

CHAPTER 1 - ASSIGNMENT

Lioness Maud of the M'Brannoë stood by the railing, moving with the motion of the ship as they neared the harbor mouth. Breathlessly, she gazed at her first foreign city, oblivious to the confusion of pigtailed Chorwaynies around her preparing the ship for mooring. The sailors chattered and laughed in a thick accent, while they worked without disturbing her privacy.

Maud was a big, muscular girl, topping the crew by a head or more. Her skin shone in the purest black, her eyes were blue and her close-cropped curls dyed the bloody red of active service. In her well-waxed body armor, she was the epitome of a Kell warrior—strong, virile and dangerous. Yet underneath her brawn she was an eighteen-year-old girl, and her heart hammered with the excitement of her first foray into the high kingdom of Malgarth.

Winsproke, place of magic! she thought. The approaching city was different from Brannoë or old Tar Kell, the only towns she had known. Here, the dwellings were tall and narrow; painted in bright colors, as if the owners vied with each other over whose house was the most garish. Only the large tower in the center was a plain gray, and loomed over the town like a mountain peak.

'Lioness.' The rough voice told Maud her superior had come on deck. 'To me.'

As she walked over to the veteran tigress, sailors took her place at the railing, and she felt a stab of guilt.

'I was in the way,' she said defiantly.

'Yes.' Veteran Hala's dark face was impassive. 'Such inattention can be dangerous in action. And spare me your huffiness, girl; you're not a full lioness yet. As long as we're in the field you're my responsibility. Behave yourself.'

Maud swallowed at the rebuke. 'Yes, Veteran.'

As soon as the crew had lowered the gangway, the two warrioresses jumped onto the graystone quay. Hala stood for a moment, rubbing her cheeks with her knuckles. Then she growled and strode into the city.

Maud hurried after her, reveling in Winsproke's sights and smells. The sun's play on the colorful buildings left her breathless. A cacophony of purples and pinks, of reds, ochre, bright greens and blues, against which the people themselves were pale shadows who went about their business as joyless as professional mourners.

These can't be warlocks, Maud thought. *They must be the common Vanhaari; servants and clerks. Surely the warlocks will be grander than these drudges.*

As they approached the main square, hawkers filled the street with their cries and the rattle of their laden pushcarts. The veteran barged through the crowd with little regard for the vendors and their unwieldy transports. Maud squared her shoulders against the angry curses and fists shaken in their wake, and followed the older woman to the warlock tower.

Close up, the building was even more impressive than seen from the sea—half a mile of gray stone blocks, rising up to the sky.

'So high; it's humiliating.' Maud gazed up to the top of the tower, lost in the clouds. 'I don't like feeling small.'

The veteran snorted. 'It's only a building.' She studied the walls, and then growled. 'Openings all over it, but no damned front door.'

As they looked, a portion of the wall shimmered, and a handsome woman in a blue suit stepped through the solid-seeming stones. She was speaking in a soft voice, gesturing with a rolled up scroll as if arguing with an invisible companion.

Hala gave an exasperated grunt, and hurried to intercept her. The woman, immersed in her one-sided discussion, almost walked into the veteran, but Hala sidestepped swiftly and saluted.

‘Excuse me, ma’am. I saw you coming out of the tower, but how do we get *inside*?’

The warlock blinked in apparent confusion. ‘Eh? Oh, ask the spellscribe.’

Hala scowled at the vague answer. ‘The spellscribe?’

Flustered, the woman turned and waved her scroll at a nearby wooden stall. ‘Him. The fellow sells penny spells to the common folk. Useless, but the people like them. He pays for his doghouse by doubling as the tower’s doorwarden.’ Without another glance, she walked on, waving and mouthing.

Hala lifted her eyes to the sky. ‘I hate dealing with those foggy-minded finger-wrigglers.’ Without another word, she marched to the booth and leaned forward.

‘Careful!’ A pinched, angry face snarled at them as the stacks of little cards on the countertop trembled. ‘Them spells be the work of days, you ignorant woman! Want to buy one?’

