but many others maintained a subtle presence. Mrs. Braxhicks knew her position was only temporary, and surely she could maintain a low profile for just a few moons, couldn't she?

So she watched in morbid fascination as Mrs. Shin finally—*finally*—recognized the truth, only to have her husband stand in her way.

That's when Mrs. Braxhicks' mouth hung open so far she didn't know if she could ever shut it again. Something was very wrong. Colonel Shin was suddenly *General* Shin, and while in one way that was likely right, it was also very, very wrong.

It wasn't supposed to happen this way, was it?

A part of her began to panic that maybe—just maybe—it wouldn't end the way it was *supposed* to.

Then Mrs. Shin was forced back to her bench, where she still sat now being watched over that nasty Thorne, and General Shin huffed off the platform with such fury that Mrs. Braxhicks shrank back a bit in worry, just in case his determined glare happened to shift over to her as he headed down the back stairs. Fortunately he seemed to be lost in his own swirling thoughts, and Mrs. Braxhicks was finally able to make her legs stand up and work her way around to the front of the platform.

While nearly everyone else had hurried out in a dismayed hum, a few villagers lingered, making their ways to the exits to pick up their copies of the dubiously fascinating findings, but also trying to see what would happen to Mrs. Shin and her children sitting restlessly next to her.

Mrs. Braxhicks knew she was doing the same thing, but she had a purpose besides simply being a nosy neighbor. She wanted to catch their eyes—at least poor Jaytsy Briter's, who seemed to be nearly hysterical—and she wanted to somehow communicate that she . . .

Well, what *would* she say to them if she had the opportunity? She hadn't been trained *that* thoroughly. Her additional responsibility—should it come up—was only to report. Not to contact, not to speak, not to interfere. That was most important—*don't interfere*.

Mrs. Braxhicks sighed, knowing there was nothing else she could do except pick up a copy or two of the findings and deliver them to her husband and the others in the trees, then go about her business as midwife to Mrs. Briter and the other two future

mothers she found in Edge looking for someone a little more experienced than what Idumea was sending around.

She tried one more time to make eye contact with any of the Shins or Briters, but felt distinctly this was beyond her ability. Increasingly anxious, she picked up her pace to bustle out of the amphitheater.

The amphitheater was emptying rapidly, with no villagers daring to look at the Shin family. That was fine with Mahrree. Anyone whose eyes she met would most likely have burst into flame. She continued to stare at the now-empty platform, waiting for every last person to leave before she'd finally stand up.

That's when she heard Peto say, "No, that's all right. I'll see that she reaches home safely."

Mahrree shifted her glare to the four soldiers now surrounding her family.

Deck stood up quickly. "Thank you, but we can take care of her. Come, Mahrree."

With surprising gumption Deck took his mother-in-law's arm and pulled her up. Peto quickly took the other side and Jaytsy tried not to wobble to her feet.

"Dessert must be ready, don't you think, Mother?" she asked in forced brightness, wiping tears off her face.

Mahrree went along only because she didn't want her children see her fight off four soldiers. At least, that's what she told herself.

They left the amphitheater and walked across the green in quiet dread through crowds that instantly silenced when they saw them. Despite Deck and Peto's assurances, the four soldiers followed several paces behind.

Mahrree's thoughts reeled. He once called me a traitor, she remembered. Years ago, right after Peto was born, and she told him she wanted more children. But he had traitorous thoughts as well, in Idumea. Had he forgotten that? Has he forgotten everything except that ridiculous title? That must be what power does to a man: erases what he knows and makes him remember only what services him at the moment. Why didn't he speak up? He knew the truth as well as she did. Together they could have changed things! If only he would have said something!

"Mahrree, just a little slower," Deck murmured as he marched next

to her. "Jaytsy can't keep up."

Mahrree tried to slow down but her anger propelled her onward.

"I've got her, Deck," Peto said on the other side of Mahrree. "Go help your wife."

Mahrree cringed at the sound of his voice. So like Perrin's. He'd be seventeen soon, but he was already acting like a man. He seemed to have aged a decade that evening.

"Don't worry, Mother. This isn't going to last."

"You of all people should be happy about his becoming a general, Peto," Mahrree said in a low snarl. "Then going to Idumea? Your grandfather would've been pleased. So why aren't you?"

Peto sighed. "It's not right. Relf wouldn't have wanted this either, I know. I can't explain it, but I won't allow it. Nothing will happen to this family. We won't go to Idumea, I promise you."

Mahrree clutched his arm. "Thank you!" she whispered. "It's all a lie, Peto. Nothing's wrong with those lands. It's a way to keep us all here, just like Querels' servants."

"I know," Peto murmured. "I feel it too. Really, you need to slow down a little. Jaytsy's going to be run over by the soldiers. I think she's waddling on purpose."

The soldiers maintained their quick step, but could go no faster than Jaytsy and Deckett. Several neighbors on their way home steered clear of the odd parade.

When they reached home Mahrree strode through her front gate, up the stairs to the door, flung it open, and waved to her three followers who quickly headed inside. She sent a stabbing glance to the soldiers and slammed the door shut.

Mahrree stomped to a chair at the table and sat down in it almost hard enough to splinter it. She stared at the stone wall trying to think, trying to understand what happened to Perrin . . . to their entire world. Everything was wrong.

In her fury she barely noticed her children exchanging anxious looks. Peto and Deck murmured together, and then Peto bounded up the stairs. Deck came over to the table and did something around the secret drawer. Peto came down a moment later, motioned to Deck, then darted into the kitchen with Deck right behind him.

Jaytsy kneeled in front of her mother, an admirable thing to do for a woman just two moons from birthing.

"Mother, I'm sure there's an explanation for all of this," she said as optimistically as she could, which was rather grim. "I'm

sure Father will be home soon and, and . . .”

“And what?” Mahrree snapped. “What will come next?”

Jaytsy bit her lip and nervously glanced at the front door.

Mahrree sighed. “Oh, Jaytsy, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean that. Well, I *did*, but . . . I can’t think right now. Come here—you should be sitting, not me.” She got up and pulled Jaytsy on to the chair. Kneeling in front of her she said, “I promise you, I’ll not be going to Idumea. Neither will Peto. We’ve already decided: we’ll be here for you and Deck and the baby.”

“But Father—”

“—will do whatever he feels he must do, even if he thinks his duty is to defend this ridiculous development and deny everything we believe. He’s going to do it alone! I’ll not leave this house. Ever. Do you understand me?”

Jaytsy seemed as if she were about to burst into tears again, but she nodded. “Of course.”

Mahrree stood up and brushed down her skirt. “I need to do something. This house is too clean. We already ate, so there’s nothing to cook. I need to . . .” She looked around, wringing her restless hands.

The idea hit her so clearly she couldn’t imagine why she didn’t think of it before.

“Garden!” she clapped her hands. “It’s time that front garden was tended to!”

“Mother?” Jaytsy’s eyebrows rose.

“Yes, time to learn to weed. Deckett!” she called. “Tell me what tools I need to garden.”

Deck stuck his head out of the kitchen, startled. “Uh, well usually for *your* garden I would recommend . . .” But when he saw his wife frantically shaking her head he tried again. “You need a hand digger,” he said, knowing full well she didn’t have one. “It looks like a big fork—”

“Then I’ll get one!” Mahrree strode into the kitchen, pushing past Deck.

Peto was by the back door looking out the window. “Mother, I’m pretty certain there’s a soldier or two in the alley.”

Mahrree rummaged in a drawer until she found one of the good serving forks, taken from Hycymum’s house. “What do I care for soldiers?” She brandished the fork with fearsome glee and marched to the front door.

Her son and son-in-law watched from the kitchen, and Jaytsy

shifted in her chair to observe her mother's madness unfold.

Mahrree yanked open the door to the evening, began to take one step, but stopped.

The burly soldier blocking her way asked, "May I be of service?"

"You can get off my property. I didn't ask for you to be here."

"I'm here for your protection, Mrs. Shin."

She wasn't buying that. "Protect me from what?"

"Guarders, Mrs. Shin. Some have been sighted this evening. I'm here for your protection," he repeated.

"Oh *really*?" Mahrree put her hands on her hips. "So why are there no banners up? No citizens running around terrified?" She gestured with the large sharp fork to the neighbors across the road talking in hushed tones to passers-by.

It wasn't difficult to guess the topic at hand. They took one look at Mahrree wielding the oversized utensil and quickly made their way down the road.

"Tell me," Mahrree squinted at the sergeant, a man whom she'd known for six years but who now seemed quite unfamiliar, "are you really here to defend the wife of the colonel," she sighed in exasperation as she corrected herself, "the *general*, or is your duty something different entirely?"

"I'm here for your protection," he recited, growing uneasy under the examination of Mrs. Shin.

"And I'm here to weed my garden," she pushed past him.

"That's your right," he replied and remained at attention.

Mahrree looked around in the twilight at her patch of land. She didn't even know where to start, so she found the biggest weed that she didn't think was a tree in disguise. Kneeling in the dirt, she began to hack away with her fork. Every ounce of anger she poured into that unfortunate bit of hard ground, and it splintered and flaked, sending bits of gravel into the air. One of the tines of the fork bent when it hit a rock, but Mahrree kept pounding.

It was unexpectedly satisfying.

"I should have taken this up years ago!" she exclaimed, stabbing the dirt harder and harder as if she had to kill it, her hair flipping wildly, and sweat building on her forehead.

Eventually she paused. "At some point I'm to pull something out of the ground, aren't I?" she asked the dirt. She glanced at the soldier, daring him to answer.

He shrewdly didn't.

Vaguely aware of three pairs of eyes watching her from the open front door, she was about to speak to them when she heard a commotion down the road.

She scrambled to her feet, and her three children joined her.

Around the corner on the main fort road they appeared, at least twenty soldiers marching, with Captain Thorne and General Shin in the lead.

“In the house, NOW!” Mahrree ordered, but she didn’t need to. Already Peto was pulling her to the steps.

Jaytsy stood rigidly on the porch. “Father will stop for me—”

“I’m more worried about Thorne,” said Deck, and pulled her inside. He shut the door when everyone was in.

Mahrree planted herself back in her chair, her stomach twisting.

The soldiers? She had expected them to pay her a visit. Led by Captain Thorne? Naturally.

But the general?

What does this mean? *What does this mean?*

Deck escorted Jaytsy to the kitchen and ordered her to stay behind the door.

Mahrree gripped the armrests of her chair. How could Perrin do this to them? His family, running and hiding from him? How did everything go so wrong, so suddenly?

Peto rushed into the kitchen as well, and when Mahrree heard the clang of steel a moment later, she spun around and stared at her son.

He stood at the base of the staircase and regarded her with a mixture of sorrow and determination. Perrin’s old sword was in Peto’s hand, pointed down, but ready. Mahrree was sure he’d aged another half a dozen years in the last few minutes.

She clenched her teeth. Peto had never wanted to be an officer, yet tonight he held an officer’s weapon. It didn’t look right in his grip as he stood his ground a few feet in front of the kitchen door, which was opened a crack so that Jaytsy could peek through.

Mahrree nodded curtly at them. Had it really come to this? She remembered younger versions of her and Perrin sitting across from each other at that table, almost nineteen years ago. They had jokingly vowed to never kill each other.

She turned back around and realized that Deck had taken position by the fireplace a few feet from her. He stared intently at the front door and steadied his hold on Perrin’s long knife that he’d retrieved from the secret drawer in the table.

“Whatever happens, Deckett Briter,” she said to him, “you care for Jaytsy and Peto. Keep yourself out of this mess as much as possible so you can take care of them. Promise me!”

“Of course, Mahrree. Of course!” But his hand trembled.

The door swung open without a knock and Perrin—the *General*—strode in, followed by Captain Thorne and four more soldiers, including Sergeant Major Zenos, leaving the rest outside.

Shem’s eyes said nothing as he blankly gazed at Mahrree, his face as wooden as the general’s.

Mahrree nearly whimpered. Even Shem?

Oh how she detested those uniforms! They changed the wearers into soulless puppets, and that dark blue was like the sky just before a violent thunderstorm. One was brewing around her, and she was going to be the one who released it in her house—no one else.

Mahrree stood up with hatred so hot she thought she’d ignite as she faced the general. He better not assume he was sleeping here tonight!

“Mahrree Peto Shin—” General Shin began in that unfamiliar voice. He even wore those ludicrous black gloves General Thorne added to the generals’ uniforms. Last year Perrin had made fun of the skin-tight gloves. Now, he was just as ridiculous as all of them.

“Get out of my house, you *son of a sow!*” Mahrree shouted at the large blue body.

Captain Thorne flinched as if he’d been slapped.

The general merely raised one eyebrow at her use of the coarse phrase and repeated, “Mahrree Peto Shin—”

“I answer only Mahrree Peto!”

“Mahrree!” the general said abruptly and took a threatening step toward her.

Peto wielded the old sword and held it at the ready with surprising steadiness.

General Shin flicked him a glance before turning back to his wife. “I’m here to ask if you intend to continue to demand the resolutions of this evening be debated. I am here to ascertain if you will continue to refuse to accept the findings of this Administration.”

Mahrree nearly rolled her eyes. Now he even *sounded* like the Administrators, with their inability to say anything without a jumble of jargon. Try as she might, Mahrree couldn’t control her shaking. She thought she heard her daughter whimper and was aware that her son-in-law had stepped closer. There was only one

response her conscience would allow her to speak.

“Yes! With my dying breath!”

Jaytsy clearly whimpered that time, but Mahrree couldn’t stop to think about her.

“I will defend the right for *any* one to question *any* thing. Each person has the right to find her own answers and believe as she wishes!”

The general’s gaze was so sharp she felt as if he was cutting straight through her, while the soldiers behind him fidgeted.

“General,” Captain Thorne said cagily. “You *now* know her mind—”

“Yes, I do. Thank you, Captain,” he intoned, not taking his eyes off of Mahrree.

“General!” Thorne said louder. “This is *precisely* the moment I’ve been trying to prepare you for—”

Shin’s hard glare turned abruptly to the captain.

Thorne’s mouth remained open, but no more words came out.

Shin shifted his stare back to his wife.

“And why are you now suddenly a general?” Mahrree demanded.

The general didn’t even blink. “Cush is dead. Messenger came this morning with the promotion, effective immediately. I’m to leave for Idumea as soon as possible. The Administrators have requested my presence to announce the new High General. And,” his dull cadence continued, “according to the aide of Administrator Genev, you, Mrs. Shin, are to join me. The Office of Loyalty *demand*s your attendance.”

Deck gasped and he took another step closer to hold her arm, for which she was grateful, even though a minute before she told him to stay out of this.

So this *was* the end.

The end of everything. Of Edge, of her family. *Everything*.

“Captain, you and the others will wait outside,” the new general said icily, still focused on Mahrree. “I’ll handle this alone.”

“But—” Thorne started, but clamped his mouth shut when General Shin raised a hand, all the more intimidating sheathed in black.

Thorne turned to the door, and the soldiers filed out to leave the Shins’ staring match undisturbed.

“Now that I’m sure of your mind—” General Shin began, and with a swift movement that no one anticipated, he drew Relf’s sword.

Mahrree stiffened in shock as Jaytsy screamed.

“No!” Peto cried. “Not like this!” He charged his father.

General Shin threw Relf’s sword on the table, sidestepped Peto’s rush, caught his neck from behind with one hand, and deftly grabbed the blade his old sword with his other, without even nicking his gloves.

Peto fell to his knees gasping in pain from the powerful pinch his father delivered to his nerve, and released the hilt. With one smooth motion, the general flipped the sword in the air and caught it by the hilt.

Mahrree finally found her voice, and with it she screamed. The general had brandished the sword right across her chest, the point just inches away from Deck’s heart.

Deck froze in his rush to help Peto. The long knife was in his outstretched hand aimed at the general, several inches too short. A pitchfork would have been better tonight.

Jaytsy’s panicked sobs carried throughout the house as the family remained motionless in their positions.

When Mahrree thought of the incident later, she considered how impressed with Perrin’s power, speed, and skill she would’ve been had he not been simultaneously threatening to break her son’s neck and run through her daughter’s husband.

“Stand down, boy,” the general rumbled at Deck. He stared past the dull silver blade at his son-in-law, who trembled and knew he was clearly at a disadvantage.

“Deck, drop it!” Mahrree cried.

Reluctantly, he dropped the knife.

The general immediately dropped his old sword on top of it.

Mahrree stared at the blades, clattering on top of each other.

Wait a minute—

The general released Peto who, also perplexed, crumpled in a heap in front of his mother.

The general, with complete composure, removed his cap, placed it upside down on the table next to Relf’s gleaming sword which still vibrated, and began to peel off the dark dress gloves.

“As I was saying before I was interrupted,” the general began and glanced at his son who remained on the floor rubbing his neck, “now that I know your mind, Mahrree, the decision is obvious.”

He dropped the gloves into the cap and unbuttoned his jacket.

His family could only gape.

The general wrenched off his jacket and retrieved the long knife from the floor. “Captain!” he shouted. “Get in here.”

Mahrree stared in bewilderment as the general held up his jacket. The door flung open and Thorne rushed in, followed by Zenos and three other soldiers with their hands on the hilts of their swords.

“You are my witness, Captain Thorne,” said General Shin.

Mahrree finally found something to say. “What are you doing?”

Already he’d slipped the knife under the patch of the Administrators’ official mark and sliced cleanly through the stitching. It fell neatly on top of the gloves in the cap.

“General?” questioned the captain as he came up and stood next to Mahrree. His astonishment matched hers.

With two more quick slices the general released two more insignias.

Mahrree stared at one of the patches, with the sword imposed on top of a pine tree. For some inexplicable reason, it looked completely different to her, as if seeing it sideways in the cap suddenly gave it new meaning. The tiny sword was pointed to the mountains behind her.

Perrin yanked the new mountain lion pin from its position above his name badge, leaving a small tear in the woolen jacket, and dropped it into his cap. After tossing the knife on the table, where it clanked against Relf’s sword, he picked up the cap.

“You may inform General Thorne, Chairman Mal, and the Administrators that today, the 6th Day of Planting Season, I officially *re-signed* from the army. This is the end . . . of my career.”

For Mahrree, the room seemed to have been turned abruptly on its side. She gripped the chair back to brace herself.

Peto put his head in his hands.

Deck sat down hard in Mahrree’s empty chair.

Jaytsy sobbed anew in the kitchen.

But Shem grinned.

The general had simply vanished and left Mr. Shin in his place.

Perrin handed his cap to the startled captain, nudging his hand to take it. “This will go down, no doubt, as the shortest tenure of a general in our history,” he smiled casually. “For your information, I’m keeping the jacket. My parents paid for that, and I earned those ribbons and medals. But the cap, well, I never liked it. As for the black dress gloves? Those are the worst idea after brass buttons and pins that look like mountain lions. Be sure to tell your father that. And gloves make it difficult to keep a secure hold of one’s sword. The insignias in the cap belong to the Administrators, as well as this

sword. It's a general's sword, after all." Perrin turned to retrieve it from the table and glanced at Peto before saying, "And it was the *first* thing I wanted to rid myself of."

Peto offered an apologetic wince.

Thorne's mouth was wide open as he automatically took the sword in his other hand. His jaw worked up and down before it remembered how to form words. "General, you can *not* be serious. When we accompanied you here tonight I thought it was because you were finally ready to . . . to . . ." He looked at Mahrree and stopped in mid-gesture with the sword.

Mahrree gave Thorne a worried sidelong glance and sidled away.

"My mind has always been the same as hers," Perrin stated firmly. "And my name is Perrin Shin, not general. You and your men are free to leave. Including the ones hiding behind my woodshed."

Thorne, realizing there was nothing left to say or do, stumbled out the door, his arms filled with the former general's effects, and was followed by the other stunned soldiers.

Except for Sergeant Major Zenos who stood straighter than he ever had and saluted, with a tear sliding down his face.

Perrin cleared his throat roughly and gave him a look only the two of them understood.

Shem dropped his arm, nodded at the family—his eyes brimming with what seemed oddly like joy—then left the house, shutting the door behind him.

Outside, Shem noticed the other soldiers were back in formation, but bewilderedly. Captain Thorne stood at the head of them, staring blankly at the cap and insignias in one hand and the sword in his other, as if he'd never before seen such things.

"Time to go home, Captain Thorne!" Shem ordered.

Thorne looked up at him as if coming out of a dream, and nodded dumbly. He started for the fort, the soldiers following reluctantly.

Zenos paused before bringing up the rear, a small smile forming on his face that no one in the dark could see.

"The wait is *finally* over, Shin family," he whispered. "Time to go home!"

Inside, Deck rushed to the kitchen to check on Jaytsy.

Peto still sat on the floor, staring at his father who tossed his army jacket sloppily on the table and seemed chagrined that he did so.

"I can't believe you did that," Mahrree whispered, holding on to the table for support, but not quite yet daring to hold on to Perrin. Just a moment ago he was a general she hated. Her emotions were having a difficult time catching up to the events of evening, and something about him still seemed so distant.

Perrin grunted, still focused on his crumpled jacket that he never set down unless it was properly. "A part of me can't believe I resigned either," he said. "But it was the right thing to do," he added.

He turned to Mahrree. "You're a little pale," he said, concerned.

She hadn't dare look at him yet, worried about what she might see in his eyes. Still watching his jacket as if it would jump to life at any moment, she exclaimed, "Why shouldn't I be! After everything that just happened, and—" Her chin waggled.

He took her gently by the arm, and she finally looked up into his eyes. His dark brown eyes that still—*still*—had the effect of disrupting her breathing. Something in them smoldered in the old familiar way, but his eyes were ringed with worry.

"Mahrree, Mahrree, what did you *think* was going to happen?"

She opened her mouth to speak but nothing came out. When she finally formed words, they hardly made sense. "You just stood there, and didn't say anything . . . and then you were forcing me off the platform, and the mountain lion pin, and 'general' and . . ." The tears started. "I didn't know what to think!"

Perrin, never quite sure to do with her on the rare occasions that she cried, pulled her into him, which was an appropriate move. "Did you really think I could go along with *any* of this?"

"But you were!" Her voice was muffled against his chest. The same chest that just minutes ago wore a uniform that designated him as General Shin. Who was now gone . . .

It was going to take awhile to sort it all out in her head.

"You didn't tell me anything, or look at me about anything."

He surprised her by chuckling sadly. "What look is there that I could possibly give you that says, 'By the way, our entire way of life is now completely undone'?"

She almost chuckled back. "Why didn't you give us a hint?"

"When? It's been a rather full day, Mahrree!" He sighed. "The

messenger that came up this morning handed me the mountain lion pin, said that Chairman Mal insisted I put it on immediately, and then announced that Cush had died yesterday, and that I was to report for Idumea as soon as possible. I'd barely received that information when the coaches arrived with their 'findings.' Mahrree, even you have to admit that all of that was a little much for just one look. I had no idea what to tell Shem, except that you shouldn't come to the fort until I had everything sorted out."

"Doesn't seem like it sorted out very well," she whimpered.

"Actually, I think the general thing sorted out quite well." He sounded genuinely cheerful. "Except for you and me. What happened to you at the amphitheater?"

"To me?" she pulled away to look at him, and noticed his expression was still anxious despite his effort to appear confident. "What happened to you? You turned into a *general!* I thought my husband was gone forever and . . ." The stupid tears started again.

"Didn't we work this out in Idumea?" Perrin whispered, taking her face in his hands and brushing away a tear with his thumb. "When you start spouting off, I need to shut off. With as angry as you became tonight, one of us had to stay calm. If I agreed with you up there in front of everyone, Thorne would have killed us both, I'm sure of it. Or we would have been incarcerated by Genev's assistant. But fortunately for this family *I've* learned some self-control." He smiled drearily. "You silly woman. I remembered my vows. All of them—including the one to not kill you," he chuckled. "That's what you thought was going to happen here, isn't it?"

Mahrree felt utterly foolish. Yes, she thought he had abandoned them. Instead he abandoned the army and everything he'd known and lived for his entire life.

Now he was only Perrin Shin.

No general could have been greater than Perrin Shin.

"I did," she confessed, "and I've never been happier to admit that I was wrong."

He grinned. "I definitely want *that* in writing!" He leaned in to kiss her, but stopped just as his lips brushed hers. "Wait a minute. I just remembered." He pulled away from her. "You called me a *son of a sow?*"

"But I didn't mean it!" she insisted. "The general—*he* was the son of a sow!" There she was, saying it again, and all she could do was slap her hand over her mouth.

But her husband was already grinning. “I didn’t realize you even *knew* that phrase.”

“I teach teenage boys, remember? I know all kinds of things.”

“I’m learning all kinds of things as well,” said Peto cautiously, standing up behind his father.

Perrin kissed Mahrree before turning to his son. “I don’t know whether to praise you or punish you for what you tried to do today.”

Peto bobbed his head back and forth. “I could say the same thing about you, you know.”

Mahrree wondered when her son had become so brave.

Perrin cracked a smile. “Agreed. But Peto, what did you *think* you were going to do with my old sword?”

His son squirmed. “I, uh . . . was hoping to stop you . . . from whatever it was I thought *you* were about to do.”

Perrin released a low whistle. “I don’t really want to think on any of that.”

“Neither do I!” Peto said. “Sorry, about everything. I just wasn’t sure, and Deck and I were worried, and—”

Before Peto could finish his rambling apology, Perrin caught him in a brief but fierce hug.

“Just don’t ever do something like that again,” Perrin said as he released his son. “However, I’m proud of you for trying to defend your mother against my resignation.” He picked up his old sword and examined it. “Needs a bit of polishing, but still sharp. I’ll put it away in a better hiding spot later.”

“Father?” Peto cleared his throat nervously, “when I charged you . . . you dropped Grandfather’s sword on the table.”

Perrin continued to examine the tarnished blade. “I did.”

Peto swallowed before saying, “You didn’t mean to, did you?”

Mahrree had been wondering that herself. It was almost as if Relf’s sword had slid itself out of Perrin’s gloved grip. Maybe the gloves hadn’t been such a bad idea after all.

Perrin was silent, pretending to rub at a smudge. Eventually he said, “No, I didn’t.” He shifted his gaze to his now-pale son. “I was acting on instinct. For twenty-five years I’ve been conditioned how to respond when I see someone coming at me with a blade. I don’t even think; I just react. For that reason alone I should never take up another sword.” He threw it on the table. “I’m sorry, Peto. The gloves are stupid, but tonight they saved your life.

“But I don’t think that was entirely everything,” he said as the three

of them watched his old sword slow its vibration. “As ridiculous as this may sound, I don’t think my father’s sword would have tolerated its use in taking an innocent life. I know it’s an inanimate object, but I think somehow it would exact revenge for someone using it wrongly. It’s as if it slipped out of my gloves to avoid harming you.”

“Perhaps it still carries part of Relf Shin’s spirit?” Peto said.

Perrin looked up from the table, nodded at his son, and blinked away the wetness in his eyes. “Maybe it was Relf himself.”

Mahrree sniffed and put an arm around her husband’s waist, realizing it was safe again to touch him.

Peto nodded once, the color slowly coming back to his face. “I’m just glad I didn’t have to knock any sense into you, *Mr. Shin*. I never thought I would be so upset about you becoming a general.”

Perrin turned to him. “That struck me as odd, too. Care to explain?”

“No.”

Perrin studied his son, as if he could find more of an answer in him somewhere, but instead called out, “Deck? How’s my daughter?”

“Jaytsy!” Mahrree cried as she remembered she had another child, and rushed to the kitchen with Perrin behind her.

They found their daughter on the floor, still weeping.

Deck was cradling her and rocking. “She’s all right. She’s just a little emotional again,” he said, visibly concerned. He looked up at Mahrree. “You know, cows just don’t behave this way when they’re expecting. A little extra mooing maybe, but not like this . . .”

“I *do* know,” Perrin said. “Remember, we talked about ‘the condition?’” He winked at Deck.

“I can’t tell you how good it is to see you back, Perrin!” Deck said. “Sorry about the whole long knife thing. I see why pitchforks are better, though.”

Perrin chuckled and crouched next to him. “I never intended to run you through, by the way. Peto, yes. But you? Never.”

Perrin put his hand under Jaytsy’s chin and lifted it. “And I’m sorry I worried all of you today.”

Jaytsy sniffled and giggled. “I’m all right, really. I’m just more relieved than anything, Father. And I still get to call you Father!” She reached up to hug him. “And Grandpy!”

“How could I possibly leave my grandbaby?” he said as he embraced her and sat on the floor by her. “Just . . . just not *Grandpy*, all right? We’ll find another name.”

