

Chapter 1

Galdasten, Eibithar, year 872, Morna's Moon waxing

After the bright glare of the dirty road and sunbaked fields, it took Pytor's eyes some time to adjust to the darkness of the tavern. He stood at the door waiting for the familiar shapes to come into relief: the bar with its dark stained wood and tall wooden stools, the rough tables and low chairs, the thick, unfinished pillars that seemed to groan beneath the weight of the sagging ceiling, and, of course, Levan, stout and bald, standing behind the bar. The air was heavy with the scents of musty ale and roasting meat, but Pytor also smelled Mart's pipe smoke. It seemed he wasn't the first.

"Starting a bit early today, aren't you, Pytor?" Levan asked, filling a tankard with ale and setting it on the bar by his usual place.

Pytor sat on his stool and took a long pull. "I'll do without the commentary, Levan," he said, tossing a silver piece onto the bar. "I'll just thank you to keep the ale coming."

The barkeep held up his hands and shrugged. "I didn't mean anything by it."

Pytor frowned before draining the tankard with a second swallow. He set it down on the bar sharply and pushed it toward Levan, gesturing for more with one hand and wiping the sweet foam from his mustache with the other.

"Got yourself a thirst today, do you, Pytor?" came a voice from behind him.

He turned and saw Mart sitting at a table in the back, pipe smoke hanging like a storm cloud over his head and curling around his gaunt face.

"Since when is my taste for ale the whole world's concern?"

Pytor glanced back at Levan and shook his head. The barkeep grinned like a ghoulish and handed Pytor his ale.

“Don’t be sore, Pytor,” Mart called. “I was just talking. Come back here and join me.”

He took another drink and sat still for a moment. Mart wasn’t a bad sort. Back when Kara was still alive, she and Pytor had spent a good deal of time with him and Triss. Mart and his wife had been good to them when they lost Steffan. Better than most, if truths be told. They’d looked after Pytor’s crop and beasts while he cared for Kara, and even for some time after she finally died. And Mart had continued to be a reliable friend since, accepting of Pytor’s quick temper and rough manner.

Still, Pytor wished that he had been the first to arrive that day. Since early morning he’d been restless and uneasy, the way he sometimes felt before a storm. *Perhaps it’s only that.* Morna knew they needed the water. But he knew better. Something was coming, something dark.

Kara used to say that he had Qirsi blood in him, that he had the gleaning power, like the Qirsi sorcerers who traveled with Bohdan’s Revel. They always laughed about it, Pytor reminding her that he was much too fat to be Qirsi. Still, they both knew that he was usually right about these things. He didn’t doubt that he would be this time, too. He was in no mood to talk. But Mart was here, and it wouldn’t have been right to just leave him back there alone.

“Come on, Pytor,” Mart called again. “Don’t be so stubborn.”

Pytor tugged impatiently on his beard. There was nothing to be done. He pushed back from the bar, picked up his ale, and joined Mart at his table.

“That’s it,” Mart said, as Pytor sat. He tapped out his pipe on the table and refilled it.

Then he lit a tinder in the candle flame and held it over the bowl of his pipe, drawing deeply. The leaf glowed and crackled, filling the air with sweet smoke. “What’s new, Pytor?” Mart asked at last, his yellow teeth clenching the pipe stem.

Pytor shrugged, not looking him in the eye. “Not much,” he mumbled. “Grain’s growing, beasts are getting fat.” He shrugged again and took another drink.

“You seem troubled.”

He looked up at that. Mart was watching him closely, pale blue eyes peering out from beneath wisps of steel gray hair.

“Is something brewing?” Mart asked.

Pytor held up his tankard and forced a smile. “Only this,” he said, trying to keep his tone light.

Mart just stared at him.

“Nothing I can name,” Pytor finally admitted, looking away again. “Just a feeling.”

The older man nodded calmly, but Pytor saw his jaw tighten.

“It’s probably just my imagination,” he said a moment later, drinking some more ale.

“We’ve been almost a fortnight without rain and I’m starting to fear for my land. It’s affecting my mood.”

Mart nodded a second time and chewed thoughtfully on his pipe. “Yes,” he agreed after some time. “That’s probably it.”

Pytor could see that Mart didn’t believe this either, but the man seemed as eager as he to let the matter drop. Draining his tankard again, Pytor motioned for Levan to bring him another.

“Can I buy you one?” he asked Mart, noticing for the first time that his friend had no

drink.

Mart hesitated, but only for a moment. “No, thanks,” he answered with a shake of his head. “Triss will thrash me if she smells it on me. She’s stingy enough with my time without having to worry that I’m spending all of our money on ale.”

Pytor looked at the man with genuine concern. That wasn’t Triss’s way, and they both it. Anyone who spent even a few minutes chatting with her could have seen that.

“Things that bad then?” he asked

This time it was Mart’s turn to shrug. “They’ve been worse.” He paused, then gave a wan smile. “Though not in some time.”

Levan walked over to their table and placed another ale in front of him, but Pytor hardly noticed, so great was his surprise at what Mart was telling him. True, they needed rain, but things weren’t that bad. Not yet. Another turn of it would be a different story, but the planting season had been generous, and the ground still had a good deal of moisture in it.

“What happened?” Pytor asked. “You’re not having trouble with mouth rot in your herd again, are you?”

Mart shifted uncomfortably in his chair and stared at his hands. “Actually, we are,” he said at last, his voice barely more than a whisper. “But not ‘again,’ as you put it. It’s still the same problem.”

Pytor narrowed his eyes. “I don’t understand.”

“I’m sorry, Pytor,” Mart said, his eyes meeting Pytor’s briefly before flicking away again. “I should have told you at the time how bad it was.”

Pytor just stared at him. He knew what was coming. He should have been used to it by

now, but it still stung. “So?” he finally managed. “How bad?”

“We’ve lost all but three of our beasts. Most of them died at the end of the planting, just as the grain was starting to sprout, but four more of them died during this past waning.”

“Your crop’s all right though, isn’t it?” he asked dully. “You can get through the cold turns.”

Mart nodded. “Barely, yes. The crop’s fine, and Brice has just sold me a half dozen of his beasts at a low price. It’s been a hard time, but we’ll get through.”

“Why didn’t you tell me the truth?” Pytor demanded, struggling to keep the ire from his voice. He knew the answer, but he wanted to make the man say it. “Why didn’t you come to me? I’m doing fine; I could have helped you.”

Mart looked away, his face reddening.

“We would have, Pytor. Really. But after all you’d been through. . . .” He trailed off, making a small helpless gesture with his hands.

It didn’t matter. Pytor could finish the sentence for him. *We didn’t want to trouble you.* He could hear the words in a dozen different voices. It had been a constant refrain in his life since Kara’s death. His friends had been so considerate of his feelings that they’d made him an outcast.

“The others know?” he asked.

“By now, they do. They didn’t right off. At first I only told Brice. But now . . .” He shrugged.

Pytor nodded and pressed his lips together. He wasn’t certain why he felt so angry. Mart hadn’t done anything wrong; certainly it was nothing the rest of them hadn’t done as well.

