

Chapter 1

Marching to Marka

Belaika shivered in the predawn gloom and stared up at the heavens, mouth open with wonder at the display of shooting stars. While his silvery gray eyes were turned upward, his earpoints twitched as he waited for the whistle that must come, informing him of the intentions of his master's enemies.

Other sounds came from behind, where the army readied itself for battle. He shivered again, this time not from cold. Although he was an army scout, subject to the same discipline as all other soldiers, he did not like battles. He and his kind were scouts and messengers; they were not expected to fight.

Pitched too high for human hearing, the sharp whistle reached Belaika and he stiffened, stretching up to his full height to acknowledge it with his own whistle. He trotted through the outer row of wooden stakes, twisting his way through the defenses and heard the whistle repeated as the message was relayed to the flank camps.

Most soldiers acknowledged him as he passed. He returned their greetings with nods and smiles. Infantrymen formed up before the earth bank and small detachments of mounted cavalry were behind them, all in full view of the approaching enemy. Behind the earth bank stood the war machines: ballistas and huge mangonels.

He reached the yeoman. "*Donenya*, I heard," he said.

"How far?" asked the yeoman.

"Five milas, closing." He gave the rest of the message.

The yeoman nodded. "Go and tell the boss," he said.

"*Se bata*."

As he turned away, soldiers lifted a hopper full of spears and positioned it on the ballista. Along the rank of ballistas, more men did the same. The green fire was prepared, but the huge cauldrons were not yet lit. The bombardiers hated green fire: they said the only thing worse than handling it was having it land on you. The throwing arm of the last mangonel was now being hauled down, so it would not be seen until it was too late. These war machines - although in one line - were three ranks, each with a corresponding row of marker posts in the field, masquerading as advance stakes. All the mangonels had been ranged the previous day, pins locking the throwing arms into their respective ranges and colored boards attached to each machine to tell the bombardiers which was in which rank. Red for the first - or furthest - markers, white for the second and blue for the third. The men already positioned at the advance stakes had orders to turn and run, lulling the enemy into a false sense of security. They wanted him to believe this was only a small force, not the full army.

Joining the paved road on which the army was camped, Belaika began to run, only slowing as he approached his master's large tent. Orders were shouted, repeated over and over as the yeoman did his work. He was challenged at this tent, though he was well known to the guardsmen.

"Akram," he said.

"Pass." The guard nodded and relaxed the spear that had been leveled against Belaika's chest, more for show than real threat. The guard winked at the scout. "He's awake."

Belaika nodded and pushed through the tent flap. He doubted if many had slept well.

"*Enya*," he began, "they are five milas away, coming fast. They move one mila every fifteen minutes, but their war machines are five milas further back, moving one mila every twenty-five minutes. The yeoman knows."

Marcus Vintner, allegedly descended from the first Mark and claimant to the vacant Markan Throne, looked up from his map. Light-crystals provided plenty of light in the center of the otherwise dim tent. As the canvas partition that normally screened off a sleeping area was tied back, Belaika glimpsed untouched bedding, for Marcus had slept with his head on his arm at the map table. Belaika was a little taller than his owner, his appearance more striking thanks to the gray, green and brown skin paint that covered his body, with vivid slashes of black across face and chest. Despite this, Marcus was the one with real presence. Belaika's silvery gray eyes, cat-slit black pupils narrowed against the brightness of the tent's interior, and his pointed ears, betrayed his race and hence his status.

The smile Marcus directed at his sylph was, however, genuine and warm. "Good." He pushed dark hair away from dark-blue eyes. "Ask Kelanus to join me."

The sylph paused, toying with the black leather collar about his neck. "They come as you predicted."

Marcus's smile broadened and his eyes sparkled. "This is the only road to Marka from the north." He stroked his chin, thinking aloud. "Even so, Branad won't expect us to be waiting for him here. What about the rest of them?"

Belaika shook his head. "Too far away still." A thought struck him and his earpoints twitched. "The shooting stars. Did you see?"

"I have seen them before. Go to Kelanus. I need him here."

"*Se bata.*" Belaika bobbed a quick bow and ducked back out of the tent.

Marcus reached for the still steaming cup of alovak and savored its distinctive odor before sipping the black liquid. It might be his last. His personal sylph - Jenn - had served breakfast hours before. She should now be with the nurses, ready to help with bandages and equipment.

Today would decide who reached Marka first. Shivering, he fancied destiny walked beside him. Today should be decisive. Before he could restore Marka to her rightful place he must end the civil war between the various claimants.

He looked up as his general, Kelanus Butros, heeled by Belaika, entered the tent. The real military leader had just walked in; Marcus was just the claimant to the throne and a figurehead. He was not ignorant of military tactics, but Kelanus knew war. The general had been with him for two years, after being dismissed by Branad. A decision his rival might rue today.

Kelanus stood beside the map. "Too late for looking at that now," he remarked, bass rumble resonating in Marcus's chest. "Word should have already reached the other camps."

Marcus grinned, knowing how that had been achieved. The sylphs had suggested that they could be used as scouts even before he had taken over from his father and, together with professional military scouts, he had begun a training program fifteen years ago. That program had changed beyond all recognition since.

The original intention was to use the sylphs as messengers, as their hearing range was better than that of any human, so they could whistle messages to each other without threat of interception. Nobody initially realized that these sylphs would replace humans in the role of scout. There were now in excess of three hundred sylph scouts who had proved their worth over and over. Many were here, but a few were scattered throughout his lands, serving the small detachments of the army dotted about.

Kelanus had at first doubted the sylphs' value, but misgivings soon evaporated and he proved an enthusiastic convert. Now he would never think of using any but sylphs for scouting. Not only a sylph's hearing, but also his eyesight was far superior

to a human's. They could see as well as cats in the dark. Kelanus's only regret was that sylphs were too pacific to be warriors as well. But this would have broken ancient precepts concerning sylphs and warfare.

Marcus's thoughts turned back to the plan. His opposite number and distant cousin, Branad, marched on Marka from the north and, as both men knew the other was invited to Marka, he doubtless expected a delaying attack somewhere along the way. What game Marka's Supreme Council played was anyone's guess, but it was obvious the two rival claimants would meet sooner or later and that the outcome would be bloody.

"He's coming to meet you," said Kelanus, "and leaving his war machines further and further behind. Branad will launch straight into the attack when he makes contact."

"Just cavalry and mounted archers?"

"And some infantry. Branad is not so big a fool as to believe only cavalry wins battles."

Marcus wondered who had taught Branad that; he rather suspected that man stood in the tent with him right now.

Kelanus continued. "So long as we appear to fight defensively, he'll swallow the bait. He always does. When he realizes war machines are here, he'll push forward even faster to avoid the worst they can offer. That's common sense and gives us a further advantage: he'll leave his infantry behind."

"Makes life easier for the snatch squads." Marcus could not restrain a shiver at the mention of the new snatch squads: men trained to dart through a battle and capture the enemy leader directly.

"You wanted Branad captured rather than killed outright." The inventor of those snatch squads narrowed his eyes. His tone hinted that "killed outright" was the wiser option. "Snatching him is the only way I can think of. Even then, there is no guarantee of success."

"What *I* want," retorted Marcus, "is minimum bloodshed. This so-called civil war has dragged on long enough." He fumbled for his gold necklace and stared lovingly at the miniature of his wife painted and enameled on it. The less killing the better. Like his own, Branad's army had always acted honorably. It had never pillaged its way across the countryside, nor had it caused any more damage than could be avoided. Both Branad and Marcus had embarked on charm offensives to win people to their point of view. Marcus wanted to win both armies and both sets of people. The plan was a good one.

However, Marcus had seen enough battles to know that few ever went to plan. Once the fighting started, anything could wreck the best battle plan. And there was a further complication.

"Why has Branad divided his army?"

Kelanus smiled. "Ranallie's idea, I suspect." The general tapped the map. "Perhaps part of his plan for when he reaches Marka. Or search for the rest of our army. No doubt there are hundreds of little known ways to Marka through the forest, where we might be hidden."

"We are all here."

"Let's hope Branad doesn't know that. At least, not until it's too late."

"And if he has a Gifted one in his ranks?"

Kelanus shrugged. "The sylphs have given no warning of sudden changes in direction. I assume they *are* still in contact?"

Belaika narrowed his eyes and his earpoints slanted forward.

A scowl briefly crossed Marcus's brow. "Once they find something the size of an army, they don't lose it again. Belaika assures me they are headed the other way."

"All right, I trust the scouts; I learned my lesson about that some time ago."

Belaika wore a satisfied expression, while giving the impression he was not really eavesdropping. He settled back on his heels again.

Marcus continued. "We can't risk having that army swing round to cut us off, or join with Branad."

"They cannot reach us today. If they change course, the sylphs will give warning. Concentrate on what is in front of us for now; worry about the rest another time. It is the only way a soldier can deal with these things."

Marcus wished this war was over; he was a politician, not a warrior. He stared glumly at the map table.

"You'd better get ready," suggested Kelanus. "It'll begin sooner than you think."

Marcus nodded and turned away. Once again, he pulled his gold necklace free to stare at the image of his wife. He took strength from it, imagined he could breathe her scent.

Whatever happens, fight with honor. He recalled his father's words, those Zandra repeated whenever he left her for the field. He brushed his lips gently across the miniature before tucking it under his shirt again. As he left the tent, Belaika drew himself upright and heeled his master.

As usual when not scouting, Belaika felt underfoot as he scurried after Marcus, the claimant strapping on his sword and what little was left to don of his armor. Stablehands had already prepared Jablon, Marcus's warhorse, and the animal stamped a foot in greeting. The sylph regarded the horse warily. Sylphs did not feel happy around large animals at the best of times, and this one was trained to hurt. Jablon liked to go in with his head and shoulder, both of which were armored accordingly, complete with lethal spikes.

The Imperial Bannerman - Adrewa - waited while Marcus mounted. He carried the Vintner Standard: a gold dragon's head on a dark-blue field. Belaika shivered as Marcus and the bannerman joined the rest of the army and a cheer went up.

Marcus acknowledged it with a wave of his gauntleted hand. Kelanus joined them and the army formed up. The reserve units remained behind, while the rest moved slowly downhill along the road. They gave the appearance of reinforcing the forward units, where Belaika had earlier waited for the signal. Those manning the mangonels and ballistas added their voices to the cheers; pikemen and archers looked up from their work, but remained silent.

As the army came to a halt amid the jingling of harness and armor, the cheering stopped and an eerie silence descended. Even the birds were quiet. Saddles and leather creaked as the waiting began.

Belaika's breath came in short gasps as he fought fear. His earpoints already lay back in his hair and felt as though they were about to tuck themselves away. There were a few sylph scouts within the barricades, but none this far forward, this exposed. Most were beyond the barricades, eyes and ears open for any surprise moves. They would be as afraid as he was.

He glanced quickly into his master's face. The dark-blue eyes were calm, face still and relaxed, exuding confidence and optimism. No fear to be seen there, nor in any of the human faces. Yet Belaika knew the humans *were* frightened, that they

feared death as surely as any other animal. They were just so much better than sylphs at hiding feelings and emotions. Their faces hid fear as war helmets hid hair.

"Stand close, Belaika."

The sylph nodded, though he needed no reminders of his duty. It felt safe behind the stockade, beyond the range of enemy arrows and missiles. Belaika was experienced enough to see the enemy would be unable to get his war machines within range before Marcus deployed all three ranks of his own. For those who managed to get closer after the bombardment, there were archers with arrows of fire and pikemen with their bristling weapons. Belaika knew the enemy would be forced to close the range as quickly as possible, which would also play into his owner's hands.

Behind the stockade, light cavalry prepared their lances and armored cavalry readied their horses. Behind them stood infantry with short swords and shields. All were ready to leap out from behind the stockade, both to help defend the retreating squads of men intended to draw Branad ever further forward and to maintain the illusion of being the real reserve. Beyond the stockade, to either side on small hills, were small detachments of cavalry, to give the impression of waiting to fall on the enemy's flanks.

But, beyond the war machines Branad would not see before it was too late, beyond the small detachments of men, stood the real army. Belaika scanned the hillsides and beyond the war machines. Thousands of men were hidden there and not even he could see a sign of them. They would push behind Branad's men, cut off their retreat and capture the opposing war machines. If everything went to plan.

Belaika sighed. All living creatures died eventually; he supposed this was as good a day to die as any other.

Without further warning, it began.

Belaika shivered at the rhythmic thrumming of spears and swords against shields.

Someone bawled "First marker!" The ballistas launched their first salvo and the mangonels hurled rocks and green fire against the foe. He heard the first screams.

"They come exactly as we hoped."

The sylph stared up at his master. How could his voice be so calm? Was his heart hammering against his chest? Did he want to flee, to run and hide somewhere safe?

The light cavalry readied themselves, making final adjustments to their snowy pennons. Those strips of cloth at the lance ends would not remain pristine for long.

Behind, the ballistas and a few of the mangonels managed a second dispensation of death and destruction, or perhaps some of the throwing arms had not released properly. Such things happened often.

"Second marker!"

Jablon snorted, as did many of the other horses. A moment later, Belaika also smelled the coppery stench of fresh blood. He kept his head down, knowing that the enemy was close now. He sensed, rather than heard, the missiles from the second rank of war machines pass overhead. The screams and cries were louder, nearer.

He dreaded the touch of his master, knowing he would want a message carried. He would take it if he must, but he was fully aware of the risks. His earpoints tucked away as screams and howls continued. Men and possibly even sylphs were dying out there and he didn't want to hear.

"Third marker!"

Belaika never heard the third rank of war machines launch their missiles, but he did hear the results of the salvo, pots containing green death bursting to shower

men and animals with fire that could not be extinguished, flames that could not be escaped. Most men from the war machines now took up pikes, as did most archers. Yelling and shouting, light and heavy cavalry joined the fight. Time for hand-to-hand fighting: difficult, dangerous and bloody.

Still the reserve remained steady. Belaika glanced up every now and again, watching lines of wounded and groaning men headed towards the rear. Some had to be carried.

Since his master had taken over the army, there had been many changes to its organization. Now, laundresses, seamstresses, buyers, carters and officers' sylphs were all expected to help the nurses during a battle. Before Marcus, sylphs were never used by the military, except as servants for senior officers.

Belaika knew Jenn was somewhere back there. She always resented being more than two pacas away from Marcus, but even she had the sense to stay away from a battle. She would play her part with the nurses, well out of harm's way. Belaika was protective of the small infertile, although she was much older.

Marcus drew his sword.

The sylph shivered and very much wanted to be with Jenn.

From behind the hill, the reserve of infantry and cavalry drove forward, carrying with them the snatch squads, intended to capture the enemy commanders and - hopefully - Branad. Marcus touched his sylph's shoulder.

"We'll move forward with the banner to a new command post. Stand ready for messages."

"*Se bata.*" Belaika prayed there would be no messages.

Now that battle was joined, it was unlikely that he would hear whistles from his brother scouts and equally unlikely that they could hear his properly. Knowing this, messages were kept to a minimum during a battle, but one that must be communicated had to be passed by physically moving from one place to another and whistling from there. Which might mean picking a way through the battle. He shivered.

The new command post stood between the original stockade and the third marker. Marcus stood in his stirrups and tried to see what Kelanus could see of the battlefield. His general's small army of messengers - these carried messages through battles all the time - did not contain a single sylph. Kelanus knew the blue-skinned creatures were of little use in a fight. Excellent scouts and nurses yes, but unable to defend themselves properly when weapons were used against them.

Marcus also ignored the spyglass that Kelanus used to survey the field. It was a sore point with the claimant that Sandester made the best lenses in the known world. All of Branad's officers had a spyglass; Kelanus had brought his with him when forced to change his allegiance. A useful tool, but Marcus avoided using it whenever possible.

The battle went much better than expected, as they were still following the original plan, itself a small miracle. Branad's advance was exactly as Kelanus had predicted: an advantage of employing his enemy's former commander. The reserve still thundered out, a terrifying sight for an army that had expected to fight only a small contingent. Branad's men were hemmed in.

Beyond, large detachments of Marcus's men battled for - if they had not already won - the enemy's war machines, left far behind as the rest of Branad's army advanced at speed. He glanced skywards, surprised to see the sun already approached its meridian: time always passed quickly when the blood ran hot.

Marcus stared at the battlefield again, grudging respect for his enemy turning to admiration as he saw how well the field was still held, despite being outnumbered and encircled. The opposing army was as well trained and disciplined as his own. Training and discipline kept men alive in battle and he hoped today would not be as bad a slaughter as feared. He had plans for both Branad and his army. Kelanus would like to see the false claimant dead, but Marcus had a use for him yet. He certainly had a use for the lands he controlled, to say nothing of his army.

Marcus stiffened. Was that a sylph, darting through the struggling men? The news he carried must be pretty dire to take such a risk. Had they failed to take the enemy war machines? Had Branad sprung reinforcements that the sylphs had somehow failed to see before now?

The camouflaged scout headed directly for the command post and was quickly beside Kelanus, the general bending his head to listen to the report. A thin line of blue, smudged at one end, betrayed the presence of a wound. It stood out against the sylph's painted skin.

Marcus restrained his impatience and tapped Belaika on the shoulder. "Who is that?"

"Neptarik-y-Balrus," replied Belaika, able to recognize every scout, even under paint.

Marcus nodded. Neptarik was one of the first sylph scouts and had run with the army for ten years. Experienced, skilled and reputedly fearless. He loved adventure and gambling, traits no doubt copied from his owner. He was the first sylph to use *ebatela*, the nonviolent method of personal self-defense adopted even by some of the soldiers. And a rarity: a scout who belonged to a common soldier. Marcus recalled that magistrates had sent him to the scout training. Neptarik had not always been honestly employed. The moment the sylph had gone, thankfully towards the rearguard, a messenger crossed to Marcus.

"Sire," began the messenger, "we have news of the rest of Branad's army. They have turned and are headed straight for us. If they keep on, they are little more than a day away."

"Probably the plan all along," muttered Marcus. He raised his voice. "Thank you, Felis. Anything else?"

Felis nodded. "There was more resistance than expected at the war machines. Their soldiers fought hard and well. We lost more men than expected, but we have the machines."

Marcus grimaced and dismissed the messenger. A large number of casualties - on either side - was precisely what he wanted to avoid. He swung out of his saddle as Felis hurried away. "Come, Belaika."

Kelanus turned as the claimant joined him and saw the unasked question in his eyes.

"We should have Branad defeated long before they can reach us," the general reassured his superior. "Unless they move faster than the sylphs say."

Belaika stiffened. This, he knew, was highly unlikely; the scouts knew their work and took great pride in getting their part right.

"The sylph who brought the news," said Marcus. "Neptarik. He is to be commended."

Kelanus nodded. "I will speak with his owner."

A huge cheer went up from the battlefield and the two commanders strained forward. Shouts from Marcus's men, repeated all over the battlefield. "Surrender and

you will not be harmed. Surrender!" The shouts were gradually replaced by a growing yell, one word repeated over and over.

"Marcus! Marcus! Marcus!"

"It seems the snatch squads are successful." said Marcus; he and Kelanus exchanged a look.

The battle was over.

In accordance with their orders, Marcus's soldiers took prisoners and did not slaughter the defeated foe out of hand, the murderous practice followed by so many other claimants and thugs wishing to carve empires for themselves. Marcus knew that had the positions been reversed, Branad would act in the same honorable manner. The defeated claimant's army had never been accused of committing atrocities, but had always behaved professionally. As professionally as Marcus always insisted his own army behaved, even against those who would show no mercy had they won. This was why Marcus wanted Branad and his army. But even had he not needed them, he would still treat them army with the respect they deserved.

Marcus could barely restrain himself as he saw a detachment of his best men, led by two sylph scouts, bring a prisoner. A man who even now held himself regally, despite dented and stained armor, with burnished overlapping plates at shoulder, elbow and knee. Although his surcoat flapped in the breeze, the Vintner Arms were clearly visible. The same as those worn by Marcus, except the dragon's head was on a pale-blue field. The small coterie halted before Marcus and Kelanus.

"Now I know how my own tactics were used against me," said Branad Vintner, defeated claimant to the Imperial Throne of Marka. A small smile twisted his mouth as he stared at Kelanus.

Kelanus bowed. "Highness. Perhaps it was an error to dispense with my services? Is Ranallic with you, or were we fortunate to see him killed this morning?"

The smile broadened. "Unless he has fallen off his horse, he is alive, but not here."

"Pity." Kelanus could not hide the bitterness in his voice.

Branad's attention switched to Marcus.

"Greetings, cousin," he said.

Belaika crouched at the entrance to Marcus's tent. He glanced over his shoulder and masked a quick yawn. While his master bathed and changed his clothes, the scout nibbled on spring greens the thoughtful Jenn had provided. The soldiers who had earlier tidied the tent were now gone and only the guard remained outside. The tent's main room was ready for what might be the most important meeting of the civil war.

The sylph peered outside and shook his head. Captured soldiers were usually stripped of weapons and armor, but several prisoners openly cleaned their swords and axes. Admittedly, Branad's men were split into small groups and a large number of Marcus's men supervised them. Discreetly, of course. And there were no sounds of celebration, most unusual after a battle. It was turning into a strange day.

He rose to his feet as Marcus joined him and laid a fatherly hand on his shoulder. "Pining for Eleka?"

"Missing her, yes," replied the sylph. Eleka was his first - and so far only - wife.

"Still hoping for a son?"

"She says she carries one child." Belaika's eyes sparkled. Sylph males were always born individually, not in pairs or litters like the female and infertile sylphs.

"Good." Marcus smiled. "Then she will allow you another wife."

All of Belaika's children would belong to Marcus, but he allowed his sylphs a large degree of freedom, short of manumission.

"We'll reach Marka within the week and can send for our loved ones." He did not add that his own family had already left Calcan and the caravan would include Eleka.

"Another wife." Belaika nodded. He would gain more status when he had more than one wife, just as female sylphs gained more status by birthing a son. Eleka had given him twin girls and a litter of infertiles, but no son. As the first wife chose all subsequent wives - or at least had more say about them than her husband - he knew there was little chance of a second until Eleka had given him a son, cementing forever her position as senior wife.

Outside, the tent guard banged the butt of his spear on the ground.

"Ready, Belaika?"

They hurried further into the tent. Marcus lounged arrogantly in the largest seat and casually draped one leg across the chair arm. Belaika was ready to serve alovak, already brewed.

Much to her disgust, and after a tantrum that wilted Belaika's earpoints, Jenn had gone to the back of the tent. She was to remain there until called, to serve sweetmeats if all went well. Sulking, she retreated to the small section that was her own private space. There was a small smile for the scout, to show she harbored no ill feeling towards him.

Jenn was always mindful of her position within the strictly hierarchical sylph society, treating everyone else as her superior. All other sylphs referred to her as an equal, for this was how Marcus spoke to her. Nobody wished to intimate that he was of lower status. Jenn had served Marcus faithfully for a quarter of a century and clearly resented being pushed aside now.

Kelanus's voice came from outside the tent and he spoke as if Marcus already held the Throne. "Majesty, I present Branad Ulvic Vintner." No title was given to the defeated claimant. Kelanus pushed the tent flaps apart and escorted Marcus's rival inside.

"Very impressive, cousin," remarked Branad, as he glanced around the tent. Belaika earned a small, puzzled frown.

"Come and sit down," invited Marcus.

Three scribes followed Kelanus into the tent and they took their seats down one side, the map table now serving as their desk. Branad took a smaller chair opposite Marcus and Kelanus sat opposite the scribes.

This was Belaika's cue. He hefted the can of alovak and moved around the tent slowly and gracefully. He offered the dark drink first to Branad, then Marcus and finally Kelanus. As he poured the last cup, Branad spoke.

"I heard rumors, but could not believe that you would break the precepts concerning warfare and sylphs." He inspected the contents of his cup before gesturing towards Belaika. "I assume the paint covering this sylph is a mark of his work?"

"He's a scout," replied Marcus. "The precepts are not broken. As you can see, he bears no arms, neither is he - or any other sylph - expected to fight. I use sylphs as scouts or messengers, and as nurses. Thanks to them, I know the other half of your army cannot reach me today, which gives me time to consider what to do with you, never mind them."

Kelanus grinned at his former employer's discomfort.

Branad sipped at his alovak, hand and arm steady. "And what do you plan for me and my men?"