Mahrree sat down on the floor by Jaytsy, which left Peto standing all by himself.

“Well that was an exciting evening,” he said. “Now what?”

Mahrree exhaled. “Good question . . . now what?”

Perrin’s brow furrowed. “We’ve just started a high stakes game of dices with Idumea, I’m afraid.”

“What’s dices?” Deckett asked.

“A dumb game where soldiers throw dice, pretend they know what numbers will come up, and bet against each other,” Peto said, sitting down on the wood floor across from his brother-in-law. “You know, we *do* have a sofa and stuffed chairs out in the gathering room,” he pointed out as he leaned against a cabinet and a knob caught him on the back of the head.

Mahrree shuddered. “A few too many raw and recent memories out there right now. They’ll fade by morning, though. This is nice, all of us together in a circle on the floor.” Realizing how odd that sounded, she added, “Glad I swept thoroughly before we left for the amphitheater,” and recognized, as Jaytsy giggled, that sounded even more ridiculous.

Everything about the evening had been ridiculous.

Perrin smiled at his family. “Yes, this is just fine. Deck, Peto’s version of dices is a bit abbreviated, but accurate enough. We just threw a set of dice, then declared what we think the next roll will be. Now we have to wait for Idumea to see if, and how, it will bet against us.”

Deck frowned. “Sounds like a mere game of chance.”

“It is,” Perrin agreed. “But fortunately that’s really not what we’re playing right now. We’ve created a very complicated situation that will take Idumea several weeks to unravel, if they don’t get frustrated and give up all together.”

Mahrree twisted to look at him. “Exactly what have we done?” she asked, worriedly. She hadn’t yet stopped to think of long term consequences to any of this. A few minutes ago she was just trying to get through the night alive.

Perrin tried to put on The Dinner smile, which told Mahrree the situation was indeed bleak. “The initial plan was for you to accompany me to Idumea *tomorrow* to be questioned about your protests by

the Administrator of Loyalty. Genev's assistant was on the platform and insisted that you be reined in for your behavior."

Mahrree went paler than milk, and Peto whispered, "Reined in? Oh my."

"I took a quick walk around the green to come up with a plan," Perrin told them. "You see, it's one thing for a regular citizen to speak out as you did, but as the wife of the new High General—"

Mahrree gasped. "Were you to be the High General?"

Peto didn't have a smart comment for that as Jaytsy whimpered and Deck swallowed so hard all of them could hear it.

But Perrin merely shrugged. "That's what Mal's message implied," he said off-handedly. "And that was another thing I was trying to figure out: how to get out of the appointment safely. Qayin Thorne would be furious he wasn't getting the position. I'm not even sure we would have arrived in Idumea alive." He rubbed his forehead. "Ah, Mahrree—so much was happening so quickly that I could hardly think!"

She grabbed his arm and hugged it, the only belated comfort she could offer.

"By the time I came back from my walk to ask Genev's assistant some questions," Perrin continued, "he already had a new understanding. It seems Rector Yung had spent a few minutes with him explaining how we are 'cornerstones of the community' and how anything that happened to Mahrree would most likely generate a great deal of ill-will toward the Administrators. Yung told the assistant that the last thing the Administrators needed, after the disappointing news about the ruins, was an all out riot. And," Perrin smiled, shaking his head, "he reminded the assistant that I was still considered a hero. Even though the play finally ended last year, the Administrators certainly wouldn't want a new play surfacing about the untimely downfall of everyone's favorite colonel's *wife!* That Yung—he's something else, isn't he? I need to thank him—" He stopped when he noticed Mahrree was horror-stricken.

Worse than that—she was paralyzed, unable to breathe or think. Her children eyed her worriedly.

"Mahrree, it's all right!" Perrin took her shoulders and gently shook her, causing her to remember how to breathe again. "We've got time, and now we're regular citizens. The law is a little easier on citizens than for officers. The worst that can happen is that Genev's assistant will start a file on you. And probably me, now, as

well. But they need *pages* of evidence before they can take us to trial for sedition. There will be only one entry so far.”

Mahrree melted on the kitchen floor.

Perrin put a bracing arm around her to prop her up again. “We’ve created a good and complicated problem here. You spoke as the general’s wife, but I wasn’t *officially* a general yet—not until I swore the oath in front of Nicko Mal and the garrison. You were still the colonel’s wife, but with my resignation occurring the same day, we’re now both regular citizens, and the law takes into account what you were at *the end* of the day. And as much as the Administrators like to argue, they’ll take weeks before they come to any consensus about us, if at all. No one would be able to claim that what you and Kori engaged in on the platform was anything like a reasoned debate. And, last but not least, Yung was right—the Administrators can’t risk doing anything to us because I’m loved too much.” He batted his eyelids and Mahrree somehow found the strength to chuckle.

“Besides, now that I am no longer in the army—” he stumbled on the words, which panged Mahrree’s heart, “—the road is wide open for the Thornes. This should make Qayin and Lemuel very happy. I really don’t think anyone will care about me or you, or anything we say or do, ever again. We can now fade away and become as anonymous as everyone else.”

“And as unprotected as well,” Mahrree reminded him.

Perrin sighed. “Well, I’m not so sure about that. I still know a few things, I still have my old sword and long knife. We still have Shem. And a few friends in forts . . .” His voice faltered as he began to wonder about the veracity of that statement. He shook his head and put on a determined smile. “But it’s best we prepare for anything, right? That means training you two—” Perrin pointed at Peto and Deckett “in how to do a thing or two.”

“What do you mean?” Deck asked nervously.

“I may be as old as the both of you put together, but you would have never stood a chance against me,” Perrin said. “Deck, you gripped that knife like it was an udder!”

Deck blushed. “It’s all I know!”

“Considering the circumstances, beginning tomorrow both of you should begin some basic training. I seem to have a surplus of time on my hands now.” More gravely, Perrin added, “I simply don’t know who the soldiers are fighting for anymore. We can’t assume it will be *for us*. And Deckett, maybe starting tomorrow you can teach me how

to hold an udder. I understand that since your wife has been slowing down, you've been looking for another farmhand?"

Chapter 32 ~ “And next is . . . ?”

Thorne’s gait had flagged a few times on the way back to the fort, and as he stared at Shin’s career in his hands he felt Zenos come up beside him.

For the first time ever Lemuel let his guard down in front of a mere enlisted man and spoke to Zenos as if he were nearly an equal. “How could he do this? There’s no other life for him—”

“Pick up the pace there, Captain. No other life? Thorne, there are always options.” He sounded far too cheerful.

That put Lemuel on edge as he scoffed. “The only options are general or . . . or nothing!”

Zenos actually chuckled at that. “There are *always* more options. Always.”

The fort was charged like lightning with activity when their group arrived, the news of the resignation spreading so quickly that there was no need to post a notice.

But everyone fell deathly silent in the command tower when Captain Thorne trudged up to the offices. All but one soldier ran down the stairs to avoid the inevitable confrontation.

In disgust, Thorne dropped the ex-general’s effects on the forward office desk and ordered the staff sergeant that didn’t escape quickly enough to retrieve a file hidden in the captain’s quarters.

In the command office Thorne sat down without hesitation in the forbidden big chair, and pulled out paper and a quill. He thought for a moment, then began to write. The more he wrote the more enraged he became, referring frequently to the file the sergeant brought him. Half an hour later he rolled up the sheets of paper, hastily sealed them together with sloppy gobs of wax, and sent for a messenger.

While he waited, Lemuel looked around the office that Shin would never come to again. The desk he would never again sit behind, and

the chair he would never angrily pull Thorne out of.

How could he do it? How could he give it all up, after all these years, after all this work? Just give it all up for . . . a woman?

That woman!

Lemuel ran a finger along a report Shin had completed just yesterday, waiting to be filed. He touched the signature of Colonel Perrin Shin with pangs of remorse. He felt worse about losing Colonel Shin than he was about his grandfather dying.

Then again, General Cush had never saved his grandson's life.

Lemuel briskly rubbed his eyes to reduce the water building in them. *Stupid woman*, he thought angrily. Stupid, selfish woman. She ruined him.

The messenger appeared at the door. "Captain?"

Thorne got to his feet, gingerly picked up the roll of sealed pages, and placed them himself in the messenger's bag. "These need to get to General Thorne and the Chairman, immediately. Take an escort with you."

"Yes, sir," said the private. "We'll leave first thing in the morning . . ." his voice trailed off as he realized that was the wrong thing to say.

"Private, I said *immediately*. You'll leave now for Idumea. The safety of this fort, and perhaps all of the world, rests in that bag. If it's too heavy a burden, I can find someone else!"

The private stood taller. "I am on my way now, sir!" He saluted and ran down the stairs.

Lemuel glanced back at the colonel's chair. During his first year serving in Edge he saw that chair as his sole goal. But for the past two years he saw it as a representing everything Colonel Shin was—strong, solid, imposing, reliable.

But tonight the chair had a different quality.

It seemed *lonely*.

His scanned the broad desk with its several drawers, meticulously organized, on each side. There was even a skinny drawer that no one, not even the captain, was to touch. Only Zenos, and only in the event of the death of the colonel.

Lemuel rubbed his palms together. He was, after all, the highest ranking officer now at Fort Shin. *The Fort at Edge*.

He made his way around the desk, his finger dragging along the edge of it longingly, almost sensuously. Behind the desk he pulled out the chair that desperately desired a body to fill it.

A smile spread across his face as he sat down and pulled opened

the narrow “death drawer.” He was momentarily disappointed that all he saw was one parchment envelope, sealed with wax. It was addressed to Shem Zenos, in Perrin Shin’s hand.

Intrigued, Thorne picked it up. “And what is Shem Zenos to do when Perrin Shin is no longer here?”

He broke open the seal.

Lieutenant Offra sat down hard on his bunk.

He was gone. Colonel Shin had quit the army, and it was over. No more races. No one to ever call him “son” again. His only real friend in the army was no longer in the army.

Jon Offra was alone again.

He glanced up to make sure the door was locked.

Then he held his head and silently wept like a toddler.

When the men are distressed there’s nothing like a little bit of drilling to get them focused again. That was why Sergeant Major Zenos lined up his newest recruits for one of his infamous Know the Forest at Night tours.

“We don’t have raids in broad daylight,” he’d remind them. “They come at night. They sit at the edge of the forest and wait for an opening. You need to know the edge of that forest in the dark.”

That was the standard speech new recruits were warned to expect. The call came just as the men were still talking past lights-out hours about the colonel’s—the *general’s*—resignation, and were pretending to bunk down.

So at a little past midnight, Zenos and a group of recruits who couldn’t sleep anyway set out on horseback to let the cool air settle their minds. Once out of the confines of the compound, several soldiers asked the sergeant major what the resignation meant.

“It means his name is now just Perrin Shin,” Shem told them, slowing his horse to allow all the soldiers to hear him. Whatever he said that night would be spread to the rest of the fort by dawn; their attitude would be the fort’s attitude. “It means we’ll get a new commander, and all will be well.” He tried to sound convincing.

“But Sarge, why? Why did the colonel—*general*—resign? Did it have something to do with his wife? I heard she really started a commotion at the amphitheater.”

“Just comes a time, boys,” Shem answered breezily. “He’s been at it for over twenty-five years. Gets a little boring, doing the same work for so long. Maybe he’ll become a builder.”

“Sarge, there’s *got* to be more to it than that. Come on, you can tell us. You were there, weren’t you? So—”

“Just comes a time, men,” he cut off the inquiry, his tone turning sharp. “Nothing more, nothing to worry about. Actually, now you need to worry about the forest. Fall in!”

Zenos guided the recruits along the edge of the forest and began his cadence.

“What is this, men?”

In unison they responded, “Marshes, sir!”

“Do we like marshes, men?”

“No, sir!”

“Why do we not like marshes, men?”

“They eat horses, sir!”

“Do we like our horses, men?”

“Yes sir!”

“So what do we do with marshes?”

“Avoid them, sir!”

A little further down Zenos called again. “What is this, men?”

“A sinkhole, sir!”

“Do we like sinkholes, men?”

“No sir!”

“Why do we not like sinkholes, men?”

“They eat horses, sir!”

As they drilled about the dangers of the mud pits, steam vents, and the occasional water spouts they passed, Shem fretted again about the timing of his upcoming leave.

Three weeks.

He was leaving *tomorrow* for three weeks to visit his father.

He told Thorne he could rescind it, considering the situation, but Thorne just gave him his simpering smile and assured him the fort would be just fine. He shouldn’t *not* leave.

Shem sighed. If the Shins ever needed an alert set of ears in the fort, it was now. And none would be available for them.

“What is this, men?” he called.

“A fresh spring, sir!”

“Do we like fresh springs, men?”

“Yes sir!”

“Why do we like fresh springs, men?”

“They don’t kill the horses, sir!”

In the dark, none of the soldiers noticed a fist-sized rock drop to the ground from the sergeant major’s saddle.

“What do we do about fresh springs, men?”

“Remember where they are, sir!”

“What is this, men?”

“A gulley, sir!”

“Do we like gullies, men?”

“Depends sir!”

“Depends on what, men?”

“Who’s hiding in the gully, sir!”

Five minutes later, after the horses and cadence faded off into the distance, a dark figure dropped from a tree by the spring. It picked up the rock and noiselessly untied the string around it that held a dark and sooty piece of paper. The figure carefully unwrapped the paper and could just make out the words in the darkness.

“Five Plus Out. DTBD.”

He frowned at the writing, pocketed the message, and jogged noiselessly into the forest. A few minutes later he reached other men dressed in green and brown mottled clothing. In the cover of a gully they lit a small lantern and read the message.

“Zenos dropped it?” a man asked, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. “Unusual. How would he know of anyone?”

The man who discovered the note shrugged. “There’s only been a few other times he’s dropped a note like this.”

“DTBD,” a third man said quietly. “Date to be decided. Why? He knows how important it is to know the date.”

“We can ask him tomorrow,” the first man suggested. “He’s on leave in the morning. We can plan the details then.”

A fourth man, larger and quieter than the rest, broke his pensive silence. “I wouldn’t be so sure about that.”

The group of men looked at him.

Jothan stood up and took the note. “I think I know *who* he’s talking about. And if that’s the case, we need to be prepared at every moment for any contingency. This will be unlike anything we’ve ever done before.”

The men regarded their massive leader with surprise and

fascination. But before any of them could ask who he was talking about, they were startled by a movement in the forest behind them. Bounding through the trees a bit too noisily were three more men in brown and green. Breathless, they nearly fell into the cluster of men.

“My wife!” one of them gasped, “my wife contacted me!”

“What’s wrong, Braxhicks?” Jothan gripped his arm.

“She was at the meeting they had at the amphitheater,” he sat on the ground, trying to slow his breathing. “Did Zenos tell you yet what happened? Or Yung?”

“Yung rarely comes up here, but Zenos will be here tomorrow—”

“They named him general!” Braxhicks burst out.

“Who, Zenos?”

“No, of course not. Shin! They announced it earlier, along with the declaration that the ruins are still poisonous, and the Creator was merely a man who led them all away from there. Here,” and he handed the startled men a few wrinkled pages. “They gave these out to everyone, explaining the . . . the whatever lies they’re trying to call it.” Braxhicks slumped against a stump to catch his breath. “Mrs. Shin tried to argue it in front of everyone, but her husband forced her off the platform. The representative of the Administrators called him ‘General.’”

None of the men around him could speak for several moments.

Finally one of them broke their stunned silence by saying, “That’s it, then, isn’t it? They’ve named him a general . . . so . . .”

“A few more things have to fall into place, though, before . . .”

“But, but how can . . .”

“We’ve been waiting for this moment for . . . for almost twenty years, so now what are supposed . . . what should we . . .”

None of the men could finish their sentences, too taken aback by the news.

But Jothan slowly nodded. “As I was about to say, men: this one will be anything but routine.”

It took them a long time to finally fall asleep that night, if they actually did. Perrin and Mahrree laid next to each other in bed trying to make sense of what everything might mean now. They had

no idea.

“At least we have another supply of gold and silver slips in the cellar,” Mahrree said sometime after midnight. “I had been thinking we should find someone to donate it to, but now I think we’ll need to donate it to ourselves.”

“Yes—we have a bit to get us by for several seasons,” Perrin said, “until we figure out what’s next.”

“And next is . . . ?”

Perrin exhaled loudly and pulled her closer. “A very good question.”

They lay in silence, pondering.

“Remember the wall you showed me in Idumea?” Mahrree said after a while. “Around Chairman Mal’s mansion?”

“The wall that kept in all the servants?”

“We now know what’s on the other side of it, don’t we?”

“Pretty much nothing at all, is there?” Perrin stroked his wife’s hair. “When you stood up on that platform and said that the whole world was the barn, you actually gave me goose bumps. In fact, the moment you stood up in the audience, I knew everything was about to change, and drastically.”

“Sorry,” she whispered.

He kissed her head. “Don’t be. I was hoping someone would be brave enough to challenge the findings. I just really didn’t expect it would be you. Then again, Hogal did warn me about you, many years ago. Who else would it have been if not you?” He chuckled tensely for a moment, but then he grew somber. “As I sat up there watching you trying to debate Kori, I knew what I had always suspected: we’ve been kept confined just like the servants.”

Mahrree shivered in his arms. “Do you think they ever suspected the truth themselves? Did they ever think, ‘Hey, it’s been awfully quiet on the other side. I don’t think there’s any danger?’”

“I have no idea,” Perrin whispered. “But consider this: if they did, what did the Queruls do to then keep them away from the wall again? What horror did they throw over to keep them contained?”

Mahrree snuggled closer to him. “What you really mean is, what will happen next to the world because we know the truth?”

He cleared his throat gently. “Uh . . . sure.”

“Oh, no,” she whispered. “That’s *not* what you meant. What you really meant is, what will happen next to *us*, because I tried to declare the truth?”

He squeezed her tighter and kissed her again. “Remember, tonight I erased much of what could happen because I’m no longer in the army. In a way, it *is* like dices; we have to see what Idumea proclaims about us, then we throw the dices and see what happens.”

Mahrree considered that. “I don’t think that’s quite right,” she decided. “We did the right things, I’m sure of it. And I believe the Creator will help us, no matter what comes back to us.”

He squeezed her again. “Of course you’re right,” he said with genuine confidence. “Did you see the look Shem gave me, just before he left with Thorne?”

“I did, but I didn’t recognize it.”

“It’s a look he made up in Idumea,” Perrin explained. “Before we were to hear what my punishment would be for the stolen caravan. He told me it was something his rector told him before he signed on with me long term. Shem even twitched the message to me several times while they read my long list of offenses, just to keep me calm.”

Intrigued, and growing a bit impatient, Mahrree said, “So what did that expression mean?”

“You were in the Creator’s army long before you were ever in Idumea’s. And the Creator takes care of His own.”

Mahrree closed her eyes, feeling another wave of peace pass over her as it had a few times already that night. The insistent sense of calm seemed to both of them an odd sensation considering that never before had their future been so uncertain. Yet still the tranquility filled their home, and only then did Mahrree realize how chaotic their lives had been before.

“The Creator takes care of His own,” Mahrree murmured. “We’re His own, aren’t we?”

“We’ve never been anyone else’s,” Perrin shrugged.

Hours later, when Mahrree eventually drifted into unconsciousness, she dreamed of a large home with faded gray wood, window boxes, gardens, and mountains. She chuckled in her sleep.

And when Perrin finally surrendered to the exhaustion of the day, he saw in his dreams a mass of Guarders run straight for his house, but continue on to another target.

He didn’t hear that annoying knocking on his door, either. He wouldn’t, ever again.

Instead he saw a little face looking up at him, smiling.

The child had perfectly squishy cheeks.

Rector Yung sat patiently in his old cushioned chair. It had been dark for many hours, but he knew the back door would soon be opening—

“I didn’t think you’d still be up,” said the voice that came through the door and silently closed it behind him. “I tried to get here earlier, but there’s a remarkable amount of activity for so late at night.”

“Tell me, Jothan—how could I possibly sleep after what happened tonight?”

Neither of them lit a candle, but the large man dressed head-to-toe in black sat in the only other chair in the sparse room of the unlit rectory. “No one’s going to be sleeping for a while, I suspect.”

“Jothan, how much did you hear?”

“Mr. Braxhicks caught up to us. His wife was at the amphitheater and filled him in. She even sent a copy of the findings for us. I don’t know when I’ve ever seen a husband so proud of his wife.”

Yung chuckled quietly.

“She’s still safe as an unknown midwife, but you aren’t, Rector,” Jothan pointed out. “According to what we read, all rectors are officially out of a job. Who knows what Idumea will come up with next. We need to get you out of here tonight.”

Yung shook his head. “Can’t. There’s another wrinkle, because Idumea has already come up with that ‘next’. I had another visitor not too long ago.”

“Oh?”

“An assistant of Genev’s, the Administrator of Loyalty. You’re right—there’s no need for rectors, so I’ve been asked to hand over the rectory tomorrow morning to the Administrators. Likely because I was perhaps a bit too vocal myself.”

Jothan let out a low whistle. “What do they want with the rectory?”

“Who knows. Apparently I haven’t paid my taxes since I arrived, although my records show otherwise. I’m being evicted.”

“So why not let me take you now?”

“Think about it,” Yung said steadily. “They expect to find me in the morning. If I’m gone, questions will be asked. No, I’ll do my duty, say a few good-byes, then . . . take a walk. I’ll meet you at one of the usual places. Besides, it’s not *me* that will be a complicated vanishing.” His tone was the weight of boulders.

Jothan sighed just as heavily. “I know. It’s not as if they can suddenly move somewhere else, or even receive visitors—”

“Are they being watched?”

Jothan nodded in discouragement. “Both houses are guarded.” He leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. “We’re already brainstorming ideas, but until we hear back . . . what do you think your brother-in-law will recommend?”

Yung thought for a moment. “Right now everyone’s on high alert. But if the Shins suddenly become silent—boringly silent—Thorne and his soldiers will lose interest. Give it a few weeks and I predict the surveillance will drop off, and then you can get to work.”

“But I’ll likely have to work quickly,” Jothan mused out loud. “I have some serious qualms about this succeeding. My instinct is to do an old-fashioned snatch-and-run, but—”

“But this is a situation unlike any other we’ve ever encountered,” Yung reminded him.

His companion nodded dismally.

“No matter what you end up doing, there are going to be questions asked and people wondering and even *wandering*,” Yung warned him. “We have to be prepared for anything and everything. It’s going to be messy, no matter what.”

“Shem and I have talked about this before, and we’ve both come to that same conclusion,” Jothan agreed. “So many things can go wrong, and I have a hard time envisioning it going smoothly.”

“It doesn’t have to go smoothly,” Yung reminded him. “It just has to *go*.”

“I suppose you’re right,” Jothan said. “I just thought of another problem: who’s going to do it?”

“Why not Shem?”

“He’s due to leave tomorrow to visit his father.”

Yung scoffed. “He won’t do any such thing. Not right now.”

“But he does have to leave. He told me the other day that Thorne reminded him he’s got three weeks leave coming, and he expects him to take it all beginning tomorrow.”

Yung scratched his chin. “I might not have time to catch up to Shem tomorrow. Not even sure where he’ll be . . .”

The men sat in thoughtful silence for a minute.

“It just may have to be you,” Yung finally said. “Stand up,” he said, getting to his own feet. “Right in front of me . . . yes, I do believe you’re rather larger than him.”

“Meaning?”

“How hard can you hit?”

“Rector?”

“I mean, can you knock out a man roughly your size with one blow?”

“Of course. Most of us can.”

“Then how far can you carry a man, roughly your size, who happens to be unconscious?”

Jothan smiled reluctantly. “Perhaps a mile, as long as I’m not running.”

“Can you do that multiple times?”

“Probably. Why?” his smile grew, although he tried to hem it in. “What are you suggesting?”

“If worse comes to worst, you just may have to employ your old snatch-and-run techniques. And bring some friends.”

“Not a problem, Yung.”

The rector smiled, a bit sadly, as he looked around the dark room. “I’ve enjoyed my time here. The Densals were very good to me. I regret having to hand their home over to the Administrators, but—”

Jothan peered around too. “Yung, there really isn’t anything here aside from that rickety table, that thin blanket you sleep on, and a handful of chipped dishes. Besides, the Densals haven’t been here for years.”

“Oh, they’ve been by to visit many times.” Yung’s smiled brightened. “Until tomorrow, then . . . but Jothan—do one more thing for me, please.” He gestured to the ancient stuffed chair. “Take a seat, would you? Just for a moment?”

Jothan shrugged. “All right, but I really need to be leav—”

His sentence was stopped by the enormous cracking sound that deposited the massive man on the floor and surrounded him with splinters of wood, torn cloth, and old gray bits of fluff floating around him.

Yung grinned. “Well done. Now that I don’t even have a chair left, I suppose my time here is finished.”

Two other men sat in the dark office of an unlit building. The sun would soon be rising.

Chairman Mal clenched several papers in his hand, shaking. When

he spoke, his tone could have ripped leather. “So NOW what?!”

Genev took an analytical breath. “Really quite remarkable when you think about it. He’s resigned—*completely* thrown away his career. Unimaginable,” he said with a faraway look in his eyes.

“Apparently *he* imagined it!” Mal bellowed to bring the younger man’s thoughts back to the room. “And he did it!”

Genev shifted in his chair. “It’s nothing out of our control—”

“That’s what my former colleague claimed once about a situation. And then he *lost his life!*”

Genev’s jaw firmed. “Are you threatening me?”

“No!” Mal shouted, waving the papers. “Shin is! He killed Brisack in Moorland!”

The Administrator of Loyalty leaned back, trying to appear confident, but he licked his lips nervously. “What’s he going to do now, really? He has no army to command, so he’s no threat to us—”

“You said you read our previous findings, right?” Mal seethed. “Where in those studies have you ever seen that Perrin Shin and his wife are *not* threats to us? When have they ever acted in a predictable manner? Surprises! Always!”

Genev met Mal’s fiery gaze. “What could he possibly do?”

The Chairman shook his head in disbelief at his new assistant’s ignorance. “Tell me, how many soldiers love Colonel Shin? How many citizens saw that ridiculous play about him? The only village it wasn’t performed in was Edge, yet the reports were that Mountseen was flooded with Edge’s citizens for the four weeks it ran there. There’s only one name more well-known in the world than mine: Perrin Shin. And now he’s supporting his wife’s protests *against* me and the Administrators?” He threw the papers to the ground in disgust.

Genev swallowed.

“I knew Perrin back when he was a student,” Mal continued, struggling to regain composure. “You read about that. He never agreed with my theories or my tactics. Not then, not now. Do you *really* want to know what he could possibly do? The man you replaced promised me I would never again hear the words General Shin or King Perrin. Then he lost his life trying to make that so. You took his place and promised me General Shin would be a good idea. It now seems clear that that is *not* the title he wanted. Would you like to take a guess as to which title he’s going for now?”

The Administrator of Loyalty firmed his position in his chair.

“I assure you, *with my life*, that there will be no King Perrin.”

“Do you swear it with the oath?” asked Mal severely.

Genev sat even taller and more resolute. “With the same oath all Guardians swear allegiance to you: there will be no King Perrin. Nor future King Peto. I swear it with my life.”

Mal leaned back in his chair and exhaled. “I’m satisfied with that answer. Now, what will you do to guarantee your life remains yours?”

Genev thought for a moment, an air of worry about him. “We still hold considerable power over the Shins. The young captain has thickened Mrs. Shin’s file significantly. Nearly every day she’s been teaching the impressionable and troubled youth of Edge contrary to what the Department of Instruction requires. I’ve already drafted the sedition papers, but with her outburst she’s rather convicted herself, hasn’t she?” He ventured a tentative smile.

The Chairman nodded slowly, but his countenance suggested he was waiting for much more.

Genev nodded back and coughed politely. “Then there’s the matter of the letter Captain Thorne found in the colonel’s—I mean, *Mr. Shin’s*—desk, addressed to Zenos. All kinds of implications in that, apparently. So many that he sent a second messenger with news about it. We can certainly find a use for that ‘death letter’ as well. That will be the final blow to Mahrree Shin should everything else somehow fail.”

“Is it still in the captain’s possession?” Mal asked.

“Yes, although I’ve told him it should be sent to us immediately. I mean, the Administrator of Loyalty told him—”

Mal cut him off with an admonishing finger point. “Don’t be sloppy!”

Genev nodded. “Sir, I believe it’s all well within our means to control,” he tried to salvage. “Perrin Shin’s ‘intentions’ must be exposed. After all, it *appears* he may be attempting a takeover of the Administrators,” he implied with raised eyebrows.