Besides, the man's herd was no business of his. He couldn't fault him for going to Brice, either. Brice was a decent man, despite his bluster. He and Pytor spent much of their time together baiting each other, but even Pytor knew that he could be counted on when times got rough. And it was no secret that he was the most prosperous of them all. Had Pytor been in Mart's place he might have turned to Brice too, in spite of their past quarrels.

So why was he so offended?

"Well I'm glad it's worked out for you," Pytor said at last, breaking an awkward silence.

"Thank you, Pytor." Mart smiled, looking relieved.

Pytor returned his smile, though he had a sour feeling in his stomach. He drank some ale and Mart puffed on his pipe, sending great billows of smoke up to the ceiling.

They sat that way for some time, saying nothing. Mart refilled his pipe a second time, and Pytor drained yet another tankard of ale, which Levan dutifully replaced with a full one. He wanted to leave, but it was early yet. The others hadn't even arrived, and there was nothing back at his house except the beasts and his now-too-big bed. So instead the two of them just sat, keeping their silence and trying not to look at each other.

When Brice and the rest finally walked into Levan's tavern they both nearly jumped out of their chairs to greet them. The comfort Pytor took in their arrival was fleeting though.

"It doesn't come at the best of times," Eddy was saying as she walked in. She stepped to the bar, gave Levan a silver, and took her ale. "But it's certainly not the worst either."

"There's never a good time for it," Jervis said sullenly, buying an ale of his own.

The others got their drinks as well and all of them walked back to the table. None of them looked happy, but Davor least of all. He was the youngest of the group, and the most prone

to worry. If he had been the only one who was upset, Pytor wouldn't have been concerned.

Brice, too, was easily disturbed, despite his money. Eddya was impossible to read. She had been through four husbands, eleven childbirths, and more difficult times than he could count. Nothing bothered her anymore.

Jervis and Segel were even tempered as well. Jervis and Pytor had often been mistaken for brothers. They had the same coloring -- red hair, fair skin, green eyes -- and though Jervis was far taller than Pytor and a good bit leaner, they had similar features. They also reacted to things the same way. They were quick to anger, but kept their wits about them in hard times. No matter the trouble, they always managed to muddle through.

Segel was a stranger to Eibithar; no one who looked at him could have doubted that. He was small and wiry, with dark skin and darker eyes and hair. He even spoke with the hint of an accent, although not one that any of them could place. Some said that he was from Uulrann. Eddya was convinced that he came from the Southlands. Pytor had never asked him, though he'd often wondered. It had never really mattered. In the important ways he fit in just fine. He was quieter than the rest; he tended to listen more than he spoke, and he rarely worried unnecessarily.

So when Pytor saw the dark expressions on his face, and on Eddya's and Jervis's as well, he knew something had to be wrong. He felt his stomach tightening like a fist.

"Looks like you shouldn't have bothered with those beasts after all," Brice said to Mart as he sat.

Mart glanced at Pytor uncomfortably before answering. "It wasn't a bother, Brice," he said awkwardly. "Your price was more than fair."

“Price doesn’t matter anymore,” Eddya told him, with a chuckle. She always seemed to be laughing when she spoke, even when she didn’t mean it.

Pytor frowned. “What does that mean?”

“The timing couldn’t be worse for Bett and me,” Davor said to no one in particular.

“What with having just put up the new shed and all.”

“The timing of what?” Pytor demanded, his voice rising. “What’s happened?”

Jervis looked at him for several moments, licking his lips. Then he shook his head.

“We just saw a posting at the meeting hall,” Segel finally said in a low voice. “The duke has called for a Feast on the tenth night of the waxing.”

Perhaps Pytor should have expected it. But the ale had begun to work on him, and he wasn’t thinking clearly. Or maybe that was just an excuse. Maybe on some level he had expected it, but didn’t want to admit it to himself. Here, after all, was confirmation of his premonitions. He could almost see Kara standing before him, nodding with that sad, knowing smile of hers. He had to clamp his teeth together against a wave of nausea.

Davor was saying something else about his new shed and how many days it had taken him to build it, but Pytor was hardly listening. There was a noise like a windstorm in his ears, and his head had begun to throb. He wished he hadn’t drunk that last ale.

A Feast, and on the tenth day no less. The duke had given them only four days to prepare, not that they could do much. This was the last thing they needed. With the weather working itself into a drought, mouth rot killing their animals, and the duke taking more than his share of what they managed to make, it was amazing that they got by at all. But a Feast, that was too much. Pytor had been through seven of them in his lifetime, including one the year he was

born, but there were just some things a person couldn't get used to.

"Has it really been six years already?" he heard Eddya ask.

"I believe so," Jervis answered. Pytor heard surrender in his words, and he hated him for it. In certain ways, he and Jervis were nothing alike.

"Hard to believe six years can go so fast," Mart said softly. He would go meekly as well.

"It's been five," Pytor said, his voice cutting through their chatter.

None of them argued with him. None of them dared. Steffan had died on the eve of the last Feast. Indeed, his death had prompted it.

"Five years rather than six," Segel said thoughtfully. "It may be that the duke's Qirsi has gleaned something."

"I remember back some years we had an early Feast," Eddya said, cackling. "Turned out there were people dead of the pestilence in Domnall."

Segel nodded. "That could be it as well."

"That doesn't excuse it," Pytor said, not bothering to mask his bitterness.

"Come now, Pytor," Brice said. "We all know how rough the last one was for you. But that doesn't mean that we should abandon the whole practice."

"The Feasts are a barbarism! They always have been, and I'd be saying that no matter what!"

Brice shook his head. "They're a necessity," he said. "And getting all riled up about it doesn't do you or the rest of us a bit of good. There's nothing that can be done."

"You have to admit," Davor added. "It has worked."

"Davor's right," Eddya agreed, grinning like a madwoman. "Galdasten hasn't had a full-

blown outbreak of pestilence in my lifetime. And my father never saw an epidemic either. Say what you will, but it works.”

““It works!”” Pytor mimicked angrily. “Of course it works! But at what price? They could kill us all with daggers beforehand and that would work too! ‘No pestilence there,’ they’d say. ‘Killing them ahead of time works just fine!’”

“You’re being foolish, Pytor,” Brice said. “No one’s been killed. The Feasts are a far cry better than that.”

Pytor took a breath, fighting to control his temper, struggling against the old grief. “And what about those the Feasts don’t save?” he asked in a lower voice. “What about them? The Feasts don’t always work.”

“No, they don’t,” Brice said. “But that’s all the more reason for us to be thankful that the duke is being vigilant. Better we should do this a year early than wait and let someone else lose a child. The risks of doing nothing are just too great. And the Feasts aren’t nearly as awful as the fever itself. You of all people know what the pestilence can do. You and Kara were lucky to escape with your lives last time. All of us were.” He looked around the table and the others nodded their agreement. All, that is, except Segel.

“Yes,” Pytor said, nodding reluctantly. “I know what the pestilence does.” He shuddered in spite of himself. He wasn’t stupid. The pestilence was no trifle. Murnia’s Gift it was called, named for the dark Goddess by someone with a twisted humor. It had wiped out entire villages in less than three days. One particularly severe outbreak two centuries ago had killed over half the people in the entire dukedom in a single waning. It had taken Steffan in less than a day.