"My aims are simple." Marcus smiled. "I want to see Marka reunited and strong; true justice and the rule of law once more prevail; and a stable throne, with me as its first occupant."

"Ah. Well, with that last, you and I must disagree-"

Marcus put both feet on the ground and leaned forward angrily. "With that last, you and I will agree before sundown, or I will see you dead."

Apparently unconcerned, Branad took another sip of alovak. "My men might not be quite so docile if you kill me."

"If I decide to kill you," countered the other, "your men may choose to serve me in this life, or join you in the next."

Branad arched an eyebrow. "Really? The man who pardoned Pilwm when he surrendered. The same Marcus who allowed the Prefecture of Metton to continue its own way after defying your instructions."

"Trenvera would never tolerate either of us swallowing Metton."

"Perhaps."

Marcus's eyes narrowed. "The reason this discussion is taking place at all is that alone of the various claimants, you and I share two things: the same ancestry and an innate sense that defeated enemies do not deserve to be slain out of hand. Your men - like mine - do not pillage and despoil the lands they pass through or conquer. Like myself, you have built up a reasonable power base, the size of which has not been seen since Hingast changed his battle tactics and decided to destroy everything instead of consolidating his gains."

"Hingast has lost his mind," grunted Branad, sourly. He sniffed and changed the subject. "I still believe my claim is stronger than yours."

"Only two claimants received a summons from the Supreme Council of Marka." Marcus took a sip of his own alovak. "You and me."

"Perhaps the summons will not go as you wish, cousin."

"My claim is stronger than yours," insisted Marcus. "I'm a direct descendant of Kylist, the younger brother of the last Emperor. You're a descendant of the last Emperor's father." He took another sip of his alovak. "The laws of succession are quite clear: if the Emperor dies without issue, the throne passes to his younger brother and thence to his descendants. More important than that, you're defeated in battle. That counts far more than bloodlines. You still have your honor and you may yet salvage much of what you've lost, but your claim to the Throne is over."

"Marka's Senate and Supreme Council may not see it that way." Branad downed the rest of his drink.

"I'm sure they will."

"What is it you want of me? Let me hear your terms."

"Your recognition of my claim," replied Marcus, smoothly. "Your army and prefectures will join with mine under my command. We'll march to Marka together."

Branad waved Belaika away, refusing more alovak for the moment. "My army will join yours, but I'll only recognize your leadership until we reach Marka. There I will submit to the decision of the Senate and Supreme Council. If they choose you, our armies and prefectures are joined. Likewise if they choose me."

Kelanus looked at Marcus in consternation. This was not going as planned.

Belaika's mouth dropped open, the alovak can forgotten in his hand.

"You will recognize my claim."

"Or what?" retorted Branad. "Kill me? You'll have a bloodbath on your hands if you do, as well as losing your reputation in Marka and elsewhere. I acknowledge your leadership until we reach Marka. You may command my men, but my claim will only be ended at the will of the Supreme Council."

Kelanus shook his head. "I told you we should have made sure he died," he said.

"If you had, the claim would pass to my son." Branad's smile was not reflected in his eyes.

The look Marcus directed at Branad was exasperated rather than angry. "Now you've been captured, I'm well within my rights to take your head and end your claim. You know it, your commanders know it and your men know it."

Branad blinked. "We can compromise," he said. "We can tell everyone that I have rejected my claim."

"You *will* reject your claim."

"I need time to consider."

Kelanus laughed and shook his head. "You're wasting time in the hope the other half of your army will rescue you. We'll deal with them tomorrow; they cannot save you today. You have no time left, Branad. Choose now and choose wisely."

Branad's blue eyes stared coldly at Kelanus. "You would love to see me dead." It was not a question.

"Ranallic is the man I want to see dead."

Belaika tugged absently at his black collar and straightened it. Finally, Branad sat back and held out his cup for more alovak. The sylph scurried to top him up.

"When we reach Marka," began Branad, "What is it you would have us do?"

The atmosphere in the tent suddenly grew much lighter and Belaika relaxed. Everything would be all right now.

Marcus grinned. "Jenn! Sweetmeats, please."

As the infertile entered to offer the sweetmeats - glaring at all the humans as if they threatened her owner - Marcus began to outline some of his plans.

Belaika, who had no interest in human politics unless they affected him directly, sat on his heels and concentrated all thoughts on his pregnant wife. He would try hard not to fall asleep.

Neptarik-y-Balrus had a scarf tied around his head, to stop his earpoints from betraying his emotions and feelings. He sorted the five cards into order quickly, before glancing surreptitiously at his companions. He hummed a few bars from *Into the Dance* before falling silent again.

His owner was already out of the card school, his copper partas shared between the surviving four members. The sylph was a little disappointed they gambled for copper: he much preferred to fatten his purse with silver. He laid his cards facedown - one from each of the five suits: crowns, swords, trades, coins and wands - on the wooden table and folded his hands. He hoped his eyes hid his excitement as well as the scarf stilled his ears.

"Card," grunted Erras, a lancer from Branad's army.

Ean - the youngest sylph on active service - acted as banker, but was not playing. He pushed another card across the table.

They played with just the numbered cards - two to eleven - but one of the pictured wild cards had been sneaked into the two packs they were using. Whoever drew it immediately lost that round.

"Twenty-four partas," said Callen. He had been among the pikemen who were furthest forward this morning. The fresh slash across his face was already beginning to heal, but he would boast yet another scar when the scabbing was gone.

"Twenty-four," agreed Nazan, a dark-skinned outlander mercenary who fought for Marcus. He pushed a small pile of coppers nearer the middle of the table.

Callen twisted his mouth, but pushed another small pile of coins out to join the first.

Erras pushed out the same number of coins.

Neptarik glanced around again, before pushing twenty-four partas out to join the rest. The bets had been put on the table before the cards were dealt; now the pile of coins beckoned. He stared at it greedily and almost hummed again.

"Eighteen," Erras said, turning his cards over.

"Seventeen." Nazan looked disgusted.

"Seventeen." Callen sat back, hands behind his head. "I'm done."

Neptarik said nothing, but turned his cards over.

"Twenty-one!" Erras turned to Ean. "Are you fixing this?"

Ean's eyes betrayed outrage and his earpoints quivered in anger.

"All right, you're not fixing it." Erras held out his hands in mock surrender. He watched Neptarik scoop the coins gleefully. "Where did you learn to play cards like this?"

Balrus grinned. "He was a quick study."

Neptarik carefully placed twenty-four partas on the table; it was for him to start the betting as he had won the previous hand. Nazan and Erras followed the sylph's lead, but neither tried to up the bet. Neptarik nodded to the other sylph, who immediately dealt.

"Should be interesting tomorrow," remarked Erras. "Branad will ride out to meet the rest of our army. I wonder if they'll believe that they follow Marcus now. I can scarce believe it myself." He inspected his cards.

"It does not matter who you follow," said Nazan. "So long as the pay is the same."

Erras eyed the other human sideways, but it was not clear if his distaste was for the color of Nazan's skin, or because he was a mercenary.

"Card," said Nazan.

Neptarik eyed his cards. They were not as good this time. He could risk another, but that might take him over the magic twenty-three maximum.

Nazan tossed his cards onto the table. "I'm out," he said. He had the wild card, which busted him. The emperor. Strangely, it was Branad's features painted on it. Doubtless Ean's sense of humor: Branad was busted, too.

Erras stared at the sylph, his expression not exactly friendly. He pushed his twenty-four coins further to the centre. "Twenty," he said, triumphantly.

Neptarik pushed all the coins across the table before turning his cards.

"Nineteen!" exclaimed Erras. "It seems as though your luck is turning, sylph."

Neptarik shrugged.

"We'll stake everything on this one." Erras grinned and pushed all his coins to the centre of the table. "Playing, sylph?"

Neptarik pushed an equal number of coins forward.

"I said everything, sylph."

"He has met your bet," interrupted Balrus, protectively. "You cannot match him if he raises it now."

Erras shrugged. "Deal. Three cards."

Neptarik stared at his cards in disbelief. Thirteen? A measly thirteen? He nodded to Ean, who pushed another card across. One from every suit except the wands, not that it mattered for this game.

"Don't you sylphs ever speak?" demanded Erras. "I hate silence."

Neptarik turned silvery gray eyes to the human. What was there to say? His attention returned to the cards. This was better. He only just prevented a hum.

Human and sylph turned their cards over together.

Erras cursed before he stood to leave the card school.

"Well done, lad." Balnus thumped his sylph on the back. "Well done."

Neptarik grinned and unwound the scarf from his head, restoring freedom to his earpoints. They twitched a few times in pleasure.

Yeomen came running through the camp. "General muster!" they shouted. "General muster!"

"No time off for any of us," grumbled Balnus.

Marcus and Branad gathered their armies to explain the new situation. That the rival claimants had reached agreement surprised both sets of men. The two armies would remain in their own units, with their own commanders, but overall command rested with Marcus, and Kelanus was the senior field officer. Mutters rose from the gathered men when Branad announced that his claim was "in abeyance" until they reached Marka and that he would afterwards "submit to the will of the Supreme Council".

"That could mean anything," said Balnus.

Neptarik stared at Belaika. His friend stood a little behind his owner and looked anything but happy with the arrangements. It was soon obvious why. When Marcus and Branad had finished, Belaika heeled the defeated claimant back to his tent. Neptarik blinked in surprise. Whatever was going on there was not to Belaika's liking.

"Alovak?"

Branad eased himself into a chair and nodded thanks.

Belaika had left the alovak to brew while the men were addressed. He poured it for the man who now commanded him in the evenings. The scout was furious that his owner had granted Branad's request for a sylph servant, especially as that servant was him.

Branad's tent only had two rooms: a living space with two easy chairs, a table and the wood burner, and a sleeping area screened off by tapestries. There was no special area for Belaika, so the sylph had piled his blankets close to the burner, where it would be warmest.

Branad detected the sylph's mood. After taking a sip of the strong liquid, he spoke. "You are wondering why I asked your owner for you to serve me?"

The sylph stared balefully back.

"I've never owned sylphs," continued Branad, when it was obvious no verbal reply was forthcoming. "I'm curious to learn more about you. No doubt you'll report back to your master now and then, so I hope you can lay his fears to rest. I'll not turn on him, even if the Supreme Council backs my claim. Of course, they may back Marcus's claim, but I'll worry about that then."

The sylph sniffed and glanced away.

Branad chuckled. "You were more talkative in Marcus's tent. What's wrong? Tongue fallen out?"

"May I go eat?" asked Belaika. "It is time." It had been a long day.

"Remember to come straight back and bring my meal with you."

In the large mess tent where the sylphs ate, Belaika found Jenn sat alone at one of the tables. The infertile glanced up at the larger scout and gave him a small smile. For a moment, he thought she might banter with him, but she seemed content to eat in silence. Perhaps she sensed he was in no mood for talking. She mopped up the last of her vegetable broth with a hunk of bread, inclined her head to him and left, headed for the officers' tent, presumably to collect Marcus's meal.

Recalling that Branad also waited to eat, Belaika pitched his food in, stuffing two pieces of unleavened bread into the waistband of his breeches before hurrying outside again. He collected Branad's meal and toiled back with it, the can swinging easily in his grasp.

Once the meal was laid out, Branad indicated that the sylph should take the seat opposite him. "Your master may be interested to hear what I have to say," he remarked. "Sit and listen."

Belaika realized that he would have little chance to reply once the man began speaking. Not that he would have replied to most of it. A sylph only spoke when necessary, except to owner or family, and Belaika was no exception.

"When I meet with Ranallic tomorrow," continued Branad, "he'll follow my orders. An ambitious man, but he does obey a command once given. I'm most amenable to Marcus's suggestion that we all travel to Marka together; much easier than fighting each other all the way, what? Ranallic will agree. Who's Ranallic? Make sure you mention him to Kelanus, they're old friends. What I don't know, of course, is what Marcus plans once he has us all in Marka."

Belaika blinked.

"No, I suppose he doesn't take a sylph into his confidence. No matter. I'm sure we'll continue to Marka, but it is there that the problems begin. Never been there myself, but I prefer the battlefield to the intrigues of Markan politics."

The sylph remained silent.

Branad lowered his voice. "Your master is politically astute." He turned his head to one side as he finished his meal. "What's that noise?"

Belaika, who slipped from his seat to collect the dirty dish and cutlery, grimaced. Was this man tone deaf? Outside, sylvan voices rose and fell in a harmonious choir. "My brothers," he said, finally breaking his silence. "They sing to the dead, to speed them to the afterlife."

"Yes, that racket would speed me along too."

Belaika hid a snarl, turned on his heel and stalked out of the tent.

Branad chuckled to himself and picked up a book. He watched Belaika return, brew alovak and serve a cup of it. Done, he left the can with the human and wrapped himself in his blankets in sulky silence. The sylph settled down beside the burner and curled up. His eyes closed and his earpoints tucked themselves away. Fascinated, Branad watched him before putting the book aside. He covered most of the light-crystals before following the sylph's example.

Tomorrow, he thought, I bring in the rest of the army. Then, we march to Marka. Together.

Chapter 2

Jewel Of The World

"This is madness!"

Kelanus shook his head and stared at Marcus. "You capture him yesterday," he continued, "and release him today. You send him to his army! What do you think will happen with an army at his back again?"

"I must show Branad I trust his word," insisted Marcus. "If we ride out to this army, they'll attack us before we have chance to explain ourselves. Particularly with your friend Ranallic in charge."

Kelanus almost shook his head again, but stopped himself just in time. He must remember whom he shouted at. The four soldiers who had ridden with them looked apprehensive; to them, the claimant was already emperor.

Belaika ignored the argument and strained his ears for the whistle that would come once the scouts knew that army's intentions.

The small group was close enough to their own army to reach safety should Branad decide to take his chances. Belaika stood a little distance from the humans, but not far enough away to be out of earshot. More than was proper reached his ears and he half wished he was out scouting.

He licked his lips, wishing there had been a little more of breakfast. Somebody had appropriated the milk Branad's army carried, adding that *and* sugar to the rolled oats sylphs ate to break the night fast. Their porridge was usually mixed with water, but sylphs enjoyed sugared, milky porridge almost as much as choqa.

He glanced around at the sparse scrubland. There were plenty of hiding places, but where they had halted was out of bowshot from the trees. They were safe here.

Marcus continued. "I don't believe Branad is prepared to abandon his men to my not-so-tender mercies if he does desert. I made it quite clear what would happen if he betrays me."

Kelanus grinned. "He knows you would do no such thing."

Marcus sniffed. "Tell me more about Ranallic."

"A southerner but, unlike most southerners, he's dishonorable and untrustworthy. You already know what he did to me." Venom laced Kelanus's voice.

Belaika did not know and his earpoints twitched. The high-pitched whistle snapped his attention away from the commanders momentarily. "They come, *enya*," he cautioned. "Under the black flag of peace."

"Thank you, Belaika." Marcus glanced triumphantly at his general. He looked at his bannerman. "Ready, Adrewa?"

"I am that, Sir," replied the Imperial Bannerman. Adrewa hefted the Vintner Standard aloft and led the six men forward.

Belaika melted away to join the scouts, almost thirty in number, who had shadowed this army for days.

The humans halted on a rise and waited for the army to join them. Marcus stood in his stirrups and nodded to himself when he spied Branad at the head of three thousand men. Everything was beginning to run in his favor. At last.

"I told you we could trust Branad."

Kelanus grunted. "Can we trust those he rides with?"

Marcus ignored his companion's skepticism and instead watched the advancing army. Three thousand men and perhaps thirty war machines, gained at no cost in gold or blood. What an impression he would give those waiting for him in Marka! He smiled. Life had not felt this good for years.

Kelanus rode behind the other commanders and listened to their conversation. He stayed apart, preferring to watch what the others were doing.

Ranallic showed interest in the sylph scouts and Kelanus watched him closest of all.

"Amazing." Ranallic stared at the rolling countryside and shook his head. "I see no sign of them. They can't have reached the forest yet."

Marcus smiled. "You see why they are scouts? Second to none; better than humans. Never had a bad report from them."

"You've used them in frontline service for ten years?" pressed Ranallic.

"It takes five years to train a successful sylph to the required standard. We start them at age five, let them run with the army from the age of ten and they can retire after twenty years' service."

Ranallic looked impressed. "Do they belong to the army, to you or individuals?"

"Individuals," replied Marcus. "Belaika is mine, but most belong to my officers and a few to my men. I do my best to keep owned and owner together, but that's not always possible."

"Probably not always desirable," added Branad.

The graves of those killed in the battle now lay two days behind them. Ranallic's men had been granted a day to get used to their new status and loyalties, while the camp was struck and preparations made to move on. The army and its attendants now stretched for three milas along the paved road, the war machines following immediately behind. A fine sight in the spring sunshine.

Detachments of men rode on either side of the column, watching for trouble. Branad's scouts were out, several in plain sight, but sylph scouts ranged all around the combined army, ready to report if required. The only sylphs in sight were supposed to be seen.

"They disappear from view quickly," remarked Branad. "Impressive. Why are those walking beside the column?"

"They listen for reports," replied Marcus. "Walking in the column they might not hear, so we have them a little way out."

"And you use others as nurses." Branad twisted around in his saddle to look where the nurses walked with the rest of the army.

"Sylphs have many uses." It looked as if Marcus was trying hard not to laugh at Branad.

Kelanus rode in silence and stared at Ranallic's back. He sneered if the southern general looked over his shoulder. If the claimants noticed the bad blood, they passed no comment.

He glanced at the large group of southern mercenaries in Branad's army. These men, who kept themselves to themselves, also avoided Ranallic. Kelanus was determined to discover the reason why. He had met southern mercenaries before, and respected their fighting qualities, but these men were new. The only southerner in Branad's army when Kelanus commanded it had been Ranallic.

"What would your sylph scouts do if attacked?" Ranallic asked Marcus.

"If anyone ever saw one to attack him, there is little the average sylph can do," came the reply, after a moment's pause. "They have *ebatela*, which is a sort of self-defense, but the problem has never arisen."

Ranallic's dark eyes glittered. "It's only a matter of time before someone thinks of a counter to them."

"A problem for the future," smiled Marcus. "Until then, I shall concern myself with winning my throne."

Branad and Ranallic exchanged a look that Marcus affected not to notice. Behind, Kelanus fought the urge to launch himself at Ranallic, still hating the straight-backed general just ahead of him. Trouble lay ahead from Branad and Ranallic. He hoped so; he had a score to settle. He prayed an opportunity would present itself soon.

Lance-Captain Kestan Entor commanded the leading left flank and ranged well ahead of the main army. He held up a hand as a sylph suddenly appeared before him. One day, he thought, a scout would get killed rising out of the ground like that. To judge from his wildly twitching earpoints, the sylph bore a report. At his signal, the small column of lancers came to a halt. Kestan inclined his head in recognition of the scout.

"What do you have for me, Belaika?"

The scout was well known to most of the men and renowned for excellent work, though the sylph would be the first to deny it. Kestan wanted a sylph scout of his own and, now that his drinking days were over, hoarded as much of his salary as possible. There were several promising younglings in training yet to find an owner and he almost had enough money saved.

"*Donenya*," began Belaika, "there is a column of wagons, with armed men, about three stridas afar. An illegal slaver, we think."

Kestan paused. He was tempted to let the caravan pass, but Marcus Vintner's orders were explicit: anything this close to the army must be investigated and the law enforced. Which included arresting illegal slavers and confiscating their property. If the sylphs suspected that this one was an illegal slaver then it probably was. The scouts were rarely wrong.

He glanced at Belaika. He was not known for carrying tales to his owner, but it was best not to take the risk. About to send his lieutenant, Kestan changed his mind at the last moment. "Lance-Lieutenant Dekran. Stay here with the seconds. Firsts with me. Belaika, whistle the message on and follow."

Kestan was glad he had decided to investigate when the sylph answered. "It is already passed on, *donenya*."

The captain said nothing to this, but wheeled his horse, followed by half his column. Thirty men should be enough to sort out one scraggly flesh trader. Banner-Sergeant Yochan carried the Vintner Standard forward with the firsts. Belaika led the way to the furthest scout and remained in sight for the humans' benefit. The sylph pointed.

Kestan inspected the caravan. Eight armed men surrounded three covered horse-drawn wagons. Each had a driver except the lead wagon, which had two. Twelve men. Nobody at the caravan seemed to have noticed the newcomers, so Kestan waited. Their direction of travel almost paralleled that of Marcus and his army.

The gap had narrowed since Belaika's report; Kestan estimated two and a half stridas lay between the wagons and him. This caravan headed directly for Marka.

"You sure he's a slaver?" he asked.

The scout who had discovered the caravan stared up at the human, revulsion showing in his silvery gray eyes. "When you get close you will smell their cargo," he said.

"Not easy for humans," added Belaika. "They carry sylphs, who do not smell as bad when dirty."

Kestan glared at the sylph, who smiled back. "Are you this forward with your master?" he asked.

No reply was forthcoming and the sylph's grin widened. The smile said it all, really.

"I am not completely sure, *doneya*," continued the scout who had first seen the caravan, "but I think the slaver has wild sylphs."

Kestan nodded. He was sure the sylph was unable to produce any evidence to back his claim, or explain how he could tell a wild sylph from any other sort, but he knew enough about the blue-skinned creatures to trust their instincts.

Wild sylphs sometimes traded infertiles to humans, but it was rare for the breeding sexes to be sold. Overpopulation might encourage a cull of misfits or malcontents the rest of the tribe wanted to see the back of. Such sylphs were in demand for use as fresh breeding stock. Wild sylphs had special rights enshrined in law, which specifically forbade the taking of them by any means except fair trade. He would soon discover whether or not this was an illegal slaver.

"With me, Ean and Belaika," he commanded.

Finally recognizing the danger, the small caravan came to an abrupt halt and the eight guards formed a defensive square. Kestan doubted if these men had much military training. He slowed a little, while half of his men rode harder, putting themselves the other side of the caravan. The two scouts sniffed at the air as they drew closer and exchanged glances. Both pairs of earpoints lay back in their hair.

"Can you smell it?" asked Belaika, keeping pace with Kestan's horse.

Kestan shook his head. "Both of you stay close." He raised his voice, shouting to the men. "Put your weapons aside, in the name of the Emperor!"

The lancers surrounded the caravan and the armed guards hastily assumed a less aggressive posture. They recognized that these new arrivals were no brigands, easily frightened away with a show of strength, but fully trained soldiers. A short stocky man stood up on the box of the leading wagon.

"What do you want?" he demanded. "We have no part in your civil war."

"You in charge?" asked Kestan.

The man nodded, wariness shining in his blue eyes.

"What goods do you carry?"

The man smiled, showing perfect teeth. "Slaves," he replied, turning to gesture at the other two wagons.

"Sylph or human?"

"Sylph." The trader stared warily at the two scouts.

"Tell your men to stand down. Then you may show me your, ah, wares."

The man drew himself up. "I will not be plundered!" he all but screamed. "We are honest traders. We pay our taxes. I will not-"

"Tell your men to stand down," repeated Kestan. "And show me."

The trader gestured. The drivers laid down their reins and climbed off the wagons. The trader jumped from his own wagon, bringing a ring of keys with him. "I will not be plundered," he muttered, darkly.

Belaika moved closer to Kestan. "The man is *dson*," he whispered, disgust thickening his voice. "You cannot smell it?"

"Be calm." Kestan smiled reassuringly at the scout.

Two lancers heeled their captain as he followed the trader to the first of the wagons. Now Kestan smelled the not-quite-pleasant, not-quite-unpleasant sinabra of

sylphs, much stronger than was normal, mixed with a rather more unpleasant smell. As the man unlocked and swung open the door of the wagon, that smell grew worse. Sickened, Belaika and Ean took a couple of involuntary paces backwards.

Stepping inside the gloomy wagon, Kestan fought off a curse. He guessed there were fifty or more sylph males in here, all young. The silvery gray eyes of the nearest glowed, but were devoid of all usual expression. There was no spirit in these younglings.

That was no surprise, nor was the fact that they were naked and chained. But there was little excuse for leaving them in their ordure and he was glad it was not summer, when this wagon would be full of flies and quite likely corpses.

"S'ranva's eyes, trader, don't you let them out?" He made no attempt to mask his disgust.

"And have them escape?"

Belaika and Ean exchanged glances, before staring at the trader in disbelief.

That, thought Kestan, *is your first mistake. Sylphs bred into slavery do not attempt escape.* Aloud, he said: "Show me the other wagon."