“Not bad,” Mal said slowly. “Not a bad spin at all. You just may survive this, Genev. But no allegations must come from either of us, nor from any of the Administrators.”

“No, of course not,” Genev said, not at all certain as to why he agreed.

The Chairman smiled faintly for the first time that early morning. “However, I know who should make the allegations.” He bent over and picked up the papers he’d thrown to the floor. “Captain Thorne’s

urgent message makes some serious allegations. Given to *his father*, I'm sure General Thorne can read between the lines and draw his own conclusions—with a little guidance—about Perrin Shin's future intents."

Genev's shoulders relaxed. "That should make General Thorne much more satisfied with the present situation. That, along with giving him the High Generalship?"

Mal sighed. "Yes, I suppose that must happen now. I'll have to rewrite all the scenarios, toss away all the future questions. I really was looking forward to this, but now?" He shook his head and looked out the dark window. "Perrin, Perrin, you arrogant man. Do you realize how much work I've wasted on you this past year? What insights could have been gained? I barely have time to create new questions before . . ." He looked again at Genev. "Before what? What's going to be tested now?"

His associate shrugged. "I'm not entirely sure yet. Have you considered just watching to see how things play out for a time?"

The Chairman pointed at him. "I leave very little up to chance! Observations should take place under carefully controlled situations. I'm not about to throw away my life's work just because one of my test subjects continues to rebel! No . . . no . . . he's still coming back to Idumea."

Genev smiled thinly again. "It sounds as if you are already planning to execute something. Tell me, how do you recommend we do this, sir?"

"Not *us*," Mal smiled. "This will follow under the jurisdiction of the Administrators. As you mentioned, we have a very thick file waiting to be addressed. We'll soon have an intriguing letter written by Perrin Shin's hand that promises additional treachery . . ." He looked off at the dark windows slowly lightening with the coming dawn. A flurry of ideas passed over his face. Scenarios, possibilities, fingers of blame, outcomes not even considered before . . .

"This may take a little bit of time to massage," he finally continued, interlacing his fingers together.

Genev waited patiently.

"But it'll be worth it. Perhaps our focus should be on the Administrators for a time. Group pressure is also a fascinating process to watch. Given enough arguments, time, and stress even the most resolute and determined man can be made fearful enough to completely reverse his ideals to conform with everyone else. No, I

believe you just may be correct. There is still much under our influence. We are still ultimately in control, aren't we?" With renewed optimism, he bellowed. "Get me General Thorne!"

As the sun rose that morning, a bleary-eyed Captain Thorne stood in the doorway of Zenos's quarters to watch him pack. Thorne hadn't slept at all that night, too engrossed with what he found in Colonel Shin's desk drawer, too caught up with sending messengers to Idumea, and too busy reorganizing the fort.

But he took time to make sure one complication would be eliminated for the next few weeks while everything at the Fort at Edge improved.

"Not taking a uniform?" Thorne said.

"Don't need it where I'm going," Zenos intoned. He shoved his work clothes into his pack and buttoned it. "I'm ready for my good-bye kiss now." He hefted his bag on to his shoulder and smiled frostily at Thorne.

Thorne glowered. "Three weeks you have off, soldier. Remember, I expect you to *enjoy* yourself. Give my regards to your father. Perhaps he'd like to see more of you? Consider a transfer to Flax while you're there. I've already sent a message to the fort to look for you."

"If they can find me, they can talk to me. Good luck, Captain. You're going to need it."

Shem pushed past Thorne and on to the stables. He strode across the compound, several soldiers looking at him in surprise that he wore his worst work shirt and trousers. But Shem didn't notice as he went directly to his horse, which Thorne had already ordered to be saddled. Nearby, Clark snuffed and regarded him with questioning eyes. Shem would have to find a way to get him to the Briters' barn. Clark didn't belong to the fort, but convincing the fort of that when he returned might prove difficult.

Shem mounted and glanced back to see Thorne standing in the compound with his arms folded, waiting. Without a word, Shem kicked the horse and headed out the gates as the sun began to rise.

He slowed the horse to a trot as he approached the Briters' farm, and spotted the soldier hiding in the bushes leading up to their drive. He shook his head in frustration.

"Don't have the baby early, please," he whispered to the quiet

house as he passed. "Take care. I'll be back. I promise."

He continued down the road and turned to the alley that led to the Shins. Another soldier sat in the tree behind their house. Shem groaned quietly as he clucked his horse to walk slowly past so as to not arouse the suspicion of the guard. He looked askance as he passed the house hoping to see some movement inside, but it was quiet as well.

"Probably didn't sleep well last night," he murmured. "I certainly didn't. But if I can't find out what's happening in the fort for you, I can find out something somewhere else. Just lie low. I'll be back," he whispered and hoped the message would somehow reach them.

At the end of the alley he turned his horse back on to the road and kicked it into a gallop.

He had a long way to go. For the first time in his life, Shem Zenos was headed south for his leave.

Chapter 33 ~ “The quieter you both are, the faster all of this will just . . . *go away.*”

Mahrree had been expecting the knock on the door in the morning.

Mr. Hegek smiled painfully, apologetically, when she opened it.

“Mrs. Shin, I’m so sorry to have to do this but I was told that I needed to—” He stopped because Mahrree was already handing him a sheath of papers.

With a kind smile she said, “Last night I made complete records about each student for whomever will be filling in for me during the last few weeks of school. I wasn’t about to get much sleep anyway. I wish you guidance from the Creator, who I still believe in, Mr. Hegek. You’re going to need all the help you can get.”

Mr. Hegek shook his head, his tiny green eyes looking lost and pitiful. “Oh, Mrs. Shin. I feel so awful about this. There’s so much I want to say to you—”

Perrin appeared behind her. “But you’d be safer to say nothing,” he warned.

“Colonel—Gen—I mean, *Mr. Shin*—” Mr. Hegek closed his eyes briefly before saying, with as much warmth as possible, “Thank you. For *everything*. Over the years. *Thank you.*”

He tried to convey so much in those few words, and Mahrree felt it all. She blinked back tears and nodded to him, as did Perrin.

Mr. Hegek nodded back and left with Mahrree’s notes.

Perrin closed the door. “Well, that wasn’t so hard, was it?” He was already wearing The Dinner smile.

Mahrree shrugged. “So why do I feel like I was just kicked out of school?”

“Well then let’s sit down at the table and ‘Consider the effect of our behavior upon our peers!’” Perrin did his best Mr. Hegek impersonation.

Mahrree smiled. “Almost as good as Lannard. You know, I think I might actually miss those boys.”

“It’s just for a little while, Mahrree. Give this some time and everything will calm down. Hegek will be here by the beginning of Harvest Season begging you to return. No one else will put up with those boys.”

“Maybe we should have kept Peto home this morning,” she worried.

“This is all about you and me, remember? Not him. He needs a distraction anyway. I don’t think he knows what to think right now.”

“That makes three of us then, right?”

He pursed his lips. “Now what?”

Mahrree sighed. “Go back upstairs and laze around in bed for the rest of the morning?”

He smiled sadly, until another knock surprised them both. Hesitantly, Perrin opened the door.

Rector Yung stood there with his usual cheerful smile. “Good morning, Mr. and Mrs. Shin!”

A movement on the road caught Perrin’s eye. “Yung, you’re a brave man. As much as I’d like to talk to you, two soldiers have just arrived at the end of the road and are watching. Perhaps you should just leave. I’d hate for anything—”

Rector Yung held up his hand. “And another one followed me here. I care nothing for what they can do to me. If I meet the Creator today or in five years, it doesn’t matter, as long as I complete His errands. I have one more to do today. Shin family, I’m here to bid you farewell.”

“What?” Mahrree exclaimed. “Where are you going?”

“It seems my rectory is needed more by the Administrators than by the citizens of Edge. And, since The Writings have been declared to be mythology and nothing more, there’s no longer a need for Holy Day services,” he said with a pained smile.

“No!” Mahrree cried.

Perrin shook his head in disbelief. “They’re just stopping everything and *taking* it from you?”

“Apparently I haven’t paid certain taxes over the years,” Yung said, “although my records—which they’ve confiscated—say

otherwise. So the Administrators, in their *generous* manner, instead of incarcerating me are allowing me to go on my way provided I hand over the property.”

Mahrree sighed. “This is about last night, isn’t it? Perrin told me what you did for us. You were so brave, and now this is your reward? I am so sorry!”

Rector Yung held up his hand again. “Not at all. Rectories all over the world are being closed. Besides, my main work here is finished, except for one last thing: Perrin, Mahrree—”

It must have been serious. He’d never before called them by their first names.

“Become very, *very* quiet,” he whispered. He stared intently into each of their eyes to see if they received the message.

Mahrree smiled sadly. “Rector Yung, if there’s one thing I want to do now, it’s to never make another peep in this village again.”

He smiled back. “I didn’t mean it as an admonition, Mahrree, but as a recommendation for the future. The quieter you both are, the faster all of this will just . . . *go away*.”

The way he said those two last words added an extra meaning which neither she nor Perrin could quite discern, but they nodded anyway.

Suddenly brighter, Yung said, “Would you please give Peto and the Briters my best wishes? I think this is the only stop I dare to make on my way out of Edge.”

“This is just wrong,” Perrin said. “Where will you go?”

“I have many friends, a few in the same situation as me now. We’ll keep ourselves occupied, I have no doubt. And I also have no doubt we’ll meet again. This is only temporary, I’m sure.”

“Please be careful!” Mahrree squeezed Yung’s arm.

“Of course,” he nodded to them. “You too. I best be going now. The soldiers *get bored easily*.” Again, there was another level of meaning, and that time Mahrree caught on to all he recommended, as did her husband.

Go quiet, bore the soldiers, and they’ll go away.

“Wait,” Perrin said, looking around him. “You don’t have any bags with you.”

“I’ve never been one for many possessions,” he assured them. “And there’s nothing from the world I want to take with me anyway. The aides to the Administrators took my copy of *The Writings*, as I suspect *they’ll take others*—” another hint, “—and recently my chair

broke, so there's really nothing left. Until we meet again, Shins!"

He trotted down the stairs, whistling cheerfully, and headed east.

Perrin closed the door again. "Unbelievable. Are we even in Edge anymore?"

Mahrree wiped her eyes. "He seems to think it's all temporary as well. That's what we have to hope for—that none of this is forever. We need a distraction," she decided.

"So what do we do next?"

"Hide our copy of The Writings, then get to work . . . here?" Mahrree suggested.

Perrin looked around. "Plenty of things around here I've been neglecting. I'll start with the front door here. Feels a little tight. Make me a list and I'll get this house in shape."

"And I'll get to the washing," Mahrree agreed.

It was the strangest of mornings.

Mahrree felt the rhythm of their life had abruptly shifted, as if they no longer knew how to do anything correctly or at the right time. She should have been at school, he at the fort . . .

They might as well have had breakfast for dinner sitting on their front porch wearing their bedclothes while loudly singing Harvest Day songs and snorting like pigs at their neighbors.

Instead, they shared stiff smiles as they passed each other while they halfheartedly completed chores that should have been done on other days.

By late morning Perrin was out in the back garden sanding the new cradle he had been working on for the baby.

Well, perhaps calling it a "cradle" was a bit of a stretch. Since it was a Perrin Shin creation that meant there was nothing dainty or impractical about it; it was a baby bed that could withstand a land tremor strong enough to bring down the house around it, while keeping its occupant secure within its barred sides. Mahrree had never seen a cradle made of full timbers before, but having watched the construction of her bed many years ago, she wasn't surprised to see what wood Perrin requisitioned for his grandchild.

Jaytsy wasn't surprised either, but Deck had stared at the timbers and design in bafflement. Perhaps he fretted about the disposition of his new baby, considering that Perrin felt it required a miniature incarceration chamber, but he knew his father-in-law well enough to not ask. It was sturdy enough to contain even Peto. Perrin had tested that aspect for an hour one evening with his

reluctant son before he began sanding it to make sure tiny fingers received no splinters.

Through the small washroom window Mahrree watched him as she rung out the clothes in the sink. Several times he looked toward Fort Shin, his jaw shifting, his eyes scanning the alleyway. Then he'd look down at the cradle, smile feebly at it, and continue sanding the beefy bars.

She sighed. Maybe if they had had time to prepare, if they could have planned for the change, they wouldn't have left so many loose ends at the fort and the school that others needed to tie up.

But Perrin's resignation was the right decision. They'd spent half the night discussing it, and both felt a release of pressure and weight. But now she would have appreciated a little of that weight back. She felt as if they were floating aimlessly, tied to nothing and not knowing where they would end up.

Mahrree smiled as The Cat rub up against Perrin's leg. He bent down to scratch his ears for a moment before staring at the dirt.

She remembered once when Peto became separated from her at the market when he was three. When she finally found him he wasn't panicked or crying, just a little sad. There was a hint of that look in Perrin's eyes today.

"Dear Creator," she whispered, "what can he do now? The fort was such a large part of his life. Please help him find his way. Help him find a new purpose. And please help us get out of this mess I created."

By midday meal Perrin had finished the cradle and shored up the wobbly fence posts. He absent-mindedly ate his food, but a few times he sent The Dinner smile to Mahrree.

"This is nice, isn't it?" he said, not believing a word of it.

"It certainly is!" Mahrree agreed with just as much conviction. "I'm sure Deck could use some help this afternoon," she hinted.

He nodded. "I'd thought of that. The cattle should be in the pasture by now so they won't stampede at the sight of me. He had some leaks in the barn roof I could take care of. Always wanted to be builder, right? Today's my day to see if that's my new calling."

Mahrree nodded back. "When do you think Shem's due back?"

Perrin sighed. "Three weeks he has off. No way Thorne would let him stay now. Much easier for him to do whatever he's planning without Zenos breathing down his neck."

It was what the young captain might be planning that had Mahrree concerned. "Do you think Shem could get us a message, to tell us

what's happening?"

"How? He's not going to know what's going on."

Mahrree squirmed. "Perrin, I'm worried. I know you said probably nothing is coming at us, but I wished I knew for sure. Maybe we could send a message to Karna or Yordin or Fadh—"

"How?" Perrin said again. "Any mail I send by the regular messengers will undoubtedly be checked. I don't have soldiers at my disposal anymore. I don't even have Clark. He's in the stables of the fort. I don't dare go up there to retrieve him, and I'm not entirely sure if he's my horse or the fort's."

"Maybe the other commanders will send us a message?"

Perrin bobbed his head. "Once they hear about what happened I imagine we may get something. Probably opened and read. We should lie low and quiet, as Yung suggested, and be model citizens, then . . . we'll see what's next. All right?"

She nodded miserably.

He stood up, leaned over the table, and kissed her. "It will get better, I promise."

She sat up tall and produced her fearless face, which she'd become good at pulling out over the years. "I'm married to the most wonderful man in the world. How could my life be any better?"

He straightened up and studied her. "Have I ever told you that you are the perfect woman, and that I love and adore you more than words can express?"

She grinned. "Yes, you have. Every day!"

He kissed her again. "I'll be home by dinner. I can promise *that*."

Perrin hopped over the fence into the alley. "I'm going over to my son-in-law's house," he said loudly, "to work on his barn. I'll be home by dinner. I'm sure the soldier hiding in *his* foliage will keep a good enough watch on me. You have permission to take a nap."

"Thank you, sir!" the voice in the tree above him said. It was followed by a groan and the sound of a hand smacking a forehead.

Perrin chuckled as he walked down the alley. "And later," he murmured to himself, "I think I'll learn how to chop down some trees. The wood pile's looking a little low."

He turned from the alley on to the main road that led to the fort. For a moment he considered trying not to see it, although once he passed the last row of houses, nothing else would be in his view other than Deckett and Jaytsy's place. But as soon as he stepped on the road he analyzed the fort objectively.

It was made of wood. It had walls. And soldiers. And horses. Weapons. Paperwork. Supply lists. Regulations. Duty Rosters. Training schedules. Messages from Idumea. Reports. More reports. Reports of reports.

And none of it, absolutely *none* of it, was his responsibility.

A smile crept around his mouth. He let it grow.

Not *his* responsibility.

He chuckled.

That was quite a liberating feeling. He took in a deep breath and smelled, perhaps for the first time ever, the dirt of Deck's farm as he approached it. Every morning for the past nineteen years at this point in his walk to the fort he had been mentally listing his duties for the day. He couldn't remember if he had ever actually smelled the dark earth before. It was welcoming, interesting, new. Something for him to explore.

Explore.

The word sat in his mind, rapidly growing, until it filled every crevice. Exciting possibilities grew with it. *Explore . . .*

His fantasy was interrupted by a group of six soldiers approaching him on their way into the village. The first test, he thought. Feeling a familiar twitch in his arm he knew he'd be fighting for a long time, he shoved his saluting hand into his trouser's pocket.

As the soldiers neared they recognized the man in the rough spun brown shirt and worn black trousers. Three automatically saluted. Two others began but then stopped, their arms bouncing absurdly up and down near their foreheads, unsure of what to do next. The last soldier merely nodded and bit his lip.

Perrin nodded back. "Gentlemen. Good day," he said genially as he passed. His right arm flinched, desperately wanting to salute back. He did, however, allow his index finger to do a miniature salute in the safety of his pocket.

This was going to be harder than he thought.

Another group of soldiers now came his way, at least a dozen. Several of them recognized him and their eyes flashed in alarm.

I should get a hat, Perrin considered. Something straw or felt with

a wide brim like Deckett's that shields my face from the sun. Maybe let my hair grow out a bit. No need to keep it above my ears and collar anymore. Could even try growing a beard for once. Mahrree would probably hate it, though.

Two soldiers stopped in their tracks, looking at each other in concern. Another broke off from the group and went across the road, and two more followed him, averting their eyes so as to not see their former colonel. The rest continued in their walk to him, some still not recognizing who he was.

Perrin kept his hand firmly planted in his trousers. Fortunately the dirt drive to Deck's was coming up. He raised his left hand in a wave to the approaching soldiers, then cut abruptly through Deck's field.

Perrin marched—*strolled*—to the Briter home. The fort was out of his view, as well as everything else attached to it. All that filled his sight now was the house, the fields, and the barn that he'd work on this afternoon. He could leave everything else behind, as simply as that. Just change his pace, find a new target, and head toward it. This wasn't going to be so hard—

A voice from the group of soldiers trailed after him. "Sir! Good-bye. And thank you, sir. For everything."

It was Jon Offra.

The Briter house in front of Perrin became blurry and he felt the need to clear his throat. He sniffed and slowed in his gait for just a moment. But he didn't turn around. He couldn't.

This was going to be harder than he thought.

Hew Gleace paced back and forth in his office while the man in green and brown clothing stood by patiently.

"I don't believe it . . . He resigned!" the elderly man whispered in amazement. "Just up and . . . resigned!"

The man in mottled clothing cleared his throat. "Rumor is he was to have been the new High General."

Gleace stopped and pivoted. His mouth was open, his eyes shiny, and his breathing paused. "That's it then, isn't it. The confirmation. *The highest rank!*" He whispered the last words and looked up at the planked ceiling. "This is it."

The man smiled. "We thought you'd appreciate that."

Gleace sat down, then promptly stood back up as anxious energy propelled him now to pace in a circle. “Not that I ever doubted, especially after Tuma Hifadhi declared it, but . . .” He looked up again. “Oh, Tuma—if only you could see this day! But I have a feeling you are anyway.”

His audience chuckled and Hew Gleace grinned at the scout. “So where’s Shem?”

The man’s eyebrows went up. “He hasn’t reported in?”

“No, he was due back for—” Gleace stopped, the joyous expression on his face fading into dread. “What’s he up to?”

The man shrugged. “I thought he was already here, helping—”

Gleace sat down worriedly. “Oh, he’s helping. Helping in ways that may prove very dangerous to him and everyone else. Oh, Shem.” The older man massaged his eyes. “The worst part is, someone’s going to have to tell his father he’s not coming home tonight.”

The younger man smiled sadly as Gleace opened his eyes again. There was simply too much excitement in the news of the day to keep Hew down for long. “Well, nothing for it, then. We have a great deal of work to do. Did you notify—”

“Everyone? Yes. They’ll be at your briefing this afternoon.”

Gleace rubbed his hands in anticipation. “I’ll put some people to work on the findings Mrs. Braxhicks gave you. We need to fully understand what they think they now understand. But for now, the big question is the Shins.”

“So how will it happen?”

Gleace’s eyebrows furrowed in new worry. “That’s what we have to work out. It’ll be like smuggling an elephant through a Holy Day service. How do you move something so obvious without anyone noticing?”

The man in mottled clothing frowned. “I don’t think you can.”

“No, we can’t,” Gleace agreed. “There’ll be a mess—we’ve always known there would be—and we’ll have to figure out how to clean it up, too.”

The man sighed. “Glad I’m not on the planning committee.”

“Then again,” Gleace said thoughtfully, “if we’re the one *making* the mess, we’ll know exactly what to clean . . .”

The man shrugged at that, not yet following his meaning. “Any recommendations for me to send in the meantime?”

Gleace rubbed his chin. “They have to become quiet. *Very* quiet.”

“Hifadhi said that’s the advice your brother-in-law was hoping to

deliver to them. He'll be on his way out soon. All rectors are being expelled from the world."

Gleace stared out the window as if he could already see Yung. "As I'd expect. This will be unlike anything we've ever done before. Tuma and I discussed it, many times."

He glanced upwards as if his old mentor sat in the rafters.

"There's still no other option, is there, Tuma?" Hew said to the ceiling. "After all these years, it remains the only one."

The man standing behind him shifted nervously. "If I may ask, what's that only option?"

Gleace watched out the window again. "There's no way to make the most well-known family in the world simply vanish. No, it looks like we're going to have to kill them."

The man gasped. "Kill them?!"

Gleace turned to him and grinned.

"Just like we killed Guide Pax."

As Mahrree hung out the wash to dry on the line in the back garden she felt someone watching her. Surely someone would be. Perrin had warned her last night that they'd be under guard until Thorne lost interest or the Administrators had made a decision as to what to do next. Mahrree subtly looked around her to discover where the soldier may be lurking. Possibly the bushes or in the maple tree that spanned the alley behind the house. Well she wasn't doing anything wrong. She was only hanging out the clothes. He was more than welcome to help.

She chuckled miserably as she picked up the empty basket. Seeing Mrs. Hersh in her back garden, Mahrree waved. But Mrs. Hersh's eyes bulged and she rushed into her house.

Mahrree frowned. "Hmm," she said. She walked back to the house and looked through the window at her neighbor.

Mrs. Hersh was carefully creeping back out, watching Mahrree's back porch door for movement.

"Hmm," she said to The Cat who had followed her in. "I hadn't quite anticipated *that*. What do you think she's been told?"

Hearing footsteps in the back garden, Mahrree turned to see Peto coming up the back stairs and open the door with a flourish.

Mrs. Hersh rushed back into her house, shielding her view of

the Shins.

Peto didn't notice, but held out his arms wide. "I've learned all that I can learn in the Administrators' School," he announced with feigned pride. "This notice," he produced an official piece of parchment from his pocket, "informs you and Father that I no longer need to attend. Isn't that wonderful?" He batted his eyelids.

Mahrree pursed her lips as she took the notice dated that morning. "Well son, I couldn't be more proud," she said with just as much enthusiasm. "It looks like you're an outcast in Edge as well. I'm sorry, Peto. Your father's at Deck's. I'm sure he'll be pleased with your expulsion."

He took the parchment and dropped the meaningless notice on the floor. "Mother," Peto said, putting his hand on her shoulder, "all I can say is, why didn't you get angry in public earlier? I'm missing only the last few weeks of school. Had you done this seasons ago, I could have been really enjoying myself!"

"Thanks," she whispered and gave him a quick kiss on the cheek. "Now go to Deck and Jaytsy's and get to work!" she ordered him.

He started to salute her, but dropped his arm and shook his head in self admonishment. This was going to take some time.

Mahrree tried to feel badly about his expulsion. But she couldn't. She wondered why she had sent him to school that morning at all.

Peto changed into his work clothes, ducked out of the back door, smirked that Mrs. Hersh ran back into her house *again*, and headed around to the front yard. He pulled the cotton bag of peach pits from his pocket and analyzed the hole his mother had hacked in the front garden.

A little too close to the house maybe. And a little too deep. Remarkable how much damage she did to the front yard with only Grandmother Peto's fancy fork. It was still lying there, bent and dirty and startled.

He'd been thinking about this all evening and morning, and still wasn't sure what the peach pits meant, but maybe this was something. He dropped to his knees and poured out the six pits into the hole. Then, knowing that was about five pits too many, he fished the extras out and slipped them back into the bag. They'd go somewhere else. He just didn't know where in the world that could be, though.

With the damaged fork he scooped some of the dirt over the pit, but left a good amount of hole so that his mother wouldn't know what was in there. He had no reason as to why *not* to tell her about the peach pits, it's just that . . . well, he didn't know much of anything about anything at all anymore and . . .

And *that's* why they let him leave school, he chuckled to himself on the way to the Briters' farm.



Perrin and Peto left from the Briters a little before dinner time. Despite everything, Perrin was smiling.

He had plans.

In the mornings he and Peto would help Deck with his chores and the cattle, and in the afternoons the young men would retreat to the privacy of the barn to undergo Perrin's new training regime. The first lesson tomorrow would be, "How to Hold Weapon as It Was Intended," followed by "How to Move Faster Than Perrin." He was also bringing home a gift for Mahrree: some of the Briters' old gardening tools.

As they turned down the alley to their home, Peto murmured to his father. "Looks different than the one earlier today."

Perrin nodded. As they neared the house, Perrin cleared his throat. "Well, Peto, tomorrow we best get to work on the wasps in the maples. Last I saw they were building a new nest about five branches up." They hopped over the fence and up to the back porch.

Shortly after Perrin shut the door, a blue uniformed young man fell out of the tree, frantically brushing off nothing from his clothes.

In the kitchen Perrin groaned in disappointment as he watched the panicked soldier. "I was really hoping it was Thorne. Maybe next time."

"Perrin, you're terrible," Mahrree chided without meaning it. "What are you holding?"

He grinned and held out the shovel, hoe, and rake. "I understand you started to work on the front yard last night. Perhaps, with all our free time, you want to do the job properly."

Mahrree took the tools. "Maybe I *do* like gardening."

Perrin's grin faded. "There's also this," he said grimly as he

pulled a piece of paper from his pocket—an official notice, ripped from the message board closest to their house.

“That may explain a few things,” Mahrree said as she took it. She glanced at the first line. “Interesting take on the events, though.”

“Politics,” Peto said dully.

“You’ve learned a lot about that lately, haven’t you?” Perrin said.

Peto scoffed. “More than I’d learn in school! I need to wash up. Farms are dirty places, and smelly. But not as disgusting as that,” he gestured to the notice before he went to the washroom.

Mahrree sat down on the kitchen chair and read. “‘*By order of the Army of Idumea*, Perrin Shin is no longer commander of the army presence in Edge. He is, for all intents and purposes, as well as according to all considerations and procedures—’” She paused to scowl. “What does that mean?”

Perrin shrugged. “It means that Thorne, Kori, and Genev’s assistant have been practicing their Idumea-speak.”

Mahrree shook her head. “‘He is blah, blah, blah, a regular citizen of Edge and is to be considered as such.’” She rolled her eyes. “So ‘He resigned’ is too few words, and too accurate?”

He smiled painfully and shrugged again. “There’s more.”

Mahrree looked back at the notice and her mouth dropped open. “What does *this* mean? ‘Mahrree Shin, despite her behavior, is also to be continued to be afforded all rights and privileges as a citizen of Edge.’ Well what else would I be ‘afforded’?” She gasped in panic. “Perrin, why did they have to write this?”

He knelt down in front of her and took her arms. “Calm down. Slow breaths. It means nothing.”

“How can you say that?!” she panted, ignoring his advice.

He pushed a stray lock of hair behind her ear. “Deck talked to Chief Bernie after we saw the notice go up. There are a few Edgers upset right now. Apparently . . .” Perrin paused to find the right words, and she knew what was coming next would be awful, “some people went to him insisting that you should be incarcerated—”

Mahrree felt nauseated.

“—for your outburst. They thought you were debating and felt you showed extreme disrespect to the Administrators and to me.”

She closed her eyes and hid her face with her hands. All she could say was the phrase she repeated so often. “I’m so sorr—”

“No, no, no! There’s nothing to be sorry about! You said what needed to be said. Maybe a little *loudly*,” he cocked his head. “News

should have reached Idumea by now. I wished Shem was still here. I was really hoping we would hear from him before he left, but with the house being watched—”

“What about Deck’s place?” Mahrree suggested. “Couldn’t he go there?”