But though it worked quickly, it was far from merciful. It began, innocently enough, with

a bug bite. It didn't matter where -- Steffan's had been on his ankle. If the bite just swelled and then subsided, there was no need to worry. But if a small oval red rash appeared around the bite a person was better off taking a dagger to his heart than waiting for what was to come. Within half a day of the rash's appearance fever set in, and with it delirium. The lucky ones lost consciousness during this stage and never awoke again. Such was the one grace in Steffan's case. But those who didn't pass out -- those whom the Goddess ordained should remain awake for the entire ordeal -- could expect one of two things to happen: either the vomiting and diarrhea would leave them too weak to do anything but waste away, or they would spend the last hours of their lives coughing up blood and pieces of their lungs. In either case, they were as good as dead -- and so was anyone who came near them within a day of the bug bite. Given their unwillingness to leave Steffan when he fell ill, Pytor still didn't know how he and Kara managed to survive.

"I'm no stranger to the pestilence either," Segel said softly, a haunted look in his dark eyes, "but I must say that I agree with Pytor: there ought to be another way."

"There!" Pytor said, pointing to the dark man. "At least one of you has some sense!"

"But what could they do?" Brice demanded. "The duke has healers and thinkers, not to mention his Qirsi. If there was another way, don't you think they would have thought of it by now?"

"Why would they bother?" Pytor asked, throwing the question at him like a blade. "Their solution doesn't cost them a thing. And as you pointed out yourself, the pestilence hasn't reached the city in ages. If a boy dies here or there, who cares? They're still safe as long as they get their Feast in soon enough. They have no need to look for another way."

Brice shook his head. “Other houses have to deal with it, too. They haven’t come up with much that’s better. Some of them just let the pestilence run its course. Is that what you want?”

“I’d prefer it, yes!”

Brice let out an exasperated sigh and turned away. “He’s mad,” he said to the rest of them, gesturing sharply in Pytor’s direction.

“They’ve been doing it this way a long time,” Jervis said, his eyes on Pytor, the words coming out as a plea. “Longer than any of us have been alive. I don’t like it either, Pytor. But it has kept our people alive and healthy.”

“Our people?” Pytor repeated, practically shouting it at him. Jervis flinched and Pytor realized that Brice was right: he was starting to sound crazed. But he could barely contain himself. Surely Jervis and the others knew the origins of the Feast.

Nearly two centuries ago, the pestilence struck the House of Galdasten, just as it had every few years for as long as anyone could recall. Kell XXIII, who later became the fourth Kell of Galdasten to claim Eibithar’s throne, hid himself and his family within the thick stone walls of his castle, praying to the gods that the pestilence might pass over the ramparts of his home and remain only in the countryside. But while Galdasten Castle had repelled countless invasions and endured sieges that would have brought other houses to their knees, its moat and fabled golden walls were poor defenses against the pestilence. The duke and duchess were spared, but not their son, Kell XXIV.

In the wake of the boy’s death, Kell ordered the razing of the entire countryside. It was, most had long since concluded, an act born of spite and rage and grief. But because the

pestilence is carried by the mice living in the fields and houses of the countryside, and spread by the vermin that infest the rodents' fur, Kell's fire actually ended the outbreak. Realizing that he had found a way to control the spread of the pestilence, Kell made a tradition of it. For a time, he looked to his sorcerers to tell him when outbreaks were coming, but it soon became clear that the interval between outbreaks remained remarkably constant: six years almost every time. So that's when the burnings came. Every six years.

Kell's younger son, Ansen continued the practice after his father's death, but the new duke added the Feast as an appeasement of sorts, a way of softening the blow. It too became a tradition. All in the dukedom were invited into Galdasten Castle to partake of a meal that was unequalled by any other. The duke had his cooks prepare breads and meats of the highest quality. He had greens and dried fruits brought in from Sanbira and Caerisse just for the occasion. And of course he opened barrel after barrel of wine. Not the usual swill, but the finest from Galdasten's cellars.

All the while, as the people ate and drank, dancing as the court's musicians played and fancying themselves nobles for just one night, the duke's Qirsi sorcerers, accompanied by a hundred of Galdasten's finest soldiers, marched across the countryside, burning every home, barn, and field to the ground. Nothing was spared, not even the beasts.

In the morning, when the people left the castle and shuffled back to their homes, sated and exhausted, still feeling the effects of the wine, they invariably found the land blackened and still smoldering. Pytor still remembered the last time with a vividness that brought tears to his eyes. Steffan had only been dead a day and a half. There hadn't even been time for Pytor and Kara to cleanse him for his journey to Bian and the Underrealm. But when they returned to their

land they couldn't find the walls of their home, much less Steffan's body. Such was the force of the sorcerers' flame.

No, the pestilence hadn't swept through Galdasten in generations. Instead, they had their Feasts.

“Our people,” Pytor said again, more calmly this time. “The duke doesn't do this for us. He couldn't care less about us. He does it to protect himself and his kin, just like old Kell did, and Ansen after him. If the Feast comes a day or two late to save the life of someone else's child, so what? That doesn't matter to him. This Kell, our Kell, is no different from any of the rest.”

“Fine!” Brice said, the look in his grey eyes as keen as the duke's blade. “He does it for himself! And never mind for a minute what we all know: that the Feasts have spared us more suffering than you can even imagine! What do you suggest we do about it? You've seen what the sorcerer's fire does! You think we can stand against that? You think we can fight it?”

Pytor glared at him, not knowing what to say, feeling the color rise in his cheeks.

Brice grinned fiercely, though his face looked dangerously flushed beneath his thick silver hair. “I thought so,” he said at last. “You're all bluster, Pytor. You always have been. I thought maybe now that you were finally alone in the world, you might have balls enough to back up all the dung you shovel our way every day. But I guess I should have known better.”

“That's enough, Brice!” Mart said sharply.

The wealthy man looked away and said no more.

Mart turned to Pytor, concern furrowing his brow. “Brice didn't mean anything by it, Pytor. He just doesn't always think before he speaks.” He cast a reproachful glance Brice's way

before looking at Pytor again. “Steffan was a fine boy, Pytor. We all liked him. And we know that losing him still pains you. But,” he went on cautiously, as if he expected Pytor to strike him at any moment, “Brice does have a point. I hate the Feasts as well. We all do. But what alternative do we have?”

Pytor didn’t answer him at first. What did Mart know of his pain? What did any of them know? Instead, he kept glaring at Brice, watching him grow more uncomfortable by the moment. In spite of the tone he had used and all he had said, Brice was afraid of him. He had been for some time now. Not because Pytor was bigger or stronger than he. He was neither. Brice feared him because Pytor had lost everything, or at least everything that mattered. Brice still had his family and his farm and his wealth, so he was vulnerable.

He kept his gaze fixed on Brice for a few seconds more, allowing the man’s discomfort to build. Then he looked at the others. They were all staring back at him. Davor looking frightened and confused, Eddy with her crazed grin, and Jervis just looking sad, like an old mule. Segel was watching him as well, but speculatively, the way a man might regard a piece of land that had been offered to him at a good price. He was appraising Pytor, considering what he might be capable of doing. Pytor grinned at him, but Segel’s expression didn’t change.

“There are always alternatives,” Pytor said at last. “It’s just a matter of having the will to find them.”

Brice let out a high, disbelieving laugh. “And I suppose you have such will!”