The old warrioress inspected the man. ‘I’m Veteran Tigress Hala of the M’Brannoe, for my appointment with the prince-warlock.’

The spellscribe made a disgusted sound as he adjusted his glasses. Careful not to knock over the stacks of handwritten cards himself, he opened a large book. Page by page, he went through the scribbles, mumbling.

‘There’s no Lala here,’ he said at last, peering up at the big Kell over the rim of his glasses.

The veteran folded her arms across her chest and leaned against the booth. It creaked alarmingly, but nothing disastrous happened.

‘Hala,’ she said. ‘With an H. I’ve got nothing else to do today, so I don’t mind waiting. I wouldn’t know about the prince-warlock, though.’

As if she’d summoned it with her words, a pink frog appeared on the booth’s counter. ‘Show them *in*, you limp-brain,’ the familiar croaked, hopping around the stacked spells in agitation. ‘You’ve been told the Splendor is expecting a Kell.’ At that, it winked away again.

The spellscribe’s face was splotchy purple with rage. He waved at the tower, and a massive pair of doors appeared. ‘Go on; get yourselves inside!’ Then he squealed as the warrioress bumped her solid hip against the booth, scattering the written cards into the square.

‘Idiot,’ Hala muttered as she marched to the now visible entrance. ‘Doesn’t want strangers in his magic castle. And he’s ugly as a newborn mole rat, so he must be at bottom level.’

Maud frowned. ‘Why’s that?’

‘You should’ve paid notice to your lessons, clansister.’ Hala’s voice carried a hint of loathing. For a moment, Maud thought it was directed at her, but the veteran’s next words dispelled her fear.

‘The warlocks are beauty-besotted. The higher they come, the prettier they must look.’ Hala made as if to spit, but restrained herself. ‘Never let their strange fancies fool you, though, girl. They are still deadly foes.’ She looked back at the spellscribe, desperately trying to gather his little cards before the wind caught them. ‘At least most of them.’

Inside, the tower was as impressive as the outside. Maud stared around at the hall. *Large enough to gather an army in*, her training said. *And all of it empty.*

A plain man rose from the desk beside the entrance. On his shoulder sat a pink frog. ‘Old fool, old fool’, it croaked, while its long tongue shot in and out.

‘Quiet, Rosa,’ the man said. ‘Apologies for that incompetent fellow outside, Veteran. Please follow me upstairs. His Splendicity the Prince-warlock is eagerly awaiting your arrival.’

Maud stared up at the winding stairs, disappearing in the distance. *No place for those with a weak heart.*

On the first floor, one of the many openings in the tower walls gave a fine view over the city.

‘What are those doors for?’ Maud asked. ‘Warlocks don’t fly, do they?’

Their guide frowned and peered at her. ‘Before the War we did—brooms and flying carpets. We lost the skill of carpet making when the enemy killed all weavers. Our towers still have flight doors, though.’ Then, as if the subject embarrassed him, he handed them to another underling, who escorted them to the next floor.

Many levels of ascending magnificence later, Maud had lost count of the steps. Without speaking, they followed a person of dazzling beauty to the top of the tower. Here, the air was so pure it made Maud giddy from breathing it. Her boots sank deep into rich carpets, and rows of blown-glass figures along the walls made her feel clumsy with their fragility.

They followed the circular corridor to a pair of doors, flanked by flowering plants bearing pink and violet blooms. Still mute, their guide touched the polished wood and drifted away.

‘Was that a female or a male?’ Maud whispered to the veteran while the doors swung open.

‘Both and neither,’ a warm voice said from inside the room.

Maud paused, hand to mouth, chagrined for being overheard.

The voice disregarded her confusion. ‘It considers itself beauty incarnate, though its appearance is an illusion. It is but a mid-level warlock, lacking any true distinction. A capable floor manager, though; that suffices.’

A shadowy figure at the window turned and sat down behind a large desk. Prince-warlock Argyr of Winsproke was a handsome man, with a pale, dignified face and black hair combed back to his shoulders. His robe was of a deep purple hue and the stars woven into it twinkled like the night sky when he moved.