“Thorne has it guarded too. Another tree I may need to take down,” he said more to himself. “I don’t know how Shem could reach us, at least not until all of this calms down a bit. Uh, Mahrree,” he pointed to the notice, “you need to continue reading.” He cringed, waiting for the rest of her reaction which would be coming in about five seconds, four, three, two . . .

Mahrree slapped the notice. “What’s this? ‘During this time of adjustment for the Shin family, all residents of Edge are recommended to *not interact* with Perrin, Mahrree, or Peto Shin until all considerations and concerns have been addressed’? So, so . . . we have no more friends?! No one who can contact us?” Panicked heat welled in her chest. “What concerns? When will that be? Perrin!” Her shoulders heaved and the tears came in a great wave. “What have I done to this family?” she choked out between sobs.

He pulled her head to rest on his shoulder and kissed her cheek. Before he could answer her, his son did.

“*You’ve* done nothing to this family, Mother,” Peto said, standing at the door with fury in his pale eyes. “It’s *them*. They’ve ruined everything. Again.”

His father shot him a glance of both approval and warning.

“And don’t say you’re sorry again, Mother. I know.” Peto said wearily and sat down in the other kitchen chair. “So now what? The Hero of Edge is to be shunned, as well as his wife and son. Any new plans, Father?”

“Well,” Perrin started slowly, “actually, yes. First we need to make some new dreams, ones that no one here can thwart or interfere with. That will take a little time. So what we do next is, we don’t worry about the notice, don’t worry about anyone or anything in Edge, except for Jaytsy, Deckett, and the baby. Their farm and their family is our focus for now. I predict that by the end of Planting Season we’ll know exactly what we’ll do next. And when we look back we’ll remember this time with fondness, because it will mark the beginning of our new lives which will be better than what we left. I promise.”

“Nice speech,” Peto smirked. “So how long have you been practicing that?”

“Actually, I was planning to use it on your mother. Did you catch it all, Mahrree?”

She chuckled and wiped her face. “Yes, I did. And I think you’re right.”

“Of course I’m right! I’m always right,” insisted Perrin.

Peto rolled his eyes. “Always right?”

“Absolutely!” Perrin said. “Now, I was also planning, after that speech to your mother which became *your* speech, to do something else.”

Peto’s eyes widened. “Don’t you dare!”

Despite his son scrambling away, Perrin caught and kissed him on the cheek.

“Ugh!” Peto yelled, wiping his face with dramatic revulsion.

Perrin chuckled. “Now be grateful. On your mother it would have been the lips. And that’s why you need to learn to be faster than me. Your attempts this afternoon were dismal. Deck’s cows are quicker than you. You should have seen what was coming.”

“How could I have seen *that*?” Peto rubbed his cheek to make sure nothing remained.

Perrin scowled. “Boy, how long have you lived with me? What do I usually do with your mother in front of you? You whine about it nearly every day. I even gave you a warning! You need to learn to anticipate and prepare. You did that on the kickball field, now do that in your life.”

“Kick a ball at me, you’ll see me anticipated and prepared!”

“So pretend that ball is an arrow.”

Peto scoffed. “No one can prepare for an arrow.”

“Learn to estimate where it’s coming from, its trajectory, the wind—you can. And you must. We don’t know who we can trust anymore.”

Peto sighed. “All right.” He stood at sloppy attention. “I will subject myself to your training, sir. But on one condition.”

“And what is that?”

“So that I can see how to dodge the arrow appropriately, I need a demonstration. I get to shoot at you first.”

That evening after dinner a subdued yet still trying to be hopeful

Mahrree headed over to Jaytsy's.

Yet as she stepped out into the alley, she couldn't help herself. "My goodness. Someone left a long knife under that bush. What would Captain Thorne think? Tsk-tsk."

After she passed the bush, she ducked behind a fence and peered down the alley. A hand reached out blindly from one bush to pat the empty ground underneath another. It was amazing Perrin had as much success as he did with those boys.

Her fleeting amusement came to an end as she turned to head north. She hadn't realized, but should have, that she was now walking to the fort. A lump filled her throat. She had no reason to go there ever again. It's not that she ever *loved* it, but the fort was a symbol of her husband. And now it felt like it had betrayed her by betraying him. True, he left it. But it forced him to.

It took her a moment to notice that soldiers were crossing the road to avoid her. The same young men who cheerfully greeted her, tipped their caps, and even playfully saluted at times now ignored her.

It's all right, she told herself. It's all right. They aren't our sons. They never were. They belong to the Administrators. The only thing those silly men in red no longer own is Perrin.

That put a smile on her face. He was his own man now. A little lost for the time being, and refusing to elaborate on his new "plan" just yet, but still his own man.

She turned to her daughter's home and noticed the perfectly straight rows beginning to sprout. Thank goodness Jaytsy and Deckett weren't on the notice. When it was time to weed this enormous farm they'd need help. Jaytsy would be busy nursing an infant. Mahrree could help, so could Peto and Perrin—

She shook her head. Perrin weeding a farm. She laughed lightly at the idea. The one-time future High General of Idumea on his knees in rows of cucumbers.

Did cucumbers even grow in rows?

"We have a lot to learn, don't we?" she muttered as she came to her daughter's kitchen door.

Deck opened the door for her. "Come to get the seeds, have you?" he said too loudly.

Mahrree patted his arm. "The soldier's in the thick bushes by the fence, probably so he can see both doors. He's out of earshot."

"I'm not really used to all of this," Deck apologized as he let Mahrree into the house. "This sneaking around."

“Remember, Deck—you’re not sneaking,” she said. “They are. None of us is doing anything wrong. Their jobs are incredibly dull, and if Jaytsy has any rotten food that the hog won’t eat, I can toss it out on my way home by the fence.”

Jaytsy came to the kitchen holding a small basket. “There’s a sample of everything we had left. And in this envelope are mystery seeds from Mrs. Briter’s collection that neither of us can identify.”

“Good,” Mahrree said, taking the basket. “It’ll be a surprise. I’m rather used to surprises by now. Bring me more!”

Jaytsy giggled. “You really are behind the times, Mother. Everyone is now Idumean-ing their gardens with turf and rock, but *you* have now decided to plant a garden.”

“I’m not behind the times, Jaytsy. I’m just finally catching on. The Creator said we should till and plant in the world, so that’s what I’m finally going to do.” She peered into the basket. “Um, Deck, Jayts—how do you know which side of the seed should point up?”

Hmph! she thought as she left their house a few minutes later—her daughter giggling so hard she had to run to relieve herself and her son-in-law literally rolling on the floor—*I don’t know why they never answer that question.*

Chapter 34 ~ “This has always been such a nice village—”

The very next morning Mahrree attempted to take out the weeds in the front garden. After half an hour she sent Peto to get Deck’s plow to churn it all up. His ox wouldn’t fit in the small yard, but his largest goat proved to be powerful enough to till the whole yard.

Peto sat on the front steps and offered advice only an almost-seventeen-year-old could.

“Are you sure you don’t want to just rock the whole thing like the Hershes did, and place one little flower in a pot on top of a big boulder? I’m afraid this dirt won’t know what to do with seeds. It’s too old and has never had anything purposely placed in it. Ooh, careful what you grab, Mother. I don’t think that’s really the *front* of the goat—”

That’s when Perrin dragged him over to the Briters, because Mahrree was coming after her son intending to use a hoe on him in a way no hoe was ever intended to be used. It was bad enough the goat was giving her a hard time.

By that afternoon she had churned up the yard and made a sizable stack of rocks along the fence. She wondered if everyone in the neighborhood and dumped their rocks in her garden over the years. But it wasn’t as if she could’ve asked anyone about that.

Poor Mrs. Hersh kept watching Mahrree out of her front window, probably waiting for a break to go to the markets without having to speak to her. Passing neighbors crossed to the other side of the road and never looked in her direction.

Mahrree did her best to not look at them, either. It was as if there

were an invisible barrier around their property. That's fine, she told herself. No one can throw in any more rocks and no more sheep would nibble . . . whatever it was she was about to plant.

By evening she was thoroughly exhausted but wanted to have something to show for her day's labor instead of just wobbly rows of uneven grooves in the dirt. She took the envelope of mystery seeds and scattered them in a square section she designated as The Surprise Garden in the middle of the yard.

"All right, Mrs. Briters, both older and younger: I hope you're proud of me." She smoothed the dirt over the seeds and sat down beside them. Her yard didn't look any different than it had a few minutes ago, but Mahrree knew it was. Something was hiding, waiting to burst open, beautiful and amazing. It was going to take time, and Mahrree had all the time in the world now.

When Perrin came home he evaluated the front garden. "Well, it's *different*," was all he could come up with. "Any messages?"

"No. I was out here all day, too, watching."

Perrin sighed. "The road to the fort was rather quiet today. No Administrative or fort messengers. I was hoping maybe something might come from Brillen—" Discouragement clouded his eyes.

"Who knows what they were told, Perrin," she reminded him. "Edgers were told the army took away your command. What news was sent to Brillen, Graeson, and Gari?"

"True, true. They'll have only Thorne's version. But they should know me well enough to realize that . . . Well, doesn't matter anymore," he lied.

There were no messages or even contact with anyone the next day, either. Or the next.

But that would change, because Mahrree had to go to the market.

Jaytsy volunteered to go with her. "At least people are allowed to talk to me."

At the market Mahrree expected the worst, and both her and her daughter got it. People barely dared look at them.

At the baker's Mahrree realized just how drastically her world had changed. As she and Jaytsy entered the shop immediately three women turned and left, leaving them alone with the baker's daughter, a woman in her thirties who shifted anxiously behind the counter.

Mahrree put on her best smile. "My usual today, Bettie. And the same for Jaytsy, please." She started to fish bits of silver out of her pocket and didn't notice Bettie setting a sign up on the counter.

“What’s that?” Jaytsy snapped, and Mahrree looked up.

Closed for midday meal.

“You took your midday meal two hours ago!” Jaytsy sneered.

Bettie shrugged and glanced behind her to the ovens. That must have been a cue because a voice came, sounding stiff and rehearsed. “Bettie? Time for midday meal. Sorry it’s late today. Come *right now*.”

Jaytsy scoffed, but Mahrree said, “So I see how it will be. I still need my regular order, though. Are you above taking my silver?”

Bettie, still refusing to open her mouth, shrugged again. Her eyes darted all over the bakery, and even to the windows where other customers were waiting, refusing to come in.

“Look,” Mahrree said, “taking my silver doesn’t mean you’re violating any orders. Look around! There’s not even anyone to report us. No official has followed us, and I *know* when I’m being followed. Just give me our loaves, take my silver, and you’ll have done nothing wrong.”

“Bettie!” came the voice from the back more urgently. “Midday meal is getting COLD!”

“Just go,” Mahrree sighed. “I’ll help myself and I’ll leave our pay on the counter, all right?”

Bettie’s shoulders got a workout that day as she shrugged again, sent an apologetic look to Jaytsy, and scurried to the back room.

“Unbelievable!” Jaytsy declared as Mahrree gingerly made her way around the counter. She slapped the slip of silver loudly on the counter to make sure those whispering in the back heard it.

“They’re just scared, Jayts,” Mahrree said as she pulled the warm loaves off the shelves and put them in her cotton bag.

“She could have talked to me, at least! No, Mother. These people WANT TO BE COWARDS!” She shouted the last words, and spun to turn to send a severe look at the windows.

Those waiting there suddenly became interested in something on the road before them.

“It’s as if these people *want* to avoid us. After all you and Father have done for them!”

“Jayts, please,” Mahrree said as she finished filling her daughter’s bag with a week’s worth of bread. “I think your condition is making you brasher, which isn’t necessary or wise right now.” She reached into her pocket and slapped a second slip of silver on the counter. “A little extra for your troubles,” she called to the oven room. She came back around the counter and handed Jaytsy’s bag

to her.

“I feel like a thief,” she mumbled.

“Thieves don’t pay TWICE AS MUCH for tasteless bread than it’s worth,” called Jaytsy loudly.

“Please, let’s just go,” Mahrree said, feeling as if she’d been stabbed in the chest. She knew people wouldn’t feel free to talk with her. She’d seen them skittishly rushing past their home for the past several days. But she thought the same easy conversations she’d had for decades in the shops wouldn’t change. Maybe people would be a bit quieter, or give her a quick smile of reassurance as they wrapped up her plucked chicken, but this—*this* was unlike anything she expected.

All Mahrree did was stand up and bellow to Edge, just as she had done years ago. She was merely spouting off again—

But this time had been different. She’d made missteps in the past, but this was clearly a miss of enormous proportions. A mis-leap off the edge of the world.

She blinked rapidly as she opened the door for her and Jaytsy to head for home.

Jaytsy noticed her fighting back the tears. “Forget them, Mother. They don’t deserve you,” she said as they stood on the side of road to rearrange their bags. The market was bustling in the early afternoon, and all of it tried to bustle in the opposite direction of Mrs. Shin and Mrs. Briter.

“I guess I’m just surprised,” Mahrree murmured as another two women whose children she used to teach took a circular route around her. “This has always been such a nice village—”

“A *nice* village?!” Jaytsy nearly wailed.

A dozen people trying to get around them moved even faster.

Mahrree stared at her daughter in surprise.

“A nice village!” Jaytsy announced sarcastically, glaring at a few more dozen who stopped in their tracks to see what Shin was erupting this time.

“That’s what my mother just declared: Edge has always been such a nice village. And I wonder,” Jaytsy said, her voice booming as far as her father’s as she addressed everyone who had ears, “exactly what village is Mahrree Shin remembering?”

People leaked out of market fronts to cluster in whispering groups.

Now Mahrree knew how her family must have felt when she stood up at the amphitheater: complete dread.

“Jaytsy, I really don’t think—”

Mrs. Briter gently but firmly brushed her mother’s hand away. “Surely Mahrree Shin remembers this village *before* it turned on itself to steal goods from those who died from the pox! Surely she remembers a village that appreciated its commander—”

Mahrree bit her lower lip and took a step back from her daughter. She’d seen that look before, in Perrin’s face. Jaytsy Shin Briter had something to say, and everyone was going to hear it.

Mahrree hadn’t realized before how much Jaytsy favored Perrin. Her dark brown eyes were wide with fury and her voice developed an authoritative quality that insisted everyone stop what they were doing and *listen*. Jaytsy carried the blood of the greatest officers the world had ever seen. Couple that with the fact that the generals’ descendant was also in the throes of expecting a baby, and it was a very dangerous combination indeed.

Mahrree took another protective step back. “Oh, dear . . .”

“—A commander who, on more occasions than you will ever know, put his life on the line to defend each one of you!” Jaytsy bellowed to the rapt and growing audience.

A few women broke away from the crowd and trotted purposefully down an alley.

Mahrree noticed but Jaytsy didn’t, or she didn’t care.

“And this is how you repay the Shins for their years of sacrifice and dedication? By ignoring them? Shunning them? If Perrin Shin *chooses to resign* from the army because twenty-five years of risking his life is enough, then this *nice village* should be throwing him a celebration of thanks! They should be lining up to shake his hand for the many sleepless nights and bloodied blades and terrors he faced for them! They should be hugging his wife who tolerated their rotten sons and taught them when no one else in the village wanted anything to do with them! A nice village? I’m looking but I’m *just . . . not . . . seeing . . . it!*”

Mahrree’s fists were clutched near her face in nervous fascination. Jaytsy would have been marvelous on the platform, Mahrree thought fleetingly. But right now, right here, was not good.

In her peripheral vision Mahrree kept an eye on the growing crowd that was stunned silent. Villagers had subtly rearranged themselves, men in some groups, women in others. A few more women had slinked away and now Mahrree saw why: Chief Bernie was being reluctantly led to the market by a gaggle of outraged women.

Interestingly, none of the men had run to report on a disturbance in the market, likely because they knew of Jaytsy's condition too well. None of those men wanted to be on the receiving side of a female version of Perrin Shin coupled with the fervor of a soon-to-be-mother.

Now Jaytsy was shouting about cowardice, and a few more men hugged tighter to the buildings behind them.

"Edgers never had to be brave!" Jaytsy continued, turning in place to address several hundred people now in a full circle and a safe distance away from her. "You know why? You counted on Perrin Shin to face the dangers for you! Only a handful of Edgers ever joined the army here, hoping instead that others would come save you. And Perrin and Mahrree Shin did exactly that! When this village was starving, my parents risked everything in the world just to bring you wheat and dried beef. We were attacked on the road! My grandparents were later killed!

"And what did this *nice village* do when Perrin Shin suffered? When his wife had to struggle with a traumatized man? When his children were terrified to stay in their home? Why, this *nice village* talked about the Shin family behind their backs! Oh, don't look so surprised. I heard the rumors. You really think we didn't know? Did you ever come by and ask how you could help? Did you ever lend a shoulder for any of us to cry on? Not that I remember! We recovered without the help of this *nice village*."

"And then Perrin Shin violated his probation and every rule in the army book to attack the Guarders in Moorland. Have you been threatened lately? I didn't think so! Your greatest enemy blown out of the world by my father! My parents have changed your entire village for the better. But when they have a personal crisis, when the world turns on them, where is this *nice village*? The Creator knows I certainly don't see one. I see selfish cowards—all of you!"

Mahrree exhaled, realizing she'd been holding her breath for far too long.

Barnie and the cluster of women had stopped at the perimeter of the circle to hear Jaytsy's tirade. One woman was frantically taking notes.

Mahrree stepped up to her daughter and gently took her arm. "Jaytsy, well said. I think you're done—"

Mrs. Briter's chest heaved furiously as she turned her glare on Chief Barnie. Two women were pushing him into the open space, and

his stuttering steps made it obvious he would rather have been anywhere else in the world right then.

“Mrs. Briter?” He cleared his throat and firmed his stance.

Jaytsy folded her arms defiantly in a Perrin-like manner, and Mahrree massaged her cheeks. If she weren’t so worried as to what might happen next she would’ve been bursting with pride.

“Yes?” Jaytsy said with so much malice that Mahrree marveled how Bernie still stood erect.

“Do we have a problem?” Bernie timidly asked.

“She’s debating!” a woman shouted from the concealing safety of the crowd. “There’s laws against that!”

Edgers erupted into whispered discussions, and Mahrree saw the groups of men try to blend into each other to keep from being an obvious target.

The women, however, were far less protective. Anyone who thought women were softer, or calmer, or gentler had obviously never visited Edge: home of vindictive females.

Edge didn’t seem to be such a nice village anymore.

Mahrree watched her daughter, praying her response would be appropriate.

Jaytsy’s hands moved to her hips. “A debate?” she shouted. “Bernie, do you see anyone challenging me? Talking back?”

The crowd couldn’t get any flatter as Bernie obediently glanced around. He shook his head.

“That’s right. Two people are needed for a debate. I’m just . . . delivering a free history lesson!”

That did it. Mahrree couldn’t hold it in anymore. She burst into a grin which she quickly covered with her hand.

None of the villagers dared move a muscle. Even the angry knot of women glanced at each other hoping one of them could think of what to say next.

“Now,” Jaytsy began as she bent down to pick up her bread bag from the ground. She didn’t move like an expecting woman but more like a general retrieving his dropped sword. “My mother and I will be shopping here twice a week when the shops open, and if anyone here has a problem with that, I suggest you arrive *after* we leave. Mother? We need to start dinner.”

And Mrs. Briter marched briskly away. The crowd was so eager to separate for her to pass that a few feet were trampled on.

Mrs. Shin followed quickly, trying to keep down her smile of pride until they passed the last of the stunned shoppers.

Perrin stared at his daughter. “I’m delivering a history lesson? You really said that?”

“Shouted, actually.” Jaytsy sat proudly at the table sorting dried beans with an air of well-deserved superiority.

Deck shook his head while Peto burst out laughing.

Mahrree hadn’t stopped beaming since they left the market. “They were stunned silent! No one dared follow us home.”

Perrin sat down slowly next to Jaytsy. “I don’t know whether to congratulate you or berate you for throwing yourself into the same pit as the rest of us. You realize what you’ve done, don’t you?”

She stopped sorting to face him. “I stood up for my family when no one else would. I said what people needed to hear—”

“And the way this village gossips, it’s been heard by everyone by now!” Peto grinned.

Deck exhaled worriedly.

“But Jayts,” Perrin continued, “not to discount your remarkable defense of our family, you may have done all of us more harm than good. If you think Genev’s not going to add you and Deck to the shunned list, I have to tell you—”

“I don’t care!” Jaytsy declared. “I belong with you on that list.”

“But does your husband?” Perrin gestured to Deck.

Deck nodded. “Wherever Jaytsy belongs, I belong.”

Peto patted him on the back.

Perrin sighed, picked up a bean and analyzed it. “I was rather counting on the two of you still having freedom in this village.”

“We don’t, Father,” Jaytsy snapped. “And never did. Guilt by association. We already were on that list in everyone’s minds. I just made sure we were there for a good reason.”

Perrin dropped the bean. “I suppose you’re right.” He put his hand on top of hers. “Thank you, Jayts. My only regret is that I didn’t get to witness it myself. I feel better knowing the truth was spoken. What happens next really doesn’t matter. It’s out there.”

That evening Peto said good night to his parents and willingly went

straight to his room after dinner, partly because he was exhausted from moving bales of hay for Deck.

He blamed that on his father. Two days ago he made Peto stand in front of him, wearing only his undershorts, while Perrin evaluated his development. Shem had said the kickball scouts were worse than the army, but as Peto stood at attention while his father prodded and jabbed his muscles, he couldn't see how this was any better.

Then again, former General Shin didn't have an army to beef up anymore so he was pouring all of his attention on his son.

"Seems I've been neglecting your development, Peto. I apologize for that," Perrin said as he held his shoulders and shook them violently for no apparent reason.

"Did I ever complain?" Peto asked. "Until now? They don't come off, if that's what you're trying to figure out."

"Just evaluating your muscle tone. Your legs are well developed—no surprise there—but your upper body could use some filling out. You're at the perfect age for doing so, and I have just the activity to firm you up through here. And here. And here . . ."

And so Peto was assigned to moving bales of hay which, he had to admit, was doing something to his muscles. It made them scream.

But he willingly went to bed also because he didn't want to see his parents *watching* him again.

It was painful. His mother gave him looks of pity, apology, and worry, while his father smiled drearily at him with ever increasing lines around his eyes. They both felt guilty, and he felt just a little bit better about things because of that.

But then he felt even worse for them.

Edge had changed. Actually, it had been changing for several years, but it finally reached a point where that change was obvious.

However, the shock of the change was rather invigorating, he decided. Almost adventurous, even though it left him feeling as if he was standing on top of a tall fence, unsure which way to go, and worried that he might not be able to balance up there for too long. He found himself worrying more and more about his parents each day rather than about his future.

The day after his father's resignation when he went to school for that last time, his friends surrounded him.

"They made him a general?"

"You're going to Idumea! You can try out for the teams."

“When are you leaving?”

The only way he could respond was, “No . . . it’s complicated.”

He was grateful when class started just moments later.

Then the door opened, right after midday meal. Peto didn’t bother to look up from his reading because the way the air dampened he knew it was about him. His teacher cleared his throat, and reluctantly Peto looked up. There stood Mr. Hegek and Lieutenant Radan.

Hegek looked like he was about to cry.

Radan looked like he wanted to burn something.

Peto slammed shut his book and leaned back in his chair. “Well?” he asked cockily.

Mr. Hegek shook his head before saying, “Peto Shin, because of incidents last night, I’m sorry, but—”

Radan had jabbed Hegek so forcefully that Hegek coughed and took a step forward. Every boy watched him keenly.

“Congratulations, son!” Hegek slipped into an awkward speech he must have memorized only moments before. “You are hereby awarded this notification that you no longer need to attend the Administrators’ School in Edge.” He held out the parchment with a trembling hand.

Peto nodded once, gathered up his books, and walked past the rows of desks to the front of the classroom.

“That’s not fair,” one of his friends whispered. “Why does he get—”

Lieutenant Radan loudly clearing his throat shut Peto’s friend right up.

Peto took the parchment without opening it, nodded to Hegek, and left the classroom without another word. He noticed Radan and Hegek remained behind, probably to explain things to his classmates.

Later that afternoon, when a few of the boys walked past the Briters’ farm to go to an empty field to kick around a ball, they didn’t look at him at all. Peto knew they saw him. But what he didn’t know was what Radan and Hegek told them.

And suddenly, that was that.

No more friends, no more kickball, no school, and no universities. Just today a letter came from the University of Idumea stating that they wouldn’t have room for Peto Shin that year, should he be thinking of applying. It was accompanied by a terse note from the head of kickball Mr. Flamafool uninviting Peto for tryouts.

Just that quickly, the world had changed.

And strangely, Peto was all right with that.

Chapter 35 ~ “I have an idea, a plan!”

Mahrree hadn't realized the water was flooding the field until it stopped flowing.

“Oh,” she stared, bewildered, at her feet.

“And here I thought you were doing better with watering,” she heard Perrin's voice. “Distracted?”

Mahrree rolled her eyes at the obvious. “It's been three weeks, Perrin. Shem should be returning—”

She stopped short.

She still couldn't get used to it: Perrin, in one of Cambozola Briter's old floppy hats. Deck had pulled it out for his father-in-law, and Perrin appreciated the loose weave of the pale straw. But whenever Mahrree saw her husband, her first reaction was always terror that a towering scarecrow was creeping up on her.

“Actually, Shem's back tomorrow,” Perrin said, and he put on what Mahrree was calling his Farmhand Face to begin his slow drawl. “Mr. Briter says we done well today! We can go home for dinner now, Missus. The boy's already headed back, Missus. Jus' me and you for a stroll?” He waggled his eyebrows.

Mahrree cracked a smile. “Sometimes I just don't understand you. I think a bit of Cambozola's spirit must be in that hat. How can you be so cheerful when the village still won't even acknowledge we're alive?”

He chuckled as he put his arm around her to steer her to the far west side of the farm. While avoiding the fort road meant their walk home took a bit longer, it was worth it to circumvent the traffic. “I had a breakthrough today with someone who used to shun us.”

“Really?” For the first time in weeks Mahrree felt a glimmer of hope. She was growing weary of neighbors and villagers turning their backs to her, fleeing the shops when she and Jaytsy arrived as they opened, and catching the sidelong glares of soldiers. “Who's

tolerating us?”

“Clover!” Perrin announced.

“Clover . . . wait. Isn’t that one of Deck’s cows?”

“It is!” he said breezily. “We tried one of his experiments. While he was doing that sweet talking to her, ‘Who’s a good milker? Who’s a good milker? My Clover is!’ I snuck around behind her. Instead of Deck sitting down at the bucket, I did. I nearly had the bucket full before Clover turned and noticed it was me. She tried to stomp on my boot only twice, but I got her milked.” He held up his hands. “We’re calling it an *udder* success!”

Mahrree groaned.

“Oh, come on. Even Peto thought that was funny.”

“It’s definitely the hat. There’s no other excuse.”

“I do like the hat,” Perrin declared. “But primarily for the reason coming up.”

Mahrree looked ahead and sighed.

Soldiers.

It had taken them three days to figure out that the Shins were no longer using the main road. Now there were pairs stationed along the perimeter of the farm and the back alleys Perrin and Mahrree took to get home. For the past week, however, there had been fewer guards, and today the two positioned beyond the gate had their heads bent down over something.

Perrin adjusted his hat, pulling it down to his eyebrows. When he tipped his head down, the soldiers couldn’t see his face—although they knew the brawny scarecrow was him—and Perrin could spy on them through the gaps of the straw.

Today the pair on duty merely glanced up at the Shins, then went back to studying what looked like a book. Mahrree had seen the dark red cover in the window of Sareen’s book shop, and thought it odd that soldiers were reading instead of soldiering.

They passed in silence, and only once they were twenty paces away did Perrin release a low whistle. “Our dear Captain Thorne is *in trouble*,” he said smugly.

“How do you know?” Mahrree was tempted to turn back to see what her husband noticed, but knew better than to draw attention to herself.

Grinning, Perrin pushed the straw hat above his brow. “While I know the soldiers were never perfect under me, none would have ever dared be so derelict in their duties. That tells me a few things. One, the soldiers have no respect for Thorne. Those sergeants

aren't even worried that someone may notice their lax behavior.

"Two, I didn't recognize those sergeants, which means they came recently from another fort. And when fort commanders transfer soldiers, they always unload their troublemakers. The sergeants probably don't even know why they're on this route, or who we are. If Lemuel asked for help from other forts, he didn't get it. That means we're no longer a high priority, and I suspect that Thorne's biggest concern right now is that he's losing men."