Pytor heard the goad in his words, and he knew then what he would do, what he had to do. None of the others would act. They weren’t capable of it. But he was. Realizing this, he felt more alive than he had since he’d lost Kara. He turned slowly to face Brice again, allowing

himself a smile. "I guess we'll see, won't we?"

"I'll tell you what we'll see," Brice replied. He looked scared still, but it almost seemed that he was unable to stop himself. "We'll see you at Galdasten, lining up at the gates while the sun's still high so that you'll be assured of getting your fair share of wine and mutton. That's what we saw at every Feast before the last one. This one won't be any different."

Pytor bared his teeth like a feral dog, hoping Brice would take it for a grin. "And you'll be there right next to me, won't you, Brice?"

"Absolutely," he said, laughing nervously. "Absolutely. We'll sit together and have a good chuckle over this. And we'll fill our cups with the duke's wine and drink to our good health."

The others tried to laugh as well, but they were looking at Pytor, trying to gauge his reaction. When he joined their laughter, their relief was palpable. Pytor just laughed harder. He had made his decision.

He glanced over at Segel and saw that the dark man was still eyeing him closely, a strange expression on his lean features, as if he could read Pytor's thoughts. Pytor was surprised to find that this didn't bother him, that in fact he found it comforting. Segel, of all people, might understand.

The others had begun to talk among themselves, all of them in great humor now that the unpleasantness had passed. But Segel's expression remained grim as he moved his chair closer to Pytor's and signaled Levan for another ale.

"I'm concerned about you," he said in a voice that only Pytor could hear.

"Concerned?" Pytor replied lightly.

“I like you, my friend. I think I understand you. I’d hate to see you come to harm.”

Levan arrived with Segel’s ale and placed it on the table. The barkeep pointed at Pytor’s empty tankard and raised an eyebrow. Pytor shook his head and watched the barkeep return to the bar before speaking again.

“I like you, too, Segel. I respect you.” He turned to face the man. “I wouldn’t want anything to happen to you or your family.”

Segel’s eyes widened slightly, but otherwise he offered no response. When he reached for his ale, Pytor saw that his hand remained steady. After another few moments, Segel turned his attention to what the others were saying.

Pytor left the tavern a short time later. He was tired, he told the others. He wanted to check on his beasts before nightfall. But all the way home he could only think about Segel and their brief exchange. He hoped that he had made the dark man understand.

The next several days dragged by, like days spent waiting for sown seeds to sprout. Pytor didn’t change his mind about the decision he had made, though given time to think about it, he felt fear gnawing at his mind like mice in a grain bin. He tried to keep himself busy by tending to his beasts and his fields, but knowing what was coming, he couldn’t help but wonder why he bothered. Occasionally he would pause in the fields and stare beyond the pasture and the low roof of his own house to the towers of Galdasten, which rose like a thunder cloud above the farms and the low, gnarled trees.

He didn’t return to Levan’s tavern. After what he had decided, he couldn’t bring himself to face the others again. He should have known that they wouldn’t let him off so easy. The day before the Feast, Mart stopped by.

“I was concerned about you,” the man said, sitting atop his wagon and chewing on his pipe, even though it wasn’t lit. “We all have been.”

“I’m fine,” Pytor said. He was putting out grain for the animals, and he avoided Mart’s gaze. “I’ve just been busy.”

“You shouldn’t listen to Brice, Pytor,” Mart said, no doubt trying to be kind. “He’s an old fool. I can say that even after all he’s done for me. He had no business saying what he did.”

Pytor glanced at him briefly, making himself smile. “Don’t worry about me, Mart. I’ve already forgotten it. As I said, I’ve just been busy.”

Mart nodded. “All right. I’ll leave you. We’ll see you at the Feast though, right? Triss has been asking after you.”

“I’ll be there,” Pytor said. “Right along with you and the others.”

Mart had picked up his reins and was preparing to leave, but he stopped now. “Not all of us,” he said.

Pytor froze, his heart suddenly pounding like the hooves of a Sanbiri mount. “What do you mean?”

“Segel told us yesterday that he’s heading south for a while. He says he’s going to see his sister in Sussyn.”

Pytor felt himself go pale, in spite of his relief. Apparently the dark man had understood well enough. “Well, the rest of you then,” he said, fighting to keep his voice steady. “I’ll see the rest of you tomorrow.”

Mart smiled. “Good.” He whistled at his ox and the animal started forward. “Good night, Pytor,” he called as his cart rolled away, raising a thin haze of dust.

Pytor lifted his hand in farewell, but couldn't bring himself to say anything.

The day of the Feast dawned clear and warm. Pytor rose with the sun and started out into the fields without bothering to eat. Now that this day had finally come, his fear had vanished, to be replaced with a sense of grim satisfaction. At least he was doing something. At least he was proving Brice wrong. Indeed, he thought with an inward smile, Brice was to be wrong about a good many things.

Pytor didn't line up outside the castle gates with the rest of the horde. He spent nearly the entire day in his fields, and though his arms and hands were covered with bites from vermin by midday, it took him several more hours to find what he had been searching for.

As he approached Galdasten Castle, the prior's bells tolling in the city and the sun hanging low to the west, he had to keep himself from scratching his arms. He wasn't certain which had been the killing bite -- there were rashes around several of them -- but it didn't really matter. All he cared about now was getting past the guards before delirium set in. He had his sleeves rolled all the way down and his hands thrust in his pockets to hide the red welts on his skin. But the day had grown uncommonly hot, and with the fever coming on, he was sweating like an overworked horse by the time he reached the great golden walls of the castle. If it hadn't been for Pytor's girth, and the fact that the guards could see him hurrying up the path that led to the gates, they might have suspected something and not let him inside. As it was, he felt rather unsteady on his feet as he walked by them.

This at least he had anticipated. He had forced down some ale on the way to the castle, and now he endured the guards' snide comments about his drinking with a good-natured smile

and a deferential bob of his head. It was a small price to pay. Once he was past them he had nothing to fear.

Pytor made his way slowly through the outer ward to the great hall. The illness was fully upon him now. He had hoped that the pestilence would attack his lungs -- that was said to be the quicker death. But it was not to be. He had to close his throat hard against the bile rising from his gut, and he stumbled through the doorway into the hall, barely able to keep his balance.

This is what Steffan went through, he thought, bracing himself against the open door. And one last time he thanked the gods for allowing his boy to slip into unconsciousness before the illness was at its worst.

He shook his head violently, as if the motion itself could rid him of such thoughts. He needed to concentrate. He had come for a reason.

Still leaning on the door, Pytor surveyed the scene before him. It was early still, but already there was food on all the tables and empty wine flasks everywhere. Though his vision was beginning to blur, he could see that the duke and duchess had arrived and were dancing near the front of the room. That was all he needed to know. It would have been nice to see Brice's face as well, but he didn't have the strength to look for him. He could feel himself starting to fall. It was all he could do to reach into the small pouch that was strapped to his belt, pull out the three mice he had found in his fields, and throw them into the middle of the room.

He fell to the floor retching, his body racked by convulsions. But he heard the music stop. He heard the incredulous silence and he could imagine the look on all of their faces as they stared at the tiny creatures who had brought the pestilence to their Feast. And then, just before another wave of illness carried Pytor toward his own death, he heard the screaming begin.