This wagon was longer and higher and Kestan expected to see more males. When the door finally swung open, he winced. He estimated some two hundred sylph females were within, again mostly youngsters or infertiles. This wagon boasted a two tier arrangement, presumably to cram in more souls. There was just as little care for personal hygiene here, with filth finding its way from the upper level to the lower. The same dull, spiritless glow from the nearest sylph eyes met his entrance.

"You travel south, trader," said Kestan, fighting to keep his voice level. He had no time for unnecessary cruelty to wild or civilized sylphs. "To Marka?"

The trader nodded.

"Where did you buy this stock? No cities in the north trade fertile sylphs with Marka."

The trader's eyes flickered, but he had obviously not dreamed up any cover story, which suggested there was usually no need for one.

"These," continued Kestan, "are wild sylphs."

The trader did not try to deny it. "All bartered and traded for."

"Do you or any of your men speak sylph?" demanded Kestan. "I am happy to test their knowledge of the language."

The trader's mouth worked soundlessly. "Their chieftain spoke our tongue," he finally managed to splutter.

"Wild sylphs have as little as possible to do with humans," retorted Kestan. "They do not learn our language." He turned to the sylphs and raised his voice, so all could hear him. "*Nul awa salu sallit dondon?*"

"*Le newu,*" replied an anonymous sylph, after a few moments of stunned silence.

Kestan turned to the trader. "They don't speak our language. You must explain to me how you successfully trade with creatures whose tongue you do not speak and who do not speak ours. Outside, away from this disgusting stench."

The trader was protesting even before he relocked the door. "I am an honest man. I..."

Kestan ignored him. "Sergeant! Disarm these men and place them all under arrest."

"Arrest?" The trader's eyes widened.

Kestan turned back to him. "These are wild sylphs who I believe have been abducted against the will of their tribe or tribes. When I rejoin the rest of my army

and we have time to get these unfortunates cleaned up and clothed, we will question them and you. I am sure we will then hear the truth."

"You cannot do this to me!" howled the trader as Kestan returned to his men. Wrapped in pleased silence, Belaika and Ean followed.

Surrounded by lancers, the caravan had no choice but to go in the direction they were commanded to travel. Ean whistled a message, warning the main body of the army that prisoners were on their way. The trader and his men stared at the sylph as he gave the appearance of whistling, but none of the humans heard a sound. Kestan had never fully understood the sylphs' explanation of noises that humans could not hear, but he had learned to let it pass.

Late in the day when, rejoined the rest of the army. Most of the scouts and all the armed detachments were back. Even better, the camp was already set up. Belaika glimpsed Jenn at the mess tent, where she collected Marcus's meal and he crossed to join her.

"One is for Branad-ya," said the smaller sylph, hefting two plates. "I suggest you do your duty and take it." She sniffed. "I brewed his alovak while you were out enjoying yourself in the field."

Belaika grinned and his earpoints twitched in amusement. Jenn was in a bantering mood. "Thank you for caring for him I did not ask to care for."

Unimpressed, Jenn sniffed, although her eyes glinted mischievously. Her face was stern, but her earpoints betrayed inner laughter. "None of us chooses our owner," she retorted. "It is enough that *enya* has commanded you do this that you should."

"All right," laughed the male sylph, holding up his hands in mock surrender. "I will tell Branad-ya who he must thank for his alovak. He might send me back to *enya* and ask for you instead."

The look of horror on Jenn's face made Belaika laugh harder. He gave her a small bow. This time her earpoints and facial expression matched exactly.

"Thank you for covering my duty." Taking the mounded plate of meat and vegetables, Belaika trotted towards Marcus's tent, knowing Branad's would be pitched beside it. The guards waved him inside without a second glance.

Branad turned at his entrance.

"A good day's scouting?" he asked. "An illegal slave caravan, I hear."

Belaika inclined his head and placed the meal in the required place. As Jenn had said, the alovak was already brewed, so he poured a large cup and put it at Branad's elbow.

"May I go eat?"

Branad glanced up and nodded.

The sylphs' mess tent was set up beside a small lake, not far from the impounded caravan. Sat among *yenakula* - brother scouts - and a few sylph nurses, Belaika turned as he heard a growing noise from the small collection of wagons. Lance-Captain Kestan, together with a few men and several nurses - both human and sylph - sorted the inmates of the wagons. If further proof concerning the released prisoners' origin was required, the contempt that shone in their eyes for the sylph nurses should have been enough. For their part, the pity in the nurses' eyes had nothing to do with filth streaking naked bodies. Wild sylphs held civilized sylphs in contempt, while civilized sylphs viewed their wild cousins with pity, as they would never know the security of good owners.

The wild sylphs viewed the humans with wariness and fear, except those involved in their rescue. Belaika knew hero worship when he saw it: these sylphs were more than grateful to Kestan and his men.

"They're being washed," someone said, as more of the scouts and nurses finished their meal and began to gravitate towards the caravan, curious to learn more about the newcomers. For most, this was the first time they had encountered sylphs from the wild tribes. Finishing his meal, Belaika followed the general drift towards the wagons, pushing aside his duty.

He watched everything.

The captive slave traders were set to work scrubbing the wagons, while human and sylph nurses checked the freshly washed sylphs for disease, rubbing salves into all fester-sores. Kestan and his men made a tally of the sylphs, counting sixty-one males, including eight fully grown, if young; one hundred and sixty-eight females, including twenty-four adults; and thirty-three infertiles, who seemed even shyer than any other sylphs. Two hundred and sixty-two sylph souls crammed into the vilest conditions possible.

Belaika listened as questions were asked of the sylphs. Kestan looked pleased to have arrested this caravan. The sylphs were from more than one tribe and none knew the way back home. They were from the north, from various prefectures. Snatched in ones and twos, some had been in the wagons for only weeks, whereas others had suffered far longer.

The scout itched to help, but he noted the wild sylphs would only speak to the humans involved in their rescue. They viewed the other sylphs with contempt, and that changed to fear when they saw a collar.

"I'll have a word with them," said Marcus, from beside the sylph.

Belaika turned a brighter blue; he had not heard his owner approach. "If they listen," he said.

"We'll soon find out."

Marcus spoke, using the sylph language. He quickly assured the newcomers that they had not exchanged one set of masters for another and that they were free to leave when they wished. He warned that where there was one slaver, there would be others and, for the time being at least, the wild sylphs would be safer marching with the army. If they found a piece of land they felt should and could be colonized, then they were free to set up their own tribe. It was up to them.

Two hundred and sixty-two pairs of silvery gray eyes swiveled to Kestan. Belaika's lip turned. How *dare* they treat his owner so? He recognized the light shining in those eyes, replacing the dull and listless impression given earlier. They waited for Kestan to speak.

"I recommend you stay," said Kestan, before realizing he had just used a language they did not understand. He translated hastily.

The larger sylph males nodded and the group of wild sylphs, seeing food laid out for them on nearby tables, drifted away.

Kestan turned to Marcus. "Will we hold a trial for the slavers here?" he asked.

"No. We'll hand them over to the Markan authorities where they will doubtless escape with only the mildest of admonitions. Until then, we must hold them securely." Marcus nodded towards the wagons, his dark-blue eyes shining with laughter. "Strip them and chain them in one of the wagons in the same way they chained the sylphs. Give them food and water, but do not let them out. At least some justice will be done."

Kestan grinned. "As you command, so do I obey."

Marcus turned to the listening Belaika. "Aren't you supposed to be with Branad?" he asked.

Belaika inclined his head. "*Se bata*," he replied.

"Belaika! I was beginning to think you'd deserted for the night."

Branad turned as the sylph pushed the inner tapestries aside to enter the tent. The defeated rival for the throne took a sip from the glass in his hand.

The scout was grateful for his paint, as it hid his blush. "I am sorry," he apologized. "After eating, I went to see the wild sylphs. Time flew."

Branad nodded and turned again. Belaika had already seen they were not alone. General Ranallic lounged in one of the easy chairs, one booted foot arrogantly propped atop the other and a glass of wine in his hand.

"You are Belaika," said Ranallic. "One of the much vaunted sylph scouts. We met the other day but have not spoken. Come closer, boy."

The sylph nodded, trying to avoid the general's cold stare, finding his slanted eyes fascinating. He wondered why the other southerners did not associate with Ranallic. Obeying the command, he moved forward.

"My parents used to keep sylphs," continued Ranallic. "Timid creatures, of whichever sex, inclined to run away from everything, yet always submissive to the point of sacrificing themselves. And too pretty for masculinity." His feet abruptly hit the carpeted floor with a dull thud as he swung himself upright and shot out an arm to grip Belaika by the shoulder. The sylph tensed. "I'm impressed by your scouting colleagues. How did Marcus manage to invent sylph scouts?"

"We invented ourselves," replied Belaika, recalling his master's command to be open. He wondered why Branad took no part in the discussion, but instead fiddled with something behind him. "We can do this task, so offered our services."

Ranallic nodded, but his cold eyes did not change. He leaned back and waved his hand, indicating that the sylph might sit. Belaika sat cross-legged on the rug. As it was growing dark and cold outside, he was grateful for the warmth of the stove in the tent. The southern general stared into space for a few seconds.

"Tell me," he said, eventually, "if there has ever been trouble between General Kelanus and sylphs. I would not ask, but these new arrivals force the question."

Belaika blinked. "Trouble?" he echoed. "I know of none."

Branad joined in the conversation. "Ranallic, we have no wish to stir anything up from his past. Perhaps he has begun afresh."

"And perhaps not," countered Ranallic.

Belaika sat and thought, hoping not too many emotions flashed across his face. What was going on here? He was well aware that Kelanus and Ranallic hated each other, but what trouble could there be between Marcus's general and the sylphs?

"Kelanus-ya is kind to us," he said, slowly. "When there is choca, he is quick to share it."

"Ah yes, choca." Ranallic looked and sounded amused. "A weakness shared by all sylphs."

Branad could see that a change of subject was called for. "Tell me everything you know about this caravan. How did you know they were illegal slavers?"

The sylph nodded. "When Ean ran it down, he knew that, despite outward appearances..."

Belaika forced his breathing to slow. He estimated two hours had passed since the guard changed. He'd almost missed that, as the tapestries forming the inner wall of Branad's tent masked almost all sound, even for him.

Branad's slow gentle snore came from beyond the partition, again muted thanks to tapestries screening it off. The sylph wanted to see his master, but what he wanted to communicate must be done privately. He could not just walk out of this tent without arousing the suspicion of the guard - one of Branad's men - especially when he immediately went into Marcus's tent. If Marcus's guard would even let him in, unlikely at this time of night. So he must find a way out of this tent, break into that of his master, say what he must, ask his question, leave stealthily and break back into this one. All without seeing anyone other than Marcus.

He slipped from his blankets and shouldered through the tapestries to find the tent wall proper. It was almost too dark even for him, but he could see enough for his purpose. Crouching at one of the joins in the outer canvas wall, he loosened the bottom two ties. As the temperature suddenly plummeted, he tried not to shiver or draw a sharp breath. He rolled out from the tent and came still, taking stock of his surroundings.

There was no moon, but plenty of stars, which gave enough light. The camp was silent, for even the hardest soldiers were asleep. Only the tent and perimeter guards were awake and they would not have heard him. Dodging guy ropes and tent pegs, Belaika wriggled across the short distance between the two tents.

He knew the exact spot he wanted, where one of the ties was missing at the bottom. Finding it, he pushed his way through that and under the inner canvas wall of Marcus's tent. A more effective way of trapping heat within perhaps, but not as soundproof.

Half in and half out, he drew breath sharply.

"The entrance is that way, Belaika-y-Marcus," hissed Jenn, irritation lacing her voice. "Use it and do not frighten honest sylphs."

He was close enough to see the faint glow of her silvery gray eyes. "Hush." Belaika recovered from his shock and squeezed himself the rest of the way in. Why wasn't she in her blankets? The smaller sylph, stood beside the wood burner, was in no mood for banter.

"Why are you in the wrong tent?" persisted Jenn. "Give me one reason why I should not call the guard. What treason is this?"

"No treason. I must speak to *enya* - with you if it makes you happier, but with no other human. I came this way because Branad-ya's guard must not know I am out."

"You could say you needed the latrine."

"Before entering this tent?"

"You cannot see the entrance from there." Jenn shrugged. "If you want to see him, go see him."

The infertile watched him enter Marcus's sleeping quarters. Questions burned in her mind, but she had served her owner long enough to know when it was best to keep silent.

"*Enya*?" Belaika gently shook Marcus by a foot. "*Enya*?"

Marcus grunted and sat up. "Jenn? What?"

"It is Belaika, *enya*."

"Belaika?" Marcus came to his senses. "Why are you here in the middle of the night? You have news? Tell me, tell me."

He reached out a hand, intended for his sylph's shoulder, but caught an earpoint instead. Belaika irritably twitched it free before speaking, using the human tongue.

"Something is wrong between Branad and Ranallic on one side, and Kelanus-ya on the other," he said. "Ranallic asked me if there was trouble between Kelanus and sylphs. Branad said they had no wish to bring up his past, but I think otherwise. *Enya*, I had to come and speak with you. Something is going on."

"Plotting," whispered Marcus. "Jostling for position. Politics." His eyes gleamed in the darkness, visible to Belaika. "What does my most intelligent sylph think?"

Belaika blinked. "That Branad and Ranallic want to push Kelanus-ya out of the way."

Marcus sighed, but in anticipation, not resignation. "When Kelanus came to me, asking to join my army as a senior commander, he told me why he was asked to leave Branad's employment. He was accused of murdering sylphs - by sylphs - which he strenuously denied. He was quite vehement about it when he came to me. I believed him then and his conduct since leads me to stand by my original belief. I've known him for two years, but I've only known the others for days."

"Was it just murder?"

"*Just* murder?" Marcus controlled his voice. "It doesn't get any worse than murder. Sandester is not the Imperial Republic, where an owner can take a sylph's life and nobody will stop him."

Belaika restrained a shudder; life in the Imperial Republic sounded harsh. "I meant to ask if any other crime was committed before the murder."

"Apparently so. Want the details?"

The sylph shook his head before remembering that his master could not see. "I can guess."

"Your guess is probably wrong. What was done is shocking, terrible. Worse than interference."

Belaika winced and decided not to ask. "Is Kelanus-ya a good man?" There, his question was asked. "Is he innocent?"

"There have been no complaints about him since he came to us. Do you think him a good man? And innocent?"

"I trust my master's view. But we might be wrong."

"The sylphs who made the allegations were not prepared to face Kelanus in court. That counts for something. It's always easy to make accusations." Marcus gave a disapproving sniff. Those who made false accusations deserved all they got, in his opinion. "Go and rest, Belaika. Thank you for your report, which may prove invaluable."

Or may not, thought the sylph. "*Se bata*."

Jenn, still awake but silent, watched him leave the same way he entered, but she did not respond to his cheerfully whispered goodnight. Outside, again feeling the sting of cold against his painted skin, he wriggled back to Branad's tent. He fastened the ties he had loosened, crept through the tapestries and dived into his blankets. Once snug, he was asleep in seconds, dreaming of flying.

The next day, the scenery changed from rolling moor and rough pasture to hilly woodland and forest. Although not the highest or grandest mountains they had seen, they were tall enough to boast snowy tops and the night air was winter cold. Everyone - including the wild sylphs, who relied on others' charity for their garments - donned an extra layer of clothing.

They were close to Marka, the city nestled in the wide valley beyond the hills. When they reached the edge of the forest on the other side, the grandest city in the world should be in view. Most itched to see it.

As they marched, Marcus observed his expanded army. He rode alone, and Jenn ensured he stayed that way for as long as he wanted.

Most of the men from the two armies seemed to be getting along with each other. There had been one or two fights, but fewer than expected, which was to the good. Even better, the men were learning from each other, exchanging skills and knowledge. They were working together. If the two claimants fell out with each other... Well, Branad did not have sylph scouts. Marcus had the beginnings of an unstoppable army, necessary to back his claim should diplomacy fail.

They were at least a day ahead of schedule, even allowing for the diversion to catch Branad before Branad intercepted him. Thinking of this, he again thanked Siranva for the sylph scouts.

Branad's senior officers and commanders resented being a half step below their original rank, having to report to their opposite number in Marcus's ranks. They refused to accept that they were defeated and lucky to still have lives, never mind a post in the new army.

It upset him that Ranallic and Branad conspired against Kelanus, but he would only drop hints that he was aware if it got out of hand. That Ranallic and Kelanus hated each other was obvious to all who took the time to look closely, but there was nothing he could do about that.

Marcus strongly suspected Ranallic was behind the dissatisfaction of Branad's senior officers as well. There was little he could do without betraying his source - Belaika - or having someone killed. This was not the time for political assassinations, though he did have contingency plans. He hoped most of these minor irritants would fade when they reached Marka.

A light sylvan voice began to sing.

Branad and his men looked confused, as the song was begun in the sylph tongue. Marcus's men began to grin, but nobody joined in the first verse. Ignoring Jenn's protests, Branad urged his horse to draw level with Marcus.

"What insubordination is this?" he asked. He understood enough sylph to know this was not a complimentary song.

Marcus grinned. "No insubordination," he replied. "It's my favorite."

The verse hinted at how hard done by sylphs were, and how they had all been tricked into becoming scouts. The humans listened in silence, before they joined in the chorus. This was sung in the human tongue, so even the most ignorant would realize what a terrible life the unfortunate scouts had been thrust into.

We march for choca,

No other cause;

We march for choca,

Not for your wars.

The humans laughed, while the sylphs took up the next verse. Branad's men grinned uncertainly at each other, before they joined the next chorus.

Branad shook his head, but allowed Jenn to force him away from her owner. She flapped her arms to emphasize something she was saying.

Marcus did not sing, again wrapped in his thoughts. Ranallic presented another riddle he was determined to solve. That platoon of southern mercenaries, all with dark slanted eyes and lank black hair. Despite their smaller stature, they were

ferocious fighters, who killed three of Marcus's men for every one of their own dead. Their new allegiance was still unclear, but they caused no problems and no trouble.

Although outwardly friendly and polite, they kept to themselves. Despite Ranallic obviously being a southerner, he and they ignored each other as much as possible. A mystery he knew that Kelanus wanted to solve, one more baffling even than the sylphs.

Their song caused even more laughter: the hapless scouts were getting themselves into deeper trouble, running up gambling debts and forfeiting chocha rations. More and more of Branad's men joined in the chorus.

The sylphs amused Marcus as much as they confused him, and not for the song.

Wild and enslaved sylphs ignored each other completely, not even bothering with polite small talk. Perhaps from pity, the enslaved - scouts, nurses and the few infertiles who served the senior officers - tried to get on with the newly liberated wild sylphs. At every turn, their advances were rebuffed. It had not yet ended in a squabble, but the two groups made it so obvious that each ignored the other that they may as well fight.

Jenn, usually so fair minded, suggested that it might do them some good to be returned to the wagons for a day or so. Marcus restrained his laughter whenever a wild sylph passed an enslaved cousin, both looking away, while earpoints twitched in concentration.

The wild sylphs made themselves useful and joined the foraging parties during the day. Although they were wary of most humans, the exceptions amused Marcus. Lance-Captain Kestan and the men who had rescued the wild sylphs were obviously marked men, for they were followed around everywhere. This further annoyed the sylph scouts - especially Ean, who had first seen and reported the caravan - who were yet to receive a shred of gratitude for their effort. Marcus was curious to learn how many of the wild sylphs would choose freedom when the time came for them to part company.

He was surprised that the liberated sylphs never taunted their former captors, still incarcerated in one of the wagons that had held them. The irony of the situation could not have been lost on them, but none went anywhere near. Perhaps the smell after the first day put them off.

His attention returned to the song as he recognized the last verse.

"The chorus is different after this one," Marcus called over his shoulder to Branad.

*We march for chocha,
No other cause;
So give us our chocha
And stuff your wars!*

Humans and sylphs roared with laughter together and even Branad managed to raise a smile. He pushed forward again. At a sign from Marcus, Jenn made no move to stop him.

"See?" Marcus smiled at his defeated rival. "All appreciation and gratitude. Certainly not insubordination."

"Enya? Water? Fruit?"

Marcus started. "What? Oh, Jenn. Um, water please. Thank you."

Jenn dropped back while Marcus drank his water.

"How much further to where to road summits?" asked Branad. "I'll be glad to be out of this damned wind."

Marcus smiled. It was true that, now they had gained more altitude, a cruel wind had grown up around them. Fortunately, the forest sheltered them from the worst of it. "All the other road branches have joined us now," he replied, "so it can't be much further. Aah! A fortune awaits the man who invents a container to keep alovak hot for hours!"

"Yes it does." A small frown furrowed Branad's forehead. "That sylph certainly knows how to look after you."

Marcus glanced back at Jenn, who fought to keep the skirt of her tunic from lifting in the wind, despite scouting breeches beneath. "I should think so, after a quarter of a century," he replied. "Twenty-six years next month, to be precise."

"Your first slave?"

Marcus wagged a finger. "She may wear a collar, cousin Branad, but Jenn is more than a slave. She knows more about me than my wife."

Ranallie moved up to join them. Kelanus had ridden ahead to keep an eye on the advance troop, who had a relatively inexperienced commander, but that was only an excuse. Marcus suspected that he stayed away from Ranallie.

"I could not help overhearing," said the southerner. "It is said a properly bonded sylph is a joy to behold. I must congratulate you on bonding Jenn properly."

Marcus laughed. "You congratulate me for bonding Jenn?" He glanced at his sylph again and she grinned back at him. "I think you should congratulate her, not me. Bonding is a two way thing. We grew up together." He lowered his voice. "She was disappointed when I married and jealous when children began to appear. But she managed to persuade me into letting her come on campaign with me when I took over from my father by making herself indispensable. Clever girl, eh?"

The other men laughed.

As the road reached its highest point, it gave tantalizing glimpses of the valley far below. Roads, rivers and small hamlets were laid out as if on a map, but there was no hint of Marka, which must be masked by forest and altitude. Nobody, except the human prisoners locked inside their caravan, had ever seen the city. Everybody wanted to be the first to see its fabled pyramid, which was said to dwarf every other building. It was believed that the taller structure dated from the original civilization, long lost. Many said the ancients held more knowledge than was now even hinted at.

Of them all, the wild sylphs gave the impression of being least eager to see Marka. They claimed to be looking for somewhere to establish a new home, but few were keen to settle at so high an altitude. One or two were used to this climate, but most were not.

The scouts began to resent being stuck at the rear or on the flanks and most preferred to range ahead, hoping to be the first to glimpse the city. Even the nurses began to run ahead of the army, ahead of even the leading platoon of soldiers. Despite denying that they wanted to see the city, the wild sylphs also ran forward with their enslaved cousins, patches of blue that stood out long after the others were camouflaged.

A full day and a half earlier than expected, a scout proudly reported that Marka was in sight. Marcus and Branad led an advance party to see the city for themselves. When they reached the place where forest gave way to a viewpoint, Marcus was disappointed to see the scouts and leading soldiers mixed together, all staring, necks craned. The rebuke he had prepared died on his lips.

"By Siranva!" he whispered, as his gaze traveled up and up.

The pyramid dwarfed the city, never mind individual buildings and most of the watchers paid Marka no heed at all. The giant looked as though it was built from polished black marble or glass and the ground it covered was incredible. It appeared to tower to the sky and many wondered aloud why they could not see it when the road reached the pass. It was topped by a giant light-crystal that glinted like a ruby in the weak sunlight. Wisps of cloud hovered below its peak.

"Marka," said Branad, in a voice only a little louder than that of Marcus.
"Now I know why everybody wants to come here at least once in a lifetime."

"Marka." Marcus nodded. "The jewel of the world."

Chapter 3 A Throne Recognized

Zenepha-y-Olista heard the raised voice and looked up from his book, a blue forefinger marking his place. His wife Selkina moved closer, a question in her eyes. Both sylphs' attention turned to Tamsin, Olista's senior wife. The human woman glanced compassionately at them and shook her head in reassurance.

"Nothing to worry about," she said, but she too looked at the door, knowing her husband was about to walk through it. And not in the best of moods.

The sylphs looked at each other and Selkina tugged unconsciously at the skirt of her tunic, her anklet of bells jingling as she shifted position. Zenepha was thankful that he was not expected to wear bells and insisted his wife remove hers whenever they were alone.