Maud looked in awe at the rich paneling and the framed images of strange places on the walls. *Some place he has here.*

Her superior didn’t even glance at all the trappings. She stepped forward and saluted. ‘Veteran Tigress Hala of the M’Brannoe, by appointment.’

Argyr folded his hands on the desktop, and his lips formed a small smile. ‘You are prompt; that is promising.’

A fine voice, Maud thought, standing at attention beside Hala with her eyes fixed on the opposite wall. *Magically prettied, as is all of him, of course.*

The prince-warlock turned his head to look at her as if he’d read her thoughts. ‘Who is your companion, Veteran?’

‘The Lioness-cadet Maud of the M’Brannoe is my second. A field training assignment.’

‘Ah, a trainee; that explains her tender age,’ the prince-warlock said. ‘No matter. I asked the Brannoe Queen for a capable person to execute a minor but delicate duty, and she sent you. I want you to find a boy for me.’

The veteran raised an eyebrow. ‘A boy, Your Splendicity?’

Prince-warlock Argyr gave a small smile. ‘You do not think naughty thoughts, do you, Veteran?’ He rose and walked to a tall mirror in the corner of his office.

‘A boy.’ With a wave of his pale hand, an image appeared of a young male about Maud’s age. He was small and slender, with long, wavy red hair accentuating the alabaster beauty of his face and his large gray eyes.

Divine Otha! He's delicious! To her disgust, Maud felt her loins react to the boy's delicate beauty. *Keep your pants on, girl. This time.* But the mirror reflected her face next to his, in black contrast to his whiteness, and she couldn't stop her breath speeding up.

Argyr cleared his throat. 'To be clear, the boy in the mirror is my son Basil, the Spellwarden. I have not personally seen the one you are to fetch. I only know where you may find him. He should look much like my son; a cruder version, but the similarity will be there. I have need of this boy.' He paused, looking at the two women. 'It is nothing improper, or dangerous. The Spellwarden has to go somewhere, but he never leaves his apartments. I seek a double to take his place; that is all. As there *is* some urgency to the matter, I have ordered my dirigible to expect you.'

'That's most efficient,' Hala said. 'Ah, where do we go to, if I may ask?'

'The Five Tradeports. To be precise—Port Brisa.'

'That cesspool?' The veteran pressed her lips into a thin line. 'One more reason to make it quick. One finds more sins among the Garthans in the Five Tradeports than anywhere in the high kingdom.'

Argyr smiled. 'But you won't be tempted, Veteran. Now will you?'

Hala moved her shoulders. 'I won't, but I'm not a young Kell anymore. We are lusty lasses in our youth, Splendicity. That's why our juniors won't ever be allowed to leave Kell without an elder in command.'

Neither of them looked at her, but Maud felt the blood rush to her face. *Lusty!* As if she couldn't concentrate on her orders. Her eyes strayed to the boy in the mirror. *This will be the hells of a job.* She pulled her thoughts back in time to see how the prince-warlock handed Hala a pouch and a signed contract. The veteran saluted, wheeled around and marched from the room. Maud followed her, without missing a step, fuming in silence.

'I heard you breathing,' Hala said as they walked down the stairs unattended. 'Like a bitch in heat. Forget it, you hear? We're on duty.'

Maud sighed. 'I know. But by Gorm, it's not fair.'

'Lass, if you need a screw, there are males enough. But not the contract. Understood?'

'Of course.' Maud swallowed her chagrin.

'And not in Brisa. That town isn't safe for innocent young girls.'

'Innocent?' *I turned eighteen; I'm not a child anymore.*

Hala growled. 'Pure as a nightwing's tear.' She halted and gripped Maud's arm. 'You don't fool me, lass. The only boys you've laid were Kells and our males are meek as lambs. In the other lands they're still wild and believe me, they don't tame easily. You may be almost a full lioness, but this is your first assignment outside Kell, and you're as wet as a frog in a pool. So no experiments, no funny games, no nothing. You're on active service, and if you try anything, I'll kick your butt back to Brannoe. You're not going to shame me. Am I clear?'