Mahrree was mystified. "How did you put that together?"

"Early this morning when I came to help Deck with the cows I spied four soldiers with their full packs jogging from the fort. I knew those soldiers, and none of them had leave coming. They were deserting," he chuckled darkly.

Mahrree couldn't help but snicker as well. "And the ones on duty are reading books about love!"

Perrin cleared his throat. "Uh, not exactly reading. And not quite love."

"What do you mean?"

He sighed. "In the brief, unfortunate moment that I happened to focus on the page they were poring over, I noticed that it was a woodcut. Of a woman. Without clothes."

Mahrree stopped dead in her tracks.

"Keep moving, keep moving," Perrin hissed as he pulled her along. "We're now in view of a watch tower, and a soldier is actually watching. Act natural."

She forced her feet to keep up with him. "How can I 'act natural' when you tell me that Sareen is selling books with woodcuts of—" She couldn't bring herself to say the words.

"I know," Perrin whispered, keeping his gaze through the straw focused on the tower. "All right, he's no longer watching us. This is good, Mahrree. Better than good. It's turning out to be great—"

"Great?" Mahrree wailed in a whisper. "Great that Sareen has brought to Edge books of . . ." Still she couldn't say the words.

Perrin smiled as they turned east on the alley that would lead to their back garden. "No, not about the book, but about the soldiers. Look—the other pair that's normally posted here isn't. Do you realize what this means?"

"Sareen's having a sale, and all of the soldiers are waiting in line?"

"Well, maybe. But it's working—Yung's advice? Stay low and quiet until the soldiers get bored? No one's paying extra attention to

us, Mahrree! That means we can . . . *start doing something else*,” he whispered conspiratorially.

“Such as?”

“Remember how a couple of weeks ago I told you I was working on a new plan?”

“Yes.”

“Wanna hear it?”

Mahrree grinned at his boyish enthusiasm. “Yes!”

He gripped her arm. “Wait till we get home. And stop smirking. I see another soldier trying to hide in the shrubs.”

“You’re smirking, too,” Mahrree pointed out. “Someone really should tell Thorne that no one believes a shrub has undertones of blue and boots that stick out.”

They couldn’t help but snicker together as they passed the spying soldier. Mahrree hadn’t felt so light-hearted in weeks, and guiltily realized it was partly because all that her husband had built for the past nineteen years was falling apart because he left it.

They went in the back door and found Peto at the table, sleepily finishing off the chicken pot pie. Seeing her weary son sobered Mahrree again. The poor boy had nothing—no friends, no kickball, no future.

Perrin’s smirk had dissolved as well. “Leave us anything to eat?” he asked his son.

“Couple of crumbs,” Peto yawned. “I’m heading to bed. When I die, I’m going to ask the Creator why cows insist on being milked so early in the morning. Surely He could have planned *that* a little better. Some One all knowing should have known I hate early mornings.”

Perrin chuckled until Peto shut his bedroom door, and Mahrree heard the contrived tone of it.

She sighed. “You know that message he got a few days ago and threw in the hearth? I fished it out. It was to inform him that the University of Idumea wouldn’t have room for him, and that the professional kickball teams didn’t want him to come for tryouts. I had been hoping our family troubles were confined only to Edge, and that maybe Peto could go south—and that you and I with him—until all of this died down, but now I realize . . .” her voice began to break, “there’s no where we can go. The whole world will shun us.”

Perrin pulled her into his arms. “I agree that we can’t go on like this,” he whispered. “We have to do something for Peto. He’s

almost seventeen and has nothing to look forward to.”

“But Perrin, what can we do? Maybe when Shem comes back, he’ll have some news—”

“Mahrree, he’s already back. He rode by earlier this morning.”

“But you told me he wouldn’t be back until tomorrow!”

“Sorry, but I didn’t want to worry you until we got home. Shem sent me a quick look—wasn’t safe for him to stop and talk—and I could tell that he knows something and . . . it’s not good.”

She sagged in his arms. She *was* going to suggest that perhaps Shem could take Peto to his father’s ranch near Flax, and that maybe they could go as well, but if Shem heard even on the southern edges of the world about the Shins—

“But Mahrree?” Perrin cut into her thoughts. “I have a plan, remember? It’ll fix a great many things, and give Peto something to do!”

She pulled out of his embrace to see him . . .

Well, the only way to describe his demeanor was *nearly giddy*. And it wasn’t because of Cambozola’s hat, which he’d taken off.

“Since the soldiers aren’t watching us anymore, it’s time to share with you what I’ve been working on for the past weeks.”

He released her, rushed to the study and came back with rolls of maps and pages of notes.

Mahrree watched in astonishment and thought she even heard what could only be identified as a giggle escape as he placed the stack of papers on the table. He unrolled a large piece of paper that looked like a map and used the mugs from midday meal to hold down the corners.

Mahrree’s breath caught when she realized what she was seeing.

“*You want to find the ruins? Terryp’s land?*” She ran her hand over a new large map Perrin had made, complete with arrows, lines, potential paths, camp locations, and question marks.

“Yes, and beyond!” He struggled to keep his voice low in his excitement. “And there *is* a beyond. I’m positive there’s no danger, no poison, no undetectable gases that kill entire populations overnight. *There never was!* Only land and vast amounts of it, just waiting to be explored and settled. I’m sure it’s where we *began*, where the Creator placed the first five hundred families. I want to find the proof! Now, Mahrree, you know I’ve had old maps, but I must confess I never showed you these.”

She watched breathlessly as he shifted some of the papers and put

others on top. The parchment of the three maps he laid out before her seemed far older and thicker, with dark patches and stains.

“Some of these suggest what’s beyond our borders. King Querul the First’s scouts made this one, the oldest in my collection. Vast regions of land to the west, right there, beyond the desert.”

Mahrree stared in wonder, not daring to touch the parchment that was dated more than 130 years ago.

“Perrin,” she whispered in awe, “how did you get—”

“I took them from the old garrison when the new one was being constructed. They were nearly buried by dirt in the old storage room my father used. They were probably destined for that fire Querul started, but were forgotten about. If I had more time I would have dug some more.”

Mahrree alternated between holding her breath and panting as he spoke.

“There seemed to be a crate buried there, too,” he continued, “but I felt rather guilty for finding and taking these, so I left before anyone saw me. I never had another chance to go back or investigate the crate. It’s probably still there, in fact. I moved an old cabinet in front of it to hide it, but now it’s buried along with all of my father’s paperwork. I doubt anyone ever looked for these maps. I shouldn’t have taken them, but I was twenty-two and I rationalized that no one wanted them. I told you that I rescued them from a rubbish heap, but . . . well, I *did* rescue them. Anyway, Mahrree . . . Mahrree?”

She heard his voice but was too stunned by all that he laid before her to.

He wanted to go. He wanted to find the ruins.

He was saying her name.

She forced herself to stop staring at the fantastic display and looked up at him.

He grinned with the enthusiasm of an eleven-year-old. His dark eyes were so vibrant they lit up his entire face. “Mahrree,” he said with a passion she had never heard before. “You’ll *love* this one. I’ve been saving it for a very long time. Well . . . now it’s time!”

He took one of the maps he hadn’t yet unfurled and gently slid out a smaller map concealed inside it. The parchment was brown on the edges and slightly crumbly.

“What is this?” she whispered as he carefully unrolled it. “And why have you never shown it to me before?” She could already tell it was something ancient and important and beautiful.

“This, my darling wife, is Terryp’s map.”

She gasped.

“His *original* one.”

She stopped breathing.

She stopped moving.

Her heart may have stopped beating, but then it began again with such pounding force she felt it in her throat.

Right there, in front of her, with markings and writings and notes and everything—Terryp’s own map!

Without meaning to, her hand hovered over it.

“Just don’t fondle it,” he whispered in her ear. “I don’t think the old parchment likes to be handled as a statue. So, Mahrree, tell me . . . what do you think?”

She was thinking too many things at once. She wanted to scream, to shout Terryp’s name, to leap up and down and kiss her husband and kiss him again, but she couldn’t. She couldn’t even blink. She didn’t want to miss any of it.

There, in ink still dark enough that Terryp could have applied it yesterday, was a detailed map of a land directly west of Sands.

She felt her knees grow weak as she began to realize what was before her, what had been done . . .

“Perrin!” she breathed. “It was *you*! You . . . did it? You . . .” She heard a chair pull up behind her.

“You better sit down. You’ve gone gray.”

She sat down, only to be closer to the map. Gingerly, she tenderly fingered a corner of it.

Perrin sat next to her. “Happy 19th Anniversary, a bit early.”

Mahrree let out a very reverent but very excited whimper.

“You . . . *you* made the copy!”

He grinned and nodded, nearly exploding with enthusiasm. “Several, actually.” He gestured to the rolls which had hidden Terryp’s map. “When I made the map of Moorland, I realized I could make *other* maps too. I’m sorry I couldn’t let you see the first copy of Terryp’s map I sent to the Administrators which they then sent back here for me to ‘authenticate’. Although I disguised my writing, I was sure you would’ve recognized some of the characters I made. I couldn’t let you know yet. I made the extras,” he indicated the roll of additional maps, “to send out to others should the Administrators declare the land still poisoned. I fully intended to smuggle them out in the army messenger bags as I did with the first one I sent, but now I don’t

have that access anymore so here they sit, waiting for me to come up with another solution.”

She could barely breathe, until she burst out with, “Why did you never tell me you had this before? It’s been in our house?! All this time? Perrin, *TERRY P* was in *MY HOUSE!*”

He put a finger on her lips and laughed lightly. “Shh! I wanted to tell you,” he whispered, “but do you remember our second anniversary?”

How could either of them forget the night she told him she wanted two more children, and he turned into the rabid dog of the Administrators? “Oh, yes. Most definitely.”

“Do you remember how that night I stayed up working on numbers and maps?”

“Yes, I came down and . . . wait a minute. You knew I knew?”

He smiled. “I know everything, Mahrree. This was even on our table at the time. I’m sure you touched it, but you didn’t realize it because it was too dark. That previous evening on the blanket in our front garden I understood something about you that Hogal had warned me about. I even wrote it down, and later burned it so you and no one else would ever see it.”

Mahrree blinked at him. “What did Hogal say? What did you write?”

“That you are the most dangerous woman in the world. Think back to your state of mind then. What if you knew I had these maps?”

Mahrree threw her hands up in the air. “I would have insisted we go . . . oh. Oh, *I see.*” She bit her lip. “Hmm. Could have been a problem, huh?” Too many ideas ran through her head of what she would have done had she known Terry’s map was in her home for all those years.

Until she remembered . . . “You and Hogal really thought I was the most dangerous woman in the world?”

“Absolutely. In fact, you recently solidified your claim to the title. The truth *is* dangerous. Especially shouted in front thousands of people.”

She looked back at the map. “Oh, Perrin—it’s amazing! But I really think I could have kept quiet about it.”

His laughter startled her. “You? Keep quiet?”

She bit her lip. “I guess the evidence to the contrary *is* rather overwhelming, isn’t it?”

“It doesn’t matter anymore,” he grinned and kissed her. “Take

a look and tell me where you want to go first!”

She laughed a sigh. There, in amazing detail on the small parchment, was all anyone could ever hope for. A narrow passage of land between the desert and the mountain range opened to a vast valley area. The distance to the valley was barely two miles through the desert, easily traversed.

To the north was the same mountain range that sat beyond them in Edge, and to the south was a large open plain where remnants of a massive city, larger than Idumea, once existed. Beyond it, to the west, south, and east where the desert ended were vast fields, grasses, trees, rivers—everything a civilization could need.

Mahrree’s eye was drawn to the north again. The mountain range ended two-thirds of the way, leaving a large opening in the northwest. Terry had merely put a question mark there. The land Terry outlined was enormous, several times larger than their world.

“It seems Terry didn’t explore most of this land to the south,” Perrin gestured to the map. “But according to this scale, it’s hundreds of miles, so no surprise there. The dotted line around the perimeter of the ruins is where he personally explored. The dashes further out are as far as the scouts went. The rest of the map comes from the records made at the carvings. The southern sea doesn’t even show up for another three hundred miles. There’s no border to the west—no end in sight! And right here,” Perrin said, pointing to the mountains in the northeast where the question mark stood, “when I made the copy, I put mountains all along the top.”

“Why?” Mahrree asked, still astonished her husband was the unknown copier she had wanted so desperately to meet.

And Terry’s map was in her home, all these years.

Right under her nose was the truth and evidence she had craved for all of her life. She just never knew where to look.

“Because I wanted the expedition to discover it,” Perrin explained. “I knew they’d be terrified to go out knowing the mountains actually *ended* somewhere. I hoped they’d be intrigued by the gap they’d find and follow it. Instead they all turned and ran for home instead. Can you imagine? Half of them were soldiers, and they were cowards!” He shook his head in disgust.

“So this is your plan?” Mahrree whispered.

“Yes! Mahrree, let me take you away from Edge, from all the world! Let’s go prove that Terry’s land is safe. Then let’s go *beyond* it, to the northwest. What happens where the mountains end? What a

fantastic adventure for Peto! We can *do* this!”

The ruins! Terry! Her childhood hero, his map underneath her fingers, his lands begging to be rediscovered. She could do this for him. Prove what he wasn't allowed to do. They could do this together—

No. No!

No, they couldn't.

Mahrree let out a small moan. Perrin's face was so hopeful that she dreaded what she had to say next.

“Oh Perrin, we have a grandbaby coming in just a moon's time. That's what we can do—be grandparents. We can't go now.”

“I know, I know!” he gripped her arm. “And that's what I want too. But Mahrree, we can do *both!* We don't go until the baby's born and Jaytsy's rested up, maybe early Weeding Season. I'll need that long to gather supplies and plan properly. Since the soldiers no longer care about us, it'll be easier. We can use Deck's barn to hold everything. There's room in the rafters to hide it all, I've already measured. We'll secure a few horses and I'm sure Shem will find a way to bring us Clark. Then we'll vanish, like Yordin's grandparents. Maybe that's what they did! We can take a packhorse laden with paper and ink just for you to record everything. Peto and I can scout the area while you sit at the ruins playing Terry and copying everything he did. You'll have to learn to ride a horse, but we can do that in the next few weeks.

“Mahrree,” he said, his face glowing with anticipation, “as much as I hate to leave Jaytsy and Deckett, we can't sit here and mope. We'll be back before the baby's a year old. We can't let Peto continue like this, Mahrree. Think of the adventure! Think of everything we can bring back! We can change the world!”

He was shaking her arms with so much zeal that she wasn't surprised later to see small bruises there. He released her arms and rubbed them apologetically.

More calmly, he said, “Just *think* about it, all right?”

She gazed again at the map and tenderly ran a finger across some of Terry's words written in tiny letters to conserve space. The words “potential farmlands” refused to be wiped off.

“Oh Perrin, I'm thinking about it! In fact, I've been thinking about it my whole life.”

It took them hours to settle down that night. Mahrree kept Perrin's larger planning map on the desk in their bedroom, frequently jumping out of bed to check it and ask him questions. He never

opened his eyes but grinned as he mumbled, “Uh-huh. Sure. We could try that too. Add it to the list.” Mahree went so far as to plan out what clothing she’d take and how she’d cook on the journey before the fatigue of the day overwhelmed her.

After she finally fell asleep in the early hours of the morning, she dreamed again of a large house filled with noisy children.

Terry was sitting in the corner reading a story to some of them.

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

“I must confess,” said Mal to his companion, “this new scenario is turning out to be more rewarding than I initially anticipated. You’ve redeemed yourself.”

Genev nodded once, greatly relieved. “You’ll not be disappointed, sir. I promise you that.”

“I don’t think I will be. I believe you can pull this off. To get the measures passed through the Administrators was quite a feat in itself. Now time is of the essence. I expect nothing else but to be completely impressed with your next efforts.”

“You will be, sir,” Genev said, “I’m personally going to see to everything.”

“You do that. And if your efforts do *not* impress me, do as your predecessor—don’t bother coming back.”

Chapter 36 ~ “I intend for this to be the most *enlightening* day of my life.”

The next morning Mahrree sat on the front steps and gazed at her patch of rocky gray ground, wondering when the first blades of whatever might come up, and if she'd be there to see them fully ripen. Or bloom. Or whatever they would do.

Actually, she was wondered if anything could replace in her mind the fantastical idea of leaving the world.

There was no real reason *not* to go. If they left, surely Edge would warm back up to Jaytsy and Deck again, and everything would return to normal.

Even Shem could benefit by moving into their home. And should he be threatened with a transfer—which seemed inevitable as long as Thorne was in charge—he'd already have a place to live, he could resign just like Perrin, then start building houses. Jaytsy and Deck would be fine as long as they still had their Uncle Shem.

Then Perrin, Mahrree, and Peto would eventually return, and they could start all over again.

That is, *after* they delivered the news of the unpoisoned “Cursed Lands” which would shake the world, and *then* everyone could start all over again, even in Terryp's western lands if they wanted.

Even as Mahrree stared at the ground she wasn't seeing it, but was “going over the wall” and envisioning forests. Deserts. Stone buildings that were broader and taller than anything in Idumea, and stacked like pyramids stepping upwards. There were three of those on the map. Temples, Terryp had called them.

What temples were Mahrree had no idea, but desperately wanted to find out.

And what lay beyond? Perrin suspected the expedition didn't even make it to the ruins before they turned back. He guessed they camped on the edge of the desert most of the time creating the new reality of their "origins" that they presented to the world.

But Perrin and Peto would find a route, with Mahrree in tow—

She shook her head and tried focus on her meager garden. *Listen to me*, she thought, I'm already on the trail Perrin has yet to cut!

They hadn't told Peto yet, nor Jaytsy and Deckett. Perrin and Mahrree decided to keep the idea to themselves until the baby was born and all seemed well. How they could keep their plans quiet until then, Mahrree could hardly imagine. But it was her pledge to her husband: Test me and you'll see that I can keep something to myself for once. She did owe it to him, after all.

She grinned at her tiny yard without noticing a cluster of women watching her from across the road trying to figure out why Mrs. Shin was beaming at raked soil.

Before Mahrree could wonder what exactly saddle sores were, she heard Peto shouting from the back garden as he ran to the front.

"Mother! Jaytsy says the pains are coming every ten minutes!"

Mahrree leaped to her feet. "Oh, it's too soon!"

As she ran into the house she heard Peto call after her, "You don't have to rush. A representative is already there and said she can help."

Mahrree froze when she heard that news. "Oh no she won't!"

She ran to Jaytsy's old room and snatched the birthing bag that sat next to the new cradle.

"Stupid Administrative retraining!" she grumbled as she hastily checked the bag left for her by the only midwife in Edge Mahrree felt they could trust. "The first woman willing to talk to us, and they send her to Idumea for the week. As if a woman in her fifties and experience with dozens of deliveries needs 'retraining' by the government. Dear Creator, she better not be listening to them. And she better come back, quick!"

As Mahrree rushed with Peto back up to the Briters, she remembered first meeting Mrs. Braxhicks last week.

"Mrs. Shin! I'm so glad to see you here," Mrs. Braxhicks had said when Mahrree came into the Briters' kitchen. "I was hoping you'd come by since *I* can't come to *you*." She shook her head in annoyance. "Stupid regulations! I need to tell you, as I've already told your daughter: I have to leave for two weeks for Idumea."

"Why?" Mahrree had asked.

“Ridiculous Administrative *nonsense!*” she blustered. “I’m sorry to put it that way, but if anyone would agree with me it’d be you, right?”

Mahrree looked hard at the woman. “What color is the sky?”

Mrs. Braxhicks immediately glanced out the window. “Gray and white. Storm’s coming. Be clearer by tomorrow, though.”

Mahrree grinned in approval. There were still a few thinking women in the world.

“You see, even though I’ve been delivering babies for over thirty years, I’m not ‘qualified’. To continue practicing I need to be re-trained by the Office of Family. They even issued a handbook,” Mrs. Braxhicks scoffed in disgust. “Under the heading ‘How to handle a breach birth’ they have one sentence, then a full paragraph on how to comfort the grieving husband and father after the deaths. Why, Mr. Briter could do better than that. And I’m telling you now—should Jaytsy start her pains before I return, do NOT let the Office of Family representative in this house. Mrs. Shin, you and Mr. Briter can handle this.”

Jaytsy and Mahrree both burst out laughing at that.

“I’ll do my best,” Mahrree said. “But Deckett? I don’t know where you’ve been delivering babies for thirty years, but around here men don’t do anything but pace the fields out of earshot.”

“In some villages the fathers are just as involved with the delivery as the mother,” Mrs. Braxhicks said soberly. “They’re responsible for getting it *in* there, they better assist in getting it *out*.”

That elicited another round of laughter, and even the midwife broke into a smile.

“I didn’t mean to put it so coarsely, but Mr. Briter has more experience with birthing than most of the new representatives. Just tell him it’s natural for a baby to come out head first, and there’s no need for him to bury his arm in anything.”

That afternoon last week Mahrree and Jaytsy received a fast lesson in how to birth babies.

When they told Deck of the midwife’s recommendations, he went gray.

“Then I’ll pray to the Creator that nothing happens in the next few weeks.” He walked outside and sat under a tree with his head between his knees.

I guess he didn’t pray hard enough, Mahrree thought as she bounded through Jaytsy’s door.

“Up here, Mother,” Jaytsy’s voice called down to her.

“You’re on your own,” said Peto as he quickly made his exit.

Mahrree ran up the stairs to Jaytsy’s bedroom where she was resting—so to speak—on the bed.

A representative in a crisp white uniform—

White? Mahrree thought incredulously.

—and a bag of her own sat waiting on a chair. Her hair was tidied into a neat bun and gloves were on her hands. What was she planning to do in such an absurd outfit?

White, of all colors . . .

Mahrree glared at her, worried that the girl had even less experience with birthing than Mahrree. “What have you done to my daughter?” She turned to Jaytsy. “And why are you in bed? Where’s the bale of straw?”

“She shoved it out and she told me I belonged up here!” Jaytsy said angrily, pointing at the young woman.

“But birthing in your bed will ruin it!” Mahrree exclaimed.

“I know!”

They both look accusingly at the Administrators’ representative.

The young woman paled even more than her silly uniform and seemed stunned to be on inspection. “If she’s lying down it’s easier for me to deliver the baby.”

Jaytsy blinked. “Why should I accommodate you? It’s my baby, and I’m doing all the work! Aren’t *you* supposed to be serving *me*?”

The girl furrowed her brows, clearly never having considered that before. Her eyes began to dart back and forth, as if reading an invisible text, searching for the script she had carefully memorized to become a well-trained Administrative servant. Finally she found it and looked at Mahrree.

“Good morning, Madam. I’m Miss Giding.”

Mahrree nearly snorted. “You certainly are!”

Jaytsy guffawed, but it sounded more like a cough of pain than derision.

The poor girl’s brows furrowed further, but she kept to her script. “And you are . . . ?”

“Irritated that you’re here without permission,” Mahrree snapped. “And you know full well who I am. *Everyone* does.”

Miss Giding batted her eyelashes and stood up. “Now there’s no need to worry. I don’t charge anything. I’m here as a *service* from the Administrators,” she said as if she really believed it. “I come to bring help and comfort.”

“Mother, she hasn’t done anything to me,” Jaytsy assured her. “I won’t let her. I wanted to wait for you before I listened to what she had to say.” Jaytsy’s eyes closed and she began to breathe deeply.

“That’s looks like the real thing,” Mahrree fretted. “So you’re trying the breathing first? Roll to your side, remember?”

Obediently Jaytsy rolled over and breathed rhythmically until the pain subsided.

“You could try to crooning, too. Get in that practice.”

“She doesn’t have to do that, you know,” the representative said. “We’ve found that many women prefer to remain on their backs.”

Mahrree stared at Miss Giding and said, “Jaytsy, did it feel better on your side or your back?”

“The pain is *in* my back! Why put more pressure on it?”

“*Our* midwife,” Mahrree said pointedly, “who’s been sent away for two weeks, taught us many ways to ease the discomfort of laboring.” Her eyes burned holes in the woman’s white uniform. “So tell me, Miss Giding, how long are women in this new regime supposed to lie on their backs?”

The representative looked confused. For a moment Mahrree almost had compassion for this young woman, barely older than her daughter. “For the entire time, madam!”

Mahrree’s eyebrows flew upwards. “Tell me now, how is that position supposed to help her deliver the baby?”

“Her body does it for her,” Miss Giding looked perplexed.

“And so she just . . . what, takes a nap?” Mahrree prodded.

“Yes, actually she does.”

Jaytsy sat up as quickly as she could. “How’s that possible?”

The representative rummaged in her bag and produced a dark bottle. “With this! Truly, you haven’t heard of sedation?”

Mahrree’s mouth opened, shut, and opened again like a gaping fish. She looked at Jaytsy, then back again to the representative. “Oh, we know all about sedation,” she said tonelessly.

“Then you know this is a real wonder. The mother sniffs it and she falls asleep almost instantly.” Miss Giding beamed, as if it were her own invention. “She’s in a deep sleep for hours. If she wakes before the baby is delivered, we just give her more. Within a day, occasionally two, the baby emerges and the mother has experienced nothing.”

Mahrree looked at her daughter.

Jaytsy answered with surprising calm. “To sleep through the pain of what’s to come does sound appealing.” She shifted in her bed to find a comfortable position but failed. “But there are ways to deal with the pain, and I do *not* want to miss a moment of bringing my baby to this world.”

“But it’s completely safe! It’s been in use for almost a year.”

Mahrree covered her mouth to keep herself from exclaiming, In use for *almost* a year? Ha!

Jaytsy’s eyes flared in fury. “I will NOT be sedated! I don’t want to sleep away the first moment of my child’s life.”

“But it can be frightening,” Miss Giding leaned on her bed in earnestness. “Why would you want to experience fear? And it is a bit dull, frankly, because it can take hours, or even days. You don’t have to subject yourself to fear and boredom.”

“Fear and boredom?” Mahrree asked. “There’s an unusual combination I think I’d like to see . . . But, *dear representative* of the Administrators—”

The unfortunate girl failed to notice Mahrree’s scorn.

“—fear comes only when you don’t have faith in the outcome. And boredom comes when you believe there’s nothing new worth learning. I simply can’t understand how any of that will occur today.”

Jaytsy sat up, kneeled, then fell forward onto her hands in a dog-like position that alarmed the representative.

“Should you be doing that?” she asked.

“Absolutely!” said Jaytsy, “Because it relieves the pressure on my back.” She began crooning like a tone-deaf cow trying to sing.

Miss Giding stared at her. “Why is she making that noise?”

Mahrree raised her eyebrows. “Just how many birthings have you witnessed?”

The girl pursed her lips. “You mean, without the sedation?”

Mahrree nodded.

Giding just gulped.

Jaytsy stopped the moo-ing as the pain subsided. “An old midwife told me how to work through the pains. There’s a variety of sounds, breathings, positions, movements—different techniques for different women. We’re not identical you know. Oh wait—maybe, you don’t. Since this is an *old* way of doing things, at least from *one* year ago, I’m sure you have no idea what I am doing. But we do.”

Of all the traits to develop, sarcasm seemed to be the newest one to reveal itself in Jaytsy. When Mahrree was a young teacher she

thought sarcasm was the sign of true wit. But as she aged she realized that sarcasm was just lazy, and more damaging than enlightening.

Then again, there were occasions like this when sarcasm kept someone from exhibiting true violence. Mahrree tried not to smile.

“I thank you for coming,” Jaytsy said with finality, “and I send you on your way. You don’t need to make any more ‘routine’ checks on me.” She cringed in discomfort and began to sway her hips, like a dog trying to dance.

Miss Giding’s lips peeled back in dismay. “You just don’t have to do this! What good can come from suffering?”

Jaytsy continued her swaying. “Who said I was suffering? I intend for this to be the most *enlightening* day of my life. Good day.”

Mahrree beamed at her daughter.

The representative looked at them both, baffled. “Send for me if you change your mind. I’ll be expecting you,” and she left.

As they heard her go down the stairs, Mahrree released a big breath. “How’d she know to come?”

Jaytsy shook her head. “I’m not sure, but I have my suspicions. I’ve been feeling pains for a while.” She crawled out of bed and stood nearly erect. “That’s better! I was in the curing sheds early this morning pointing out to the fort’s cook where the ripened cheese was when a pain hit me. I’m guessing he went back and reported it to Thorne.” She cringed, either from saying the name or a twinge or both. “The captain probably sent the representative. I can’t really imagine why, though.”