The small sitting room had originally been the sylph room, but Tamsin had taken it over for use in the winter; being smaller, it was more comfortable in the cold season. Three upholstered and three plain wooden chairs were arranged around the hearth, though Zenepha was stretched out on the deep rug before the fire.

There were two small paintings on the wall opposite the fire, depicting summer scenes, and the floor was one mosaic, though all the furniture had to be removed to see it properly. It showed two sylphs working in a garden, another reminder of the room's original purpose.

The door opened and Olista Allert, Supreme Councilor of Marka, strode through. A human serving girl scurried in his wake, bearing a glass of alovak, which she proffered, a worried look in her gray-blue eyes.

Olista calmed for a moment, his dark-blue eyes softening as he saw the girl properly. "Thank you, Helena."

She fled.

Olista's expression hardened again as he turned back to his wife and the two sylphs. "Damn the Supreme Council!" he snarled. "Damn the Senate! Damn all politicians!"

More than used to her husband's outbursts, Tamsin looked, unperturbed. Zenepha waited with slightly wilted earpoints. He did not enjoy his owner's bad moods. Selkina did not directly serve Olista and attempted to copy Tamsin's aplomb, with some success. She even managed a calming smile for her husband.

Olista dropped into his easy-chair with a sigh and almost spilled his alovak. "Thirty-six years in public service and still they will not listen. The two Vintners will be here in days, if not today, and still they will not listen."

"When the Vintners get here," suggested Tamsin.

"They'll just split into factions. Sandev says the Vintners will fight when they meet and that one will defeat the other, thus giving us a simple choice. But I fear it won't be that easy. There's a faction for each of the Vintners, of course, together with a third who favours Marcus Vintner senior, although Daddy Marcus renounced his claim. Worse, there are Senators - and High Councilors! - who support Hingast, or one of the other unsuitable claimants."

Olista paused. "That's not all. Only the two Vintners were invited, but Hingast has caught tell of it and is heading our way. His intentions are anybody's guess. Though I doubt if they're peaceable or decent."

Zenepha coughed discreetly into his hand. If Olista was ready to listen, he would allow his sylph to speak.

The two humans looked at him.

"*Enya, anya*, would it not be best to wait until the Vintners arrive and then see what happens? When High Councilors and Senators can see these two men, perhaps minds will change. From what you tell me, the Vintners are honorable."

If Olista and Tamsin were surprised by the sylph's opinion, they did not show it.

A slow smile spread across Olista's face. "You see why I bought him, Tamsin? Almost as good as a gwerin. Able to see straight to the heart of a problem in moments. Well done, Zenepha!"

The sylph blushed and even Selkina gave him an admiring stare.

Tamsin nodded. "A wise sylph. A pity you are unable to stand for office; you would make an excellent Senator and could do no worse than most of clumsy fools already there."

"You wouldn't do so bad yourself," Olista told his wife.

"Some women prefer not to stand for public office." Tamsin sniffed. "The brighter among us marry those already there, or who are likely to get there with a little encouragement. Then, women who want to see something done approach the wives of the relevant Senators."

Olista laughed. "Who then pressure their unfortunate husband to act in a certain manner."

His wife smiled. "Who gently *persuade* said husband," she insisted. "It's the best way to be represented. More gets done. Besides, I prefer to stay in the background and let you and Zenepha believe that you come up with all the best ideas."

"Everyone suspects you pull my strings anyway. They're right, of course."

Tamsin sniffed again and changed the subject. "Any news of the Vintners?"

"Rumors of a battle on Candin Plain, but nothing confirmed as yet. My spies inform me that a column has left Calcan, presumably headed this way. We think it includes Marcus Vintner's family. Worryingly, Hingast is on the move as well. What he plans is anyone's guess but, as I said, probably not nice. I'd like to take a sword to whoever put it into his head to come."

"And the other claimants?"

Olista gave Tamsin a quick glance. "Two or three trying to subvert the Imperial Republic, without success; Enthans's grip on power is too strong. Another letter pressing his claim to the Throne has come."

"Any news about the Throne?" asked Zenepha, quietly.

"The Senate have all but promised to recognize it," replied the sylph's owner. "When they do - the debate should finally be over tomorrow - the Supreme Council is bound to follow suit. The problem isn't getting the Throne recognized: it's getting the Senate and Supreme Council to agree who should sit on it."

"What does Sandev say?" asked Tamsin.

Olista grimaced. "I've been waiting to see Sandev for days."

"Alovak, *anya*?"

Sandev turned from the balustrade of her verandah and smiled at her sylph. "Thank you." Unlike most in Marka, Sandev had never insisted her domestic slave wear the anklet of bells that fashion demanded. Again unlike most others, her own slave was a breeder and not an infertile. But there were more demands placed on this sylph than was normal. Demands that required more independence than the average infertile possessed. "How is Caya this morning?"

The sylph's silvery gray eyes, at a height with Sandev's sapphire-blue, flickered briefly aside. "I am well, *anya*. Your breakfast is nearly ready."

Sandev smiled as she watched the slave turn and pad noiselessly into the room. Not a single board creaked under the sylph's tread, thanks to her natural light weight.

Her attention returned to the sky above the dark pyramid outside the city. A glint in the brightening sky reassured her by its presence. The Ark Star was one of only three celestial objects ever visible in daylight, the others being the moon and sun. Sandev was one of the few who knew the Ark Star was inappropriately named, and what it really was. Its orbit brought it directly above Marka several times a day, or perhaps more correctly, directly above the pyramid. Beyond, the ring of hills protecting the end of the valley rose up and up. Just to the right of her view of the pyramid, the road from Candin Plain dropped into the valley. Along which she hoped Marcus Vintner would come any day now.

Preferably alone.

That part was her biggest gamble. She had studied the Vintners ever since the collapse of the Second Empire and knew both Marcus and Branad Vintner had an about equal claim to the Throne. That of Marcus was a little stronger, as he was descended from the last emperor, but his claim was muddied by the fact that his father was still alive, although the older man had renounced the claim in favor of his son.

Despite hoping that Marcus Vintner would arrive alone, Sandev was well aware of his renowned mercy. Branad Vintner was no less honorable, but if the two arrived together, it would only be after a battle and one of them may have been forced to renounce his claim. At the very least, one would be the loser of the battle. One might have been killed, but Sandev knew she was rarely that lucky. Unless the wrong Vintner lay dead.

She drew in a breath before sipping the alovak. If Marcus was dead, she would transfer her support to Branad Vintner. Rumors already circulated of a great battle on the plain; she had been tempted to go for a look to satisfy her curiosity, but eventually decided against.

Her thoughts came to an abrupt end as Caya poked her head around the door onto the verandah, earpoints twitching in agitation.

"All right," laughed Sandev, "I'll come through now." Annoyingly, the boards squeaked for *her*.

Even as she ate her breakfast, watched by a silent Caya, her mind whirled. Branad Vintner's cluster of prefectures lay to the north and east; Marcus Vintner's lay east, separated by the grandly named Kingdom of Trenvera. There were one or two other prefectures and also some abandoned land sandwiched between the miniature empires.

To the west was a coalition of prefectures ruled by Hingast, a man now headed for Marka. This man's vile reputation preceded him and even the rumor he was coming was enough to set the city buzzing. Sandev suspected who really controlled Hingast and was uncomfortable with the thought of facing that power again. Between Marka and the west, and the Imperial Republic to the south, lay many former prefectures of the old empire. Most reveled in their independence, but others were wistful for the old days. All squabbled with their neighbors.

But Hingast - together with the man she suspected was the real power - was her greatest cause for concern.

Hingast began to earn his reputation when he came to his throne young, sixteen years ago. His father died in a stinking alleyway in a small provincial town.

Hingast ordered every inhabitant impaled, before the town was razed and every hint of its existence obliterated. The young prince fell into paranoia and spent a lot of time executing his many - and likely imagined - enemies. Only marriage had calmed him; that and hunting sylphs for sport.

Alone of the claimants to the Throne, he was uninterested in expanding his dominions. He added some land from conquered territories to his existing prefectures and destroyed the rest. His policy was to prevent any potential invader of Eldova from living off the land. The inhabitants of the newly wasted lands were offered farms in Eldova or other prefectures, if they capitulated to his rule. Those who refused to surrender, Hingast enslaved or killed. If he felt particularly vindictive, they were left to starve. Sandev suspected it depended more on which general did the conquering. Some had more honor than others and she suspected Hingast did not care either way.

Someone had learned of the invitations issued to the Vintners and told Hingast; now the man was coming. That he ruled nine Prefectures weighed heavily with some High Councilors and Senators. That he had wasted as many more, they preferred to ignore.

"What is wrong, *anya*?" Caya stepped forward.

Sandev blinked; she must have made a sound without realizing. She smiled at the sylph and remembered that this one was smart enough to see a lie. "Just one or two nasty thoughts. Nothing to worry about. The food today is excellent." Truth to tell, she couldn't remember exactly what it was she had eaten, but she had enjoyed it. "I'm going into the city. Please ensure everything is clean when I return."

Caya inclined her head and smiled. "*Se bata*."

Gathering her cloak, Sandev left the villa and stepped into the bustling crowds. Before she had taken ten paces, she was no longer alone. She glanced to her left and slightly behind.

"Good morning, Stanak," she said.

"Good morning, Sandev," replied the man, coming to walk alongside her.

He was of average height, only a little taller than Sandev, but he emanated menace, his gray-blue eyes taking in everything. He had been her bodyguard for six years and was very good at it. The streets of Marka were much safer than most believed, for the City Guard was very efficient at dealing with malefactors. However, most wealthy people, particularly ladies, went nowhere without a bodyguard. Unless Sandev wanted to stand out, she must have one as well.

"Ready to face the Senate again?" he asked.

"Not that. The Senators can make up their own minds. I've interfered enough."

"I'm sure they will vote as you suggest."

"Hmm. I trust my hand is not that obvious."

The Senate and Supreme Council were due to vote on the small matter of recognizing the Throne. If the debate which had raged for days ever ended. The large matter was getting them to recognize the right claimant to that throne. If they failed to agree on that, recognition was pointless. Yet there was always the contingency plan, known only to her and the Supreme Councilor.

Stanak was not so easily diverted. "They believe your hand is obvious even when it is not. If you were in the public gallery, it might help persuade them."

Sandev smiled. "You have a point. Very well, the Senate it is."

She wound her way through the crowds, pleased that nobody recognized her. In the days before the Empire collapsed, she was instantly recognizable everywhere,

people bowing and scraping to her left and right. All very nice, but she had tired of it over the centuries. Now, with everyone wrapped in their own worries and miseries, she was just another highborn lady walking through the streets with her bodyguard. She barely received a second glance.

Only the sylphs, darting through the crowds on errands for their owners, or begging for food, gave her a closer look. Sylphs always saw far more than they let on.

Sandev paused to watch an itinerant group of entertainers, mostly sylph, but with a smattering of young humans, smiling as she saw a sylph complete a double backward somersault. The maneuver was executed perfectly and she suspected that the entertainers practiced for hours each day. She looked beyond the itinerants and crowds, staring at the imposing buildings beyond.

The library, surrounded by the great schools, was deserted now, learning all but smothered in these turbulent times. Before the collapse, all humans and as many sylphs were fully literate and educated to the best of their ability. Now, perhaps one in three humans were functionally literate and only a handful of sylphs. The situation in the remaining Markan prefectures was even worse.

Sandev was not too saddened. The Markan Empire would again take its rightful place as ruler of the civilized world. She believed that and she believed she knew who would best help Marka recover.

Turning another corner, she ignored a sylph beggar crying for bread and paused. Before her stood the building that housed Senate and Supreme Council: the hub of Marka. Opposite, someone had built a warehouse, which was now in disrepair and full of itinerant sylphs. That beggars were tolerated this close to the seat of government demonstrated to many how far things had fallen, but those beggars were permitted to remain for good reason.

All but a few beggar-sylphs belonged to some gang or other. In exchange for "protection", they handed over most of their takings. Those infesting the old warehouse really worked for either Senate or Supreme Council. These sylphs were controlled jointly by Sandev and the City Guard, forming an excellent network of intelligence gatherers.

"Bread, *donanya*," repeated the sylph.

She looked again at the beggar and recognition dawned. She kept her voice low. "What do you have for me, Janin?" Now she knew why Stanak had not chased the boy off.

"Bread!" repeated the sylph, more for effect, although nobody was anywhere near. He now spoke quietly. "Saxin saw one of the guards let armed men through one of the side gates in the middle of the night. She saw three, then four more the next night."

"Which guard, Janin?"

The sylph's earpoints wilted slightly. "The men called him Gestlin," he replied. "But we do not know the name. Those he let in have gone to the Guildsman."

Sandev stilled her face. The Guildsman was not renowned as the most loyal in Marka. This was not good news. "Did Saxin see the guard?"

"Not his face. Not to pick him out should she see him again."

"You have done well, Janin. What will you do now?"

Janin grinned. "The Guildsman is my begging spot," he said.

"You be careful. These men are more dangerous than usual." She turned to Stanak and raised her voice. "Give the boy a coin for bread."

"*Mutydo, donanya.*" Janin bobbed his head, bit into the copper coin Stanak passed to him and melted away.

"I've always envied sylphs their ability to disappear like that," muttered Sandev.

"The Senate," growled Stanak. The sylph boy was easily seen if one knew where to look and how. He was anything but invisible. "Are we going in, or not?"

Sandev spotted Captain Crallin of the City Guard as she mounted the steps to the Senate. He bowed to her as she approached; he knew who she was.

"You have a man named Gestlin," she said, without exchanging any pleasantries. "I think it might be best if he is always accompanied when on watch. I have received troubling news about him. For his own safety, it may be better to give him a partner."

Crallin forced a smile. "Janin has already been to see me." The City Guard doubled as police force and intelligence gathering agency. "I have no guard by the name of Gestlin."

Sandev stared. The wily Janin had probably been paid twice for the same information. "Then we have a spy. A traitor. Saxin saw this man, whom she overheard named Gestlin, admit seven men through a side gate over two nights. Seven armed men. They are staying at the Guildsman."

Captain Crallin nodded. "Saxin saw this man, yet claims she did not."

"You know how it is, Captain. Beggars do not want to be seen to be tangled with the authorities."

Crallin shrugged. "That attitude does not make our work easier. The side gates are kept locked and unmanned over the winter months. I'll check and see if there are any unexplained absences from the main gates with the roster sergeant. And I'll speak with my intelligence officers to see if they can unmask any impostors. And we will pay yet another visit to the Guildsman. I'll let you know what we find." He grinned briefly before touching the rim of his helmet and turned, about to leave.

Sandev laid a hand on the captain's sleeve. "Tell your men to take great care," she said. "These strangers are no friends to Marka."

Crallin opened his mouth to speak but, seeing the expression on Sandev's face, changed what he was about to say. "Very well, I will do as you ask." The soldier continued down the steps.

Stanak watched the soldier stride away. "He's probably already forgotten he wanted to say something different." The bodyguard chuckled. "How often have you used that mind trick on me?" His gray eyes were untroubled.

"Shall we go to the Senate?" asked Sandev, quietly. "Let us see how our representatives vote today."

Marlen glanced out of the window of the main room of the Guildsman and ignored the sylph who placed a tankard of ale on the table before him. She lingered until Marlen turned his pale-blue eyes to her, when she bobbed a hasty curtsy and darted away, earpoints wilted. Marlen's attention returned to the busy street outside.

People hurried about their business, dodging sedans and carriages, each wrapped in private thoughts. Marlen always relaxed when he watched the bustle of a large city, as people rushed about their mundane and mostly pointless lives, trying to ignore their inevitable destiny. Marlen saw them all as his inferiors. Sheep, the lot of them.

Marlen had been born with the Gift, a power that came directly from Siranva. He had even begun to learn to use it, until he learned about sorcery. On the day he

had discovered this alternative, he turned his back on Siranva for ever. Now fully committed to the other sephiroth, he worked to replace Siranva with gods more ready to reward mankind.

He watched a sylph beggar, wrapped in a dirty blanket against the thin spring wind, thrust his hand at passersby. Beggars, in Marlen's opinion, were the lowest of the low. Had this sylph no personal pride? He looked closer, and realised that the boy was not even fully-grown. It was of no consequence; he hated sylphs almost as much as he hated ilven and Siranva. He turned his head and beckoned to the innkeeper.

The man, summonsed from his casks, hurried across, dodging scrubbed wooden tables and benches polished from long use.

"That sylph always beg there?" he asked, pointing out of the window.

The innkeeper nodded. "Most days."

Marlen grunted and scratched at one side of his nose. "Just coincidence he's always there?"

The innkeeper laughed. "There's always sylphs outside inns. Prime pitches for them and they squabble if an interloper moves in. They wait for drunks to drop their coin. Sylphs can hear one fall from two streets away and the first one there is usually quick enough to catch it before it stops rolling."

Marlen only just stopped himself from telling the innkeeper that sylphs, particularly beggars, were vermin and should be eradicated. Beggars would perform small tasks for money and he supposed sylphs were no exception. In Marka as in other cities, the beggars would be controlled and disciplined by gangs who fed off their earnings. But who controlled the gangs?

With a woman as powerful as Sandev in Marka, beggars might be dangerous. He never wanted to fall into Sandev's clutches without Dervra to protect him; he could not face one of the Ten alone. He heard a footfall behind him.

"Good afternoon, Petan." He spoke without turning, seeing the man's reflection in the glass of the window.

The large man lowered himself into the seat opposite Marlen. "How long are we staying here?" he asked.

Marlen sniffed. "Until we receive further instructions. Be patient."

The newcomer nodded. "We won't get too comfortable then."

Marlen managed a smile. "That's right, you won't. Ask one of the men to keep an eye on that sylph beggar. I want to know his every move."

Petan's eyes widened. "You have reason to fear a sylph beggar?"

"I have reason to distrust that sylph beggar," corrected Marlen.

"I'll arrange an accident for him, if you like."

Marlen's good humor returned. "That might be necessary, but wait for me to give the word."

"Very well." Petan leaned back and caught the eye of the sylph slave. "Girl! Ale!"

The public gallery in the coronation building was really two galleries. The first overlooked the Senate, where most executive decisions affecting Marka were made. Two dividing walls separated it from Coronation Hall, where the Supreme Council met and deliberated on all legislation coming from the Senate; to accept, reject or amend as necessary. A huge stained glass window, depicting the first Mark founding the original Markan Empire took up one wall of Coronation Hall. The empty warehouse opposite stole much of the light for the window, but it was still an

impressive piece. But Sandev had no interest in the Supreme Council while the Senate continued its debate whether or not to recognize the Throne.

Unlike the Supreme Council, where the seats were arranged around a gray plinth - presently empty, but where the Throne would stand once recognized - in a vague "u", the benches in the Senate were arranged in two rows, facing each other. Those rows were five deep, each higher than the one in front. And there was a chair at one end of the hall, occupied by the Senate leader.

"We have no need of the Throne!" The Senator presently speaking was unknown to Sandev. He was still young and, like all Senators, opinionated. "We have conducted our affairs for two-and-a-half centuries in peace and good order. There is no need for an empty throne."

"Which will not stay empty," added another Senator, an older man with iron-gray hair. "Today we debate whether to recognize the Throne; tomorrow we debate who to put on it. Must we rebuild the Empire, knowing it will be reborn in blood, as empires always are?"

Everybody stared at this Senator.

"Taylon Xanas still trying for a republic," whispered Sandev.

"We want to see Marka united and strong again," explained the Senate leader, Lanas Exen. "We all agree on that much. Two Vintners have been invited to Marka and we all agreed it could be allowed, especially as either could take this city, should they wish."

"We should have invited all the claimants!" The young Senator grew angry, which was to the good in Sandev's opinion. It meant the argument was being won, if slowly. "And tell them to drop their claims."

Lanas shook his head. "It's inevitable that one will force his way to the Throne," he replied. "Best for the Senate to debate the strongest claims, make its recommendation and then support the new monarch in his quest to reunite our lands. Or would you prefer one to fight his way and take what he sees as his right? What future for Senate and Supreme Council then? An emperor guided by us, or one who is our sworn enemy?"

At this point, the Senators became aware that Sandev was in the public gallery. One by one, heads turned and she was pointed out. Finally the young Senator looked up and scowled.

"Do we really run Marka?" he asked, sourly. "Would we really advise any new emperor? Or will another pull the strings?"

Sandev remained unruffled. The young man would not dare name her, but his accusation held an element of truth. She wanted the right man to become Emperor and to achieve that, the Throne must be recognized. She continued to sit through the proceedings, outwardly unperturbed. She leaned towards Stanak.

"What's his name?" she whispered, nodding towards the young Senator.

"Dlavan Hallend," replied Stanak. "By all accounts, a rising star."

Sandev reflected that unless Dlavan's parents had a taste for exotic names, he was not from Marka.

Lanas brought the debate back to its point. "We are not here to debate who should take the Throne, or what to advise any future occupant, but whether or not the Throne should be recognized. You should have polled your constituents; my own favor recognition."

They should all favor recognition, reflected Sandev. That the people wanted an Emperor should be obvious to all Senators. The only problem was which of the

claimants to choose. She felt quietly confident one of the Vintners would fill that throne. If these windbags ever recognized it.

"The debate is going well," remarked Stanak, watching for potential danger. Political arenas held more risk to his charge than the street.

Sandev sniffed. "They've discussed this for days. They may take many more to discuss it. Time we do not have." She turned her head, becoming aware that someone called to her from the floor.

"Why doesn't the great Sandev come down here and tell us her view?" demanded Dlavan. "I'm sure we will listen."

Sandev leaned forward over the balcony. "If I wished to impose my view, I would stand as a Senator myself. I am sure Marka is in good hands today."

Laughter and applause met her words and the young Senator, with a good-natured grin, turned away.

"A lucky escape," remarked Sandev. "It is rare for me to address the Senate, but it usually ends in disaster when I do."

"Too many minds to control at once?"

She turned to Stanak. "What did you say?"

The bodyguard smiled. "Nothing important." He changed the subject, bored of the debate dragging on below. "Do you want me to visit the Guildsman? We'd better check Janin's story."

Sandev nodded. "Yes, but be careful."

"I am always careful." Stanak's smile broadened. "Very careful."

Olista strode from Coronation Hall into the main lobby, pleased to hear that the debate in the Senate was proceeding well. They had taken longer than he thought was possible, but he was certain recognition might come today. He smiled as he saw two familiar people stood inside the main entrance.

"Rare to see you here, Sandev." He inclined his head and managed to include Stanak in his smile.

"I tire of those who see me as a manipulator or a threat," replied Sandev. Her sapphire-blue eyes sparkled; she had genuine liking for the Supreme Councilor. "I had to see how the debate was going. Yet even in the public gallery, I could see they feared."

"Better fear than love," Olista retorted. "In politics, nothing good ever comes of love."

"Unfortunately."

Olista barked a laugh. "They fear an immortal," he said, pausing outside the doors.

"Siranva's gift is sometimes a curse," replied Sandev. "And I am not immortal. Stick a knife into me and I'll bleed to death as surely as any other human."

"Just so." Olista nodded again. "But the knife is unlikely while they believe you *are* immortal. Your presence may help swing the vote in our favor. Any news of Hingast?"

Sandev shook her head. "Nothing you don't already know. Incidentally, when are you inviting me to dinner? I would love to see how Zenepha is shaping up."

"Come on Sylvanday," replied the Councilor. "Somewhat apt, don't you think?"

"Very." Sandev turned to leave, but Olista's next words halted her.

"He still remembers most of what he read in the Histories. I've tested him several times. He's doing quite well with the Legal Histories, too."

Sandev nodded. "Excellent."

The Supreme Councilor inclined his head and left Sandev, returning to the innards of Coronation Building.

Stanak spoke. "I am surprised that a sylph can learn to read, never mind work his way through all seventeen volumes of the History. And you say he is now working his way through the Legal History?"

Sandev smiled. "Many sylphs can be taught to read," she replied. "I admit that Zenepha is exceptional, which is why I loaned him the books."

"What are you two planning for him?" pressed Stanak. "High office? He's a slave, by Siranva! A slave, and he's better educated than I am."

She laughed. "Like sylphs, you see far more than you let on."

Zenepha put the book aside with a sigh. That was Volume Six of the *Legal Historie of Precedent and Landmarks* almost finished. And only three more volumes to complete after this one. Thankfully, this series of books was much less than the seventeen volumes of the *History of the Markan Empire from the First Mark to the Collapse of the Second Empire*. One day, he hoped someone would compile books like these with titles that did not take as long to read as the books themselves.