Maud took a deep breath. 'Yes, Veteran,' she said. 'Perfectly clear.'

CHAPTER 2 - SUMMONS

‘Damn them!’ Basil’s voice was hoarse with anger as he limped around his sitting room, clutching a crumpled paper. His finely cut white countenance had gone pink, and the gray in his eyes was stormy. ‘I’ve been summoned! They want me to prove ... And now Father’ For a moment his rage reduced him to silence. Biting back a sob, he dropped down in a chair and sat clenching and unclenching his slender hands.

Darquine poured wine in a glass and held it out to him.

Without thinking, he took a large gulp. ‘Blast them all.’ He looked at his friend sitting opposite him, and desperate anger clawed at his nerves.

The girl leaned back in her chair. She stretched her booted legs out and brushed a tiny speck of dust from her master merchant’s dress coat. ‘Tell me.’

Basil opened his eyes wide. ‘I am telling you.’

She sighed. ‘Then tell me coherently.’

‘It’s that bastard Volaut; it can’t be anyone else. He’s had his eye on the prince-warlockry for ages.’

She frowned. ‘I know. What did he do this time?’

Basil felt his face grow hot again, but with an effort he wrestled his fear down. ‘The Warlockry Council has summoned me to appear at their midwinter general meeting and prove I have toes.’

Darquine whistled. ‘You can’t do that,’ she said. ‘Not with your left foot.’

‘Curse it, of course I can’t.’ In reaction to his turmoil, fire leaked from his fingers. He raised his hands to his face and stared at the little flames. With a muttered curse, he slapped them out of existence. ‘Ever since my birth, my father has lied to the Council about my foot. He has lied himself ugly in the face that there wasn’t anything *wrong* with my foot. For that alone the Council will kick him out of the prince-warlockry. Father was so sure he could heal me! He has tried a shipload of spells to make those five stupid toes grow. They wouldn’t; I’ll stay lame. And now’

‘Now what?’

He emptied his glass and resisting the impulse to throw it across the room, set it down on the side table. ‘Now the Council will see I’m not beautiful. They’ll judge my father a bungler in producing a deformed child, and a fool in trying to keep it a secret. They will depose him. Perhaps even hang him. Me, I’ll be ... demagicized! They’ll have the healers cut up my brain and take away my powers. I won’t be a warlock anymore.’

The fear in his face was such that Darquine frowned. ‘Would they go that far?’

Basil clenched his hands, surprised they were shaking. ‘Yes, they would! That’s what they always do! They’ll make me a lackwit.’

He took a deep breath and bent forward. ‘There is more. Father has this brilliant solution, you see. He knows of a guy somewhere, who looks like me. With pretty feet, of course.’ He almost choked on the words. ‘Can you imagine? Father wants to bring the fellow here and make the Council believe he is me. Some yokel from the provinces should imitate *me*, and the Council is supposed to fall for it. How stupid can you get?’

‘He’s three sheets to the wind,’ Darquine said, gazing open-mouthed at Basil. ‘Yar scuttled, matey.’

Her backsliding into the mock-pirate speech of her youth diverted Basil from his troubles. ‘You’re doing it again. It’s so silly.’

‘It’s not!’ Darquine’s eyes flashed. ‘My father is a pirate.’

Basil relaxed, feeling his rage drain away. ‘He’s a merchant captain.’

‘He’s a pirate when it suits him.’ Darquine clenched her fists. ‘All our people are. As soon as I get my hands on a ship, I’ll be one. Shucks, I didn’t get my master merchant’s license just to ship dullfruit.’

Basil sighed. Her father was Wallanck, the Overcaptain of the Chorwaynie Archipelago. Ruler over countless islands and a famous merchant captain. All Chorwaynie captains were pirates when the chance offered itself. Perhaps he should join them; be free of that bloody Council’s nonsense. Then his mind cleared, and he knew what he was to do. He cast a sharp glance at Darquine. ‘A pity you haven’t got a ship yet. I’m going to run.’