Mahrree moaned quietly. “Maybe Thorne sent someone because he’s such a fan of sedation. Still,” she said, “it’s a little troubling. It seems rather compassionate of him toward you. Jaytsy, since you’ve been married has he ever . . .” Mahrree didn’t know how to put her concern into words.

Jaytsy looked down at her hands. “He still rides by, slowly. I catch him looking at the house sometimes. But he’s never done anything outright. Deck keeps the old pitchfork by the back door, just in case,” she smiled. “Mother, maybe word about me will get back to Shem, and he can—”

Mahrree shook her head. “We don’t know what Shem can do right now. We best not even try to hope. I know. I miss him too. But let’s get you moving, see if this is the real thing or not!” she said brightly. “Peto did this to me quite a bit for many weeks before he was actually ready to come.”

“Oh,” Jaytsy moaned, “please don’t tell me I’m about to give birth to another Peto! And if this baby doesn’t come today, then I’ll know he’ll be as annoying as his uncle.”

Mahrree and Jaytsy walked around the farm that morning, pausing every ten minutes for Jaytsy to breathe through another pain. Perrin and Peto stopped with their digging a new canal, winced with worry at their direction, then quickly turn back to digging hoping not to see something they shouldn’t. They also visited Deck in the barn while he was in the middle of helping a cow birth a calf.

As soon as Mahrree realized what was happening she tried to steer Jaytsy out of view, but she insisted on staying. “I want to see him do it, Mother, so I know he can help me.”

Mahrree shook her head and shielded her eyes. The graphic nature of nature wasn’t something she naturally dealt with.

Deck heard his wife and called over his shoulder, his arm up in something Mahrree didn’t want to understand. “Jayts, what are you talking about?”

“You taking care of me after that cow.”

If he could have spun around he would have. “What?! Jayts, don’t even . . . whoa, easy, easy . . . Look, Jaytsy, I’m a little busy . . . we’ll discuss this later . . .”

Mahrree waited outside, practicing her own deep breathing, until her daughter came out a few minutes later.

“Well, that wasn’t *so* bad,” Jaytsy said, holding her belly protectively. “No, not so bad. As long as Deck doesn’t drop the baby on the straw.”

By late morning, as Mahrree and Jaytsy walked the perimeter of the farm again, Mahrree began to suspect this day would not be ‘lightening’ her daughter at all; the pains didn’t come any closer, much to Mahrree’s secret relief. The afternoon was even longer, the pains still ten minutes apart, and the time passing unbearably slowly for Jaytsy.

By evening the pains had subsided completely. It was a good thing Perrin and Peto had already left for home to make dinner, because Jaytsy was disappointed.

Intensely, violently, furiously disappointed.

“What a useless day!” she bellowed as she sat at the kitchen table and pounded her fist on it.

Mahrree was making dinner, because she didn’t think her daughter should be allowed anywhere near sharp knives tonight.

Deck, himself exhausted from three calvings, trudged up to the

back door. When he heard his wife yelling he paused with his hand on the doorknob.

“Wasted! This whole day! This child will never come out! I’m stuck with this belly until the Last Day!”

Deck glanced at the window and noticed Mahrree watching him. He sighed and walked in the door.

“*You!*” Jaytsy cried when she saw him. “This is all your doing!”

Deck turned to his mother-in-law, pleading for assistance. Mahrree shrugged apologetically.

He crouched in front of Jaytsy. “I’m sorry this has been such a bad day for you,” he said sweetly as he took her hands. “But Jayts, all things happen for a purpose.”

His wife rolled her eyes at him.

“What do you think?” he cautiously asked Mahrree.

“I’m sorry, Jaytsy, but Deckett—it’s not happening today. And maybe Mrs. Braxhicks was right. She thought the baby still has about four more weeks—”

“No!” Jaytsy wailed.

“—So no, Deck, we don’t need you to reach in and pull it out by the legs tonight.”

Deck flushed red, but Jaytsy sat up. “You could, Deck! You could do it! Just wash off your hands and—”

“Jaytsy!” Deck cried. “Mahrree, is she serious?”

“It’s just that extra mooing, Deck. Don’t your cows do that? Complain a bit more?”

Jaytsy glared at her mother.

“Just a few more weeks, you two. I promise. I’ve been there, and it will end.”

Perrin walked in the back door with a tired Peto.

“All I want is a piece of pie and bed, Father,” he said as he took the entire pie from the counter, remembering a fork at the last moment, and headed out to the eating room. “Why people want to be farmers is beyond my comprehension. It never ends. Good night,” he called before shutting his bedroom door.

Perrin laughed softly. “Good night, son,” he said, although he was sure Peto was too far away already to hear him. Soon Peto’s farming days would be over, and his exploring days would begin.

Perrin didn't know how much longer he could keep it from his son, but he enjoyed imagining the look of shock on his face when he'd finally hear about his new future.

Perrin lit a candle and headed down to the cellar in search of something for dinner. He'd seen the look in Mahrree's eyes—the baby wasn't coming tonight—and she'd be home soon, spent and with frayed nerves from having to deal with their very disappointed daughter. The least he could do was bake a few potatoes, which he dug out of the cellar. Reluctantly he also pulled out a crock of cheese; Peto's first attempt at making it. Well, someone had to be the first to try it.

After he put the potatoes in the oven and stoked its fire, he walked the crock of cheese, held out safely at arm's distance, and a candle to the eating table.

The crinkling of the hairs on his neck that told him something in the shadows by the fireplace wasn't quite right. And he was a man who knew all about the shadows of a dark room.

“Reveal yourself!” he commanded.

“Perrin Shin,” a soft, gentle voice said, “I'm here because a friend has sent me.”

A woman's voice.

That unnerved him even more. He slammed down the crock on the table. “Show yourself!” he commanded again, holding the candle far in front of him to light whatever was lurking there.

The shadow moved from the fireplace and slowly walked to the opposite side of the table. It was definitely a woman, and she was holding up her hands. “Perrin Shin, I am unarmed. You may check me if you need to. I wish only to speak with you.”

Perrin held up the candle to better see her face and sidled to the end of the table and the drawer that was hidden there.

He'd never seen the woman before. She was as slight in build as Mahrree, with black curly hair and dark earth-brown skin. As she smiled, her eyes were gentle. Deceivingly so. But it was her clothing that most alarmed Perrin—it was dyed in a mottled black and brown, and loose all around her. Convenient for hiding blades.

Having reached the secret drawer, Perrin set down the candle. With his free hand he subtly felt for the drawer and noiselessly slid it open.

“Who are you?” he demanded.

“A friend,” she said, gingerly approaching the opposite side of the table. “I can't tell you my name right now, but I will later.”

Perrin felt in the drawer. “How did you get into my house?”

His heart sank when he realized the drawer was empty.

The woman smiled sweetly. “Our mutual friend helped me in. And Perrin Shin, your knife is not there.”

That’s when Perrin noticed the second shadow by the front door, and it moved. The dim candle light glinted off the long knife that normally sat in the table’s drawer, clenched in the folded arms of a truly massive man.

Perrin sized him up. Not only was he taller, he was younger and more muscular. Not good. He was as dark as the woman but his eyes weren’t nearly as gentle as he walked slowly, forebodingly, to the table.

The small woman continued to smile as if he were nothing more threatening than a puppy. “This is my escort, my guard, and my husband. I’m sure you understand how protective he is. He’ll care for your knife until we’re finished talking.”

Perrin’s chest heaved in frustration. “There’s only one man outside of my family who knows about the location of that knife. Where’s Shem Zenos?”

She shook her head. “There’s no Shem Zenos with us.”

Perrin was losing patience. “Who are you and what do you want?!” he bellowed, hoping that perhaps he’d arouse his son and maybe he’d be wise enough to slip out his window and get some help. But all he heard was snoring from Peto’s bedroom.

“We want to help you and your family,” the woman leaned across the table. “Please, sit down, former Colonel Shin. I am, what you might consider, a Guarder. And we come with a proposition. Please, let’s talk.”

Mahrree left after tidying up the house, leaving Jaytsy sitting grumpily at the table. She dutifully ate the dinner her mother prepared, while Deck sat down next to her and rubbed her back.

“I’m so sorry about today. The Creator does things with a purpose, and at the right time. The 33rd Day of Planting Season just wasn’t the right time.”

Jaytsy didn’t respond but dug into the beans and potatoes with more effort than was necessary.

Deck looked around the kitchen, searching for the right words

as if his mother-in-law had left a short speech for him somewhere. Finding nothing, he did the best he could on his own.

“You know as well as I do that an apple picked before its time is sour,” he said. Feeling empowered by the wisdom of the metaphor, he continued, realizing that he had a whole farm he could use as examples. “While peppers are all right to pick when they’re still green, wheat that isn’t ripe is of no use, and lettuce picked before its prime is bitter—”

Jaytsy gripped the front of shirt, yanked him closer and said, “If you keep going, you best not compare me to a cow, unless you’re ready to be compared to an *ox!*” She released his shirt and went back to attacking her dinner.

Deck swallowed, straightened up, and took a wary step back.

Jaytsy was truly the most thoughtful, intelligent, and beautiful woman he’d ever met. He fell in love with her so easily and knew there was no one else in the world that could compare.

But there were moments, such as this one, when he recalled with gut-punching clarity that she carried the blood of several army officers—the deadliest men in the world.

And it wasn’t as if any of that was tempered on her mother’s side; Deck had seen Mahrree’s kindness turn into rabid ferocity on enough occasions to be a bit leery around her as well.

So naturally it was moments like this that made Deck wonder what kind of children they may have, and if they would terrify him.

As he watched Jaytsy hack at a boiled potato until it was pulverized, he worried about his own wedding vegetables being abused so rashly, so he tiptoed out of the room.

“Just a little more mooing,” he assured himself as he headed for the safety of the barn. “Just a little more mooing.”

Chapter 37 ~ “Who in the world would be brave enough to visit us?”

Instead of going through her back door as she normally did, Mahrree went to her front garden to inspect her seeds before entering the house. It had been three weeks since she planted, and she was hoping something would decide to bravely break through the gravely soil, but it was too dark for her to see anything. Or maybe Peto had been right—nothing would know how to grow there.

Disappointed, but not yet discouraged, she trudged through the front door, went straight to the sofa, and plopped onto it. She had thought expecting a baby was hardest thing to do, but watching her daughter expecting was a very close second.

Noticing that the kitchen door had swung shut as she came in—Perrin was likely trying to figure out something for dinner—she called out to him, “So it wasn’t the real thing, as I’m sure you’ve surmised by now.”

Peto snored loudly in his bedroom.

“I knew it was far too early,” she called again. “It’s better this way, but Jaytsy won’t believe that tonight.”

Her husband said something quietly in the kitchen.

“Perrin, are you all right in there?”

“Uh, yes,” he called louder. “Fine.”

“Want some help?”

“No, no, no. I’ve got it.”

“Really, I’m not that tired,” she lied as she closed her eyes and heard the door to the kitchen slowly open.

“Since when do you come home through the front door?” he

asked.

“Since I have a garden to attend to. Nothing’s up in it yet, as far as I can tell.”

“Uh, dinner will be ready in a while. Got a late start. Just baking some potatoes. We’ve got cheese, too. Peto made it, so we should be *cautious*.”

“Sounds fine,” she mumbled with her eyes still closed, noticing only vaguely that the way he said cheese suggested additional meanings. But cautious about cheese?

A moment later his voice was right above her. “Mahrree? We need to talk.”

She forced her eyes opened to look at him, hearing something tight and tense in his voice. In the dim candlelight she noticed apprehension on his face that she’d never seen before.

Maybe he wasn’t worried only about Peto’s cheese.

Immediately she sat up straighter. “What’s wrong?”

He gave her The Dinner smile. “Nothing’s *wrong*, actually . . . it’s just that, uh . . .”

His eyes flickered to the front door, then back to her again.

“You came through *that* door?” Despite her questioning expression, he continued. “Mahrree, when I came home tonight, I found a visitor waiting for me.”

Mahrree blinked at him, stunned that someone had been there. “Who in the world would be brave enough to visit us?”

“Interesting choice of words for your question,” he chuckled rigidly. “*Who in the world?* I haven’t yet heard everything, but we need to hear this together. Mahrree, it seems that perhaps a solution has found us.” With his eyes he gestured to the kitchen.

Her shoulders sagged in disappointment. “But Perrin, Terry’s land! What happened to your plan? We were going—”

She stopped as a horrible realization came to her.

Maybe the visitor in the kitchen was someone who wouldn’t *let* them leave. Perhaps it was someone from the garrison, or the Administrators.

And here she was blurting out their secrets, very *incautiously*—

“Mahrree, will you listen to what the visitor has to say?”

She’d never seen him so hesitant and stiff. Maybe this was finally Idumea’s response to her outburst.

Feeling herself grow weak, she said, “Perrin, are you sure—”

“Mahrree, just . . .” He glanced to the kitchen. “Just wait here.”

She sat up properly and turned from her position on the sofa to watch him go to the kitchen, bracing herself for whatever would come through that door. She had to be brave; there was no other choice.

A moment later someone came through the door, initially hard to see in the dim candlelight.

But soon Mahrree noticed enough that she stiffened and took to her feet. Perrin walked calmly behind the stranger who wore rough linen or cotton, Mahrree wasn't sure which, dyed in mottled colors.

She went into full alarm. "PERRIN! Why is there a Guarder in my house?"

"Actually, we're not always called Guarders," the person—female—said as she padded, strangely tranquil, across the room.

Mahrree glared at Perrin. His face was unreadable, which made Mahrree feel even more anxious.

A *woman*. A Guarder woman which Perrin thought didn't exist, but that Mahrree knew did. She recognized the clothing—the same as she had seen on the woman years ago in the forest. But this wasn't the same person; she was younger, darker, and more gentle.

Gentle?

Her soft brown eyes complimented her curly soft black hair which was tied up in a wide ponytail. Everything about the woman was calm, reassuring, and highly suspicious.

She stopped in front of Mahrree. "Our ancestors *were* sort of Guarders, for a time, but now we have taken a new name: Salem-ites."

Every inch of Mahrree panicked. "What does that mean?" She looked frantically to Perrin for answers, who stood behind the woman. Mahrree fully expected to see him holding his long knife, prepared to eliminate this threat in their gathering room, but his hands were empty.

"Just listen, Mahrree. And . . . keep an open mind." He smiled tentatively. "If anyone can, it's you." He pulled out a chair by the table and sat down, nodding for the woman to continue.

Mahrree knew her mouth was hanging wide open, but she had no power to close it. She stared at her husband, then finally back at the woman.

The visitor smiled so beautifully Mahrree felt her whole body become warm. That was wrong! She hated this woman and her people who killed her husband's parents, who took Perrin away from her so many times, who . . . who—

“I understand you know the history of your people very well, Mahrree Shin,” she said kindly. “Tell me, what happened to the men that were guarding the ninth Guide?”

Mahrree scoffed. “They killed Pax in 200! They had spies everywhere, and when Querul the First discovered the traitors he rooted them out. We’ve been rooting Guardians out ever since!”

Astonishingly, Perrin slowly shook his head.

Mahrree’s shoulders fell. “Wha—, Perrin?”

The woman knelt down in front of Mahrree. The action was so unexpected that Mahrree quit spluttering and sat down clumsily on the sofa to see what odd thing the woman would do next.

“Mahrree Shin, Guide Pax wasn’t killed. The men guarding him were not traitors. They were his assistants, his brothers, and his protectors.”

“So what happened to him?” Mahrree snapped. “Tell me that!”

“I would love to!” she said with a radiant smile. “It was King Querul and Guide Pax who had disagreements. It was King Querul’s guards who were told to kill Pax. And it was those guards who betrayed Querul, not the other way around. The guards supported the Guide, and told Pax that Querul wanted him and all other followers of The Writings dead. King Querul feared that the followers would destroy his kingdom and power by protesting his changes to the world. Pax recognized much could be resolved in letting Querul believe he was successful. So Pax and the guards went into the forest up toward Mt. Deceit, just as Querul wanted. They found a route past Moorland to a new land. The guards then left Pax and a few of his men, returned to Moorland, killed a deer in the forest, bloodied their cloaks and hands, and allowed themselves to be captured.”

Mahrree sat breathless, unable to believe what she was hearing, yet desperately hoping it was true.

“Querul told the world he executed the guards for their treachery, but in reality he rewarded them for eliminating his greatest enemy. A few nights later he released the seven guards to escape from Idumea, their pockets filled with reward gold. They split up and went to different villages of the world, bringing word to others who were devoted to Pax that they’d found a new home. They went to every village to bring the good news, along with directions of how to get there, and even a bit of gold to help them leave. Querul’s reward gold became the means for moving more than two thousand men, women, and children.”

Mahrree couldn't move, too stunned to even blink.

All the history she knew so well was just Querul's story.

His-story.

"After a few hundred people disappeared, Querul became suspicious. But after two weeks and more than two thousand people missing, he began to realize something was quite wrong. That's when he fabricated his story about Guarders, about a people living in a secret society out to betray and destroy the world." The light in the woman's face dimmed and her voice quieted. "We lost almost four hundred people who tried to join our ancestors. They were tracked down and killed by Querul's soldiers. After that we had to establish secret ways to move them." Her face brightened considerably. "*And we did. We've been very successful ever since. The division of the world did happen, Mahrree Shin! And it's still happening!*"

The words, as soft and sweetly as the woman delivered them, hit Mahrree with the force an ice storm. Yet still she was filled with enormous heat and tears flooded her eyes. So conflicted and surprised, she didn't know what to think. It was too much to believe. It was too good to be true . . .

She looked at Perrin.

He was leaning forward in his chair, arms resting on his legs, watching her intently. "In a way, Pax was an explorer."

The dark woman smiled at Perrin's explanation. "We're not as you've been told. Your kings and now Administrators ignore all evidence of us. To keep your people here they had to control you with fear of the unknown, just like a parent tells of dangers of wild beasts to keep a child within arm's reach. And it's worked, very well," she said with a sad smile. "The children of the governments have never questioned their leaders. Even when they were mature enough to realize the truth could be something entirely different."

A memory buried deep in the back of Mahrree's mind suddenly flared up, filling her again with such heat and light it nearly knocked her off the sofa.

She gulped as the woman smiled at her. "Mrs. Shin, a long time ago you were told that 'someday' would come for you. Do you remember that night?"

Oh, yes. All of it rushed back to her, memories that she tried to forget. The forest. The woman—

Almost sixteen years ago she watched her husband riding along the forest's edge trying to discern what was disturbing the woods.

That night she decided that she would discover the truth about the Guarders. She ran into the forest, was surprised by a woman, was too cowardly to find the truth . . .

Perrin stared at her, mystified, with his eyebrows furrowed.

The woman in front of her seemed to read it all on Mahrree's face. "Do these words sound familiar to you, Mrs. Shin? 'There will be a day when you *will* be ready to leave it all behind and embrace the truth. Until then, think of this night never again. Should your mind ever find itself surprised by this memory, tell yourself it was just a vivid dream, for that's all it really is. You can practice looking at the world in different ways, preparing your mind to realize you know really nothing at all, looking at the sky and realizing it changes minute by second, but until that *someday* comes, nothing will ever quite make sense. That's all right. But when that day *does* come, everything will hit you with such finality and power you will never again be able to forget it or deny it. You will find the truth and *run to it*.'" "

"Dear Creator!" was all Mahrree could whisper as the words she forced herself to forget reformed themselves clearly in her mind. She'd almost forgotten that a day would come for her.

And now . . . ?

Mahrree gasped. "She was one of you!"

"Mahrree?" Perrin asked sharply, "What's this all about?"

How could she tell him about the time she was a naïve 31-year-old who thought her husband and father-in-law were cowards? That she ran straight into a Guarder and shrank away from the truth? That she found their massive black dog Barker bounding through the forest, most likely acting as the distraction that had frustrated her husband and the fort all day long.

The kneeling woman somehow knew it all. "It means, Mr. Shin, that your wife is ready to hear the truth. And whatever it is, and *wherever* it is, she'll accept it."

"I will," Mahrree breathed. "But this is still all so unbelievable."

"Tell me a truth," Perrin demanded, his squint becoming cynical.

The visitor nodded. "Gladly. So well has your Administrators poisoned your minds against us that rarely has anyone set foot on your mountains beyond the forest. We know. We watch. We always have. We were always ready to welcome your people. But the lies were so readily accepted that no truth could enter your imaginations." She leaned closer to Mahrree. "We're a simple people who have a beautiful life. We're not violent. We don't raid your lands, and we never

have.” She turned to Perrin before she dropped the next sentence. “Your own people do that.”

“Possible,” he conceded. “We’ve suspected for years that Guarders were living among us. Riplak. Kuman. Maybe even old Wiles. But I imagine it’s more widespread than I suspected.”

The woman nodded grimly. “It is. The Guarders have always been a secret group, but secret among your own citizens. An army needs an enemy, correct? The kings knew it, and so do the Administrators. If you don’t have an enemy to fight, you begin to fight among yourselves. I believe you’ve seen that in the past year, ever since you eliminated the Guarders in Moorland.”

Perrin let out a low whistle. “Yes, yes we have. With the land grab. You say the Administrators know? Who? How many?”

“Unsure,” she shook her head. “If we knew we could have much more success in exposing them. But we suspect at the top it’s a very small number. Maybe just a couple.”

“Maybe just Nicko Mal?” Perrin said darkly.

The woman shrugged. “None of our people have been able to get close enough to him to know, but that’s what we believe.”

Perrin nodded, his jaw working in thought.

“But,” Mahrree said, trying to organize the onslaught of information that was overwhelming her, “You said *you* watch us from the forests?”

“Yes, we have for years,” she smiled again. “And not just from the forests. We live among you too. We’ve always sent scouts. Some spend just a few seasons, some a few years. We watch and help as we can.”

“Who do you send?” Mahrree asked, still in disbelief.

The woman beamed. “You met one just recently. Mrs. Braxhicks, the midwife? She came to your daughter a few weeks ago.”

“She—, Why—, Yes—” She remembered: Mrs. Braxhicks knew how to check the color of the sky.

“We have a midwife in every village and even in Idumea now,” the woman explained. “We started over twenty years ago. Some of our midwives have gotten themselves in trouble by being too vocal, but we’ve never lost one yet. We’re trying now to undo the Administrators’ damage. Mrs. Braxhicks is hoping to convince them to change some things in their new handbook. We have much better ways. And, I don’t know if you noticed, there are very few of your women who want to be midwives. Your people have so few babies now.”

“I liked her,” Mahrree considered. “She seemed to know what she was doing.”

“She does. She has twelve children herself.”

“Twelve!” Mahrree gasped.

“And she’s delivered hundreds more. Edge needs someone like her. *Your daughter* needs her. That’s why she’s here.”

Before Mahrree could question how the woman knew about their daughter, Perrin fidgeted. “Who else has Salem supplied?”

Mahrree heard the growing paranoia in his voice. She was feeling a bit paranoid herself.

“Idumea and the world no longer have much use for midwives, and they also have little use for rectors,” she told him. “So for the past few years, all rectors have come from Salem as well.”

Perrin sat up with a small yet irritated smile. “Did you have a little old rector . . .” he snapped his fingers trying to remember the name.

The woman laughed lightly. “Are you thinking of one who several seasons ago caused a ‘little disturbance’ in the traffic of Edge? Before your attack on Moorland? Rector Chame?”

“Yes!” Perrin slapped his leg. “He’s yours?”

She nodded. “And he was mortified by it. When he returned he told us all about it, and how it was all worth it because he got to meet you. He’s still quite remorseful. Perhaps you could let him know that you forgive him?”

Perrin nodded, the tension in his face easing briefly. “He said he had known about me for years. I couldn’t figure out what that meant.”

“We *have* known about you for years. We’ve watched you from the forests.”

“So, is Rector Yung . . .?” Mahrree began.

She nodded again. “One of us as well, yes. He returned to us, with several other rectors, right after Mr. Shin resigned and the Administrators said they were no longer needed.”

“Unbelievable!” Perrin whispered.

“And Mrs. Shin? That night I just spoke of?” the woman said gently. “The woman you met in the forest was his wife.”

Mahrree covered her mouth with her hand, but Perrin jerked in surprise.

“Mahrree? You? In the forest?”

“That was Mrs. Yung?” Mahrree asked the woman, unable to face her husband just yet. “She was . . . she was . . .”

“One of our best scouts, especially in the trees,” the woman

explained. “She passed away peacefully some years ago, in her sleep. But that night many years ago she wrote down the words she spoke to you, so that we could tell you them when the time was right.”

Perrin held his hands out, his patience gone. “MAHREE?!”

She gulped.

His expression was dreadful.

“I’ll tell you later. I promise.” She turned back to their visitor who, strangely, seemed safer for the moment. “Why are you all here?”

“To bring home those who should be with us, to Salem,” the woman explained. “There are many in the world who feel disaffected by it. It no longer reflects their beliefs or hopes. They’re alone and lost, and looking for something more. The Creator plants in all of us a seed of hope. Some people let it die. Some deliberately crush it. Some let others destroy it. But there are those who protect it and help it grow. They know something more is out there and they look for it. Does this sound familiar to you?”

It was so familiar it was if she were reading their minds.

Perrin cleared his throat roughly, forgetting for the moment about his wife’s unexplained visit to the forest. “Yes,” his voice cracked.

Mahrree nodded, tears trickling down her face which she brushed away. She thought of Guide Hierum again, pleading with the first families to not reject the society the Creator had established for them. So often she had read his last words, uttered just before he was killed by the six men who formed Idumea, that she could hear them in her head again.

But instead of feeling sorrow for a lost way of living, she felt .

..

“We have what you’re looking for in Salem,” the woman promised. “We follow The Writings. We allow people to think, to grow, and to explore. We even allow them to disagree and debate! But mostly we are of one mind and one heart. We live after the way the Creator established the first five hundred families. We even teach our children to notice the true color of the sky.”

Mahrree knew what she was feeling: hope. For the first time in weeks—*years*—hope.

“Everyone has a place there. Perrin Shin, Mahrree Shin—there is room for you as well. And for your children.”

“It’d be so *convenient* to believe you,” Perrin said, his voice still

shaky. "But also so difficult. This could be an elaborate hoax. I gullibly surrender to you, and then what? I get turned over to the Guarders, who you still may very well be. Perhaps they've sent you here to take me so they can have revenge for what I did to Moorland. *He* certainly looks like one of them!"

"He? He who?" Mahrree looked around quickly.

A large dark man emerged from a shadow next to the front door. Mahrree whimpered.

"Please don't be alarmed," he said in a deep voice.

"I . . . I walked right past . . ."

"Yes, you did," he chuckled softly.

"That's why she'd never make a good officer," Perrin said dully. "She misses things."

Mahrree saw Perrin's long knife in the man's hand, his arms crossed.

He unfolded them. "Would it make it easier to believe me if I was no longer holding this?" He held up the knife.

Until he passed in front of her on his way to the table, Mahrree didn't realize how massive the man was. He seemed to blend into the shadows, making him appear to be part of everything and everywhere. She tried to stifle another whimper.

The man stopped and looked at her kindly. His dark face was far more pleasant than she expected. "You don't need to fear me. If I really wanted to kill you, I could have done it a while ago. Besides, I never kill anyone unless I have to. I usually try only to give people something to remember me by." He turned to Perrin. "I always thought that was excellent advice."

He noiselessly pulled out the drawer next to Perrin, whose mouth was hanging open.

The man placed the knife in and closed the drawer.

"Perrin," Mahrree whispered, "how did he know where . . ."

The man turned so that he could look at both of them.

"You're right. I do look like a Guarder. That's because Guarders try to look like *us*. They've copied our dress, our mannerisms, even our ability to negotiate the forest. Not as successfully, though," he added with a satisfied smile. "They have no originality or creativity. They steal everything, from your goods and security, to our techniques. There have always been *two* groups in the forest, Colonel. But you never saw us. You saw Guarders, but not Salemites. Well, except for one more."

Perrin let out a low breath, his shoulders sagging.

“*Something to remember me by,*” he whispered, shaking his head. “I’m so dense.” He turned his gaze from the man and looked at Mahrree. He raised one eyebrow at her and twitched his nose.

Mahrree would have returned a signal, and perhaps she was, but she didn’t know what the meaning was associated with a mouth agape. She did manage to nod slowly. They said it together.

“Shem Zenos!”

The man nodded and smiled hesitantly.