Chapter 2

Thorald, Eibithar, year 877, Adriel's Moon waning

They had been in the king's tower since midday, as far from the city marketplace as they could be. The lone window in the duke's private chamber looked out over Amon's Ocean and its rocky coastline, and Filib could hear breakers pounding endlessly at the base of the dark cliffs. Gulls called raucously as they wheeled above the ramparts of the castle and the sea wind keened in the stone like Bian's spirits.

Yet, with all this, and with his uncle droning on yet again about the proper method for keeping account of the thanes' fee payments, Filib could still hear music coming from the city. He toyed absently with the gold signet ring on his right hand, wondering where Renelle was at that moment. In the city, no doubt, enjoying the Revel with everyone else.

"Filib!"

The young lord looked up. His uncle sat across from him at the broad oak table, anger in his grey eyes, his mouth set in a thin line.

"Yes, Uncle?"

"You could at least do me the courtesy of pretending to listen. This may not be as fascinating as whatever you're dreaming about, but I'm sure it's every bit as important."

Filib grinned. "Important, yes. But as I've told you, it's not necessary."

The duke frowned, gesturing at the scrolls before him. "This method--"

“Is not mine, Uncle,” Filib broke in. “I know that you like it. I know that you feel my method isn’t as orderly or as clear as yours. But it works for me. If you really intend to give me control of the fee accounting, you’re going to have to let me do it my way.”

“This isn’t just my method, Filib,” Tobbar said, his voice softening. “It was your father’s as well. And the king’s before him. Dukes of Thorald have been accounting this way since before the Queen’s War. Do you really think it’s your place to abandon the practice?”

Filib closed his eyes. His father. How was he supposed to argue with that?

“All right,” he said, opening his eyes again and passing a hand through his hair in a gesture his mother would have recognized. “But can we do this later? Please? The Revel--”

“The Revel?” Tobbar repeated, sounding cross again. He gestured impatiently at the door, as if the musicians, sorcerers, tumblers, and peddlers who traveled with Bohdan’s Revel stood outside the chamber. “You’re nearly two years past your Fating, Filib. You should know by now that dukes and lords don’t have time for the Revel. We’ve more important things to do. Besides, the Revel will be here for another five or six days. You’ll have plenty of time for all that later, after we’re done.” He picked up one of the scrolls again and began to study it. “The Revel,” he muttered once more, shaking his head. “Do you think your father would have been more interested in what’s going on in the city than in the thanes’ fees?”

Filib had been expecting this. “Actually, yes.”

Tobbar looked up again. Filib could see that he was fighting to keep the grin from his face.

His uncle sighed, then smiled. “You’re probably right.”

“I’m not sure I see the point of giving me control of the accounting anyway,” Filib said.

“I’ll be king before long. And then it will fall back to you. Why bother with all this?”

“Maybe I want a respite from it,” the duke said. “As you say, this will be mine to do for the rest of my life. I’d like someone else to do it, even for just a short while. And I don’t want that person ruining my scrolls with poor work. Besides,” he went on after a brief pause, “as I’ve told you before, kings have accounting to do as well. Where do you think our tithe goes every fourth turn?”

“A king has ministers to do this. Certainly grandfather does.”

Tobbar shook his head. “Only recently. When he was younger he did it all himself.”

Filib let out a long breath. “Fine, you win. I promise to learn your method. But not today. Not until the Revel leaves for Eardley. Please.”

The duke put the scroll down and leaned back in his chair, a grin on his face, much as Filib’s father might have done. “It is good this year, isn’t it?”

“The best I can remember,” Filib said, grinning as well. “It seems a shame to miss any of it.” He sensed his uncle’s hesitation and he pressed his advantage. “The fee accounting will still be here long after the Revel is gone.”

“True,” Tobbar said, the smile lingering. “I suppose that girl of yours is down there as well?”

Filib felt something tighten in his chest. He had no doubt that she was still angry with him about last night. It had been the Night of Two Moons in Adriel’s Turn. Lover’s Night. They should have been together, she would tell him. Of all the nights of the year, this was theirs. That’s what she would say, her dark eyes flashing, or worse, brimming with tears. As if he didn’t know. As if he had any choice in the matter. She knew the limits of what they shared, he’d have

to tell her. Again. She knew that certain things lay beyond his control, that this was one of them. But still, she'd be angry and hurt. Who could blame her?

“Yes,” he said, trying to keep his tone light. “She’s probably there.”

“You’ve grown quite fond of her, haven’t you?”

Filib shrugged, looked away. “I care about her. Shouldn’t I?”

“Of course you should. As long as you remember who she is, and who you are.”

Filib kept his eyes trained on the window, but he nodded.

“What you said earlier about becoming king soon is true, Filib. I expect your grandfather to abdicate within the year. It’s time you started thinking about a wife and heirs. We’ve been lucky. The king’s long life has ensured the continuation of Thorald control of the crown, despite you father’s death. It’s time now that you did your part.”

“Has mother put you up to this, Uncle?” Filib asked, meeting Tobbar’s gaze.

His uncle gave a small smile. “Not directly, no. But she has mentioned her concerns to me. She fears you’ve grown too attached to the girl.”

“Her name is Renelle.”

Tobbar’s expression hardened. “Comments like that concern me as well. Her name isn’t important. In the larger scheme of things, neither is she. If you wish to keep her as a mistress, I’m sure that can be arranged. But I don’t want you--”

He stopped suddenly, a stricken expression on his ruddy face. “Last night!” he breathed. “You didn’t . . .”

Filib looked to the window again. “No,” he said, his voice thick. “We didn’t.”

His uncle let out a sigh. “Good. That would have been a terrible mistake, Filib. You

need to be building ties to the other houses right now. And what better way to do so than with a good match.”

“I know all this, Uncle!” Filib said, his voice rising. “I don’t need to hear it again from you!”

Tobbar fell silent. Filib looked away once more, but he could feel his uncle’s eyes upon him.

“I’m not even sure the legend applies in this case,” the young lord said after a lengthy silence. “It says only that a love consummated on the Night of Two Moons in Adriel’s Turn will last forever. My . . .” he swallowed. “My affair with Renelle was consummated long ago. Last night probably wouldn’t have mattered.”

“Perhaps not,” Tobbar said softly. “But you were right not to take the chance.”

Filib nodded again. A lone gull glided past the window, its cries echoing off the castle walls. *Tonight*, he promised himself. *I’ll be with her tonight. After I ride.*

The two of them sat without speaking for some time, Filib staring out the window, the duke, no doubt, watching him. His uncle deserved better than his tantrums. In the five years -- five years! -- since the death of Filib’s father, Tobbar had done everything in his power to prepare Filib for the throne. Where a lesser man might have allowed jealousy and resentment to keep him from such duties, Tobbar had embraced them. In Aneira, Caerisse, and every other kingdom in the Forelands, Filib knew, a man in Tobbar’s position would have been next in line for the throne, with his heirs inheriting the crown after him. Only in Eibithar, with its ancient Rules of Ascension, did the line of succession pass over the younger brother in favor of the eldest son of the deceased king. The rules had been established by the leaders of Eibithar’s twelve houses

after the death of King Ouray the Second, the last of the early Thorald kings. By creating a peaceful process for sharing royal power among Eibithar's five major houses, the dukes sought to give the land some stability, while preventing one house from establishing an absolute dynasty.