‘You are what?’ She sat upright in her chair, almost upsetting a table with her legs.

‘I’ll not sit and wait for the Council to ridicule and depower me.’ Basil balled his fists. ‘I’ll escape their knives.’

She stared at him. ‘Well, you’re an adult, what holds you?’

‘Lack of money,’ Basil said.

‘There is that. Haven’t you got an allowance?’

‘My father says I need no money as long as I live here in the tower. The servants arrange for everything I demand of them.’

Darquine sighed. ‘What a blissful idea. Where do you want to go?’

Basil grimaced. He hadn’t thought that far; his knowledge of the world outside the Winsproke tower was at best limited. ‘Anywhere. To the continent, for all I care.’

Her eyes narrowed. ‘Leave Malgarth? You’re mad.’

‘Desperate. I need time to *think*. To make a plan.’

Darquine sat staring at him, chewing on her single pigtail. Her pirate queue, as she called it. ‘That won’t do,’ she said. ‘Pardon me for saying, but the continent is much too rough for you.’

‘Thanks,’ he said, piqued. *Too rough!* The worst thing was she was probably right.

‘Let’s go to Towne,’ Darquine said. ‘I’ve got a boat, so we can sail some, and you’ll have plenty of room for thinking. You never know what will happen; midwinter is still months away.’

Basil looked at her. Why hadn’t he thought of that? ‘We’ve been friends for so long and yet I’ve never been to your place.’

‘Of course not. I came here to escape from it.’

‘Your father has ships. Could we get a lift to Towne?’

Darquine jumped up and walked to the balcony. ‘You’re lucky; she’s still there.’

Basil gripped his dragon staff and limped to join her. ‘Who is?’

She pointed toward the harbor and beyond it the blue sea. ‘You see those red sails?’

‘Yes. What about them?’

‘It’s the *Willowdrake*; one of my father’s vessels.’

Basil stared at her. ‘And could you?’

‘If you ask nicely.’

‘I just did,’ Basil said and his heartbeat quickened. ‘Please?’

Darquine laughed. ‘All right. Pack your things, but be quick; that flag in her mast says she’ll sail within the hour.’

CHAPTER 3 - JURGIS

‘A dirigible,’ Maud said as they descended the stairs of the warlock tower. ‘What by Otha’s Tits is a dirigible?’

‘You studied military transport, didn’t you?’ Hala sounded irritated, and Maud bit her lip. She remembered a dusty old instructor droning on about it. That week she’d taken her first lover, and she’d been, well, tired.

‘Of course,’ she said quickly. ‘By land, by sea, by air. Foot, cart, boat, float, balloon. Oh.’ Balloons went where the wind blew, and dirigibles moved driven by batteries and a woman’s will. ‘It’s a steerable balloon.’ She brightened. ‘I’ve never seen one.’

Hala’s lips thinned. ‘I have sailed in them. They’re cramped, hot and stink of sweat.’

‘It’s an adventure!’ Maud said, surprised.

The veteran sighed. ‘You can keep your adventures, clansister. I’ve seen it all, far too often. Adventures, lovers, I’m done with them. Give me a room to myself at the hold and my pension, and I’ll be content. Fifty-five I am, without family but the clan, and I’ve fought in the frontlines for nigh on half a century. I’m the only one of my class to reach the rank of Veteran Tigress; the others are all dead. Believe me, I’ve had enough.’ She shivered as if cold in the full heat of the sun. Then she glared at Maud, who kept her face impassive.

Maud couldn’t imagine fifty years; that was history. ‘Why did you take this duty then?’ she said, suddenly curious.

‘Loyalty. The Brannoe asked me. One last job, and then I’ll retire. Peace at last.’ Again, Hala shivered and clenched her teeth.

They left the tower and crossed the market square. There were still a lot of folks around, and Hala became irritated having to walk around them.