His wife spoke up. “I didn’t mislead you when I said there was no Shem Zenos with us, Mr. Shin. He isn’t ‘with us’ right *now*. But he did tell us how to enter your home and where to find the knife, some time ago.”

Perrin stared hard at the dark woman’s husband. “Where is he? I want to talk to him, *now!*”

“I don’t know,” the man confessed. “He missed our meeting last night. The first time it’s happened in a very long time. Thorne must have a very tight hold on him right now.”

“You know about Thorne?” Mahrree asked, slightly dazed, still trying to process what she was hearing.

“I know everything, Mrs. Shin. Whatever Shem knows, I know.” He turned to Perrin. “Everything. You can trust me.”

Perrin sat back and folded his arms, probably feeling just as exposed as Mahrree did right then.

Mahrree shook her head. “So when Shem went on leave . . . he didn’t go to Flax—”

The man chuckled. “The first time he ever went *near* Idumea was when he was chasing the colonel almost three years ago.”

“You know about that?” Mahrree asked in amazement. “Oh wait, you know everything.” She put her hands to her head to rub her temples, as if that might put all that she heard in some kind of order.

Perrin stared at the large man, trying to understand just what all of this meant.

Shem Zenos *was* a Guarder, in a way. Both Perrin and Mahrree had suspected that once, a long time ago.

But he wasn’t really a Guarder, but a *Salemite*.

Mahrree could see in Perrin’s face exactly what she was thinking.

Shem Zenos had lied to them. For years.

They called him brother. He watched their children. He helped

when the family was ill or injured. He ate with them. Laughed with them. Cried with them. He slept in their home. He rescued them. He knew *everything* about them, more intimately than any other man.

And they obviously knew *nothing* about him.

Mahrree was wondering how to feel about him when she heard the woman speaking again.

“My husband doesn’t know everything,” she said worriedly. “He doesn’t know where Shem’s been the past three weeks.”

The man shrugged. “But he’s back, I’m sure of it.”

“He is,” Perrin said, sounding surprised to be volunteering that information. He stood up next to the large man.

Perrin could *probably* take him, Mahrree decided. Perrin was likely evaluating that scenario too. Maybe if he surprised him. And the man was wounded. And blindfolded. And tied to a large rock.

“Look,” Perrin said, “you tell me I can trust you, but I have no reason to. Until I speak to Shem, I’m going to find it very difficult to trust *anyone*. *Especially* Shem. But I can read his eyes. I think,” he added quietly.

The man put a sympathetic hand on Perrin’s shoulder. “I wished we had that kind of time. But Mr. Shin, we don’t. Your family is in danger, right now. We need to get you out and to safety.”

“Out? Where?” Mahrree asked.

“We’ll take you to Salem. Tomorrow night.”

Mahrree was glad she was sitting down because her ability to hold herself up was gone.

Perrin was already shaking his head. “Tomorrow?! No! Absolutely not. I told your wife I would *consider* this. We need time to think, to weigh the decision—”

Now the man was shaking his head. “You have no time for—”

“How do you know?!” Perrin bellowed. “What do you know?”

The man smiled patiently. “You’re a man of faith, I know you are. And as a man of faith you know there are times you must trust in what you are told, and believe that the verification will come later. I can’t tell you how we know. To be honest, I don’t know myself why you need to leave so quickly. But it has been made very clear to our leaders in Salem that you *must* leave tomorrow night. All of you.”

“That’s just not possible!” Mahrree exclaimed. “I mean, we do have enough silver and gold—”

“You won’t need any of that,” the man told them. “We have no use for it in Salem.”

Perrin scowled. "How can that be?"

"It can 'be' quite well," the woman assured them. "Oh, how I wished we had more time to explain things to you, but we simply don't. We realize that we're asking you to put a great deal of faith in us, but I promise—you'll be glad you did."

Mahrree sighed. "But right now we can't go on a journey to . . . exactly where is Salem?"

The man's smile turned apologetic. "I'm afraid I can't tell you that either."

Perrin exhaled in aggravation.

"No matter how far it is," Mahrree insisted, "Jaytsy can't make the journey. She's expecting, and soon!"

"Mrs. Shin," the woman said kindly, "moving expecting women is what we do best."

"What do you mean?" Perrin asked sharply.

The woman remained calm despite the glare aimed at her. "Mr. Shin, how many people go missing each year? We know you were trying to figure that out two years ago, before Moorland."

Perrin took a surprised step backward. "We never got definitive numbers. The villages don't like to record those kinds of failures, but at most, maybe one hundred a year."

The man shook his head. "It's closer to three hundred each year, according to Shem's records. Usually more. There *are* some who are lost to accidents, but far more are lost to Salem."

"Why?" Mahrree asked, but she already had a feeling she knew.

"Many reasons," the man told her. "Some are fleeing from some kind of oppression." He nodded to his wife. "Tell them. I think it'll help."

The woman nodded back. "Mrs. Shin, Mr. Shin—I'm sure you know, because Mrs. Shin mentioned them on the platform to Mr. Kori. Mrs. Braxhicks was there and heard," she added in explanation. "King Querul the First had servants, right?"

Perrin slowly sat down. "How do you know about—"

"Those servants were held in the compound of his mansion during the Great War," the woman said, "and after the war they were told that the world outside was a dangerous, lawless place."

Mahrree stared at the woman, fascinated.

"For three generations the Queruls held those servants, trapped as slaves," her voice grew husky, and she cleared her throat. "Until one day a general named Pere Shin decided to undo that terrible wrong. High General Shin freed those thirty-three servants, sent

them to Winds, and made sure they had a new life of freedom.”

“Yes he did,” Perrin whispered.

The woman smiled as a tear trickled down her face. “I am one of their great-granddaughters.”

Perrin covered his mouth with his hand. “I tried looking once for your ancestors . . .” his muffled voice trailed off.

Mahrree felt a tear slide down her face, too.

“Thank you!” the woman beamed. “But my ancestors left only two years after they settled in Winds. Salemites came for them and took them away for a *real* life of freedom. But they never forgot the man who freed them. As they had children they told them the story, and each one of us, as we grew old enough, vowed we would do what we could to finally free Pere Shin’s descendants. Perrin Shin, I’ve been waiting many years to fulfill my family’s vow to *free you*.”

He was speechless.

So was Mahrree.

The woman looked at her husband and smiled. “Fortunately, I don’t look anything like my great-great-great grandfather Querul the Second. At least, according to a couple of people who knew.”

It took another minute for Perrin to finally stammer out, “My grandfather . . . my grandfather thought the Queruls fathered some of their servants . . .”

The dark woman shrugged but smiled.

“It’s true, isn’t it?” Perrin whispered. “Everything. How could you know unless you learned it from those who . . . who . . .”

The woman’s husband put a comforting hand back on his shoulder. “We don’t make it a habit to drop so much information at once. We usually teach you over several weeks. I’m sorry for the onslaught, but as I said before, time is of the essence. We move people all the time. Some have been oppressed, like my wife’s ancestors. Others are being threatened by the Administrators, but many others are just looking for a better life, or are in danger of being sent to Idumea.”

“Sent to Idumea?” Mahrree wondered. Then she remembered what the woman said about moving expecting women. “Because they’re expecting a third baby?”

Perrin’s gaze shifted to the floor and his fingers pinched the bridge of his nose. That was a new movement for him, and Mahrree didn’t know what to make of it.

“Yes,” the woman said. “Mrs. Shin, it’s not by accident that many of the midwives in the world are now from Salem. When a woman

confides to her midwife that she desires more children, they're supposed to convince the woman to take The Drink. *Unless*," she said with a sly smile, "that midwife is from Salem. Then we present them with another solution."

"We've been doing it for decades," her husband told them. "Shortly after a woman delivers her second child, but before she's to take The Drink, the family is moved to another village, with our assistance. Sometimes the grandparents move with them. No one in the new village knows them, or knows if the wife took The Drink. They live there for a season, keeping to themselves and not meeting anyone. Neighbors don't take an interest in each other here, so it's not a problem. Then we take the family to Salem. Since no one knew them, no one's too alarmed at their disappearance, and they're soon forgotten. One of the main routes to Salem is controlled by Shem. He's made our job much easier over the years."

Perrin shook his head, still focused on the floor.

Mahrree cringed. She could only imagine what he was thinking. Just yesterday he told her he knew everything.

"Quite often the mother is already expecting," the woman added. "We've had several close to birthing, having been kept hidden by their husbands until they finally confide in a Salemite midwife about their disloyalty to the Administrators. Then we have to work very quickly. There have even been a few babies born along the way! We have a lot of movement to Salem once the weather warms. That's when the mothers can no longer hide their bellies in Snowing Season clothing. I'm sorry, I forgot—you call it the Raining Season."

"That's marvelous!" Mahrree sighed. "So many women have more than two children!" She beamed at her husband and her smile faded.

His head was still down, his fingers rubbing his forehead.

"Perrin?" she asked gently.

She could barely hear his response. "That's what he was trying to tell me. After Peto was born. About The Drink, and Guarder women. That's what Shem—" He slumped in the chair, still not looking up. "I didn't . . . I didn't know . . . I couldn't *imagine*. How could I have *possibly* thought that *we* . . ." He cleared his throat to reduce the emotion in it.

Mahrree's heart ached for him. He must have been reliving their conversation on their second wedding anniversary, too. The night

he told her adamantly there was no possible way they could have four, or even three, children.

Duty to the Administrators. Way it must be.

Mahrree had been bitterly disappointed, but had gotten over it years ago, grateful for the two children they did have. The news that many in the world defied the Administrators by not taking The Drink had filled Mahrree with immense hope.

But the news had the opposite effect on Perrin.

There was no way they could have done it back then, Mahrree realized. Just vanish from the world? High General Relf Shin would never have rested until he found them. Everything happened as it should, she was sure of it.

But Perrin's posture suggested a man devastated by regret.

"Your daughter can have a different future, Mr. Shin," the woman said kindly.

The man patted Perrin's shoulder.

Perrin's head slowly came up and he looked at Mahrree with bloodshot eyes. "Both of our children could have a different future," he whispered.

Mahrree nodded at him.

Perrin cleared his throat gruffly and wiped his wet face. "Uh, perhaps you may know. About two years ago, as we were planning the offensive, the commander from Quake mentioned a family with two little boys—"

"Yes," the man said. "Shem told me about them. Fadh's neighbors. They came to Salem, and four moons later they were joined by a sister. The family is expecting their fourth child now."

Perrin's shoulders sagged in relief. "Another couple, much earlier. Last name of Yordin?"

The man smiled. "Shem mentioned them, too. I had a feeling you'd be asking, so I looked them up in our records. Mr. Yordin was under pressure of King Querul the Fourth."

"To make swords?" Perrin asked. "He was experimenting with metals."

"No, to make something else. Querul the Fourth wasn't the brightest man. He was sure that the correct mixture of metals could create gold. Mr. Yordin had no success in convincing him gold wasn't an alloy. The king became desperate and, influenced by his very controlling mother, threatened to take Mr. Yordin's grandson as hostage until the grandfather found a way to create gold. Mr. Yordin confided

in his rector, asking for ideas. The rector happened to be from Salem, one of the first we sent. The Yordins came to Salem to save their grandson's life. With them gone, there was no more threat to Gari. They lived in Salem for twenty-four years. Died just a few years ago."

Perrin pinched his nose again. "Gari Roarin' Yordin—they left for *you*. How ironic. King Oren was still in power when Yordin started Command School. The very government that forced his grandparents to leave was the one he pledged to serve. All to avenge his grandparents. They were alive most of that time." He put his head in his hands. "Is there any way I can tell Gari? Let him know they were all right?"

"I'm sorry, no," the man said quietly. "We have to maintain complete silence about disappearances. As much as we want people to know where we are, we can't risk Idumea finding out about Salem. The world would never let us live in peace. Once you leave the world, that's it. There can be no contact and no returning. You have to give up all that you know, but I promise you'll wish you could have done it sooner. The elder Yordins missed their family, but they had a full and rich life, and knew that their grandson was safe. But you won't have to abandon your family. We want to bring all of you."

The four of them sat in silence, the visitors in dark mottled clothing letting Mahrree and Perrin mull over all they'd been told.

For the second time in less than a moon, all that Mahrree *knew* she knew was abruptly overturned. While the news three weeks ago was too infuriating to believe, the ideas of tonight were to fantastic to embrace. In her mind was a flood of information which she tried to contain with a washcloth.

One thing was for sure: as a history teacher, she'd been terribly inaccurate.

Eventually she whispered, "I never wanted to leave this house. My father helped build it. My husband added to it. Our children were born here. Every good memory is in this house."

The woman answered just as softly. "And you take every good memory with you. Your life isn't the house. Your life is your family. Your parents are gone, but you carry them with you, wherever you go. Things don't matter. People do."

"Ask yourselves, honestly, Mr. and Mrs. Shin—what do you have to keep you here?" her husband said. "Things? Familiarity? Now consider this—what do you have to gain by leaving? What

kind of future could your children have? Mr. Shin, you seem to be interested in explorers. Come on the greatest exploration of all! Come find a new life!”

Mahrree smiled dimly. “We were just planning to find Terry’s ruins.”

“Mrs. Shin,” he grinned, “we can give you a fully guided tour of Terry’s ruins. We send tour groups there every year.”

Mahrree didn’t know how much more she could take that night.

“Please consider what we’ve said,” the woman said. “I assure you what we have in Salem is what you’ve always looked for. We know about your family and have for years. We have what you have been looking for. It’s time to *come home*.”

Mahrree felt those last words more deeply than anything ever before. She was powerfully aware of the sudden presence of her father, and her mother as well, sitting on either side of her. They filled her with the same message: *It’s time to go home!*

The emotion overwhelmed her, and to avoid anyone seeing her eyes brimming, she glanced blurrily around the walls of her home and the rocks she loved so much. She focused on a favorite smooth, flat rock her father had placed and replaced. Tonight it looked different.

It was just a rock.

She shifted her gaze at her husband. His head was down, his fingers interlaced. She wished he’d look up and show her what he was thinking. But then she knew. As intensely as she felt Cephas and Hycymum, she also felt Relf and Joriana on either side of him.

At last he took a deep breath and released it, then raised his head and gave her a new expression.

They were going to Salem.

Chapter 38 ~ “My name is Shem Zenos. And . . .”

Shem entered the dark barn as slowly as he had approached it. While the trip to Deck’s place usually took only a few minutes, Shem wasn’t about to take any chances, not at this point of the plan.

He’d circled the area for an hour under cover of a very dark night. Not even the cows seemed to hear his footsteps. He stepped into the middle of the barn, slowly removed the bag from his shoulder, and placed it on the ground. Carefully he lit the small candle he brought and looked around.

“Perrin?”

Shem knew he was there, even though he didn’t respond. Thicker than the scent of manure was the tension that filled the barn. This wasn’t going to be easy.

“Can I just start by saying, this wasn’t how it was going to be? It was supposed to be me telling you, and I’ve had speeches and thoughts prepared for years.” Shem sighed sadly. “I can’t imagine what you think of me. And let me add that I completely understand if you’re feeling a bit paranoid right now—”

“Who are you? Honestly,” the cold voice interrupted him from somewhere above.

He looked up to the rafters and cleared his throat. “My name is Shem Zenos. I was born in Salem. My mother died when I was two. I have a father and a sister that is ten years older than me. And . . .”

He hesitated. When you’re used to expressing one form of truth, finally admitting the real one tends to catch in your throat.

But he’d been waiting for seventeen years to do this.

“She’s not my only sister. My father waded through five more

daughters before he finally got his son. I do have two nieces, as I've told you, *and* twenty-nine more nieces and nephews, not counting Jaytsy and Peto, and many great-nieces and nephews. The count changes every season. I really did have more experience watching your children when they were young than you did."

"Keep going," the voice said grimly.

Shem nodded. It felt wrong to be confessing, especially this way, but it was only fair that he experience the same vulnerability as his best friend.

"I . . . I . . . I've never been to Flax or Waves," he began his ramble. "I took those names off the map in your office the first day I met you. The first time I rode south was when I was trying to catch up to you on the way to Idumea. Remember that Guarder spy in the forest the first year that I was feeding and getting information from? Well, there was no spy. I was just trying to find a way to earn your confidence and find excuses to come to your home. I was inexperienced and clumsy back then and made a lot of mistakes—"

Which he felt he was doing again, but there was no sense in holding back anymore.

"I was initially supposed to stay only two years to learn about you and to discover if we could work around you. But I found more in Edge than I expected." He took an earnest step forward. "Perrin, I was never dishonest in my feelings toward you or your family. Yours is my second family, and I've never done anything to jeopardize you."

Perrin's tone could have frozen a fire. "Anything else?"

"I . . . I have some records in this bag that—"

"Anything else . . . *personal*?"

Shem looked up and around, trying to find the location of the voice. He saw a glint of steel in the faint light cast off by his candle.

"Personal. All right. The truth of everything. That's what I'm here to give you." He'd meant to follow that up with a tense chuckle, but it stuck in his throat. After a nervous cough he said, "Here we go. Well, Perrin, you always make me nervous when you hold that knife of yours, because no one ever seems to survive an encounter with your blades. I never cheated in the Strongest Soldier races, but I was tempted. I had a big crush on Mahrree when I was twenty-one, but I got over that when I realized it could never be. I once tried on your jacket when you were a lieutenant colonel. I loved sitting in your big chair and practicing your 'Come in!' voice when you were away.

Fooled Thorne with it on more than one occasion. And, Perrin, I swore I'd never tell you this, but you really should know. I've kept this in confidence for quite a while, but . . ." He took a deep breath. "Perrin, I find the way you say 'No, no, no' irritating. One 'no' is sufficient. Really. Why three times? I never understood that."

Then he braced for the impact.

A dark chuckle came from behind the glint of steel. "You really had a crush on her?"

"Most miserable weeks of my life," Shem sighed heavily. "Knew I had to try to get over it the night of that Guarder attack when she thought I was unconscious and held my hand, called me her *little brother*, and told me the story of how she fell in love with you. I knew then it'd *always* be you."

The rafters were silent.

Shem fought the desire to clench his fist in defense. Whatever would come, he would take.

"How did my jacket look on you?"

"Quite handsome," Shem dared a small smile. "Should've been mine."

Silence.

"I say 'no' three times because I want to make sure people hear it."

Shem scoffed in a way he hoped sounded good-natured. "You really think people don't hear you? Once really is enough."

"You're being *completely honest* with me tonight?"

Shem knew this was going to be a rough ride. He'd always pictured some scenario where he'd be sitting in the Shins' gathering room and would say something like, "About those Guarders—there are a *few* things you don't know . . ." He was going to relish the look of absolute astonishment on each of the Shins' faces once he told them, after all these years . . .

But in his mind the grand disclosure never involved dark barns or his best friend holding a long knife, with Shem as the target.

"Perrin, I think confessing to someone that I had feelings for his wife is about as honest as one man can be with another."

A body dropped out of the rafters right in front of Shem. All he saw was the flash of steel as its cold tip pressed into his throat, and a strong arm wrapped around his torso, restricting his arms.

The candle in Shem's hand snuffed out. He sucked in his breath at the touch of the blade, but he didn't take a defensive stance. Instead, he remained at the mercy of Perrin.

"So tell me this," Perrin's voice was low and harsh, "was I the

biggest fool in the entire army that you could march hundreds of people past my fort without my notice!?”

“You were never a fool, Perrin,” the steadiness of his voice surprised Shem. Almost as much as the knife. “Quite the opposite. You were the only one we could trust. The Creator placed you there so you could be the means of saving *thousands* of people. Perrin, just put the knife away please. I promise I’ll tell you everything.”

“I went to Edge because I chose to, not because I was sent there.” Perrin’s tone was thick with paranoia.

“You told me once you felt drawn to Edge,” Shem reminded him. “Why do you think that is?”

When Perrin didn’t answer, Shem said, “The Creator put that desire in you, and you listened to Him. As you should.”

“Hogal wanted me to come back. He kept writing me—” Perrin gasped as a new idea came to him. “Shem, your contact told me that the rectors in the world were from Salem! Was Hogal—”

“No, he wasn’t. We had only two or three from Salem at the time of Hogal. But Perrin, Hogal knew about us.”

Perrin pulled the knife back a little. “Are you sure?”

Shem nodded before he realized Perrin wouldn’t be able to see him in the dark. “Just a few days before that first Guarder raid he took me to his office after the Holy Day luncheon. He said, ‘I know who you are, and why you’re in Edge.’”

“Maybe he thought you were a Guarder?”

“No, Perrin. Because then he said, ‘I’ve done all I could to prepare Perrin for the Creator.’”

“Prepare me?” Perrin’s tone was now doubtful and confused, with a healthy dose of cynicism.

Shem knew it was going to be a long night, and the knife still hovering near his throat wasn’t helping things. “He told me the Creator had revealed to him who you were to become,” he explained. “That was back when you were still a teenager. So he invited you to Edge and said that you grew a great deal in that time.”

“I came to Edge for Weeding Season when I was eighteen,” Perrin murmured. “Hogal changed the way I thought about everything. He fixed everything in me, too,” he added. “He and Tabbitt always wanted me to come back, so I did when I was a captain.”

“The Creator has all kinds of ways of nudging people in the right directions,” Shem said gently, sensing that Perrin’s cynicism was fading. “Hogal told me he thoroughly enjoyed the last few years he had

with you, but he was getting too old to keep up anymore. He told me to watch out for you, and that you were now my responsibility.”

Perrin was quiet before saying, “Hogal *knew* he’d be dying?”

“Yes, I’m sure he did. Rather a lot for a twenty-one year old to hear, I have to admit.” Shem chuckled sadly. “Remember, I was struggling with that crush on Mahrree at the time, too. I think I just stared at him for a full minute before he slapped me on the back, wagged those eyebrows of his, and wished me good luck.”

Behind him, Shem felt Perrin scoff lightly.

“Ah, Hogal! He told Mahrree and me to keep you close. We thought it was because he liked you. Sometimes I think I learned so much from him, but I suppose he kept far more from me than I realized. I’m beginning to realize *everyone* has been keeping things from me. I may have to interrogate Mahrree later just to see what she knows that I don’t.”

Shem didn’t say a word and didn’t move a muscle, but stood as *sedately* as he could.

“She was in the forest, many years ago,” Perrin said. “Met Yung’s wife. Did you know that?”

Shem swallowed. “Actually, I did.”

“Figures,” Perrin scoffed again. “I’ve been thinking; those two lieutenants who were found dead in front of the guest quarters where my parents were staying after that Guarder raid? Tell me the truth—they didn’t die fighting each other all those years ago, did they?”

Shem looked down at his guilty hands as if he could see them in the dark. “No, they didn’t. They were about to kill your parents. I knew it wasn’t their time to go, so I . . . I redirected their hands. The lieutenants killed themselves, with my guidance.”

Perrin let out a low whistle. “We suspected you.”

“I know you did. Your father’s interrogation is rather hard to forget. And it made me sick to do it.”

“Of course it did. Interesting cover, too, getting sick like that.”

“I promise, that wasn’t faked!”

The men chuckled quietly. Shem sighed in relief to hear the old Perrin softening. If only he’d sheath that long knife . . .

“And Perrin—the one called Heth? His real name was actually Sonoforen.”

Perrin sucked in his breath. “Are you . . . are you *sure*? Oren’s oldest son?”

“Oh, I’m sure. He was there to kill your father and take back the mansion he grew up in.”

“How did you know?” Perrin whispered. “How much contact did you have with the Guardians?”

“I was never in contact with them. That’s the truth. It would’ve been too dangerous. But how I knew about the lieutenants? I was guided by the Creator,” Shem explained. “Whenever I saw someone that shouldn’t be where he was, I saw plainly in my mind what I had to do to move them away. That night in the hallway, when I saw the two lieutenants plotting to burst into the guest quarters, the image of my killing them came clearly to my mind. They couldn’t be allowed to destroy Relf and Joriana—not before their time. They still had to rescue Edge years later. It was my duty to destroy two evil men to keep them from disrupting the Creator’s work. Perrin, I still don’t believe I did it. I felt a force pushing me and directing my hand. It took only seconds, and I really wasn’t that skilled. And in the end I had only one drop of blood on me, a drop that your father wiped off my chin.”

“And here I’ve been saying all these years that you could never kill anything,” Perrin chuckled darkly.

“It wasn’t really me, Perrin. I was just the instrument. And it was awful!”

“Were there any others?”

Shem nodded guiltily. “That year, at the end of Raining Season. I was on patrols along the forest with three other soldiers when I received a signal that help was needed in the forest.”

“A signal . . . how?”

“Something similar to our coded messages to each other, tweaked a bit. Salemite scouts always hide in the trees above the fresh spring in case I need to drop a message to them. A quick glance was all we needed.

“That night the message was that they required help in the forest. I faked an illness, told the soldiers on patrol I wouldn’t be able to make it back to the fort before I’d need to change my trousers, and asked them to do a few circuits without me while I stayed at the fresh spring.”

“They agreed to leave you?” Perrin exclaimed. “At the fresh spring *alone*?”

“And at night. They really didn’t think anything of it. I’m not sure if you remember, but the entire fort was out that night looking for some strange noise gallivanting in the forest?”

“And I always thought I had everyone trained so well . . . never

leave a man alone, always look up into the trees—”

“You did, Perrin. I promise!” Shem chuckled.

“A noise in the forest?” Shem heard Perrin scratch his stubbly chin with his knife hand. “We didn’t find out what it was, did we?”

Shem shook his head. “No, you didn’t. And for that, I owe you an apology. Perrin, it was my fault.”

“This night’s just going to get longer, isn’t it?”

“My fault because I . . . trained Barker.”

“Wait, my dog Barker? The dog that never barked?”

“Yep. I’d come by late at night and train him to follow me, to leave my side running, then return when I made a noise like a crow cawing or a squirrel chirping. In those early years we used him to throw Guarders off our trails. They’d go running after him, leaving alone the expecting mothers and the families we were trying to move. Barker blended into the forest, made a lot of noise, but never barked. That’s because his parents and grandparents didn’t bark either. Do you remember how you got that dog?”

“He was found near a canal, abandoned—”

“Or so I told you.”

“Now that I think about it, Shem, *you* were the one who brought me that puppy!”

“All the way from Salem. Not all of those dogs are silent. Barker was the only one of that litter that appeared to not bark, and I knew you wanted a dog, we needed an animal to use as a diversion . . . it just all worked out.”

“Amazing,” Perrin breathed. “My dog was a Salemite! The Cat’s not from Salem, is he?”

“No, he’s not,” Shem chuckled.

“So tell me about that third life you ended,” Perrin reminded him.

Shem sighed. “Once the soldiers left me at the fresh spring, I headed up into the forest and received word that four Guarders had ventured far past our defenses. We always had about a dozen men in those days, sitting in the forest, watching and *encouraging* the Guarders to go in other directions away from our route. But that night we were bringing out a large group. Three expecting women, their husbands, six children, and one grandparent. Thirteen, not including the escorts helping them. Everything was going well until they made it into the forest. That’s when one of the expecting women felt her waters break and gush.”

“She didn’t, right?” Perrin must have been cringing. “Didn’t birth in the forest?”

“She did! We have ways to deal with that, but usually we try to get them to a secure location, first. Well, this baby wasn’t about to wait. They had no choice but to stop and help her birth. It was the noise that attracted the Guardians’ attention.”

Perrin shuddered behind Shem. “I was always pacing the fields when Mahrree birthed. But I can imagine the noises.”

“It wasn’t the mother, but her children! They were so frightened of the forest, of what was happening with their mother—it was all too much for them. They started wailing despite everyone’s assurances that soon they’d be a big brother and big sister.”

“Did the Guardians find them?”

“Almost. That’s what I was dispatched for. We were short on scouts because several ran to help the families calm down the children. Three different groups of four Guardians each were headed in their direction. Our men were able to take care of two groups, but my contact at the fresh spring told me to lure the last group to a trap of nets and ropes we had established, just in case of a situation like this. So . . . I found them, killed one of them, which made the other three follow me, and I led them straight to the trap.”

Shem took it as a good sign that Perrin’s arm holding his knife had been dropping. Still, Shem wasn’t about to move.

“How did you kill him, Shem?”

“Long knife. Heart.”

Perrin let out another low whistle. “I remember you saying you lost it, and never wanted to own another one again. You said it was too deadly a weapon.”

Shem sighed. “It was. I never carried another one until Thorne.”

“Amazing,” Perrin whispered. “So the families got away?”

Shem smiled. “Yep! They went into the forest with thirteen, came out with fourteen. That baby’s a strapping teenager now who wants to be a scout when he’s old enough. His parents named him Woodson: son born in the woods.”