Under the Rules of Ascension, only the king's eldest son or eldest grandson, if he had come of age, could inherit the throne. If the king had no heir, power passed to the duke of the highest ranking house not in power. Thorald ranked highest of all the houses, for it was the house of Binthar, Eibithar's first great leader. After Thorald came Galdasten, Curgh, Kentigern, and Glyndwr. Thus, if Filib's grandfather, Ayllyn the Second, had died in the interim between the death of Filib's father and Filib's Fating, the duke of Galdasten would have taken the crown. Or rather, the duke of Curgh, Filib realized, remembering with a shudder the dreadful incident at Galdasten that killed the duke and his family several years before.

Because Thorald was the preeminent house in Eibithar, and because power always reverted to the highest ranking house, Filib's house had held the throne for more years than any other. Filib's father would have been pleased to know that his death would not keep Filib from taking his place in Thorald's pantheon of kings.

A knock on the duke's door broke a lengthy silence. Tobbar and Filib exchanged a look, then the older man called for whomever had come to enter.

The door opened and Enid ja Kovar, the duke's first minister stepped into the chamber.

"Sire," the Qirsi woman said as she entered. "I was just--" Seeing the younger man, she stopped. "Lord Filib, I didn't know you were here. Forgive me for interrupting."

"It's all right, Enid," Tobbar said. He glanced at his nephew. "I think we're done."

Filib stood. "Thank you, Uncle."

"I'm going to hold you to that promise, though. When the Revel leaves, you're going to learn the old method."

"You have my word," Filib said, grinning.

"You're off to the Revel, my lord?" the first minister asked, her yellow eyes reflecting the light from the window. Like all the men and women of the sorcerer race, she had white hair and skin so pale that it was almost translucent. Enid wore her hair pulled back from her face, making her appear even more frail than most Qirsi. Filib sometimes found it hard to remember that she wielded such powerful magic. Yet just two years before, when a late-night fire threatened to sweep through the center of the walled city below the castle, he had seen this wisp of a woman raise a dense mist that dampened the flames, and a stiff wind that blew against the prevailing natural gale to keep the fire from spreading. Without her magic the townsfolk might not have been able to put the fire out before it claimed the entire city.

"Yes," Filib told her. "I'm heading to the Revel now. Have you been?"

She gave an indulgent smile, as if he were still a child. "I find the Revel . . . tiresome. However, I will be at the banquet tonight. I trust I'll see you there?"

The banquet. He had forgotten. He had no choice really; he had to be there. He was hosting it, along with his mother and Tobbar. But how would he explain this to Renelle? She'd be there as well, though not at his table of course, and she'd expect to be with him after. But he needed to ride. It was going to be a very late night.

His uncle was watching him closely, awaiting his reply to Enid's question.

He made himself smile. "Yes, of course I'll be there."

Tobbar continued to stare at him, as if expecting him to say more.

“I give you my word, Uncle,” Filib told him. “I’ll be there.”

Still, his uncle did not look satisfied. “Then why are you behaving as though it’s the last place you intended to be? Is this about that--?” He stopped himself. “Is this about Renelle again?”

“No, it’s not.” He exhaled heavily. “I had planned to ride tonight,” he said at last.

“That’s all. It’s not important. I’ll just do it after the banquet.”

Tobbar paled. “I’m sorry, Filib. My memory is not what it once was.”

“I’m afraid I’m a bit lost,” Enid said looking from Filib to the duke.

“My father was killed during a hunt the night of Panya’s full,” Filib said. Just speaking the words made him shiver. He still remembered being awakened by the tolling of the guard house bells and hearing his mother wailing in the next chamber.

“Forgive me,” the Qirsi woman said. “I hadn’t come to Thorald yet. But it was my understanding that this happened in Kebb’s Turn.”

Filib nodded, playing with the ring again. “It did. But each turn, on this night, I honor my father by riding to the place of his death. And on this night in Kebb’s Turn, after leading the hunt as he once did, I remain there until dawn.”

“It seems a fine way to remember him, my lord,” Enid said.

“Thank you.”

“I’ll see to it that the final course is served early enough, Filib,” his uncle said. “I should have remembered. Forgive me.”

“There’s nothing to forgive,” Filib said with a shrug. “Mother says I’m foolish to do this

more than once a year.” He smiled. “Actually she called it unhealthy. But I’ll have to stop anyway once I leave for Audun’s Castle, so I feel that I should continue until then.”

“Each of us honors your father in his or her own way,” Tobbar told him. “Including your mother. I see nothing wrong with your rides, and I’ll tell her as much the next time I speak with her.”

“Thank you.”

“Be watchful tonight, though,” he went on. “For all that the Revel gives us, it also attracts more than its share of knaves and vagrants. I’d feel better if you’d take one of your liegemen.”

“I’ll be fine, Uncle. I do this every turn, and I always do it alone.”

“Very well,” Tobbar said, shaking his head slightly.

Filib glanced toward the window. The sunlight on the castle walls had taken on the rich golden hue of late day. He barely had time to find Renelle before he’d be expected back at the castle for the banquet.

“Go on, Filib,” the duke said. “We’ll see you soon.”

He was walking toward the door almost before Tobbar had finished speaking. He stopped himself long enough to bow to his uncle and nod once to the Qirsi woman. Then he hurried out of the chamber, down the winding stone steps of the tower, and out into the daylight. With any luck at all, he’d find Renelle in the markets. He could only hope that in her happiness at seeing him she’d forget her anger.

The singer beside him was nearing the end of the first movement, her voice climbing

smoothly through the closing notes of “Panya’s Devotion,” finding subtleties in the piece that most singers missed. This was a difficult passage, although no part of *The Paean to the Moons* could be considered easy, and she was handling it quite well.

Cadel couldn’t remember her name, though they had been practicing together since the second day of the Revel. It was not unusual for wandering singers in the Forelands to meet up with others of their craft, practice and perform with them for a short while, and then, after a most careful division of their wages, part ways to continue their travels. It was especially common in the cities hosting Eibithar’s Revel. Cadel and Jedrek had been making their way through the Forelands in this manner for nearly fourteen years; they had sung with more people than Cadel could recall.

He had never been very good with names, a trait that actually was quite useful in his other, true profession. But in this case, he would have liked to remember, merely as a courtesy. She had not been shy about showing her interest in him, allowing her gaze to linger on his face, even after he caught her watching him, and standing closer to him than was necessary when they sang. He liked bold women. Had he and Jedrek not had other business to which to attend, he might have been interested as well. She was rather attractive, with short dark hair, pale green eyes, and a round, pretty face, and she was just a bit heavy, which he also liked. But most of all, she was a fine singer, her voice strong and supple. For that reason alone, he felt that he should have known her name. Her interpretation of “Panya’s Devotion” had earned his respect.