‘This takes too much time. We’ll do it the old way.’ The veteran tigress opened her mouth, and her deep battle roar had the crowds ducking for cover between the stalls.

Maud bared her teeth in a smile. She liked how people scurried away from their fearsome yells, as the two warriresses came at them in that long-legged gait of the fighting Kell.

Without further hindrance, they reached the aerodrome. Maud looked about her, at the black-and-white longhorns grazing everywhere. *Some aerodrome*, she thought as she suppressed her disappointment. If it weren’t for the regularly spaced mooring-towers, this would be a common goat field.

‘The prince-warlock’s dirigible?’ Hala asked of a porter pulling a cart laden with boxes.

Maud turned to look at her, surprised. The veteran’s tone had lost its snap, and she sounded out of breath.

‘Tower six, the red boat,’ the man said without pausing.

Number six was on the other side of the field, a wooden platform on four legs, dwarfed by the enormous sunfish shape of the airship.

As they neared, a uniformed young Garthan came down the ladder. ‘You are the passengers for Port Brisa?’ he said. ‘I’m the first officer. Please board, ladies; we’re ready to sail.’

Ladies? Don’t be an ass, man; I’m a lioness. Maud cast a quick glance at Hala. The veteran hadn’t heard; her eyes were blank and sweat dripped from the wrinkles on her forehead.

‘You all right?’ Maud whispered, and she felt Hala’s arm tremble under her touch. The veteran had complained of a cold earlier and kept to her hammock on the journey here. Now those shakes told Maud of something worse than a runny nose.

Her superior didn't answer.

Once on the platform, Maud saw the dirigible's cabin close-up. *It isn't very large*, she thought, remembering what Hala had said about feeling cramped.

At the entrance, the dirigible's captain met them. 'Welcome aboard, Tigress.'

Without a word, Hala presented her orders.

The captain frowned. 'I take it we can sail?'

Hala nodded, breathing hard. She shivered again. 'Sail,' she said through clenched teeth.

Maud gripped the veteran's arm. 'What's wrong?'

'Cursed ... bogs,' Hala mouthed. 'Must sit.'

Maud's eyes narrowed. *Bogs. Damned rotten moment for it.*

'You're not sick, are you?' the captain said, eying the veteran with suspicion.

'Bog fever,' Maud answered. 'These bouts come and go. She needs to lie down.'

'Then she can't sail.' The captain's face tightened. 'Fever'

Divine Otha! There goes our mission! Maud squared her shoulders. 'Don't worry; it's not catching. You have a cot available?'

'I can't sail with a sick person aboard,' the woman protested.

'You have to,' Maud said, and her scowl of desperation made her appear ferocious. 'The prince-warlock's orders brook no delay.'

'The veteran can use the watch cot,' the first officer said. 'It's only for one night.'

The captain looked at Maud's face and turned away. 'Warn me when you're ready,' she snapped to the first officer. 'Engineer! Start her up.'

'Aye aye, ma'am,' a voice answered from the back of the cabin.

Without another word, the captain disappeared behind a door with a sign saying "Bridge".

'Don't mind the Old Lady,' the first officer said. 'Officially she's right. We're not supposed to sail with a sick passenger. But the prince-warlock Well, he's paying our wages. You're sure it's not catching?'

'Perfectly sure,' Maud said, fuming. *Miserable cowards!* She forced a smile on her face. 'You get it from swamp flies, not from humans.'

'Well then,' the young airman said, brightening. 'Lead her this way.'

'Come lean on me,' Maud said, taking the veteran's arm. 'You should lie down for a bit.'

Hala tried to focus her eyes. 'Orders must be' A new bout of shivering made talking impossible.

'They will be,' Maud said. 'I'll do it.'

'No! You're too' Hala's teeth chattered, but Maud knew what she wanted to say. She was too young. Ha!

'Cadet or not, I'm a warrioress. If you're out, I'll go into Brisa. That's our way.'

Hala cursed desperately.

'It's only a town,' Maud said; she didn't see the difficulty. 'It's not a war zone.'

The older woman closed her eyes, shaking uncontrollably.