The walled garden was also a suntrap at this time of year and the sylphs usually made the most of sunny days, basking in the heat, even in winter. A couple of outdoor sylphs, under the supervision of the gardener, weeded and dug in the borders, preparing them for fresh plants that would soon be taken out of the glasshouse. Zenepha stretched and yawned, his blue tongue protruding briefly as he pushed his arms to their fullest extent.

"I hate seeing that thing," remarked Selkina, at his side.

"What? Oh, that." Zenepha regarded the tattoo on the inside of his left biceps with little emotion. The black lines had always been there, but nobody knew what they meant beyond proving Zenepha was from the Key. Although most sylphs sold from the Key had no tattoo, those with it had all been sold from the Key. He remembered little from before; the few memories left to him were hazy and vague. His master believed that he had been drugged to make him forget and this was the only thing that made Zenepha angry. More than anything else, he wanted his memories back.

Over the wall of the villa, he could just see the upper part of the giant pyramid. Many claimed that was the Key, but Olista said it was not. His master became evasive when Zenepha asked to know where the Key was. If everyone in Marka knew that the empire came into being to protect the Key, it seemed they had forgotten its location.

But Zenepha was certain Sandev knew where it was hidden.

He used to ask questions about the Key, the Ark Star and the strange objects like the pyramid outside the city walls, but Sandev refused to answer. She told him research sharpened the memory and that he should read more. Many ancient books held answers. When he persisted, she said the full truth would frighten humans, never mind over-inquisitive sylphs.

Selkina watched her husband with concern. She knew mentioning the tattoo made him introspective; she had done it to make him forget those books he was forced to read. She felt Zenepha read too much. For sylphs, knowledge was a dangerous thing. She had even tried to talk him out of pursuing Sandev to find out answers about his past. If humans had somehow stolen her husband's memories, they had

done it for good reason. It was sad Zenepha could not remember his family, but he had her.

"You spend too much time with books," she said. "We should try for children again."

Zenepha grimaced. "A waste of time." Not that the trying wasn't fun, of course. "They did something to me. *Enya* says no sylph with the tattoo can breed."

Selkina winced. He was far more comfortable with that fact than she. Her own status suffered because there were no children, but she tried not to care about that. Zenepha would make a good father. He was good with the younglings here. "Even so, it is a duty to try."

Zenepha looked at his wife with compassion. "You knew before saying yes," he said.

Selkina smiled. "You deserve to have children."

"So do you."

They were silent again. Zenepha reached for his book again.

Selkina rose to her feet and dusted herself down. "Shall we walk? Then we must get the chores finished."

Zenepha pushed the book aside again and nodded. No more reading today.

The Supreme Councilor's office was the most lavish of all in the coronation building. His outer office held the workplaces of researchers and advisors, who labored under the careful eye of his secretary, Melda. The inner office was his own sanctuary, strewn with papers and lined with books. Only Melda entered uninvited and she was with Olista now. Her news was not good.

"Molochi and his troop have returned," she told him.

"Excellent." Olista managed a smile. "What did the sisters say? Are they amenable?"

Melda held the Supreme Councilor's gaze. "They said nothing and they gave no reaction. The ilvenhome is empty. They are gone."

"Gone?"

"They are all gone," repeated Melda.

"They have moved? We need an ilven."

Melda held her ground. "They rode straight into the ilvenhome. Molochi says it looks as though they were never there. Completely deserted. No sign of any sister."

Olista shook his head and forced calm on himself. "We need an ilven to attach herself to the Vintner claimant. It'll help woo the Senate and nudge them towards recognition of the right claim. If the sisters are gone, it makes Marcus Vintner's life harder. I assume that also means no sign of the gwerins?"

"No gwerins either." Melda looked sympathetic. "They could be anywhere. Or dead."

"One began advising in the Eleventh Century; she's bound to be dead by now. The others are much younger. Barring accidents, they should be lurking somewhere."

Melda scratched her chin. "I heard a tale about a gwerin who came here the same day Emperor Evlander's three left," she said. "No record of her existence, but none of her leaving either."

"Rono's mythical advisor?"

"Perhaps no myth. An order penned by Rono has survived: that no record of her presence was to be made. A live myth, I suspect."

"If we can find her, I'll have her," said Olista.

Melda inclined her head. "No trace so far, but I will continue to search."

That, thought Olista, was typical of his secretary. She knew of a fourth gwerin and already begun a hunt. She needed no direction from him. "If the ilven have abandoned another home, their numbers are still dwindling," he said.

"That is Sandev's worry more than ours," pointed out Melda.

Practical, and to the point.

Olista and Melda turned as the office door opened, revealing a messenger.

"Supreme Councilor!" The boy panted, doubtless rushing around all the offices. "The Senate have agreed to recognize the Throne."

"I shall come to the Supreme Council immediately."

The boy was gone, leaving the door open.

Olista took time to tug his robe on over his clothes, nodded to his secretary and left his office. He walked leisurely through the corridors back to Coronation Hall. As he entered, the Supreme Council fell silent. The stained glass window, depicting the first Mark, dominated the room. Ominously empty, a gray plinth stood at one end of the hall, under the window. Lanas Exen was beside it.

Olista swept into his seat. "You have something for us, Senator?" he asked.

"Supreme Councilor," began the Senate leader. "We are pleased to announce to this Supreme Council that the Senate has agreed to recognize the Throne of Marka again. We request the Supreme Council recommends to us candidates for that Throne."

"Senator Lanas," began Olista. "Thank you for your information. We are well aware this subject has been debated over several days and are pleased such a contentious issue has finally reached conclusion. We in the Supreme Council have already agreed that, should the Senate again recognize the Throne, we will authorize that decision. Go and announce that the Throne is again recognized; Marka is again an empire."

Lanas nodded and left.

Gorfron, the oldest High Councilor, stood. "I suppose we'd best get some strong young men to bring the throne in here," he said, his voice thin and reedy. "Supreme Councilor, I must warn you that now it is recognized, our troubles are just beginning. Many former prefectures have grown used to their independence. The way ahead will be tough, difficult and bloody. May Siranva help us all in the centuries to come."

Olista smiled. "I am sure that Siranva will help us ensure any bloodshed is kept to an absolute minimum."

"Siranva will leave human affairs to humans," countered Gorfron.

"The new Emperor will deal with the prefectures. Many want to see the Empire rise again."

"Many more do not."

Olista smiled. Doubtless the councilors feared a time of military conquest and bloodshed. He had read several pamphlets written by Marcus Vintner and knew the man was more political than militaristic in his outlook. He would prefer to take reluctant prefectures by stealth. He would offer military protection, fiscal aid and possibly even a customs union to bring them into the fold. This method took years but, once they agreed to take the Markan currency, their fate would be sealed and their independence doomed. These men would learn, eventually.

"Marka already has ten prefectures under her rule and protection," remarked another Councilor. "More will come with the Vintners and, with an emperor, still more will return to the fold."

"If the two Vintners stop fighting each other."

"To say nothing of the other claimants. Hingast, for example."

"Councilors!" called Olista, deciding to end this before it got out of hand.

"These are problems for another day. For now, let us rejoice that Marka has taken the first step out of the ashes of the Second Empire."

"There are many things we need to recommend."

Olista let it all wash over him. The first battle was won.

Stanak dropped a small copper coin in front of Janin as he passed. The sylph stared down at it.

"Is that all?" he squeaked in disbelief.

"If it displeases you, I'll have it back." Stanak scowled down at the beggar and lowered his voice. "Are they in?"

Janin scowled right back. "Misers like you usually ask for change," he snarled. His voice dropped to little more than a whisper. "They have not come out all day."

"No pleasing some people." Stanak looked at his hand. "Thank you." The copper coin was joined by a silver one.

"Better," grumbled Janin, secreting the silver under his blanket. Never show silver to passersby, who would then assume you needed no more. He thrust the copper coin towards Stanak. "Your change."

"Keep it." Stanak pushed the beggar from his mind and crossed the road to the Guildsman.

The moment he entered the inn, he knew that everybody would immediately suspect he was something to do with the City Guard. They would be wrong, of course, but he was certainly not their friend. Stanak had no sympathy for Hingast or his supporters at all.

He pushed the door open and looked around. The main room was as clean as could be expected, ale casks set on trestles, with a couple of serving girls and a sylph with a miserable expression ready to move. Several men sat at tables drinking, but the inn was quiet this time of the day. He glanced towards the man with pale-blue eyes sat at the window.

"Ale, sir?" The sylph looked at him, earpoints slanted forward.

"Please."

The sylph blinked at the pleantry. She busied herself pouring the ale.

"Half a parta, sir."

Stanak passed over a full parta and waved away the offer of change. He looked for and found the innkeeper.

"I'm looking for a man named Marlen," he said.

All conversation ceased. The innkeeper looked terrified. "Know nobody by that name, good Sir," he managed.

"Who's asking?" The man with pale-blue eyes joined them.

Stanak drank half his tankard. "Word on the street is you're looking for swords," he said. "I'm available."

"Word on the street is wrong." Marlen looked him up and down. "Try the City Guard."

Stanak snorted. "Some of us are known to the Guard for the wrong reasons."

A smile ghosted across Marlen's features. "Why you looking for work?"

"Two wives and eight children murdered by raiders." Stanak's voice caught in his throat. The memory was as fresh as if it had happened yesterday.

"My commiserations, but I have no work."

Stanak nodded, drained his mug and walked out. This time, he ignored the sylph beggar across the road.

"You're *sure* it's Marlen?"

Stanak nodded. "I asked for him by name. Used the murders as cover."

"You asked for him by name? I trust you didn't leave yours."

"I may do foolish things, but I am not stupid."

Sandev sighed. "Marlen. A promising student. The Gift flowed strongly in him. I never found out why he threw it all away. The Malefic Sephiroth always makes its proposal seem so much better; their way looks easy and appealing. The Father selects those humans He blesses with the Gift, but anyone can learn sorcery. They never learn its true cost until too late."

Stanak decided to keep to the subject in hand. "It doesn't matter what may or may not have been," he said, gently. "All that matters is what we decide to do about him."

"He is a powerful sorcerer."

The bodyguard nodded. "Working for Hingast."

Sandev shook her head. "Not Hingast, though he would prefer you to believe that. Marlen works for Dervra."

"Dervra?"

"Another of the Ten. Well, once. He went over to the Malefic Sephiroth and made a pact with Andromech. They want to subvert the Ilvenworld for their own ends. Marlen is dangerous, but only a child compared with Dervra."

"But these are Hingast's men," protested Stanak. "They're working to make his claim possible."

"Hingast and Dervra are probably working together, though perhaps Hingast does not yet know he's the junior partner."

"There are plenty of reasons for them to be here," pointed out Stanak. "Gain intelligence for more raids, cause trouble in the city, or even assassinate the Vintners."

"Let's see what the sylphs discover," said Sandev.

Stanak did not share his employer's faith in sylphs. "If anything," he grunted.

Eyes shut, Sandev sat at her desk. She had no need for the books lining the walls of her study tonight. She ignored the gurgle of the clepsydra as a hand hovered over the contents of the desk drawer. Evidence for Dervra's involvement mounted daily. Which in turn meant Nicolfer was not far away. They always worked together.

One of the Ten she could handle, but not two. Not when they had the Gift *and* sorcery to draw on. There was only one way she could even the odds, only one member of the Ten who would help.

Grayar.

She prevaricated.

If she put her mind to it, could she force herself against Dervra and Nicolfer?

Grayar had helped found Marka, but had spent the last six hundred years nurturing a still-expanding land named Skorin. That it lay thousands of milas across the ocean to the east was not a problem, not for the Gifted. With what others saw as magick to carry her there, she could meet him tonight.

She had always liked Grayar, even before they became members of the Ten. She hoped they were still firm friends, despite their differences of opinion. Grayar would never approve of the school she had founded within Marka, with the aim of

progressing the human race. He claimed progress always caused more trouble than it was worth, but Sandev believed it was inevitable. Far better to channel and control it than let it run unchecked.

None of that was the cause of her prevarication.

When they had become the Ten, Grayar was the oldest and Sandev the youngest. That had always remained, although any age difference was insignificant now, after the passing of so much time. Sandev did not want him to think she feared dealing with another member of the Ten without holding his hand.

She reached a decision. She would wait a little longer and see what happened. She could always reach Grayar if things worsened. She opened her eyes, stared at the small stones packed into the drawer and slammed it shut.

Olista stared at the worn throne of the first Mark. At last, it stood where it belonged on the plinth in Coronation Hall. It shone golden in the low light, glistening with fresh varnish. The Supreme Councilor was alone in the chamber, at his ease in one of the seats used by the Supreme Council. The old padded seat was gone for the moment, a replacement due tomorrow. The throne had a stumpy appearance, because the upper back had been removed for the moment. Right now, the missing part boasted the heraldic arms of the first emperor, a golden eagle clutching a sword. That would be repainted with the arms of whichever Vintner took the Throne and only then replaced.

The flags were not out yet, but Olista knew two would flank the Throne. The Royal Flag, with Mark's gold eagle and sword on a black field on one side; the People's Flag, gold over green over gold, on the other. A permanent reminder of the Emperor's obligations to State and People.

Olista knew the Vintners were unrelated to the dynasty of the First Empire, but everybody else believed they were. Even so, he needed all his political skill to persuade the Senate to choose the right man. Marcus Vintner. The problem of his father still being alive was easily solved, but the problem of his cousin, Branad Vintner, was not so simple to overcome. Both men were descended from Emperor Evlander: Branad Vintner from Evlander's son and Marcus Vintner from his grandson.

On the face of it, Marcus boasted the stronger claim, but Rono III had ruled for only days before disappearing, presumed murdered. His younger brother, from whom Marcus was descended, had never been declared Emperor.

Sandev had filled in the gaps. Evlander's second son, uncle to Rono III, had become Preceptor of Marka and the family held this title until expelled from the city sixty years later. Many believed this man's descendant - Branad Vintner - should therefore take the Throne. But, during all his canvassing, Olista had never passed on what Sandev had revealed about the last Emperor, Rono III himself.

Still only sixteen, Rono had fled in the chaos of the collapsing empire. He wandered for years before marrying a peasant girl, who gave him three daughters before a fourth birth killed mother and child. Slave raiders attacked the village where Rono lived, killing the former emperor and taking his daughters. Two died but the toughest survived to marry her former owner. Hingast was her direct descendant and - in theory - had the strongest claim to the Throne.

Olista sighed. Any thought of having that monster as Emperor made his blood run cold. He looked again at the throne, sniffed and turned to leave.

Chapter 4 Zenepha's Day Off

Zenepha had long ago decided that what set some owners apart from the majority was the way they treated their sylphs. The best thing about Olista was that he allowed his slaves a day off each week. Free days were spread over the week, so some were always available for work. Most spent their free day taking a lie-in, or mending clothes, or chatting. Zenepha preferred to spend part of his day walking around the city.

He accepted he would never be allowed out of the city gates without a permit from his master and remembered with a smile his early attempts. Fortunately, Olista was not an owner who insisted on punishment for sylphs over any small infringement of rules and Zenepha took the hint long before matters got that bad. Even now he doubted he would return if he got outside and discovered a way to the Key. Nowadays, he contented himself wandering the streets, learning all he could of Marka's ways and people. Olista insisted he do this, though he wondered why it was necessary for a slave to learn anything other than how his owner wanted things done.

Selkina never understood either, and she had long ago stopped coming into the city with him, spending her free day with her mother. Initially disappointed that his wife preferred to be elsewhere, Zenepha quickly learned to enjoy his solitude. Even surrounded by people and sylphs, it was possible to be gloriously alone.

Unless he was recognized. Two City Guardsmen walked around the corner and eyed the sylph with neutral expressions.

"Run away again, Zenepha-y-Olista?" asked one, while the other checked his collar. It was all show; Zenepha was friendly with most guardsmen and they knew him and his owner well.

The sylph could not hide a smile and his earpoints twitched. "So long as I am back for the evening meal, I may run free."

The guardsmen chuckled while one affectionately ruffled his long silvery gray hair. "We won't keep you from your freedom any longer. Keep your earpoints up and your eyes open; today might be interesting." The guard who had spoken winked conspiratorially.

The streets heaved with humans and sylphs dashed everywhere. Knots of freemen and freewomen gathered to speak in low voices. Where he could, he eavesdropped.

"Hundreds of rumors fly around the city."

"They should be here sometime today."

"Perhaps tomorrow."

"Eylan was certain. Today."

The group became aware of his presence and gave him glances hinting he should take his long ears elsewhere. Caught, Zenepha was happy to oblige.

The broad boulevard along which most of Marka's traffic traveled had trees along the center. Some long forgotten Senator had paid for benches under the foliage, so citizens could rest and watch the world pass by. Zenepha used to worry that slaves were forbidden to sit here, but nobody ever bothered him, so he made use of the benches.

He always perched at the very end of a bench, so freemen could sit if they wished. He picked his way to his favorite bench, which was unoccupied, and made himself comfortable.

Carts rumbled past continuously, some leaving and others entering Marka. The city was completely dependent on surrounding farms for food, and its trade all

moved by cart and caravan. Some carts had armed guards, others no guards at all. Dusty sylphs traveled with some caravans, staring openmouthed at the city. Not all the gawpers were sylphs of course. A goodly number of humans were also seeing the city for the first time. Whether coming or going, all the carts were full. They carried news - and rumors.

Zenepha tried to ignore the rumbling carts and stared across the street.

Opposite stood a row of shops owned by the same family: bakery, goldsmith, clothier, carpenter and a tavern. Zenepha liked to watch the goldsmith, who owned several sylphs. Their deft fingers were better adapted to using the small tools that jewelry sometimes demanded. He admired their skill.

Outside was the obligatory sylph beggar, in this case a small infertile he used to assume was still growing, until passing years showed that this sylph had no more growing to do.

Zenepha felt sorry for beggars. They left him alone of course; there was no point begging from slaves, who had no money, or just enough for their errands. Most beggars were sylphs. Few humans lasted long on the streets, the girls and even some of the boys falling into prostitution or foul of the law. Most sylph beggars had fled from now abandoned farms raided by bandits, or dumped by owners who could no longer afford to keep them.

Groups of itinerant performers - known as taynors - were not regarded as beggars by the authorities, but they tended to remain within the city walls, not daring to wander for fear of attacks. Any who left usually traveled in company with caravans lucky enough to have guards.

The true beggars had Zenepha's wholehearted sympathy. They were collared, to remind them their status was that of slave, but also so the authorities could track them. Nobody stopped them from entering the city, but they were no freer to leave again than Zenepha. Only the taynors were free to leave if they wished. He glanced again at the infertile outside the tavern.

She would know that the alehouse was called the Vintner Shield, but unlike Zenepha, she was unable to read the letters. He watched her catch bread thrown her way, snatching it out of the air and stuffing half into her mouth and smacking her lips in satisfaction. The other half was eaten more slowly.

She looked around, saw Zenepha, gave him a cheerful wave and smiled. Picking her moment, she darted across the boulevard, earpoints twitching in pleasure.

"Hello, Nata." Zenepha smiled at her.

"Morning, Zenepha-ya," replied the beggar. She looked at him expectantly.

He ignored that she wore very little beneath the blanket wrapped around her small frame. He was pleased that the thin wind had dropped, replaced by bright sunshine that heralded the start of the dry season.

"Anything exciting happening?" he asked her.

Nata nodded. "A fight outside the tavern early last night. Many coins were dropped. Tonight, I will get new clothes."

"That will be nice." Zenepha knew - and disapproved - of the "system". Humans, usually gangs of adolescent boys, divided the sylphs between them and, in exchange for "care", all coins the beggars managed to accumulate during the day went straight into their so-called protectors' pockets. And if a beggar failed to bring in enough, there was trouble. He suspected that Nata's "new" clothing would be little more than rags cast off by someone else.

"You don't need to hand everything over to them. You would be much better off if you begged alone."

Nata scowled. "You have an owner," she countered. "You cannot understand, but I prefer the security they offer to freedom."

Zenepha found it incredible how sylphs refused to pull free from their human controllers; even fertile sylphs fell into the arrangement. Perhaps fall was the wrong word: sylphs actively sought out the racket, which was endemic throughout Marka. Zenepha believed that the Supreme Council ultimately controlled the gangs in some way, but he had no evidence to back up that belief.

"Nata, it is exploitation." From the look on her face, Zenepha knew it was time to change the subject. "Any news or rumors?"

"The Senate has recognized the Throne," she replied. "And they will put a Vintner on it."

Zenepha smiled. "News travels fast on the street," he remarked. "They do not know who will sit on the Throne."

"The carters say there is an army in the hills. Maybe two or three armies."

"It is true an army is close to the city."

"They will bring the Emperor here. It will be good to have one again." Nata's expression firmed. "Everything will be put right when he takes over. There will be no more beggars, because people will farm again and need sylphs to work for them." Her eyes gleamed as she spoke and her earpoints twitched upright for the first time.

"That is what should happen." Zenepha found her hope touching.

Nata had never worked on a farm, but was born into one of the poorer sylph owning families. She remained unsold and, with many other young sylvan mouths to feed, her owners eventually showed her the door. Every sylph craved human ownership; infertiles more than breeders. No doubt she felt the shame of her expulsion, instead of those who had kicked her out, and that was probably the reason she decided that negative attention was better than none at all.

"You had better get back over the road, Nata," continued Zenepha. "You will miss the best opportunities. Oh, almost forgot." He passed over the dark bread he always brought for her. "There is more fruit in it this time."

"*Mutydo, Zenepha-ya.*" Nata grinned and almost snatched the bread from his fingers, a hint she was still hungry. She took two bites and tucked the rest away. She inclined her head before scampering back across the boulevard, surprising the driver of a carriage, who slowed down. He swore at her, but she did not respond.

Zenepha spent a little time watching the sylphs inside the goldsmith, but soon moved on, giving Nata a small wave as he walked away.

Returning to the crowds, he watched sylphs on their errands. Zenepha also watched humans about their daily business, but he liked to observe his fellow sylphs more. They darted everywhere, rushing to complete their tasks as quickly as possible. The urgency was the same in Olista's household; the quicker chores were done, the sooner one returned to whatever she or he wanted to do. He unashamedly watched everybody around him.

Some were quite well dressed - a few even better dressed than he was - but most were not. Many were almost as ragged, if considerably cleaner, than the beggars. This was quite in keeping with the times; with many more poor humans, poverty was bound to affect their slaves. Despite sylphs' well-refined sense of shame, he noted many ragged slaves were often cheerful and, if not exactly sleek, certainly fed. On the other hand, he saw miserable well-dressed sylphs as well as miserable ones in rags. Having a wealthy owner made no difference to sylphs: a slave was a slave and it was always better to have a decent poor owner than an evil rich one. Some owners - rich or poor - were not always kind to their sylphs.

Zenepha was fortunate to have a decent and wealthy owner. Even better, he belonged to the most powerful man in Marka.

Which, if Olista had his way, was about to change.

He regretted not paying so much attention to the bustling humans the moment his eyes focused. He put his head down and tried to hurry past without being noticed. Being a sylph, this was usually not difficult.

The man Zenepha tried to avoid had his back to him and leaned forward to inspect something in the shop window. Sandev's bodyguard was instantly recognizable. Either Stanak had a day off - which the sylph doubted - or Sandev herself was somewhere near. The attention she lavished on him was worrying; her obvious great age awed and her power terrified him. He had no wish to meet her on his day off. He preferred avoidance, assuring himself he was only frightened by the Gift, not of Sandev herself. She was on the good side, a servant of the Father. He almost managed to convince himself. He was less successful slipping past unnoticed.

"Good morning, Zenepha."

The sylph's spirits dropped. Stanak's eyes were on him. The human must have seen his reflection, or turned at exactly the right moment. Or else he had been seen *before* he spotted the bodyguard. "Good morning, Stanak-ya," he replied. "Is Sandev-ya with you?"

The bodyguard smiled. "No, I'm looking after Caya."

Zenepha looked into the shop, where he saw Sandev's slave waiting her turn in a queue. He heaved a mental sigh of relief. A couple of years ago there had been suggestions that he marry Caya, but Sandev had decided against. Zenepha had liked the idea and he was certain Caya had shown equal interest. Sandev gave no reason, but now he had a wife, Zenepha was content. Selkina was his only love.