Jedrek and the woman’s sister, whose name Cadel had also forgotten, were backing her with a strong, even counterpoint, their voices twined like lovers. The two of them had spent the previous night together, Cadel knew, and it showed in their singing. Jedrek gave little credence

to the moon legends, although he wasn't above using the promise of a lifetime of love to lure a woman into his bed. He had been doing it for several years. Nonetheless, it still angered Cadel to see him behaving so recklessly under these circumstances. He hadn't gotten the chance to talk to Jedrek about it this morning -- Jedrek and the woman had arrived only a few moments before their performance began -- but he would as soon as they ended their performance.

The first woman -- *what was her name?* -- had reached the end of "Panya's Devotion." The counterpoint was to complete its cycle once, and then it was Cadel's turn. He took a long, slow breath, readying himself. The opening of "Ilias's Lament" was by far the most difficult part of the *Paean's* second movement. It began at the very top of Cadel's range and remained there for several verses before falling briefly during the middle passages. It rose again at its end, but by then his voice would be ready. The opening, that was the challenge.

The counterpoint completed its turn. Cadel opened his mouth, and keeping his throat as relaxed as possible, he reached for the opening note. And found it. Perfectly. His voice soared, like a falcon on a clear day, and he gave himself over to the music, allowing the bittersweet melody and the tragic tale imparted by the lyrics, to carry him through the movement.

Those who knew him -- or thought they did -- solely through his profession would have been surprised to see what music did to him. At times, he was surprised by it himself. How many times had he finished a passage of surpassing emotion, only to find that his cheeks were damp with tears? Yes, there was a precision to the art that excited him, just the way the precision demanded by his other craft did. But there was more. Music had the power to soothe him, even as it exhilarated. It offered him both release and fulfillment. In many ways, it was not unlike the act of love.

With no piece was all of this truer than with the *Paeon*. Normally it was sung only once a turn, on the Night of Two Moons. But their performance last night had been such that all those who missed it and heard others speak of what they had done, demanded that they repeat it this day. Jedrek and the women had been more than happy to oblige, but Cadel hesitated. The previous night's performance had been wondrous. Singing the second movement, Cadel had felt for just a moment that Ilias himself had reached down from Morna's sky to add his voice to Cadel's own. The others had sung brilliantly as well, particularly the woman singing Panya's part.

But magic such as they had found the previous night was not to be taken for granted. They could not be certain that they would find it again. Besides, he and Jedrek had other things to do this day. It was only when one of the local innkeepers offered them twice the wage they had earned the previous night to sing the *Paeon* again that Cadel realized he had no choice in the matter. Not that he or Jedrek needed the gold. But they were supposed to be wandering bards, and no bard could turn down such a wage without arousing suspicion.

So here he was, singing the Lament again, and, much to his amazement, giving a better performance than he had the night before. All of them were. He had only to see the expressions on the faces of those listening to them to know it was true. Even sung poorly, the *Paeon* was a powerful piece of music, capable of evoking tears from the most impassive audiences. But when sung by masters, it could overwhelm listeners with its splendor and arouse within them the same passion, longing, and heartache it described.

It told of the love shared by Panya, a Qirsi woman, and Ilias, an Eandi man. The two races were young then, and the gods who created them, Qirsar and Ean, had long hated each

other and had thus decreed that the Qirsi and Eandi should remain apart. But what Panya and Ilias shared went deeper even than their fear of the great ones. Soon Panya was with child, and Qirsar's rage flared like the fire magic some of his people possessed. For it was well known that Qirsi women were too frail to bear the children begotten by Eandi men. When Panya's time came, she lived long enough to deliver her child, a beautiful daughter, but then she died. Ilias, bereft of his love and unable to find consolation in the birth of his daughter, took his own life, hoping to join his beloved in Bian's realm.

Qirsar, however, had something else in mind for them. He changed the lovers into moons, one white and one red, and placed them in the sky for all to see, as a warning to Qirsi and Eandi who dared to love one another. For all eternity, the great one declared, the lovers would pursue each other among the stars, but never would they be together or even see each other again. Whenever white Panya rose, red Ilias would set, and only when she disappeared below the horizon would he rise again.

But so great was their love, that even in death they were able to defy the God. The first time Panya rose into the night sky, brilliant and full, she paused at the summit of her arc. And there she waited until Ilias could join her. Ever after, they traveled the sky together, their cycles nearly identical.

Cadel moved slowly through the second movement, carrying his audience with him through the range of Ilias's emotions: his passionate love for the Qirsi woman, his fear of the wrath of the gods and his joy at finding that Panya was with child, and finally, as the melody spiraled upwards again toward the Lament's heart-rending conclusion, his anguish at losing Panya. Jedrek and the second woman stayed right with him throughout, easing the tempo of

their counterpoint as he lingered on Ilias's passion, matching him as he quickened his pace to convey Ilias's fear, and, at the last, slowing once more, to wring heartache from their melody as he sang Ilias's grief.

The third and final movement, "The Lovers' Round," which described Panya and Ilias's final defiance of Qirsar, was sung as a canon. It began with the first woman singing the lyrical, intricate melody in a high register. As she moved to the second verse, Cadel joined in, beginning the melody again, though at a lower pitch. He was followed by the second woman, who was followed by Jedrek. Thus the melody, first sung high, then low, then high again, then low again, circled back on itself, each voice drawn along by the previous one. Just as Ilias followed Panya through the sky, turn after turn, so their voices followed, one after the other, thirteen times through this final theme, for the thirteen turns of the year.

They finished the piece and the audience erupted with cheers and clapping. But much more gratifying for Cadel was the single moment of utter silence just after their last notes had died away and just before the applause began. For that silence, that moment of awe and reverence, of yearning and joy, told him more about what their music had done to those listening than all the cheers the people could muster.

He glanced at the woman beside him and they shared a smile. *What is your name?*

"You sing very well," he whispered to her.

Her smile deepened, though she didn't blush as some women might have. "As do you."

Each one of them bowed in turn, then the four of them bowed in unison and they left the stage, the noise from the audience continuing even after they were gone. Four times they returned to bow and wave, and four times the people called them back, until finally the innkeeper

came to them and asked if they would sing the *Paeon* once more, for another five qinde apiece.

Once more, Jedrek and the other woman were willing, but this time Cadel and the dark-haired woman refused.

“But, Anesse!” the second woman said, turning toward her sister. “He’s offering gold!”

Anesse! Of course. Anesse and Kalida.

Anesse shook her head. “I don’t care if he’s offering fifty qinde. Twice is enough.” Her eyes strayed toward Cadel for just an instant. “We found magic twice with the *Paeon*. We’d be fools to chance a third time.”

The younger woman opened her mouth, but Anesse stopped her with a raised finger.

“No, Kalida. That’s my final word.”

Cadel nodded his approval and faced the innkeeper. “I’m afraid we must refuse.”

The man looked disappointed, but he managed a smile. “I figured as much.” He turned away and started toward the bar. “I’ll get your wage and you can be on your way,” he said over his shoulder.

Cadel glanced at Jedrek, who gave a small nod. The time for singing was over. They had business.

“Will you be joining us at the banquet tonight, Corbin?”

It took him a moment. The alias he had chosen for the Revel.

“I’m afraid not,” he said, meeting her gaze. It was a shame, really. He would have enjoyed passing a night or two in her arms. “Honok and I will be visiting with some old friends this evening.”

She gave a small frown. “That’s too bad. I had hoped to spend some time with you,

away from all this.” She gestured toward the stage, giving him the same knowing smile she had offered earlier as they finished singing.