From Winsproke on Malgarth's west coast to Port Brisa in the north was by air six hours. A long time of utter discomfiture, sitting at Hala's bed, wiping her forehead and listening to her fevered babbling. Maud was embarrassed. Watching the strong woman's weaknesses and hearing her inner torments—the loneliness, the terror of losing her strength and with it her usefulness, and the utter weariness of nearly fifty years being a tigress.

When the first officer came to tell them they'd arrived, Maud felt wrung out, and eager to get away from the tiny cabin.

‘We’re there,’ she said, bending over Hala. ‘I’ll need the money and the contract.’

‘Take m’gun.’ The veteran forced the words out. ‘Y’never know.’

‘Your gun?’ The order surprised Maud. The small handgun was a costly possession, and she hesitated before unhooking it from the veteran’s belt.

Hala waved at her bag. ‘Ammo ’n powder. Load it.’

Maud inspected the weapon. As a cadet, she wore a sword, but while she’d been trained to use a gun, a personal firearm was a badge of honor. At the first try, the flint gave a healthy spark. With quick fingers, she emptied a powder cartridge into the flaring muzzle. A little bag contained twenty bullets and wads. She inspected one bullet by eye for any irregularities and put it with a wad on top of the powder. With the gun’s ramrod, she pushed all of it down the barrel. Then she checked the safety catch. With eyes closed, she went down the list again, but she hadn’t missed a thing.

‘Done.’

The veteran nodded weakly.

‘We’ve moored,’ the first officer said from the doorway. He stared at the gun in her hand and swallowed. ‘When you are ready, Lioness?’

‘I’m coming.’ She pressed Hala’s hands. ‘Don’t worry; I’ll be back.’

She stepped through the door onto the platform of the mooring tower and looked around for a moment. It was a warm evening. The sky was filled with lights, and the broad band of Otha’s Highway stretched across it. Maud smelled the smoke from a thousand hearth fires coming from the town, the stink of refuse and unfamiliar foods. Then she nodded to the first officer. ‘I’ll try to be quick.’ Her feeling of oppression lifted as she ran down the stone stairs. *I’ll show them!*

At the town gate, a halberd barred her way. ‘Where be you going, lassie?’ The unshaven face of a guard in a rusty breastplate smiled at her, baring a row of bad teeth.

Maud was unused to familiarity from a male, and the look she gave him was frosty. ‘Step aside, soldier.’

The guard’s smile turned nasty. ‘Don’t cause any trouble, wench. I’d have to spank you.’

Maud shifted her shoulders, and the muscles in her arms rippled. ‘You would try to,’ she said scornfully and walked on, pushing aside the man’s halberd. The guard staggered and cursed, but she ignored him and walked into Brisa.

The veteran had said it was a rough town. Well, it certainly wasn’t Tar Kell. Those drunken sailors she saw careening from tavern to tavern, that bone-thin trollop venting her desperate wares, the off-duty guards betting on a cockfight; none of it would’ve been tolerated back home. Maud chuckled. Had Hala warned her for this? The old tigress really was a prude.

As she walked past, a few drunks whistled and shouted lewd jokes. Maud disregarded them. She was looking for a boy, red-haired, pale of face and beautiful.

From one of the shady taverns, three men stepped into the street. The foremost, a big, hairy fellow with a rough beard and a massive belly, stopped in his tracks.

‘Whaddayathink,’ he said, his voice slurred by drink. ‘A lonesome girlie. I’ll have fresh sports tonight.’

‘Leave her be, Atark,’ the thin man at his shoulder whispered. ‘She’s a Kell, man!’

‘Ah don’t mind,’ the big one said, with a leering eye. ‘So she’s an outlander. In bed, they’re the same as we, aren’t they?’

Maud had only vaguely heard their exchange, but she noticed the smell of stale beer and sweat as the big man stepped in front of her.

‘Gimme a kiss, lass,’ he said, barely understandable, while he tried to put a clumsy arm around her waist.