"Some would say your owner is careless, letting you out by yourself," said Stanak.

Zenepha shrugged. "The city is safe," he said. "Who bothers sylphs? Besides, Guardsmen are everywhere."

"There are still dangerous areas where even the City Guard treads with caution," countered Stanak. "And there are those who would strike at the Supreme Councilor through you."

The sylph shivered and his earpoints wilted a little. "I know where all the bad places are. And avoid them."

"As you wish. Ah. Caya."

Sandev's slave left the shop, carrying purchases for her mistress. She smiled at Zenepha, her earpoints slanting ahead and twitching. She remained unmarried, and her interest had clearly not diminished. The two sylphs inclined their heads, but said nothing. At least he had not run into Sandev.

Janin muttered in his sleep, baring his teeth in a grimace of fear.

He'd left his begging spot late, with darkness shrouding even the Guildsman. He picked his way carefully through the streets, hoping to see the night beggars about their business. Someone followed. Not someone, but something. More than anything, he wanted to see more of his own kind. Why was he alone? There were always scavengers about. Just him and whatever followed.

He began to run and almost screamed as the something poked him in the back...

Janin opened his eyes and stared at the blank whitewashed wall in front of him. Safe in his blanket, he blinked. Long abandoned by humans, the old warehouse was now colonized by beggars. Another poke in the back.

"You going to lie there all day, lazy one?" came Saxin's voice.

He groaned and rolled over to look into the infertile's sparkling eyes. Sunlight already streamed into the building and he blinked again.

"Us night scroungers need beauty sleep as well." Saxin sat on her heels as she spoke, offering old vegetables as breakfast. Probably collected from a rubbish heap somewhere. Some places night scavengers visited were truly disgusting; Janin no longer asked. "Most of the day boys have gone. Only idlers like you left. Wind has finally dropped; looks like spring is here at last."

He lifted his hands in mock surrender and rolled free from the blanket. "I was back late."

"I noticed." The other sylph nodded. "Something bothers you as well; you cannot hide it from me."

"I was followed from the Guildsman. Probably one of those you saw come into the city."

"You be careful." Saxin's concern was genuine. Only a handful of years older than he, they had spent a lot of time together when younger. She always looked after him with an almost motherly eye; maternal feelings where there should be none. She still treated him like a child, though he was now the taller.

"I am always careful. Thanks for breakfast, enjoy your sleep."

Saxin grinned before wrapping herself in her blanket in the same spot Janin had just vacated. "Happy begging." Moments later, she was asleep.

Despite being one of the last to leave the old warehouse, Janin still had Senate Square pretty much to himself. As Saxin had said, the thin winter wind was gone, but he still carried his blanket. His feet felt chilled from the pavement; his blanket would be better to sit on than cold stone. He had not gone very far before the shivery feeling from the night before crept over him again.

All his instincts warned he was not alone. Somebody watched him and, worse, followed him. He looked over his shoulder.

Nothing. A couple of citizens chatting in the square, one throwing glances his way, and a Guardsman slowly patrolling. The uniformed man also had an eye on Janin, but the sylph suspected this was not the watcher. The Guardsman was bound to watch a beggar, especially one making his way across Senate Square.

He turned onto the main street and greeted the first beggar from a rival gang he had seen today. They were woken and sent out early by their gang masters; he pitied them. Like them, Janin craved the security of a good owner, but the human boys who controlled the gangs did not really own the sylphs they bullied and cajoled. They were users who took what they could, and gave little back. Sylphs from the warehouse were usually left alone, but he would prefer to work on a farm. Anything but the indignity of begging.

He had never known anything but an itinerant's life. He did not know if he was a rejected sylph, one who once belonged to a farmer who had surrendered his farm, or if he was a survivor from a raid. The older sylphs only told him that he had been found as an infant, wrapped against the cold in the depths of winter, abandoned by either his parents or a surrogate. He never felt bad about this: there were plenty of sylphs with worse tales.

This time Janin noticed something wrong when he glanced over his shoulder. A large man, ducking out of sight. His mental hackles rose. He was definitely being

followed and now he knew who it was. The large man was one of the newcomers staying in the Guildsman.

"Seen you," he murmured to himself.

His fear abated now he had seen the follower. Should he return to his usual begging spot? Was he in danger? If these people realized he was spying, he might be in trouble. They followed for a reason, perhaps suspicion he was a spy. He decided to carry on as normal but, if anyone from the Guildsman approached, he would run.

"I am no easy target," he growled under his breath.

Maintaining his pace, Janin turned another corner and risked another glance over his shoulder. This time, the big man was caught in the open and looked away from the sylph far too quickly to be innocent. A human might have missed it, but he did not. This man was the cause of his unease.

Reaching the Guildsman, he spread out his blanket opposite the tavern and dropped onto his heels. Lucky no other sylph had beaten him here. Perhaps he was not that late after all. Moments later, the large man appeared, glanced quickly at the beggar and disappeared inside.

Janin determined to watch and wait, while he continued with the serious business of begging for his living. The sylph smiled to himself: these men had something to hide, or why would they worry about an insignificant sylph beggar?

Zenepha realized he was in Marka's industrial quarter.

He had come here unconsciously. Nestled against the west wall, the industrial quarter had its own gate for importing raw materials, and almost all the important manufactories of Marka were here. Iron tools, weapons and ornamental goods were made here; the Imperial Mint was discreetly tucked away without even a sign to announce its presence... Wainwrights, carpenters, coopers, fletchers, wheelwrights, stonemasons, potters, metal workers... Every skill or process known to humans and sylphs was here somewhere. Most jewelers were scattered through the city, but their raw materials came from here: precious stones were cut here before being sold on, and ingots of precious metals were cast in the foundries. Bolts of cloth and wool were prepared here before being sold on to clothiers. The busiest blacksmiths were all here.

The industrial quarter spilled outside the walls. Four tanneries and two soap makers were sited out there, presumably to keep the worst of their stink from wafting into the city proper. From his studies, Zenepha knew three-quarters of the population - human and sylph - worked here.

"Stop gawping and move aside!"

Zenepha stepped smartly off the road and flattened himself against the nearest wall as three men with handcarts bustled past. Apart from the rather abrupt call, the men ignored him once he was out of their way and they hurried past. Once they were gone, he relaxed, but did not step back into the road.

Dark, windowless buildings oppressed his sight in every direction. There were too many sounds to concentrate on at once: hammering, sawing, shouting, screeching wheels, whinnies from horses, and whistles all beat in his ears. He wanted to tuck his earpoints away so he could no longer hear. Smells assaulted his nose: tar, pitch, wood smoke, burned stone, fresh timber, paint, horse dung, straw and stray stinks from over the wall. Some were so strong he could taste them. Polluted air caressed his skin and his bare feet threatened to skid on the greasy cobbles.

He was thankful to be a domestic slave and not belong to an industrial owner; this was an unpleasant place. Conditions could be terrible here for humans and sylphs

alike. Most workers he could see looked happy enough, but many of the sylphs were ragged and all hurried about their tasks. Zenepha knew wages were not good, even by human standards. A goodly number of sylph slaves belonged to human workers, used to bring in extra cash for their owners.

Many sylphs here never saw their owners at all, as a few humans bought many sylphs, living off their wages as their own income. Such people annoyed Olista, but Zenepha could see no wrong in it. Were slaves not supposed to work for their owners? What was the difference between using a slave you saw every day and using one you did not?

As carts hurtled past, traveling much more quickly than they did through the rest of the city, Zenepha kept out of the way. The drivers didn't much care who got in the way in the more genteel areas, so he supposed they would be even more dangerous here.

Despite the bustle, knots of people gathered here and there, talking in low voices. As Zenepha watched, the noise lessened a little as humans left their work, pausing to speak with colleagues. There was a slow drift towards the main part of the city, and an expectant buzz filled the air. He failed to discover the cause.

Swept along in this new movement of people, he was grateful to escape. He supposed workers grew used to the racket and stench here, but he could not. Soon back in the main part of the city, he took deep lungfuls of purer air.

He had only been in the industrial quarter for a few minutes, but the streets crackled with anticipation. Something was going on and he wanted to know what. At last, he could overhear conversations.

"They were seen yesterday, coming down from the Candin Plain."

"They're setting up camp outside the northern gate."

"Forestsideside?"

"Are they laying siege?"

"Have they surrounded the city?"

Humans and sylphs alike swapped rumors.

"Who is it?" Zenepha asked a human woman.

"An army, a big one. They've come down from the plain and are camping outside the walls."

Zenepha drew in a breath. Only the arrival of the Vintners could cause this much excitement. He picked his way toward the North Gate, but the closer he came, the denser the crush of people and the louder the hum of wondering voices. He reached Senate Square and realized this was as close as he would get.

People hung flags wherever they found room: both the gold and green of Marka, and the gold dragon's head of the Vintner family. He looked around at the sea of pleased faces. Sylph earpoints twitched everywhere he looked and human eyes shone. The sylphs were numerous, but Zenepha saw that humans were leaving their places of work to catch a glimpse of the man who wanted to be their emperor. History was being made this very morning.

"What's going on? Anything happening?"

Zenepha hid a smile. There were always those who followed a crowd without ever knowing why it had gathered. The speaker earned some strange looks, but nobody enlightened him.

The crowd surged and a collective sigh boomed in his ears. He strained to see, aware that someone - several someones - headed towards Coronation Building. He thought he glimpsed his owner among them, but Olista - if it was him - was hidden by

a knot of taller Senators and Supreme Councilors who dashed up the steps. Moments later, human and sylph girls left the building, lining the steps to give welcome.

A cheer rose from the direction of the North Gate, spreading like fire in a dry summer. Zenepha remained silent, wanting to see rather than shout. Nobody would notice if he was quiet.

"It's them! The Vintners!"

Zenepha rose up on his toes, to see over the heads of most of the crowd.

City guardsmen led the way, keeping back the more adventurous who tried to push forward. They were followed by a detachment of mounted men, obviously from the army without the gates. Their armor and weapons were different enough to show they were not from Marka. Two large horses, decked out in the colors of the Vintner family, followed, riders similarly armored and wearing surcoats boasting the Vintner Arms. Both men boasted dark-brown hair curling over their ears. Immediately behind rode a bannerman, carrying the Vintner Banner. Everything was gold on dark-blue, with the exception of one of the riders. One surcoat boasted the gold dragon's head on a pale-blue field.

An infertile sylph walked, quite at her ease, beside the stirrup of the leading horse. Zenepha stared briefly at her, thinking she was quite scruffily dressed for one who must serve someone important, then remembered that the army had been traveling for some time. The men weren't the most pristine he had ever seen, either.

All his thoughts were banished as another collective sigh rose from the crowd.

Zenepha was unsure if the apparitions were sylphs or not. Both were gray and green and brown, instead of blue. Some sort of paint covered their skin. Vivid black slashes stood out across the face and chest of one, and both wore short breeches also painted gray, green and brown. Both had very short hair, unusual for sylphs. Silvery gray eyes, pointed ears and black collars about their necks were the only normal things about them. They *were* sylphs, they must be.

He continued to stare as the strangers passed him, carrying themselves with considerably more self-confidence than Zenepha expected from his race.

"What's been done to those sylphs?" he overheard a small child ask.

What indeed? He wondered what part those two played in the Vintner Army.

Olista looked around the Senate. His heart beat much faster than normal as excitement coursed through him. Senators and High Councilors were packed into the Senate, with only just enough chairs. Even though he was not in the coronation hall, as Supreme Councilor he presided. Two of the many claimants to the Markan Throne stood to one side. Marcus Vintner's personal sylph was with him. He gave the sylph a neutral expression; sylphs never entered the Senate except to clean it. It was not his place to shoo her out, despite her somewhat threadbare appearance. If Lanas was prepared to tolerate her presence, that was the end of the matter. Olista doubted if many even noticed she was there.

Sandev had assured Olista that one of these two men would be defeated in battle and he understood this was true. Marcus had defeated Branad Vintner, but the older man looked anything but beaten. The Senate and Supreme Council, sat in the same place for the first time in two-and-a-half centuries, were silent. The leader of the Senate stood.

"We have assembled to welcome two of the claimants to the newly-recognized Throne," intoned Lanas, formally. "I introduce to you all, Marcus Marcus Vintner-"

Marcus, his dark-blue eyes thoughtful as he glanced at his fellow claimant, inclined his head and smiled at the polite applause that met the Senate leader's words.

"-and Branad Ulvic Vintner."

Branad, his blue eyes equally thoughtful, inclined his head, but did not smile at his applause.

It was Olista's turn to speak. "We on the Supreme Council invited to the city those whose claims to the Throne we believe to be strongest. We on the Supreme Council recommend to the Senate that they debate the merits of each of these candidates and make their views known to us. One of these men will be Emperor of Marka."

A stunned silence met his words. It was finally broken by an elderly Senator, a supporter of Enthan of the Imperial Republic.

"We cannot make our views known if only two of the claimants are here," he complained. "There at least two other candidates who should have been invited."

"Senator Cleran, it is not the task of the Senate to recommend the claimants; that is the Supreme Council's remit, and we have recommended these men." Olista looked displeased at the interruption.

"Also," added another Senator, "it must be noted that Marcus Marcus Vintner is the *son* of the true claimant of his side of the family. His father is still alive."

"My father renounced his claim to the Throne six years ago." Marcus Vintner's voice was self-assured and carried well. "He is now sixty and says that he is too old to reunite our lands."

"The laws of Succession are quite clear," retorted the same Senator.

"Senator Aelfrec, I again remind you that it is within the remit of the Supreme Council-

Olista was cut short as Aelfrec held up a hand and continued to speak in a firmer voice. "The *Law* cannot be ignored or pushed aside on the say-so of *anyone*," he insisted.

"The laws of Succession allow any man to renounce his claim to the Throne," replied Olista.

"Provided he does so before the Senate," argued Aelfrec. "In person."

"Until yesterday there was no Throne!" shouted a Senator from the back of the mass of politicians. "These are the two claimants put before us."

"One of whom is defeated in battle," pointed out Marcus, after a sideways glance at Branad.

"We shall decide the merits of defeat in battle," smiled Senator Lanas.

Marcus inclined his head again.

"This may take some time." Branad sniffed. "We should all sit."

Olista nodded acceptance and everybody took their seats. Once comfortable, the debate began to rage again.

"We cannot accept a recommendation when it is the son of a claimant and not the claimant himself."

"Only two claimants are here; we should have invited them all."

"All of them? Imagine the bloodbath!"

"Think of Hingast within the walls."

"I *dream* of Hingast within the walls. He will be an excellent emperor."

Both Olista and Lanas tried and failed to restore some order. Marcus Vintner silenced them.

"I have long wondered how Marka allowed herself to slip into barbarism, collapse and decline," he began. Because he spoke quietly, those nearest him struggled to hear; soon, everyone was aware he was speaking and strained their ears.

"Marka, jewel of the world, seat of civilization, protector of the Key." He looked around before continuing.

"Some of you ask why only two claimants are summonsed. Is it not enough that the political masters of Marka have seen how the various claimants behave and drawn conclusions? One of you demanded to know why Enthan was not called here, another why not Hingast.

"Do you really wish to be ruled by the Imperial Republic? Yes, Enthan is a Vintner, but he comes from an ancient branch of the family, even less closely related to me than Cousin Branad here. And the way the Imperial Republic operates is totally alien to the Markan way. You want Hingast's rule? Have you forgotten what he did to the Prefecture of Sabla? You want him here?" Marcus snorted. "You question why it is I and not my father who claims the Throne, yet some of you would welcome a man who would destroy this city on a whim. If you want me to send for my father, I will do so gladly and he will either again stake his claim or renounce it. But in Siranva's name, stop squabbling among yourselves!"

Everybody, Senator and Councilor, stared at the younger Vintner in surprise.

Marcus snorted again. "Do you think we are just warriors? That we are blind? We have seen what you have tried to do with Marka and in many ways, we salute your efforts. But never think that we were or are ignorant. I am happy to submit to the political will, which is, or is supposed to be, the will of the people of this great and glorious city. Do you think that Hingast will allow you the same privilege? He is on the move, coming this way. Our army can help protect you from Hingast. But time's running out. And it is time, gentlefolk, to decide. Wait for Hingast to arrive and force you to a hasty decision, which will likely be unsatisfactory as all hasty actions are, or make your minds up now. Calmly, reasonably."

"Instead of Hingast, it is you who forces us to a hasty decision."

Heads twisted, but Olista could not see the guilty Senator.

Marcus smiled. "I force you to nothing. Decide against us, and we ride away. Decide against Hingast and he will destroy this city. Think carefully and choose wisely."

Olista tapped his fingernails against the arms of his chair. "Now, can we please return to the debate regarding which of these claimants the Senate will recommend to the Supreme Council?"

As the debate raged again, the Senate split into four factions. Just over one-third supported Branad Vintner and another third supported Marcus Vintner. However, the latter faction was split between those who accepted Marcus Junior and those who wanted his father. The fourth faction was an alliance between the supporters of Hingast and Enthan. Olista doubted if any other claimant would be put forward. The Senate was not supposed to tell the Supreme Council whom it could recommend to its attention and Olista suspected Hingast supporters in the Supreme Council had encouraged the Senators to rebel.

He glanced at the public gallery, packed for the first time he could remember, but there was no sign of Sandev. Trust her to stay away now. Her plan that the two Vintners should meet so one could defeat the other had misfired. That Branad Vintner had lost the battle seemed to have had no effect on the factions. Even now he had not renounced his claim; a hint that the renowned mercy of Marcus Vintner should perhaps have been set aside for one day. Yet he recognized the need for that mercy. Marcus Vintner's chances were increased the more prefectures he had under his control and, as importantly, how large an army he commanded. If Hingast was coming, it was fortunate both Vintners still lived.

Olista glanced at them. If Marcus felt betrayed by Branad, he showed no sign. That the younger man was politically gifted was beyond doubt; he had brought the Senate to silence by speaking quietly and seemingly without much effort on his part. Sandev was right: Marcus Vintner was the man to be Emperor and bloodlines had nothing to do with it.

Outside the coronation building, Zenepha waited with the crowds, their voices mingling into a low hum that hung in the air. He saw human and sylph beggars picking pockets as they pushed through the throng.

It was obvious to all that something of momentous import was happening inside, but Zenepha knew a major announcement was unlikely today. He would be surprised if the Senate could decide quickly which of the two claimants should take the Throne. If they made their minds up at all. Guardsmen stood outside with some of the Vintner soldiers, all outwardly relaxed. Close to the outlander soldiers, the two painted sylphs crouched on the ground.

Zenepha watched them with interest. Sat on their heels, they took turns to throw dice. Whenever someone passed, they glanced up and earpoints twitched, more alert than the soldiers around them. Guardsmen kept nobody away: more people had gone into the Senate, presumably to the public gallery, than was normal and others thronged the steps. A few paused to speak to the outlanders. But they all stayed away from the sylphs, perhaps unsure of them.

Zenepha decided he would speak to them.

He crossed the square and approached the steps. The City Guardsmen looked away and the outlander soldiers stared at him. The two painted sylphs were aware of his approach: their silvery gray eyes were expressionless and their earpoints still. One of the outlander soldiers stepped forward and blocked his way.

"What can we do for you?"

"It's all right," interrupted one of the Guardsmen. "This one is with the Supreme Councilor."

The soldier nodded and stepped back.

"You belong to Olista-ya?" asked one of the sylphs, staring at the newcomer.

"I am Zenepha-y-Olista." He dropped onto his heels. "May I join you?" This close, he realised the sylph with the black slashes across his face and chest was taller than he was, the talkative one perhaps a little shorter.

"I am Neptarik-y-Balrus," replied the same sylph. "I belong to Balrus." He nodded to the soldier who had temporarily blocked Zenepha's progress.

Zenepha looked at the silent, taller, sylph, who blinked and shrugged.

"I am Belaika-y-Marcus."

Zenepha's eyes widened and his earpoints shot bolt upright. "You are Marcus Vintner's sylph?" His voice almost squeaked. "The Emperor?"

Belaika's eyes narrowed and his earpoints lashed forwards and back before returning to their normal position. "You support him as emperor?"

"My owner does. My views are irrelevant."

Neptarik smiled as he eyed Zenepha's silver collar. "True, you are a slave, too."

Zenepha changed the subject. He wasn't interested in thrones, or who sat on them. "Are you warriors?"

Belaika and Neptarik exchanged glances and soft laughter. The shorter sylph replied.

"We scout for the army," said Neptarik. "We see more than humans, and report back quicker. We scout, but do not fight. We are not warriors."

Zenepha heaved a mental sigh of relief. Ever since he had first seen the two sylphs, he was worried that the human taste for violence had spread to his own race. "Is this paint?"

"Skin paint," replied Neptarik. "Hides us in the field."

Zenepha nodded. "Blend in better." He looked up. "Not in cities, though. You stand out and cannot hide."

Belaika rejoined the conversation. "Humans see only what they expect to see. Stand still, do not blink and humans walk past without ever seeing you. Move a muscle, and they see. Stillness is best." He glanced around him. "We passed many sylph beggars. Have they no owners to care for them properly?"

"Bandits attack farms," explained Zenepha. "They kill the farmers, but spare the sylphs, who have nowhere to go. Many stay out there, but others flee to the city."

"Where they are forced to beg." Belaika sounded unimpressed and his earpoints sagged a little. He glanced up at the coronation building. "The rulers should do something. That is the agreement: humans give security and sylphs work for them. They need workers and we need owners."

Zenepha blinked. "Perhaps Marcus-ya will do that." He did not add that some humans did not deserve to own any sylph; that some owners abused, rather than used, those they were responsible for.

Belaika nodded. "*Enya* says he will protect the countryside as it should be protected. Then, sylphs who live on the streets can find owners and be happy. As it should be."

"Of course, the wild sylphs may colonize it instead," interrupted Neptarik.

"If they stay wild much longer," retorted Belaika. "I doubt if-"

"Wait, wait." Zenepha looked from one of the scouts to the other. "Are you saying you have *wild* sylphs with you?"

The scouts exchanged another look.

"We found a slave caravan on the way here," replied Belaika, getting friendlier and more talkative by the moment. "We freed the captives, but they have nowhere to go. They say that they only travel with us until they find somewhere to live, but I think they will ask to stay before much longer." He gave an ironic laugh. "I wonder what the slavers will say then."

"It is a crime to take wild sylphs against their will," remarked Zenepha. "Where are the slavers now?"

"*Enya* brought them with us. They will be handed over to Markan justice."

Zenepha nodded. "You think they will be punished?"

"*Enya* thinks probably not. Until I am shown different, I agree."

"Your owner is wise." Zenepha sighed.

Neptarik rattled the dice in his cup and threw them.

"Twelve," said Belaika, before they came to rest.

"Eight," replied the other sylph, before rattling the dice again.

"Six," said Belaika.

"Seven," grunted Neptarik.

Zenepha looked from one to the other. "What is the point of this game?" he asked.

Both pairs of silvery gray eyes regarded him solemnly.

"To pass time," replied Neptarik, eventually.

At that moment, there was movement on the steps above. The soldiers came ready and the crowd stirred. The two Vintner claimants had left the Senate. Slaves scurried to bring the impressive horses, which was when Zenepha took a step backwards, away from the scouts. The claimants came down the steps, the one with the darkest eyes joining the sylph scouts. The infertile sylph Zenepha had earlier seen heeled this claimant. She smiled warmly at Belaika, but shook her head at his raised eyebrows and slanted forwards earpoints. She glanced sideways at Zenepha, eyes cool.

Zenepha inclined his head to both the claimant and in respect to the two scouts. Belaika smiled at the Markan sylph before turning his attention to his owner, while Neptarik inclined his head. Zenepha stayed on the steps and watched the troops and their leaders move away, until people blocked his view of them. He looked up.

"*Enya*," he said, acknowledging the presence.

"Enjoying your day off?" asked Olista.

"It is... interesting. The younger one is Marcus Vintner?"

"Yes. He is impressive." Olista glanced down at his sylph. "Very impressive. How did you get on with the scouts?"

Zenepha nodded. "They do not fight, only scout. I had no idea sylphs could be used for these things."

"Yours is a surprising race, my boy. I've always told you that. You all have hidden talents; if only you showed them more often."

Thinking this was dangerous ground, Zenepha hastily changed the subject. "Have the Senate agreed to anything?"