“I feel like I hardly know you, Shem,” Perrin said, his tone full of astonishment. “So much you’ve been doing, *had* been doing . . . my whole image of you has changed.”

“I’m sorry,” Shem whispered.

“Not entirely for the worse, I promise,” Perrin assured him. “In fact, you have me just a little wary of you. And all this time I thought Moorland was your first deaths.”

“There were a few others in the forests, over the years,” Shem

wincing. “Sorry again. Four more. And Perrin? That night the baby was born in the forest was also the night Mahrree ran into Mrs. Yung who scared her back again.”

Perrin sighed. “She told me about that. And that she also ran into Barker . . . Oh, I see. You sent Barker to her, didn’t you? I just . . . I just . . .”

He exhaled loudly.

“You know, Shem, you’ve had seventeen years to tell me everything. Anything. *Something!* And yet you didn’t. Why’d I have to hear it all from strangers? So many times you could have told me who you really were and why you were really here. When we sat in those stupid trees spying on Guardians years ago. When we went to Idumea and slept in that barn. When we spent all those long nights at my table when I didn’t know what was real and what was nightmare. The truth could have made a difference. But not once. Why?”

Anguished, Shem said, “Perrin, so often I wanted to tell you what I knew, what I thought you should know. But usually the time never seemed right. There were moments where I could see an opportunity to give you a few hints, but I was afraid. Then again, had I told you what I knew, you may have become even more unstable.”

“Unstable?!”

“Think about it, Perrin,” Shem said patiently, “a couple of years ago you were so paranoid you even thought Deckett’s parents were spies. And more than once I saw you looking under the desk before you sat behind it. You really think I should have told you *then* that I was a plant for a people you didn’t even know existed?”

Perrin was silent for a full minute before he said, “You may have a point.”

“That kind of news would have also made you vulnerable to the *real* Guardians. Honestly, Perrin, how would you have responded to learning there were *two* groups in the forest?”

Perrin exhaled heavily in response.

“Each time I wanted to open my mouth, the Creator shut it. It wasn’t that I didn’t trust you, Perrin. It was that you wouldn’t have been able to continue what you were doing knowing all that we know. I *am* sorry. I’d been planning for years to be the one to visit you tonight. But I couldn’t get out of the fort until now. We were running out of time, and when my contacts didn’t hear from me, they decided to reach you first. I practiced my speech to you and Mahrree for years, now. Guess I’ll have to save it for another day.”

Perrin’s shoulders sagged and he let the knife drop to his side, still

clenched. In resignation he released his grip on Shem, and Shem turned to face Perrin in the darkness.

“I don’t know what to believe or trust anymore,” Perrin admitted. “My wife’s ready to follow anyone into the forest, and in the morning we’re to tell Jaytsy, Deckett and Peto. Tell them what? Shem, do I really know who you are now?”

“Yes, you do!” Shem said earnestly. “I haven’t changed. I’ve always been your brother. Now with a few more details,” he admitted.

Perrin slowly put the knife back into his waistband, to Shem’s great relief. “Yes, you’ve been my brother. A deceitful, sneaky, lying brother, but I suppose that’s the way most brothers are.”

Shem chuckled, and could just make out Perrin’s smile in the dimness. “Something else you should know. My contact said he told you I was the only Salemite you ever knew, along with Rector Yung, but that wasn’t correct.”

Perrin sighed and motioned with this hand. “Let me have it.”

“Besides me, Rector Yung, and Mrs. Braxhicks the midwife, there was Beneff.”

“*Sergeant Major Beneff?*” Perrin nearly forgot to keep his voice down.

Shem nodded. “He went to Idumea when he was in his early twenties, just like me. He was to join with the garrison and learn about the army.”

Perrin nodded. “He was always around, transferring from fort to fort. My grandfather even knew him. You must have been happy to see him come to Edge, then.”

“No, no I wasn’t!” Shem exclaimed. “Beneff didn’t do so well out on his own. He soon got caught up with the wrong people. After the first year he was no longer sending messages back to Salem. A couple years later one of our scouts found him. Perrin, Beneff joined the Guards. He was one of the first insiders.”

“What?” Perrin blurted. “Oh, come on! *Beneff?* Doddering, theater-going, never-shut-up Beneff?”

Shem smiled at his friend’s consternation. “He was never very effective, ho-ho. Fortunately he didn’t really help their side or ours. He just kind of *was*.”

“Wait a minute. No, he wasn’t from Salem,” Perrin remembered. “He said he had family. What was it? A brother and sister-in-law that dragged him to the theater?”

Shem shrugged. “I tell people I have a brother and sister-in-law in

Edge.”

Perrin sighed. “I’m assuming you know what happened to him? At the offensive?”

“Some of our men found him on his way to Moorland, but he got lost in the woods. In his pocket was a note telling them to expect an attack at dawn.”

“Stupid old man!” Perrin hissed.

“He never made it to Moorland. He paid for his treachery with his life, Perrin. I was lost in those woods looking for him when you called for the early beginning of the offensive. You could have told me, you know! I nearly missed it.”

“I thought you were answering the call of nature somewhere. I wasn’t about to hold up everything just for *you!*” Perrin snapped, but Shem heard a hint of Perrin’s humor returning. “That’s what I had called that meeting for—the one you left prematurely—to announce the early strike.”

Shem smiled apologetically. “It turned out well in the end, didn’t it?”

“Show me what’s in the bag,” Perrin said.

They took Shem’s leather bag into an inner stall where no lantern light would escape through the cracks, after Shem led out the nervous cow first. Shem pulled out detailed records with names and dates of people who left via Shem’s route over the years.

“I don’t usually keep these records in my quarters. I made a box some years ago, with a stone cover, and buried it in the forest. Salemites know where it is, but Guardians just pass it thinking it’s a regular rock on the ground. I brought the records out for you to see, thinking you might want some evidence. This quiet period here,” he gestured to a page of notes, “that’s when we shifted the route to Moorland. It was easier for a time because the ground wasn’t as active. The land in the forests here seems to cycle every few years. Steam vents and gases become very active for about five seasons, then quiet again. But after the land tremor, nothing was predictable. We still run into surprises in the forests.”

Perrin shook his head as he gazed at page after page of Shem’s neat writing, augmented occasionally by others leaving messages and updates. “How’d you do it? How’d you get people out without any of our soldiers noticing?”

“Who’s scheduled all the training for the past fifteen years?”

Perrin smiled faintly. “I wondered why you were so eager to do the scheduling job no one else wanted. And why you didn’t want

Thorne taking it over.”

“Exactly. We used Barker the Distractor at the beginning, but once I was put in charge of scheduling, I knew when groups were leaving so I scheduled training, drills, and everything else as far away as possible.”

Perrin studied the pages. “Where’s the route, Shem?” he tossed out casually, but Shem heard the old undertones of paranoia.

“I can’t tell you.”

“Come on, Shem. It’s me!”

“That’s exactly why.” Shem sighed. “Perrin, we haven’t always been successful. A few times we’ve been caught. Not everyone in the army follows the guidelines.”

Perrin looked up from the pages. “What do you mean?”

“A few years ago one group was captured by the army outside of Pools. The mother was very large with her third and she was struggling. They were taken to Idumea and questioned.” Shem hesitated.

“Yes?” Perrin said intently. “Go on.”

Shem sighed. “The father didn’t survive the questioning. Neither did our two escorts. A grandfather was released when it was finally believed he really didn’t know where they were going. He found one of our scouts and told him what happened. The less you know, the easier it may be if we aren’t successful. We never knew what happened to the mother and her two children.”

Perrin leaned forward, furious. “We don’t question *to death*, Shem! Who did it?”

“You need only one guess.”

Perrin sagged into the straw. “Qayin Thorne!”

“Perrin, *he’s one of them.*”

Closing his eyes, Perrin whispered, “Lemuel?”

“Oddly, not quite,” Shem shrugged. “I don’t know the details, but he’s not old enough, or advanced enough or something like that. But we know there are certain tests he has to pass and goals he has to achieve. He has to earn the position of being a Guarder of command like Qayin. All he knows so far is that his father is part of a secret organization. I don’t think he even realizes that it’s the Guarders, or that his father has a hand in directing some of their activities. We’re not sure even General Thorne knows everything.”

Perrin groaned quietly, massaging his eyes.

“Only one man seems to hold all the knowledge,” Shem continued, “and despite all the scouts we have serving in forts, in Idumea, and

hiding in trees listening to passing Guarder conversations, we've never been able to pinpoint who that is. But because of the way he's been able to influence activity all these years, we're fairly confident it's an Administrator."

Perrin sighed. "I'm willing to bet it is Mal."

"That's my guess as well. And Perrin," Shem added, "Lemuel thinks *I'm* part of it too. It's the only reason he's tolerated me."

"He thinks you're a Guarder?" Perrin rocked back.

"Remember when we went to Idumea, the carriage ride we took to the hospital? Thorne and Cush questioned me."

Perrin scowled. "I heard it. I don't recall you saying, 'Hey, by the way, I'm a Guarder.'"

"I didn't have to. I knew the code words."

"Code words?"

Shem nodded. "Remember back about thirteen years ago when we were sitting in the trees and rocks all night practicing our facial codes and watching Guarders spy on the fort? Remember that one who was alone and disoriented, and thought I was his contact?"

"Yes. Fortunate time for you to have to answer the call of nature, *again*. That's the one I took care of, right?"

Shem winced and nodded. "Yeah. You dropped down out of the tree, slashed his throat—that was a real mess."

Perrin rolled his hand. "Get to your point."

"When he was talking to me, he suddenly became nervous. He said, 'I've always found the north appealing.' I didn't know what to do with that, so I said, 'Really? Interesting.' Then he said it again, more urgently. 'I've always found the north appealing!' That's when I realized the phrase *meant* something. He seemed to be waiting for a response, but all I could think to say was, 'But it's cold up here.' Well, that was the wrong thing to say. That's when he got nervous, and that's when you put stains on my jacket."

"And saved your life. You're welcome."

Shem chuckled. "Only later did I remember those two lieutenants, Sonoforen and the other one, who came as your father's guard after the raid on Edge. One asked if I found the north appealing. I was so surprised by the oddness of the question that I didn't respond for a minute. Then years later, in Idumea, I remembered that again when Thorne and Cush were asking me about my background in the coach. I assumed that's what they were trying to find out, if I might not be a Guarder, and one that they had been wondering about."

Perrin cocked his head. "Wondering about? Shem," he said slowly,

“exactly what *else* have you been doing all these years?”

Shem squirmed. “In the early years a couple of our scouts contacted the real Guarders and sent them messages that the fort in Edge had a ‘quiet Guarder’ serving in your fort to keep you ‘in the game.’ To keep from blowing his cover, the Quiet Man would never make contact with the body of Guarders unless necessary.”

“So you’re the ‘Quiet Man’?” Perrin guessed.

“That’s me. The hope was that if the Guarders suspected a man was already on the inside, they wouldn’t send anyone else to annoy you. I don’t know if you remember but right after I signed on officially there was another soldier who signed up, too. Nervous, skittish slip of a boy?”

Perrin frowned, trying to remember. “He didn’t stay, right?”

“That’s right. I took him to the forest where several Salem scouts abducted him.”

Perrin’s eyebrows shot upwards.

“Perrin, he was a Guarder, sent to get close to you so he could feed information back to the Guarders. You were to take him under your wing, help him along, become his best buddy—”

“But you already took that role, didn’t you?” Perrin smirked.

Shem grinned. “Yep! There were a few more men sent by the Guarders over the years to infiltrate the fort. Our scouts in the forests would recognize increased activity in the trees when someone was to be sent. It seems the Guarders watched for several days after a new arrival to make sure their inside man didn’t need any assistance. So the Salemite scouts would send me word to watch for a new soldier who might be more than just a soldier. I’d watch who came in and wait until I got a feeling about someone. Then I lured them out to the trees where they would inevitably confess their identity and earn themselves an unexpected trip to Salem. We didn’t want anyone to get close to you. Besides me.”

“Amazing!” Perrin sat back and stared at his friend.

“You’ve used that word a lot tonight. So, when you and I got to Idumea,” Shem picked up the story again, “and I found myself in a coach with Qayin Thorne, who we already suspected was high up in the Guarder leadership, I realized he might try to figure out who I was. It would also allow me to verify our suspicions about him. If he knew the codes, it’d only be because he was a Guarder. If he thought you were already under the watch of a Guarder, they might leave you alone.”

Perrin smiled slightly. “And they did, with you by my side.”

“See?” Shem beamed. “It worked! When Thorne and Cush suggested that most people don’t like the north, I knew what to answer: ‘I find the north appealing.’ The correct response to that phrase, it seems, is no *verbal* response but a smile. Both of them smiled at me. Just like the two lieutenants smiled at me years ago after I paused for a few moments before answering them.”

Perrin leaned back against the wall in dismay. “Cush? Cush was one of them! My father trusted him with *everything*!”

Shem shook his head. “Cush wasn’t one of them, but he knew *about* them. As far as we could tell, he tried to play to both sides. He was devoted to your father, Perrin, but he was also frightened of his son-in-law. I suspect the only reason Qayin married Versula was to have access to the High General position, and I’m convinced Lemuel was sent here to secure Jaytsy for the same reason. If he married her, there’d always be a Thorne in the side of the High General. For many years it was assumed you’d have that position.”

“Thorne’s getting it anyway, isn’t he?” Perrin sounded only slightly bothered by that.

“Qayin’s going to be officially installed as High General next week. They’re planning a huge ceremony—bigger than The Dinner,” but he waved that off. “There’s talk, though, that Cush’s death wasn’t by heart failure, but that he was slowly poisoned by Qayin.”

Perrin leaned against the wall. “Why doesn’t any of that surprise me?”

Shem gripped his shoulder. “Can you see why you’re in a very dangerous position right now? They’re not going to just let you fade away, Perrin. *They’re coming after your family.*”

Perrin slumped. “So the world really is out to get us?” he murmured. “How do you know all of this?”

“Because for the past three weeks I’ve been in Idumea.”

Despite his astonishment, Perrin couldn’t help but smirk. “Really? All by yourself?”

Shem smirked back. “I knew the way this time.”

“What were you doing? Didn’t anyone recognize you?”

“There’s a great deal to be learned by being a stable hand at the Administrators’ Headquarters,” Shem winked. “Such as what Qayin Thorne’s doing to his father-in-law. Everyone in the stables assumed I was merely a man down on my luck cleaning stalls. People say all kinds of things in front of laborers who don’t matter. One of the stable boys who had something going on with one of the mansion’s maids

mentioned that she had spied Qayin sprinkling something into Cush's soup each week."

"Oh Shem, you're brilliant!" Perrin grinned in genuine admiration. "I should give you my old lieutenant colonel's jacket. You would've been a great officer."

"Thank you. I often thought so myself," said Shem smugly. "Every day the horses of important visitors came in. You'd be surprised what kinds of documents they leave in their saddle bags, assuming that manure men don't know how to read. General Thorne was there more often than he was at the garrison. Every morning he'd drop off his stallion, with ridiculous details about how I should feed it and brush it and speak to it—I think he cares more for his horse than any human being. Then in the afternoon he'd come back mumbling and cursing to retrieve his horse."

"And he never recognized you?" Perrin asked, astonished. "Qayin's seen you at least three or four times."

"He only ever saw my uniform, not me. And never once did he bother to make eye contact with his horse's manure man."

Perrin squinted. "And why was Qayin so upset each day?"

"Because of you and Mahrree, naturally," Shem told him. "We've had a Salemite in the building for several years now. He's the recorder at the main desk to the Conference Room and told me who went in and out of that room each day. Perrin, the Administrators spent the last two and a half weeks arguing about nothing else but you and Mahrree."

Perrin let out a low whistle. "Whatever you do, don't tell her, Shem. She's already a nervous wreck, especially after I warned her that Genev might be starting a file on her . . . what's that look for?"

Shem wet his lips and scrunched his mouth.

"Oh no," Perrin said in a low voice. "Since when?"

"Remember her first letter to the Department of Instruction, asking about letting parents teach their children at home?"

"Her first letter?" Perrin blinked in surprise. "That was *years* ago! It didn't make it past the skimmers."

"Yes, it did," Shem whispered. "All the way to Gadiman. He started a file then."

Perrin covered his mouth with his hand.

"It's part of the reason I didn't come earlier. I saw the file on your desk, I mean, the *command desk* this afternoon. I think it was supposed to have been hidden under the papers on top of it, but there was

a lot of activity in the office and some of the younger soldiers were a little sloppy around the desk. I think they were trying to put their transfer requests on top of the others.”

Shem unbuttoned a pouch on the inside of his bag and pulled out a thick stack of papers with a thin leather cover. He laid it on the dirt and straw in front of Perrin and opened it to the first page.

“I’d been waiting for my chance to get it, but I had to do it when no one would suspect it was me. Lemuel thinks he misplaced this in his quarters. He was tearing it apart tonight, searching. That’s why I was finally able to sneak out and come here.”

Perrin didn’t touch the file but stared at the name and the notes on the front of it as if it were a poisonous snake ready to attack the first thing that moved.

Shem didn’t like touching it either, but he shifted over Gadiman’s notes to reveal Mahrree’s first letter, marked with underlines and comments in the margins written in Gadiman’s hand.

With a stick, Shem pointed at where Perrin was already staring.

“Mahrree Peto Shin. Red dot. Traitor. Perrin, she’s scheduled for trial in three days. And so are you.”

Now Perrin’s other hand covered his mouth too, but he didn’t take his eyes off the file.

Shem slid over a few more pages, still with the stick, as if the file were infected. Mahrree’s second letter. Her third. Her fourth. Everything she said in front of the Administrators in Idumea. More notes. More comments. More pages.

“General Thorne came to the stables in an excellent mood afternoon before last,” Shem related quietly. “He was actually whistling as he retrieved his horse and whispered lovingly to it. I heard him mention your names, and that’s when I knew the Administrators had finally come to a decision. And if it was something to make Qayin so happy, it certainly couldn’t be good for you. I left immediately, dropping my pitchfork in the middle of the dirty stall, and borrowed a horse from my contact to get back here, riding all night and ‘borrowing’ a few more animals along the way.

“Late this afternoon a messenger came for Lemuel. I was in the forward office when he arrived. Thankfully Lemuel has yet to figure out about those holes in the wall under the banner and map. I heard him discussing the contents of the message with Lieutenant Radan. Perrin, Administrator Genev is on his way. He’ll be here late tomorrow night and will be taking over Rector Yung’s home and the rectory. He’s to escort you, Mahrree, and even Peto day after tomorrow

in the morning to Idumea. You're to ride in separate coaches with four guards for each of you. Perrin, you know as well as I do that there's no chance of a fair trial for any of you."

Perrin didn't breathe. He didn't blink. He just stared, motionless, at the death sentence that sat before him, written in his wife's hand, begun several years ago.

Shem continued. "There was no mention of Jaytsy. Thorne knew she was having pains earlier and was rather anxious about it. He seems to have his own plans for her, Perrin, but I don't know what they are. I don't *want* to know, either."

Perrin remained immobile.

"Do you see now why we have to get you out tomorrow night?" Shem gripped his shoulder again. "There's no more time for you. The Saver of Edge is now the Traitor of Idumea. And his wife caused his downfall. You may just be imprisoned at the garrison for the rest of your life so General Thorne can come gloat at you, but Mahrree? Recently the Administrators passed all the laws they need to convict and execute based on someone expressing their ideas. Death for merely *words*, Perrin. No actions, just thoughts. They don't even need this file! Mahrree said more than enough about her disbelief in the findings of Terry's land, and in front of far too many witnesses."

Finally finding the strength to move, Perrin could do nothing but slowly shake his head. "Before we were married for two years, Hogal told me that Mahrree was the most dangerous woman in the world," he whispered. "But she never knew she was dangerous. All she ever did was try to find the truth. That's all she's ever been guilty of, Shem. She's no traitor. Just a little woman in a little village intent on finding the truth."

He stared at the ground, his countenance heavy and dark.

"We have to destroy that file, Shem. And Mahrree must never know about it. At least not until we reach Salem."

Shem sat up. "So you agree to go? Jothan said he wasn't convinced you were really ready to leave."

"So his name's Jothan," Perrin said dully, staring at the file and fear flickering in his eyes. "Shem, there's nothing in this world I want anymore. Nothing except to take my family and leave it."

"Yes!" Shem said in a loud whisper. He grabbed Perrin's arms and shook them enthusiastically.

He even managed to shake a frail smile on to his friend's face. "All right, all right already!" Perrin said. "I'm doing the right thing,

correct?”

“Absolutely! Perrin, you can trust Jothan with anything. He’ll get you over and see to it that Jaysy’s comfortable—”

“Wait,” Perrin interrupted, “you’re not coming with us?”

“I can’t. I have more work to do here. I can’t leave yet. Someday I will, but I don’t know when.”

Clearly not happy with that response, Perrin said, “Shem, I don’t know if I feel good about this now. I was fully expecting you’d take us—”

“I don’t go, Perrin. I keep the route clear, but I don’t go, unless it’s on leave. That’s another thing I need to confess. On leaves, I never went south to go home—”

“I figured that out by now,” Perrin said hurriedly. “Shem, I barely know Jothan!”

“But he knows all about you.”

Perrin scoffed. “So he says.”

“Perrin, trust Jothan more than you trusted me. He’s the one who got you through your trauma, not me.”

Perrin’s skepticism returned, once again. “What do you mean?”

“I told Mahrree that I found a book which explained how to help traumatized soldiers,” Shem began guiltily. “There was no book. That’s why, even though she insisted on reading it, I told her she couldn’t because it was never to leave the surgeon’s office. Another deception—sorry. She didn’t want the surgeon to know what was going on with you, although he figured things out by your behavior. Another thing I failed to tell you about. Sorry. There are actually several more things you don’t know about yet. I know, I know—keep going.

“Anyway, there never was a book. Rector Yung has helped several traumatized soldiers, but even he depended upon Jothan. Normally Jothan lives in the forest in a camp he and his wife have set up, returning to Salem maybe once every four to five weeks unless he’s escorting families. But when you were having your nightmares, Jothan made the journey far more frequently to deliver my concerns to Salem, and to find out how to help you next. Usually Jothan and Asrar rotate the escorting duties with two other couples throughout the year. But when their turn for the year was up, they refused to leave. They didn’t want to go back to Salem until they knew you were going to make it. They stayed the full year, just to keep watch over you. Their last name is Hifadhi.” Shem watched Perrin intently to see how much he might pick up from that.

Perrin rubbed at some dirt on his boot until it was gone, unable to look Shem in the eyes. “Jothan and Asrar Hifadhi. I had no idea,” he whispered. “I, uh, I wasn’t the most friendly to him tonight. In fact, most of the time I was trying to figure out if I could beat him in a fight.”

Shem shook his head. “Nope. Even at your best he would’ve thrown you to the ground like you used to throw me.” He smiled. “A few times I really wished I could have seen you two wrestle and see you get humbled. Maybe I still might get my wish. You *might* have a chance at beating him. He’s only two years older than you.”

Perrin looked up. “Seriously? I thought he was a lot younger.”

Shem grinned. “If that doesn’t get you, this will—he’s a grandfather!”

That did get him. “No!” Perrin almost forgot to keep his voice down.

Shem laughed quietly. “He and Asrar married when they were eighteen. They had six children in seven years. Now that they are all grown and married, he’s devoted his life to helping others reach Salem like his wife’s ancestors.” Shem’s voice quieted. “He’s really quite a remarkable man. I have no doubt the two of you will become great friends. He can keep you entertained until it’s time for me to return to Salem. And Perrin? This wasn’t your first encounter with Jothan.”

Perrin rubbed his eyes. “I don’t know how much more I can take. All right—when did I meet him before?”

“Not exactly *meet*,” Shem bobbed his head. “It was before my time in Edge. It seems there was a determined captain who knew that twelve Guardians were coming to take his expecting wife and daughter—”

“Oh, Shem,” Perrin breathed. “I think I know what this is about.”

“You do, Perrin. There weren’t twelve men. There were fourteen. Our scouts counted them as they came into the forest. Salem knew what was coming, and they called out as many volunteers as they could find. Perrin, more than seventy men came to your aid that night—I’ve read the reports. You took out a few Guardians right off, but others had slipped past you. So the Salemites caught them and herded them back to you, knowing you wouldn’t leave until you knew all were secured. Some of our men even held and muzzled the last two men after you killed the initial twelve. They lost grip on the one who tried to strangle you.”

Perrin rubbed his throat as if he could still feel it. “The man was massive. I took my long knife and thrust it behind me, catching him on the cheek—”

“And also catching Jothan Hifadhi on his right hand. He was coming to your rescue, and you nicked him as you slashed the Guarder on the cheek. Jothan still has the scar. And it was Jothan who plunged his knife into your strangler’s neck an instant later, and bounded off into the woods so you wouldn’t know he’d been there. You did kill the fourteenth on your own, after you were injured. Had you been unable, you would’ve been helped again. Jothan had also killed a Guarder who you only injured with an arrow in the thigh. But the rest really were yours.”

Another minute passed in silence as Perrin stared at his hands. “Jothan saved my life that night,” he said after a while. “And also spent another year seeing me through my trauma? Shem, how would I even *begin* to thank him?”

“By trusting him. When he comes for you tomorrow night, just nod. He’ll get the message. He’s not a very emotional person. He’s much more like you than me, and will be pretty annoyed when he learns how much I’ve told you about him. Now, I suggest we dispose of these papers properly and get some sleep tonight. You have a journey ahead of you tomorrow night, and my duty shift just changed to the night shift. Neither of us will have had enough rest.”

As Perrin stood up and wiped straw off his pants he said, “I always wondered why you took so many night shifts. What else don’t I know yet, Shem?”

Shem smiled guardedly as he got to his feet. “You’ve heard enough for one night.”

Early in the morning Deckett walked into his barn to begin milking. He immediately saw that one of his shovels was in a different place than it was the night before. He normally wouldn’t have noticed, but he was sure he had left the shovel leaning against the back door after he had used it to pointlessly move some dirt back and forth while waiting for his wife to calm down after her frustrating day where she didn’t yet become a mother. He was too lazily distracted last night, and didn’t hang the shovel next to the second one on the pegs on the wall.

Yet it was there now.

Nervously, he looked around the barn. In the dim morning light it was hard to tell, but it seemed that in an empty stall the ground had been disturbed and straw strewn over the top so as to conceal the act.

He evaluated the spot for a moment before deciding not to touch it. His father-in-law would be over in a little while. He could investigate it and tell Deck what may have happened.

After all, Perrin always knew everything.

Acknowledgements

I acknowledge that my writing will never be flawless, so please don't let me get in the way of the story. Even though I've gone through this three-fifty bajillion times, errors remains.

I also acknowledge that I'm having the absolute time of my life scritchng out these stories.

(Ok, that's not quite accurate: I do everything on my computer, so I don't really *scritch*, but "tapping out these stories" doesn't sound as romantic. And I love the word "scritchng," even if my computer doesn't recognize it. Scritch. Scritch. I wish you could see in print all these angry red squiggly lines. My computer doesn't like bajillion, either, although it's a perfectly good word.)

I acknowledge that without my many friends and family who tolerate my hobby and occasionally proofread for me, I'd never have the time to do this.

I acknowledge that these characters haven't been created by me, but simply dropped into my head many years ago and have been growing over the years until they finally demanded that I write about them. And I also acknowledge that they surprise me as much as I hope they surprise you. Really, I have no idea what they're up to until I'm scritchng out the words on my keyboard.

It's very much their story, not mine. Forgive me when I get in their way.

I'm just the teller, not the creator.

And I checked: this phenomenon of characters taking over the storyline is quite common among writers. We're not crazy. Entirely.

But if I am crazy, please no one cure me. This is just far too much fun. I thoroughly enjoy the voices in my head. Occasionally they let me get in a word edgewise.

Thank you for reading, for tolerating my many mistakes, for your encouraging comments, and for joining me on the ride. As you can tell there are a few more books still coming in this series. The Shins and many others still have a lot more to do.

I can hardly wait to share their future with you!

About the author . . .

Trish Strebel Mercer has been teaching writing, or editing graduate papers, or changing diapers since the early 1990's. She earned a BA in English from Brigham Young University and an MA in Composition Theory and Rhetoric from Utah State University. She and her husband David have nine children (and now adding grandchildren) and have raised them in Utah, Idaho, Maryland, Virginia, and South Carolina. Currently they live in the rural west and dream of the day they will be old enough to be campground managers in Yellowstone National Park.



(Feel free to take notes here. I'm done.)