“I’d like that as well. Honok and I will be in the marketplace tomorrow, singing some Caerissan folk songs. Perhaps after we’ve finished?”

Cadel knew what she’d say. He had overheard the two women discussing their plans a few days before. Still, he had no trouble acting disappointed when Anesse explained that they would be leaving for Sanbira the next morning.

“So we’re not going to see you again at all?” Kalida said plaintively, looking from her sister to Jedrek.

“It seems not,” Cadel answered. “At least not for some time.” He smiled at Anesse. “But perhaps Adriel will bring us together again.”

“She will if she has an ear for music,” the dark-haired woman said, grinning.

Truly a shame.

They all turned at the sound of coins jingling. The innkeeper was approaching, digging into a small pouch as he walked.

“I believe we agreed upon four qinde each,” he said as he stopped in front of them.

Cadel gave a small laugh, but when he spoke his voice carried just a hint of steel. “And I’m certain it was eight.”

The man looked up. He was quite heavy, with white, wispy hair and yellowed teeth. He walked with an exaggerated limp. This was not a man who was looking for a fight.

He merely nodded. “Of course, I’d forgotten. Eight it is. And worth every qinde.”

He handed them each their coins and then smiled, his breath smelling of ale and pipe

smoke. “If you’re back for next year’s Revel, I hope you’ll sing for us again. At the same wage, naturally.”

“If we’re back,” Cadel said, “we’d be delighted.”

The four singers left the inn by way of a rear door which let out into a grassy area near the west wall of Thorald city. Immediately, Jedrek and Kalida moved off a short distance to say their goodbyes, leaving Cadel alone with Anesse.

The woman stared after her sister for a moment before facing Cadel, a wry grin on her lips.

“Well,” she said, “if there’s any truth to the old legends, we’ll probably see each other again at Kalida and Honok’s joining.”

Cadel hesitated and Anesse began to laugh.

“Don’t worry,” she told him with obvious amusement. “Kalida doesn’t believe in the legends any more than your friend seems to.” Her smile changed, deepened. “I do, however, and I should tell you that I still was tempted to seek out your chambers last night.”

“I almost wish you had.”

She arched an eyebrow. “Almost?”

“I take the moon legends seriously, too. Even if you had come, I’m not certain what would have happened.”

“Fair enough,” she said. “But what about now? I don’t think Kalida and Honok would mind a few hours together before evening. And we have nothing to fear today from the legends.”

He was tempted by her offer. Who wouldn’t have been? But he had to meet someone before sundown, and on days such as these he did not allow himself any distractions. Except for

music, of course, which actually served to sharpen his mind.

“I wish I could. But Honok and I must rehearse for this evening. We’re visiting friends, but like all our friends, they’ll expect us to sing, and we have nothing prepared.”

“If I didn’t know better, Corbin, I’d say you were putting me off.”

He felt himself growing tense and he tried not to let it show. “I’m sorry if it seems that way. I meant what I said before: I hope the goddess will bring us together again. But I’m afraid this isn’t our time.”

Anesse shrugged and smiled. “Very well. Until next time then.” She glanced back toward where Jedrek and her sister had been and, seeing that they were gone, looked at Cadel again, a question in her green eyes. “Where did they go?”

“I think they went around to the side of the inn for some privacy,” he said. No doubt Jedrek had her pressed up against the building wall by now.

Anesse frowned. “Kal?” she called.

For several moments there was no reply.

“Just a minute,” her sister finally answered, her voice breathless and muffled.

The woman faced him again, looking uncomfortable, and they stood that way for a few more minutes, waiting for Jedrek and Kalida to return.

He’s gone too far this time, Cadel thought, his anger at Jedrek building as they waited. He and Jedrek had been together for a long time, but in recent turns Jedrek had started acting strangely, taking risks where once he never would have thought of doing so. Perhaps it was the inevitable result of success, or a natural response to so many years of caution. Whatever the reason, it had to stop before one of them got killed.

When at last Jedrek and the woman returned to the grassy area behind the inn, their hair and clothes disheveled, Cadel was ready to throttle him. Kalida, her color high, refused to meet her sister's gaze, but Jedrek seemed far too pleased with himself. He grinned at Cadel sheepishly and gave a slight shrug, as if the gesture alone could excuse his behavior. At least he had the good sense to keep his mouth shut.

"Goodbye, Anesse," Cadel said, as he and Jedrek turned to leave. "Gods keep you safe."

He didn't look back, but he sensed that she was smiling.

"And you, Corbin," she said.

For some time as they walked, neither of them said a thing, and even when Cadel did begin to speak, he kept his tone low and casual, so as not to draw the attention of passersby.

"I've half a mind to kill you here in Thorald, and leave your body for the duke's men to find tomorrow morning."

Jedrek faltered in midstride for just an instant before resuming his normal gait. The smile had vanished from his lean face. He swallowed, then whispered, "Why?"

Cadel looked at him sidelong. "You have to ask why?" He shook his head. "Perhaps I should kill you," he muttered. They walked a few paces in silence. "You understand your job, right? You know what I expect of you?"

"I've been doing this for fourteen years," Jedrek said, sounding defensive. "I ought to know my role by now."

"Yes, you ought to!" Cadel said, his voice rising. He glanced around quickly. Two or three of the street vendors were eyeing him, but no one else seemed to have paid any attention. "You ought to," he repeated in a lower voice. "I need you to guard my back, Jed. I need you to

keep anything unexpected from ruining my plans. You've saved my life more times than I care to count, and I need to know that you're capable of doing it again should the need arise. And here we are in Thorald, the heart of Eibithar, on the verge of completing the most lucrative job we've ever had, and you're acting like a rutting pig."

Jedrek didn't say anything for some time. When he finally did respond, he sounded contrite. "You're right. It won't happen again. I swear."

"It better not, or I will kill you. This is a young man's profession. We all get too old for it eventually. I'd hate to think that your time had come already."

Jedrek halted and grabbed Cadel by the arm so that they were facing each other. "I'm not too old!" he said, his dark eyes boring into Cadel's.

Cadel grinned. "I'm glad to hear it. And I'm glad to see that I can still get a rise out of you."

Jedrek glared at him for another moment before giving in to a smile and shaking his head.

"You bastard," he said, as they started walking again.

They reached the inn a short time later. Cadel had arranged to meet with their employer just after the ringing of the prior's bell, which would come within the hour. He had agreed to come alone -- his employers often asked this of him -- and he gave Jedrek leave to wander the city and enjoy the Revel for a time while he changed clothes and kept his appointment.

He climbed the stairs and walked down the narrow corridor to their room. But as he approached the door, he saw that it was slightly ajar.

Instantly his dagger was in his hand, its worn stone hilt feeling cold and smooth against his fingers. He crept forward, each step as delicate as a kiss, and laying his free hand gently on

the door, prepared to fling it open and launch himself at the intruder.

“It’s all right,” a woman’s voice called. “I’d have thought you’d be expecting me.”

Exhaling, he straightened and pushed the door open.

He had never met the Qirsi woman he saw reclining casually on his bed, though he knew her name, and her title. Enid ja Kovar, first minister to the duke of Thorald. He also knew that she was right. He should have expected her.