"Such as recommending one of them?" Olista shook his head. "Not a chance. The faction which should support Marcus is divided between him and his father. Even if they joined, the vote would still be split between Marcus and Branad."

"Why did they split?" Zenepha blinked.

"They feel Marcus's father should come to Marka to renounce his claim before the Senate. Personally, I feel the Senate resents having no say which of the claimants was invited in the first place, so they're exercising every right they have, just to be awkward. It was ever thus between Senate and Council."

"I see."

"As I understand it, Branad Vintner lost the battle, but he has not renounced his claim yet."

"Will he?"

"Perhaps. Life would certainly be simpler if he did. A faction supports him, and others support Enthan or Hingast."

Zenepha suppressed a shudder. "I hoped their arrival would make Markan politics a little easier," he said, boldly venturing his opinion without waiting for permission.

"It may make a slight difference eventually," replied Olista, indifferent to his sylph's insubordination. "Though I doubt anything will ever make Markan politics any easier. I don't know if Sandev is still coming to see you tomorrow evening; this turn of events may force her to cancel."

Zenepha shrugged. "I do not mind."

"I hope the Senate and Supreme Council realize that those men camping outside Marka with their armies - they work together for the moment - can take this city easily, should they wish."

Zenepha's eyes widened. "Do you think they will?"

"The Vintners falling out and fighting immediately outside the gates worries me more." Olista glanced up at the sun. "Late morning. I don't know about you, but I'm hungry. I know somewhere to eat. Want to come with me?"

The sylph inclined his head. "*Se bata,*" he replied. His question remained unanswered, but he had not forgotten it. He glanced after the departing Vintners and hoped that the Senate would choose wisely - and soon.

The boy was breathless as he reported to Marlen and Petan. His voice squeaked with excitement as words spilled from his mouth. "Marcus Vintner and Branad Vintner are both in the city, with grand horses and lots of soldiers. There are more outside the city, they say there are thousands and thousands-"

Marlen opened his mouth, but didn't have a chance.

"-and they've got *sylph* warriors as well. Painted in gray and green and black so you can't see 'em till they jump up at you. They say they can kill you with a look cos they don't have no other weapon. I saw 'em myself, just from a distance to be safe and they look really scary. But though the Vintners are here, the Senate can't agree which one to make emperor and-"

"Thank you." Marlen forced a smile, though he wanted to slap the boy into silence. "You have done well; you may go." He tossed a silver coin to the boy, who snatched it out of the air and secreted it away.

"Thank you, sir." The boy bowed and left the room.

Marlen and Petan exchanged a glance. "Painted sylphs? New one on me. We'll have to find someone to carry messages who's a little less... excitable... in future. I thought he was going to choke, he couldn't get his words out fast enough. I wonder how much was embellished?"

"Like the sylph warriors." Petan chuckled to himself. "Sylph warriors!"

Marlen snorted. "Most sylphs find it difficult to keep their footing in strong winds, they're too light. Even a young child can pick up and carry an adult sylph. They'd be all but useless as warriors. *If* you could persuade one to pick up a weapon and do violence in the first place."

"It's not the first report to mention painted sylphs," pointed out Petan. "Everyone has mentioned them. What are they for?"

Marlen nodded. "Not warriors. They're too... *timid*. I'll wager my best coat to the undergarments you wore all last month that they are messengers, or something like that."

Petan managed a smile. Rare when Marlen made jokes and when he did, it was usually at someone else's expense. "Scouts?" he hazarded.

"That would explain the paint." Marlen stroked his chin. "Intelligence gatherers. Scouts. Messengers."

Petan nodded approval. "Good idea, whoever thought of it. They'll be good for that and the paint will help camouflage them."

"But the sylphs aren't the problem, they're not even an annoyance." Marlen brought the discussion back on track. "The two Vintners are the problem."

"Kill them," suggested Petan.

"Gaining what? Both have sons. Branad's is grown, I believe."

"Their combined army will protect the city. Hingast cannot easily overcome this many men."

Marlen smiled. "Our emperor has more than a few tricks he can use to defeat the Vintners. It's quite easy to tie down large numbers of soldiers by forcing them to spread all over the land. A series of raids..."

As Marlen continued to speak, Petan's smile broadened and he began to feel much happier. The Vintners wouldn't know what had hit them.

Chapter 5

Roads To Marka

Zandra Ems, wife of Marcus Vintner, opened the carriage door and stepped down, heeled by Eleka-y-Belaika, heavy with child. Guard-Commander Mansard Dullas turned to regard her, his dark-blue eyes expressionless. In the middle distance, the remains of a wrecked caravan were clear to the eye, as were clouds of carrion birds fighting and squabbling. Closer, a sylph scout was doubled-up, retching between swilling his mouth with water and spitting it out. On this mission, there was no need for camouflage, but old habits died hard with sylphs, so he was fully painted and wore scouting breeches. His wives flanked him, offering comfort and sympathy.

Most guard-commanders would have rushed Zandra back inside the armored carriage, fearing the woman they believed destined to be empress might be harmed. Mansard, who had watched her grow up and - much to her mother's horror - taught her the sword, felt more secure in his position and rarely interfered with her wishes. Whenever he advised caution, she listened. She did not always agree with his professional judgment, but she respected it, and obeyed accordingly. The Guard were fully trained soldiers and the personal guard of the Vintner family. There were only three ranks beneath the Supreme Guard-Commander: Guard-Commander, Guard Lieutenant and Guard Officer. Pay was higher than for ordinary soldiers, so there was never a shortage of volunteers.

Zandra glanced compassionately at the scout before turning to Eleka. "Back inside with you," she ordered. "Whatever's over there is not nice."

"*Se bata.*" The pregnant sylph bobbed her head and darted back into the carriage.

"You are quite right," intoned Mansard. "It is not nice over there." He glanced at the sylph scout, who quivered as if suffering from fever. "Bascon has seen many things, but he's never reacted like this before."

At the mention of his name the scout looked up, eyes and earpoints betraying misery. Seeing he wasn't wanted, he returned to staring at the ground and dry heaving.

Mansard continued. "I've sent some of the lads to bury the bodies."

"Many dead?"

"Four men, five women, six children and five sylphs. The caravan's empty now, but I wonder if there was any need to slaughter the people. All were unarmed and it looks though they offered no trouble to their attackers."

Zandra understood the unspoken part. Glancing around at the men in their purple cloaks and purple-lined helmets, she knew that, hardened as they were, they saw no point in killing people who offered no resistance. Their eyes were tight with anger and revulsion. She could almost feel sorry for whoever was responsible if these men caught them. Almost. "I'd like to go and see."

Mansard looked startled. "There's no obvious danger, ma'am, but it's not a pretty sight over there. They've been dead since maybe last night, and the carrion's been at them."

Zandra glanced again at Bascon, who still shook and heaved, then steeled herself. "Take me across, Commander."

Mansard inclined his head and beckoned for a spare horse for her. The door of the carriage creaked open and Zandra looked around.

"You will stay here, Eleka. *Sna alut.*"

Eleka's earpoints twitched. "*Se batut.* But, *anya*, I would like to go to Callie and Sallie while we are stopped."

Zandra paused before nodding assent. It would be cruel to keep a mother from her daughters. Zandra's three daughters and infant son were under the care of their governess, in the carriage behind her own. Kaira would keep them inside and away from the horror of the caravan. When she returned, she would visit them. She watched as Belaika's wife, taking her time, made her way to the carriage that held most of the sylphs.

She mounted the horse brought to her. "I'm ready, Guard-Commander."

Mansard touched his shoulder with a fist, before touching spurs to the flanks of his horse.

The journey was short. Zandra enjoyed to feel the wind on her face, no matter how short the distance traveled. The racket from the carrion as the men again chased them off spoiled the ride. Her horse whickered and snorted as they came to a halt.

She was pleased the stench of death did not hang in the air; none of them had been dead long enough for that. As Mansard had warned, the sights were not pleasant. Three Guard Officers dug a large grave for the corpses now laid facedown in an attempt to keep the carrion off. Zandra knew what the birds would have eaten first.

It was early in the year for flies, but a few gathered around and on the bodies, rising in small clouds whenever someone approached. Gaping wounds where skin and muscle had been stripped away to leave protruding bones were very much in evidence but she knew carrion eaters, not human murderers, were responsible for that.

She was saddened when she saw the smaller bodies and sighed at the blue corpses of sylphs dotted among the rest. The raiders had less reason to kill the sylphs than their owners.

"We'll bury them together," said Mansard. "Even the sylphs." He sucked in breath over his teeth. "Difficult to tell in some places what belongs to which corpse."

Zandra nodded. "What about the caravan?" she asked.

"We'll leave it," replied the guard-commander. "The wagons are empty and the horses have been either driven away or stolen."

"All right," she said, quietly. "I've seen enough. As soon as we're finished here, we move on. One more thing. If we catch the people who did this, they will face the wrath of the law, in accordance with the law." She looked at Mansard. "If we catch them attacking another caravan, I know you will act to protect those in danger."

Mansard nodded. "As you say. I will pass your instructions to the men."

Returning, Zandra paused beside Bascon, who had recovered some of his usual spirit. Dismounting, she patted the sylph on his shoulder and he looked up, earpoints briefly twitching upwards. She turned to Mansard.

"Your sylph deserves a rest," she said. "Someone else can scout ahead when we move on. We do still have human scouts?"

"We do."

Bascon stared at Mansard, his eyes betraying a desire to speak. Mansard nodded.

"*Donanya*." The sylph bowed his head. "Thank you for your kind words, but I rest when we stop again. I am fine."

Both female sylphs looked at the scout and one thinned her lips. Bascon held up a hand and both sniffed in disapproval.

"Very well." Zandra smiled, exchanged a look with Mansard and turned away, surrendering the reins of her horse to an officer. She made her way to the carriage behind hers, where she was greeted by the delighted yells of her children.

Bascon found an excellent place to stop for the night and Zandra marveled at his ability for finding good stops. Sheltered on three-and-a-half sides by trees and bushes, a stream gave plenty of water for cooking and drinking. Little wind found its way through the trees and bushes and, even better, the carriages were all but hidden from the road. The sylph said he thought the campsite had been made at some point, but in Zandra's view, this did not detract from his achievement.

Once the carriages had formed their defensive ring, the guardsmen curried the horses and ensured they were fed. The sylphs and officers' wives prepared a meal, all under the watchful eye of Mansard's senior wife, Kelecan.

A disapproving scowl twisted her face as, hands on hips, she watched everyone at their tasks. Most stepped carefully around her, though Zandra noted that sylphs who belonged to Mansard showed no wariness whatsoever.

Growing up in Calcan, she had always liked the company of "Aunt" Kelecan. Zandra was certain that Kelecan respected only her husband. She ruled his household absolutely, ready to crush all dissent with strong words and hard stares. Zandra was pushed to guess whether husband or wife was the harder.

A sense of calm soon returned to the carriages after the bustle of setting up camp. Kelecan's blood pressure receded slightly and several sylphs, blue-faced with mortification, washed up under her direction. None belonged to Mansard. The guard-commander was some distance away, stood beside the road, chatting with his scout. Zandra crossed to join them.

"Good evening, Zandra." Mansard inclined his head and Bascon followed his example. "Looks to be a fine night ahead, unfortunately."

"Unfortunately? I tire of mists and cloudy nights."

"Fine nights are known as raiders' nights in some parts." Mansard's gaze riveted her in place. "As we have seen today, these are certainly raiders' lands. With your permission, I'll double the guard."

Zandra inclined her head, but said nothing. Mansard would double the guard with or without her permission and she would not even call him down for it. He was the soldier. She turned to the sylph. "Have you recovered?"

The sylph bobbed his head again. "Yes, *donanya*." His earpoints twitched and he colored slightly, obviously embarrassed by his earlier shock.

"Go and see if Kelecan needs help with anything," commanded Mansard.

"*Se bata*." Bascon was gone.

Mansard watched him go with an amused look. "That lad doesn't know what's happening to him one day to the next," he chuckled. "He loves the field, but misses his wives whenever he's in it. When at home, he whines incessantly to get out in the field again. Now, he's in the field *and* his wives are here."

Zandra raised an eyebrow. "Haven't they helped settle him?"

Mansard laughed aloud. "Aye, Mayula and Geneha want to settle him right enough. Trouble is that they both gang up on him about it and then wonder why he wants to bolt for a bit. He still hopes that I'll return to frontline service." He lowered his voice. "He feels they're too demanding."

"Too demanding?" Understanding dawned and Zandra covered a giggle with a hand. "Poor Bascon!"

"I don't think he can survive them being here while he's in the field. He wanted them to follow in the next caravan from Calcan with the rest of my family." Mansard chuckled. "But they insisted on traveling with this one."

Zandra nodded. Of course, there would be several caravans leaving Calcan, bringing more soldiers' families with them, all protected by more soldiers, some of whom would travel between Marka and Calcan several times before everything and everyone who needed to be was transported. Half of Mansard's household was behind them. For that matter, more from her household followed in the next caravan.

"Two more days," continued the guard-commander, "and we should be in Marka."

"I look forward to seeing the city," smiled Zandra.

"Everybody does," replied Mansard. "Everyone should see Marka at least once in a lifetime. I reserve judgment until I see it for myself."

Hingast Rexiter stood in his stirrups and swore. He clutched the spear in his right hand and sawed ferociously at his reins with the other. His head turned, seeking his prey. Stilling his prancing horse, he settled back to listen for movement or panicky breathing. The sylph hid from the hunter somewhere nearby. Hingast waited; the creature could probably see him and prepared to lie low until the predator was gone. He stood in his stirrups again, trying to see. The problem for him was that sylphs, despite their blue skin, were very good at hiding in almost any terrain. When one lay still, he was all but invisible. He glanced towards the forest, certain his quarry had not reached the safety of the trees. Once the sylph was in there, Hingast knew he would lose him. And a good escape, which he would respect.

The rhythmic thrumming of hooves on the hard ground swung Hingast's head around. Who dared interrupt his hunt? His blue-gray eyes widened as he recognized Dervra, his closest advisor. And the only person in the world Hingast feared. Not that he ever showed it, of course.

"You will allow my kill to escape," he complained.

Dervra looked unconcerned. His iron-gray hair flapped in the wind and his lined face betrayed no emotion. "There are more important things to worry about than escaped sylphs," he retorted, dark-blue eyes glittering. "Both Vintners have arrived in Marka."

Hingast did not ask how Dervra came by his information, only that he could believe whatever the man chose to pass on from his intelligence. Hingast respected - and feared - the power of the man, one of the Ten. He sometimes wondered if the Ten were as immortal as was rumored, but the older man always seemed to know when Hingast's thoughts were murderous. Hingast tried to avoid all ideas or mental pictures of killing his advisor. If the rumors were true, he would fail if he tried. A lingering death probably awaited anyone brave or foolhardy enough to plunge the knife into Dervra's ribs. Or even to try.

"Did they arrive together?"

"Of course."

Hingast sniffed. Although he pressed his claim to the Markan Throne, he knew he had little chance of the Supreme Council recommending him. To claim his inheritance, he must take Marka by force. How he looked forward to that day! He continued to scan the wild scrubland for the missing sylph before turning back to Dervra.

"There are more lands to conquer before I am ready for Marka," he said, eventually.

"When the Vintners unite, they will be strong enough to crush you."

"When I appear outside Marka's gates, they will unite against me anyway," he retorted. "Even if my men in Marka do their work better than expected, they will still be stronger."

Dervra inclined his head. "I have other contacts in Marka. The Vintners are about to suffer quite, badly, I fear. They-"

Hingast glimpsed something blue moving from the corner of his eye and dug spurs into his mount's ribs, galloping after the fleeing sylph with a delighted whoop. In seconds, he had run the unfortunate creature down and his spear flashed in the sunlight.

Thin cries, fading almost immediately to nothing, reached Dervra's ears. He sighed; he couldn't care less what happened to the sylph, but he was slightly piqued that Hingast had so rudely dashed off before he had finished speaking. He watched as the claimant returned, cleaning his spear.

Carrion birds already circled above, waiting for the live humans to get out of the way so the feeding frenzy could begin. Blue meat was better than none and by nightfall, little would be left of the dead sylph but scattered bones.

The glint of bloodlust was still present in Hingast's blue-gray eyes. "Very well. I shall do as you suggest. We'll continue to march on Marka."

The advisor smiled, masking his true thoughts. "Your Majesty is wise and will, if I may say so, make an excellent emperor."

Hingast bared his teeth. "When I have destroyed Marka, Dervra, I will build you a new empire."

"Outside with you."

Aylos Jalan shooed the two sylphs and single human out of the stone barn. He had worked here ever since an experiment had gone disastrously wrong and caused his compatriots in the industrial quarter to raise a petition against him. Marka's Supreme Council could not ignore a petition with so many signatures.

So, while discreetly continuing to support him financially, the Council had politely suggested his work might best be done outside the city walls. Far outside the city walls.

After initial protests, Aylos had grown used to the quiet outside the city and quickly established himself at the old farm. The whitewashed farmhouse with its thatched roof was warm and comfortable and the barn, once converted, had proved an adequate laboratory. His family remained in the city, but his two sylphs and human apprentice had come out here with him.

He was not a typical man of science. Almost entirely self-taught, he was apprenticed at age fifteen when his early work on fire-causing powders first came to the attention of the authorities. His master had shown little interest and signed him off as qualified for the Guild a year later to be rid of him. Many thought Aylos was mad, but he knew he was anything but. More importantly, the Supreme Councilor thought as he did. Firepowder could - would - make Marka invincible.

Aylos repeated the shooing motion. "Are we leaving today? Lovely spring day out there, you know."

Prototype rockets stood around the walls of the barn: some were intended to be fired into the air to rain fire on an enemy, or explode to frighten his horses; others were supposed to be fired directly at an enemy, exploding the moment they hit something.

Only he couldn't get the mix for the powder exactly right.

Aylos stared again at the black explosive. The last lot had fizzed in a most satisfying manner, but had failed to power anything. The two sylphs had spent weeks making fresh powder with more charcoal and that crushed to a finer grade. This time, he trusted things would go according to plan.

He picked up the small metal container, which held the wooden ball of firepowder. It should explode. He attached the fuse and left a good length.

He looked up again, disappointed that nobody had moved. "Outside. Now," he snapped.

Despite his irritated tone, his sylphs crowded him as he left the barn, eagerness lighting their eyes. They were as excited about the experiment as their owner. The apprentice, a young man rapidly approaching his majority, followed more sedately. Obert was always rather more laid back than his master. He ignored Aylos's irritability as easily as the sylphs. Obedience clearly meant different things to the young and sylphs these days.

The area Aylos used for his trials was well away from the buildings. A stone wall within running distance of the small pit had been built for observers to hide behind. Unfortunately, everyone had grown a little blase about the need as every experiment so far had failed. It now caused some trouble.

"Baylan, Tredden, behind the wall please."

The sylphs' earpoints wilted slightly.

"No arguments." Aylos stared at them, his pale-blue eyes hard.

"But, *enya*, it has never been dangerous-"

Aylos cut Tredden off before he could go much further. "No argument," he commanded. "Behind the wall."

As the two sylphs obeyed sulkily, Aylos helped Obert set up the box. He ensured the wooden ball still held the fuse, which he poked through the metal container, leaving a long lead. Obert passed the burning slowmatch to his master. The older man nodded and the apprentice trotted to the wall to join the two sylphs in safety. Aylos put the match to the fuse. Once sure it was burning, he ran across the short distance to shelter. This had better work.

"Any second now," he whispered.

Tredden sniffed, still sore at being cut short. Baylan kept his head down.

A muffled boom reached them and the ground shook for a split second. The sylphs, eyes wide, stared at their master. Aylos and Obert grinned at each other before emerging from behind the wall. For once, the sylphs were happy to follow, rather than run ahead.

The metal container lay on one side, its lid blown off and body distorted. Of the wooden ball, only blackened shards remained.

"It worked!"

Obert did not shout, but his pale-green eyes glittered with excitement.

Aylos danced on the spot. "It bloody worked! Oh, thank you, Siranva! Thank you, thank you, thank you!"

Obert cleared his throat. "I suppose we must trial the rockets now," he suggested.

"Yes, yes, yes." Aylos's eyes glistened. His tone suddenly changed. "There isn't enough powder to trial all of them."

Obert shrugged, but remained silent. He knew there wasn't enough powder to trial the rockets; he'd told the sylphs not to make too much in case this batch also proved a failure. There was no point in wasting effort on something that might not be

a success. Now it had worked and someone had a *lot* of work to do. He glanced at the sylphs. Two someones.

Tredden looked annoyed, his earpoints lashing to and fro. "I suppose we must make more of that powder," he grumbled, showing the perception common in sylphs.

"Yes you have," agreed Aylos, absently. "And to the same standard, or I'll have your ears!"

Verdin Vintner, son of the claimant Branad Vintner, was just twenty-one years old and the nominal Crown Prince of a Markan Empire that did not yet exist. He reveled in his freedom from the armored carriage. His mother, sisters, half sisters and his father's second wife stayed in there, as they had since leaving the battlefield. Verdin had no idea if his father had met and clashed with Marcus Vintner there, or even whether he still lived, but he was pleased to leave Candin Plain. A sizeable battle had occurred there only days before. His female relatives chose to fear the worst and refused to leave the carriage. He turned to Marshal Mikhan Annada.

"Is there no way of telling who won the battle?" he asked, for the fortieth time.

Mikhan looked at the prince. His deep-set blue eyes were calm. They were always calm. "Not until we reach Marka, Highness," he replied. "We do not even know if your father was involved in it."

"Seems likely."

"Yes it does. There are no other armies large enough to leave behind such a mess." Mikhan was nearer seventy than sixty and had seen many battles. He was still as alert and sharp as ever. He had fought under Staflan Vintner, his son Ulvic and, finally, his grandson Branad.

Verdin hoped the older man was not about to begin serving a fourth generation.

Retiring twelve years before, he had handed the army over to the capable control of Kelanus Butros. After Kelanus had been chased from Branad's army, replaced by a man Mikhan neither knew well nor trusted, he had voluntarily come out of retirement and was promoted to Marshal.

For two years, he was forced to kick his heels in Sandester, the capital city of his branch of the Vintner family. Only now did he have his chance to be useful.

"We might be riding into a trap," said the younger man.

Mikhan shook his head. "The scouts know their work," he replied, dropping the courtesy "highness". "The road is clear at least to the edge of the forest."

Verdin glanced around. "We don't know how many men Marcus Vintner may have left behind," he continued.

Mikhan sighed. "Marcus Vintner is too honorable a man to ambush a caravan like this. Attempt to capture it perhaps, or even try to escort it to the city. Besides, your father could as easily have won the battle. If indeed, that battlefield is where His Majesty and the other Vintner ever met at all."

"But it seems likely that they did."

Mikhan sighed. This was going around in circles. "I agree that is what most likely has happened, if Marcus Vintner swung north to meet your father. Now, what would such a move by Marcus tell you?" Mikhan's deep-set eyes glittered.

Verdin paused to think. Despite the honorary rank of lieutenant in his father's army, he was not a warrior, but he had studied tactics and strategy under Mikhan. The marshal was a renowned captain and officers came from all over to learn from him.

"Anything?" Mikhan prodded gently.

"It tells me his intelligence is good," replied Verdin.

Mikhan gave a pleased smile. "Excellent! Knowing your enemy and learning what he is up to are vitally important. As important as knowing the land on which you'll fight. But another question we must consider is this: how does Marcus come by his intelligence? This isn't the first time he has known exactly where to wait and for how long."

"Traitors?"

"Possibly, but how do they communicate? How can a traitor know *exactly* where any opposing army can be?"

"He may have a Gifted one in his ranks."

Mikhan nodded. "Now you *are* thinking. Good man. Another thing to consider: why has Marcus Vintner begun to win important battles rather more often than before?"

"He might have read your books."

The old soldier gave a rare guffaw of laughter. "It's possible that Marcus has acquired tactical skill, but I suspect somebody has joined his army in a senior post and that somebody knows what he is about."

"Kelanus?"

Mikhan nodded. "Kelanus. It's never wise to put a man who knows the work out of work in time of war. No matter what he stood accused of. Better a secret execution than let a man like that go."

"Kelanus is a traitor?"

"You might view it that way. He needs to earn his living, like the rest of us."

"So Kelanus is how Marcus knows where we are all the time?" A confused frown furrowed Verdin's brow.

"Kelanus was never an intelligence gatherer," countered Mikhan, "although he certainly knows how to use it. Young Verdin, there is something in Marcus Vintner's army that is missing from all the others. Perhaps it *is* one of the Gifted. Or a sorcerer. Whatever, I'm sure we'll find out. When we reach Marka."

Verdin was grateful for the change of subject. "When will we see Marka?"

"When we get through the forest."

"Is it truly a beautiful city?"

Mikhan, who had visited Marka in his youth, nodded. "The most beautiful city in the known world," he replied. Pleasant reminiscence flickered in his eyes. "I can think of nowhere else as rich, as varied and as impressive. I'll not tell you too much; you can find it all out for yourself. We'll be there soon enough."

"A scout." Verdin nodded to where an armed man, dressed in dull colors, emerged from the forest and reported to his senior officer. Done, he slipped away and was quickly out of sight, only movement betraying his presence for as long as people knew where to look for him. The man's commander crossed to Mikhan.

"Marshal sir, the scouts report a good place to stop half a mila ahead."

Mikhan glanced skywards and nodded. "We'll spend the night there," he replied. He turned to Verdin. "Do not forget to join the rest of the men at sword practice this evening. I noticed you missed last night."

Verdin grinned. "I'll be there," he promised.

He dropped behind the marshal and cloaked himself in thought. He desperately hoped his father was alive and well; he was convinced the battleground they had passed was the most recent meeting place between his father and Cousin Marcus. The last thing he wanted was to be thrust to the claim young. He wanted to live a little first. He had long since decided that he could do without the throne at all

but, if his father's claim proved successful (as he was certain it would), he would meet his duty. An onerous burden, but one he could and would carry.

He had stared and stared at the family's genealogical charts, hoping against hope that Marcus or even Enthan Vintner would actually have the stronger claim. The last Emperor had disappeared in the chaos of Marka's collapse, so his legal status was questionable. He had never been crowned. Marcus Vintner was descended from this man's younger brother.

More worryingly, Hingast claimed to be a direct descendant of the last Emperor: if the Supreme Council discounted Hingast's claim, they should also ignore that of Marcus. The fact that the last man to sit on the Throne had never been crowned in his three week reign, meant that the stronger claims lay with descendants from the previous generation.

That was where his family's claim originated. There must be a way to wriggle out of it.

There was another problem. Although his father had a younger brother, Verdin did not. If he was to reject his birthright (assuming his father *was* the next Emperor), the Throne would pass to his Uncle Nazvasta. Then, if Verdin had a son who was somewhat more ambitious, there was a risk the Empire would collapse again before it was properly reunited. Verdin did not want the Throne because he had other ambitions, even if he saw no way to realize them.

He wanted to be instrumental in reuniting the Empire, to be the man who led the armies who re-imposed Marka's will, the man who directed the diplomats. He could not do that if he was heir to the Throne and later - Siranva send much later! - its occupant. Should his father be recognized, Verdin would be forced to look at all his plans afresh. Unless his father's second wife produced a son; there was time for that yet.

He could confide in nobody. Everyone here was solidly behind Verdin's father; to be otherwise was treason. Verdin looked about him, at the soldiers and their families who surrounded him. Did any harbor doubts about the validity of Branad Vintner's claim? What about Marshal Mikhan, who had spent more than half a century fighting for his family's claim? There was not a single person here he could trust as a confidant. It would be too dangerous - for the confidant as well as himself.

Bored by his thoughts, he rode forward to come alongside Mikhan again.

"Why is it so barren out here?" he asked. "Where are the farms and people?"

"Good question. We're in the Markan Metropa. There were farms here, and soldiers too, but many areas have suffered raids."

"That is something we must change," murmured Verdin, his blue eyes hardening. "Are these raiders anything to do with Hingast?"

"Him, or one of the other claimants, or just men struggling for their own survival. It's hard to say. Whatever their origin, if they harm others, they deserve to hang."

Verdin silently agreed. The sooner order was restored to these lands, the better. Only that needed an emperor and his father had the best claim. He was trapped, with no honorable way out.

Dervra inverted reality to prevent sound escaping his tent. It was a lavish piece of work, intended to impress all who could see sorcery at work and deter those with Siranva's pathetic gift. His tent was equally lavish, second only to Hingast's own. Carpets and rugs from Eldova covered the ground; the dark furniture came from a long forgotten prefecture named Senia, destroyed centuries before by the first

Imperial Republic. He barely noticed any of these things; he was more than used to them. They had been his companions for months.

A small sound caught his attention.

The sylph slave, terrified eyes wide and earpoints laid back in her hair, poured a cup of alovak. Dervra took it without offering thanks. He had forgotten she was still inside the tent and listened to her panicky breathing for a moment. She belonged to Delwin, if he remembered correctly. These things were unimportant.

He nodded her towards the tent flap. Taking the hint as an order, she fled, most likely glad to escape. Sorcery frightened sylphs and they had an uncanny ability to sense its use. She probably did not even know what it was that frightened her. Typically sylph.

He had never worked out how they did it, despite testing several specimens to destruction. Perhaps some latent ability for the Gift from their human inheritance.

Whichever, it was another irrelevance.

He thought of Hingast's hunts. The only sylphs exempted from his hunting were found in his camp. There were no male sylphs here: all but two were infertiles and the exceptions were breeder females.

Dervra had invented the "sport" of sylph hunting to distract Hingast from destroying cities and killing thousands of humans. The demise of a handful of sylphs paled to insignificance compared to that. Their sacrifice was a humanitarian consideration. His ally was a highly unstable young man, but he had his uses yet.

Now the slave was gone, Dervra sat and sipped his alovak. Any second now...

He was no longer alone. A woman stood before him, wrapped head to foot in a brown robe. At her side stood a male sylph, hands clasped meekly before him, a leash leading from his collar to somewhere inside the woman's robe. The sylph was plainly dressed in linen shirt and woolen knee-length breeches.

"Good evening, Nicolfer."

The woman inclined her head. She often gave the impression she could not stand, but such pretence was pointless here. Her ankle tendons had been cut in an ancient confrontation with Grayar, but that injury was healed long ago.

"Dervra," replied the woman, her voice only slightly muffled by the robe. He was pleased to see her: she was a friend and ally and they met all too infrequently. "At last, I have news." Jet eyes glittered.

"Yes, at last."

"Both Vintners have arrived in Marka," continued Nicolfer. "There are some interesting tensions. Marcus's general hates Branad's general. Despite being defeated and captured, Branad has not renounced his claim to the Throne; at least, not yet. Both Supreme Council and Senate are bitterly divided because only two claimants were invited and not all of them. That includes your boy. Even better, many of those who believe that Marcus Vintner's claim is strongest do not feel happy that Marcus Vintner Senior is still alive. There are many factions to exploit."

Dervra sat back and steepled his fingers. Much of this he already knew, and he suspected Nicolfer knew that he had many sources of information. She was useful; there was a good chance she would hear something that his other spies might not.

Like himself, she had once been one of the Ten. They probably still were, technically. They were no longer unique to be practitioners of sorcery *and* the Gift, but they were the first. And the most powerful.

"It is in our interest for the factions to continue," he said, finally. "The fool I'm with at the moment still believes that I support him fully and, moreover, that he is the most important of my servants. Worse, he believes that *I* am *his* servant." He

sniffed. "Yes, Nicolfer, exploit the divisions you find. Feed the cracks of distrust and hatred."

Nicolfer smiled and tugged the leash gently. The boy's head came up, though his earpoints were laid back in his hair. His eyes were wide with barely suppressed panic; even the infertile Dervra had dismissed had shown less fear.

"Tangan is coming along nicely. He now knows how much Sandev and Grayar are responsible for making sylphs into what they are today. Now he knows why his kind dream so much of flying and why they do not fear falling."

Dervra leaned forward. "His hate grows? Looks frightened to me."

Tangan's gaze remained firmly on the rugs and he visibly trembled.

"He is frightened of *us*." Nicolfer's voice was scornful. "I train him to be independent again. For a higher purpose."

Twisting his head to look deep into the sylph's eyes, Dervra doubted it. The boy's gaze flinched away as he cringed. Sylphs should be angry, murderously angry, at the changes that made them what they were today, but there was no evidence of it in this creature. "I think you'll have to keep trying," he said.

Nicolfer nodded, then she and Tangan were gone.

Whatever she planned to use the sylph for was probably doomed to failure. And why had she named the creature Tangan? If the wrong ears heard that name, it would bring owner and owned a lot of trouble.

Dervra sat back and sighed. Sometimes he felt he juggled a million and one different balls, trying to keep all of them in the air at once. There were things he must try to influence, but this time he needed a little luck. This was a thing he had always believed one made oneself, but he hoped for something more this time. If Nicolfer succeeded to exploit the tensions already showing between the two Vintners...

He smiled.

Verdin tried not to stare as they approached the guard.

Ever since it came into sight, Verdin had spent most of his time gawping in awe at the giant pyramid, with its glowing ruby crown. Even Mikhan, who had visited Marka in his youth, could not hide his wonder at so large an object. The entire pyramid seemed to glow with a frightening intensity in the late afternoon sunshine. The city, itself a source of admiration and open mouths, was primitive in comparison. Everybody stared at the pyramid, unable to believe that men could build such things.

Verdin's attention returned to the guards, neither of whom he recognized. The Vintner Arms were everywhere, but set on a darker blue background than that used by his branch of the family. These must be Marcus Vintner's men. His mouth tightened as he realized there were no banners on a pale-blue ground.

He idly noted the army was camped on the forested side of the city, well away from pastureland and arable crops. Though the forest was also a crop; Marka was famous across the continent for its wooden furniture and other wood articles.

"I am Verdin Branad Vintner, son of Branad Ulvic Vintner." He announced himself with a touch of formality.

The men barely acknowledged him. They showed no surprise to see him or the caravan. As if they were expected.

"Branad's tent is twelve spanas that way," said one. "Room for your caravan maybe, but probably not your tents."

Mikhan's eyes narrowed at the familiar use of Branad Vintner's name, but he said nothing.

That his father's tent stood at all proved he was at least still alive. Verdin thanked the guards and waited for Mikhan to pass the orders back. He rode slowly in the indicated direction and tried to ignore the large number of soldiers who stared at him and his entourage. Neither hostile nor friendly.

Every standard Verdin saw was the gold dragon's head on a dark-blue field, so he must have entered the sprawling camp by Marcus's end. He glanced at the city walls and marveled at their size. The camp sat within easy catapult range from the city.

"Looks as though neither claimant was welcomed with open arms," he remarked.

Mikhan showed his teeth. "The Council and Senate are probably still arguing over which claim to recognize," he replied. "Whoever invited your father and his cousin to Marka did so in the knowledge there was no easy decision."

"But my father lives." He was cheered by the news.

"Look over there." Mikhan pointed to two male sylphs. Neither looked particularly sylvan, dressed only in peculiar short breeches and painted green, gray and brown, one with vivid black slashes across his chest. "What do you suppose those are for?" The marshal looked as though a mystery was about to be solved.

"Sylphs?" Verdin blinked. "I wonder what the Supreme Council and Senate have to say about Marcus Vintner using sylphs in his army?"

"That probably depends what he uses them for."

Soldiers - at least Verdin recognized these men - ran downhill to meet the caravan. Soon, it was directed to a clear place beside Branad's tent. The man himself came to meet them.

"Father."

Verdin and Branad embraced. Verdin's mother, sister-mother and his sisters came out of the armored carriage and took their turn to hug Branad, pleased to see him alive. There were a few relieved tears.

"We passed a battlefield on the Candin Plain," said Verdin.

A shadow passed across Branad's face. "We didn't win."

Marshal Mikhan slipped from his horse. "What were the terms?" he demanded.

"I was captured." Branad sounded close to tears and his son stared at him in consternation. "I agreed to follow Marcus until we reached Marka."

"And beyond, else you'd be fighting again." Mikhan looked about him.

"Come inside." Branad turned and walked towards his tent.

"We saw some sylphs covered in paint," said Verdin, walking beside his father. "We assume they are Marcus Vintner's? Why has he broken the precepts? What does he use them for? Oh."

Branad sighed. "Verdin, this is Belaika-y-Marcus. He belongs to Cousin Marcus."

The named sylph, painted in field colors and also with the vivid black slashes, inclined his head, but his earpoints were slanted forward. His silvery gray eyes held irritation.

Mikhan also stared at the sylph, but his eyes held understanding.

Branad broke the short silence. "Cousin Marcus uses them as scouts. Apparently, it is something the sylphs offered to do. They are excellent and I can vouch for that."

Much of Belaika's irritation faded.

Mikhan looked at the sylph with increased respect. "Yes, I can see how they're ideally suited for scouting. This paint will hide them in most backgrounds; ability to stay perfectly still in almost any position helps disguise them; their senses are superior and I also believe their hearing range is greater." He had been speaking to himself; now he raised his voice a little. "How do you communicate with each other in the field, Belaika-y-Marcus?"

"We whistle, *donenya*," replied Belaika. "Humans cannot hear us."

"Yes." A small smile turned the marshal's lips. "Of course." His voice dropped to a murmur. "A net of sylphs whistling can quickly cover a large area and pass on any intelligence. Impressive."

Hearing every word, Belaika said nothing.

"Care to teach me these whistles?" asked Mikhan.

"Difficult." Belaika managed a small smile. "You cannot hear them."

Unimpressed, Mikhan sniffed. "That is an evasion."

Refusing to be drawn, Belaika shrugged.

Branad changed the subject. "I'm glad everybody is here. Tonight, Cousin Marcus is dining with me. Verdin, shall we walk? There is something I must tell you."

Outside, away from the possible hearing range even of sylphs, Branad and Verdin watched as the carriages were prepared for the night. Eventually, Branad spoke.

"I'm afraid we're still waiting for rooms in the city, so you will have to stay in that caravan a little longer."

Verdin blinked; not quite the conversation he expected. "A few days more can do no harm," he replied. "We cannot all cram into your campaign tent."

"And no room for me in the caravan." Branad smiled. "But not for long."

There was a longer pause before Branad took a long breath.

Verdin tensed.

"You are aware that Marcus defeated me?"

Verdin's heart began to pound. "Yes."

"It wasn't just a battle where his forces defeated mine, it was a battle in which I was captured." Bitterness thickened the older man's voice. "If he was not so merciful, he could execute me for treason. Victor's spoils, if you like. As could I, were the positions reversed."

Verdin said nothing.

"For days I have faced a difficult choice. The only honorable decision is the one I must make."

"Which is?"

Branad's eyes glistened and again he seemed on the brink of tears. "Our people in Sandester will be disappointed, our soldiers will be disappointed, and our supporters in the Supreme Council and Senate will be disappointed." He sighed and dropped into formal language. "Tonight, I will inform Marcus Vintner that Branad Ulvic Vintner renounces his claim and that of his descendants to the vacant Throne of Marka. That renunciation will be repeated in the Senate tomorrow morning. Furthermore, I will announce that our support is transferred to Marcus Vintner in the pursuit of his claim. I will join our prefectures to his and our armies will merge." His chest heaved with suppressed emotion. "I apologize for squandering your birthright."

Verdin turned to his father. "I have no birthright for you to squander," he said, quickly. "We are only claimants to a throne that has only just been recognized in Marka. I respect your decision. And agree with it."

Branad looked as though a great weight had been lifted from his shoulders.

Verdin looked away again. Now was not the time to share his relief at his father's decision. "How do you think Cousin Marcus will fare?"

"Marcus Vintner will make an excellent emperor." Branad shook his head. "A superb emperor."

"And he will have work for both of us when he gets his throne." Verdin smiled. "What will Uncle Nazvasta think?"

"I must write him a letter." Branad grimaced. "It's not what he might think. It's what he might do that should worry us!"

The two generations of Vintners laughed together.

Belaika was surprised Branad's tent held the large round table borrowed from Marcus. Ten places were laid out, the sylph helping the three serving girls place cutlery. The burner had been pushed to one side and its chimney trunked to the usual exit at the tent's peak.

Branad's sleeping quarters had been merged with the main tent, the man's bedding removed for the meal. And an extension had been put at the back of the tent, where the meal was being prepared.

Belaika had run errands all afternoon, fetching this and carrying that. He was kept so busy that he barely had time to wash and change into formal clothes. He now wore a spotless white shirt and gray knee-length breeches, the usual uniform of off-duty scouts.

He had no other clothes except scouting breeches, which would most definitely not be welcome this evening. He kept on his scouting collar, but left the sash with its decorations in his small clothes chest. It would get in the way when serving, and - worse - some might think he was showing off.

After helping one of the girls roll back a tent wall that had fallen against one side of the table, he retreated to the back of the tent, ready with the wine. A menial task nobody else wanted, but the sylph knew it would let him keep a discreet eye on everything happening at the table. And gave him a reason to watch everyone.

Branad entered with both wives, son Verdin and two of his older daughters. The sylph assumed the other girls were too young to enjoy a formal dinner. Verdin gave the sylph a strange look before recognition finally dawned.

"So you really *are* a sylph," said the young Vintner, grinning. "Normal blue skin after all."

"Part of my new disguise, *doneya*," replied the scout.

His owner and Kelanus arrived together, followed directly by Mikhan and Ranallic. Belaika watched as formal introductions were made to Branad's senior wife, Kana Santon.

That she was coolly polite to Marcus was to be expected. Kelanus she all but ignored and the sylph wondered if she was aware that a sneer of distaste turned her mouth.

That she treated Ranallic with the same disdain surprised him. It wasn't a dislike of soldiers, for her greeting to Mikhan was warm and affectionate. Perhaps she didn't like outlanders.

Belaika stared in surprise when he realized Jenn had failed to wrangle her way to the meal tonight. She always resented separation from Marcus and he guessed she was sulking in Marcus's tent right now.

As he went around the table, offering a fruit wine Branad had bought somewhere in Marka, tensions between the guests were clear to his sylvan eye.

Kelanus seemed friendly enough toward Verdin and Mikhan, wary of Branad's wives and daughters, a little distant toward Branad and quietly hostile toward Ranallic.

Something was going on there and he had heard only hints. For whatever reason, Kelanus blamed Ranallic for losing Branad's command.

Belaika had never before seen the emotion so obvious in a human, but he knew Kelanus hated Ranallic. Perhaps only the surroundings prevented him from attacking the southlander.

"You going to stand there all night boy, or are you waiting for me to die of thirst?"

The sylph jumped. That was aimed at him, he realized. Branad's other wife - Elsin, he thought it was - beckoned to him. Although the words sounded angry, she smiled as she said them.

"Apologies, *donanya*." Belaika was aware that Ranallic's eyes were fixed on either Elsin or himself as he refilled her goblet.

Verdin caught the sylph's sleeve as he passed.

"More wine?"

"Thank you, no. Why are you so happy to serve my father? I understand you weren't always so pleased about it. Yet you asked to continue."

"I did, *donenya*."

"Why?"

Belaika bobbed his head. "It saves me from other duties I do not like." As he straightened, he was aware of Ranallic's gaze. The sylph's eyes narrowed. Was he being stared at? Or did Ranallic realize that he was a spy for Marcus?

Aware Belaika would say no more, Verdin turned to Kelanus. The sylph stood back and eavesdropped.

"Did you have a pleasant journey?" Kelanus's bass rumble was muted. Even Belaika strained to overhear.

Verdin nodded. "Though my sisters were worried for my father's safety when we passed the battlefield."

"On Candin Plain." Kelanus nodded. "We intended to capture your father from the outset. Marcus has a use for him."

Belaika detected a hint of bitterness in the general's tone. He leaned forward as Verdin touched Kelanus's sleeve.

"Please don't hate my father," he begged. "He always held you in high regard and felt he was left with little choice after what you were accused of."

Belaika's ears strained.

Kelanus's eyes narrowed as he glanced across the table at Ranallic. "It's not your father I hate."

Belaika moved around the table with the wine and became aware of Ranallic's gaze on him yet again. What was the man's problem?

Conversation ceased while the main - and last - course was served.

Belaika watched the humans as they cut their meat. Most moved the food around the plate for ease, while others turned the plate. He noted the one exception was Ranallic, who swapped his knife from one hand to the other.

The sylph was not the only one to notice.

"Can you do that with other tools?" Marcus asked the southerner.

Ranallie smiled. "Most of them," he replied. "Certainly with swords and other weapons."

"A useful skill," said Marcus.

Ranallie smiled. "Very."

The silence lasted longer this time, so Belaika was happy to help the human girls clear away the dishes.

Now alovak was served and the girls left Belaika alone. As with the wine, the alovak was part of his duty. He crouched on his heels at a polite distance, where anyone who wanted more could catch his attention. The brewing can remained at his side. He waited patiently. Everybody would soon learn why Branad had called them together this evening. He glanced at Verdin, certain the young man knew that reason already.

Branad Vintner pulled himself to his feet and banged the side of his cup with a knife. As all conversation quieted and ended, he smiled around at everyone present.

"I hope," he began, "that we all enjoyed the feast."

A murmur of assent met his words, although Marcus and Kelanus exchanged a look. Belaika sat on his heels behind Branad's wives and daughters, thankful that Ranallie was out of sight from here. Why did the man keep staring at him? He placed himself the better to see Branad, his owner, Kelanus and Verdin.

Branad continued. "I wish to tell you first what I will tell the Senate tomorrow morning. As you are all aware, little more than a week has passed since Cousin Marcus and myself met at Candin Plain. Again, as you all know, Cousin Marcus not only carried the day to complete victory, but also succeeded to capture me. For which, I offer my sincere congratulation." He bowed his head toward Marcus, who returned the gesture. His expression however, remained neutral.

Branad took a breath. "Since reaching Marka, we have discovered that the Supreme Council and Senate of Marka are split into factions concerning who should take the Throne. In my view, this takes all legitimate claims and makes a mockery of them. The scale of legitimacy is worthless, as we have seen in the machinations of the Senate over the past few days. That some are prepared to support men such as Hingast renders both Cousin Marcus and myself speechless."

Marcus and Kelanus exchanged another look. Branad continued.

"It is my view that decency should reign in Marka and that a decent man takes the Throne to reunite the Empire against men like Hingast. It is my view that both the armies here should unite under one command structure as a first step to resist any move to install Hingast, or some other unsuitable claimant, on the Throne. It is also my view that three of the factions in the Senate can and should be united. The three factions I mention are those who support myself, Marcus Vintner and Marcus Vintner Senior. The method of uniting the last two factions is down to you, Sir." Branad and Marcus again exchanged nods.

Belaika could not prevent a puzzled frown wrinkling his brow. What was going on here? His earpoints twitched erect and slanted forward in turn.

Branad's mouth twisted in a vague smile. "I have always fought in the belief that my claim to the Markan Throne was the strongest of all those who demanded it and even now, I restate this remains my belief. However, I am defeated in battle and there are many who say that Siranva has spoken, that He intervened in this dispute."

Aware that history was being made before his startled eyes, Belaika stood upright. Shock painted Ranallie's face as he stared at his commander. He must

realize what was coming. Marcus had his hands clasped on the table before him, the way he did when trying to suppress sudden elation.

Branad's voice firmed. "This is why I recommend all my supporters transfer their allegiance to Marcus Vintner. This is why I renounce - for both myself and my descendants - all claim to the Throne of Marka. I renounce my claim in favor of Marcus Vintner and his descendants in perpetuity." Branad turned to face Marcus, dropped to one knee, and inclined his head. "Your Majesty."

Everybody in the tent followed suit. Belaika forgot to kneel - his master had never demanded it from him at other times - so only he saw Verdin's pleased smile. Why would *Verdin* be pleased?

The sylph's gaze slid to Ranallic, who looked anything but pleased.

"Rise, everybody please rise." Marcus Vintner could not hide his pleasure as he insisted everyone regain their feet. He cleared his throat and began to give his thanks to Branad. He had always been able to make a speech off the top of his head and he used the skill now. Belaika recovered his composure first and let the words wash over him as he wandered around the table, offering alovak.

Branad's wives were astounded. The younger girls looked unconcerned; perhaps because they were not in line for the Throne, so were not directly affected by their father's announcement.

Marshal Mikhan shook his head in disbelief.

Now the shock had worn off, Ranallic and Kelanus exchanged mutual glances of hatred.

"So," said Marcus, wrapping up his short speech, "let us now work together to rebuild the birthright of us all: a united and strong Marka."

Polite applause met his words.