‘You’re asking for trouble,’ Maud said clearly. ‘Move away, Garthan; you stink, you’re drunk and way too old.’

The big man didn’t listen. He belched, gripping her chin with a hairy paw, and leaned forward to kiss her. At his touch, Maud felt an explosion of anger that was new to her. *Animal attack!* With her right hand, she got a strangling grip on the man’s throat, killing his screams as her left hand crushed his crotch. Thus, she ran him backward to the nearest open sewer.

‘Never mess with a Kell,’ she said in a steely voice, before dumping the near unconscious man into the muck-filled drain. She looked around, with one hand to the sword on her back, and saw the shocked onlookers back away. With a loud *snick*, she pushed the blade back into its sheath. Not bothering to hide her contempt, she walked on, leaving a field of silence behind her.

A few blocks away, she stopped in the middle of a crossroads and looked around her. The empty streets were shadowy, and the narrow houses shuttered, hiding their occupants from Brisa’s dangerous nights. The only sound was a vague shouting in the distance.

Damn! How do you find one redheaded lad in a wretched warren like Brisa? Maud growled. She’d made the tyro’s mistake of relying on the veteran for orders, instead of asking. *You’re supposed to be a lioness, girl!*

The loud voices came nearer, and as she turned around to see what it was, a fleeting shape cannoned into her. For a moment, both swayed. A whispered excuse, a face pale as death and a mass of wavy red hair, passed in a flash.

It’s him! But before she could follow the boy, an angry group of men and women surrounded her, waving knives and sticks. They were frothing at the mouth and slavering like a pack of wolves ready to tear their prey apart.

‘Have you seen the scoundrel?’ a well-fed fellow in an embroidered nightshirt barked. ‘A ratty knave with demon’s hair?’

‘Yes!’ Maud cried. ‘He just bumped into me! Follow, I’ll show you where he went.’ She led them into the narrow street and at the end, where she’d seen the boy go left, she turned right, towards a square with a large, temple-like building. ‘He ran that way. Hurry! You must be close.’

The pack howled and disappeared into the dark.

Maud chuckled as she retraced her steps, and entered the opposite street. It ended in a blind wall, with a willow tree growing against it. She stood motionless and listened. It was quiet here. A slight wind brought the stink of the harbor to the east. Soon, her trained ears caught anxious breathing. *Gotcha!* She walked to a dark porch. Something moved, and she grinned.

‘Oh no, you don’t.’ She grasped the threatening knife-arm and pulled the pale boy from the shadows. ‘There you are.’ *Damn, it’s him! The Spellwarden.* She took the knife from his unresisting fingers and looked him over. *No, he’s different. The same pale beauty, but more muscled. Not a rat at all. We must be of an age, too.*

When he saw she was alone, the fear went out of his eyes.

‘Let me go,’ he said quickly. ‘I I’ll make it worth your while. A whole gold giffon for you if you let me run free.’

Maud laughed. ‘Nice try, mate. You don’t have giffons. Even if you did rob that merchant, he wouldn’t have kept gold in his house.’

‘Blast!’ the boy said and he smiled a quick smile. ‘You’re a pretty girl; can’t you just let me go?’

‘When I came to this miserable hole to find you? Not bloody likely.’

The boy froze and opened his eyes wide. ‘You came for me? What are you saying?’

‘I got your description. A very great person contracted me. He needs your help and offers to pay well.’

‘How much?’

‘A hundred giffons.’

He blinked. ‘That’s crazy. I don’t believe you.’

Maud tightened her grip.

‘Ouch,’ the boy said. ‘That hurts.’

‘I’m a Kell. Never even think of a Kell lying.’

‘Sorry. But who would want to hire me? What for?’

‘Your face.’

The boy acted nauseated. ‘Pandering for a faggot, are you? Ouch!’

She relaxed her grip on his arm. *Don’t blame him; you thought the same for a moment.* ‘No Kell would take a job like that. The gentleman needs you to double for his son. You’re that one’s spitting image.’

‘Then I’m to be an assassin’s target? No thanks.’

Maud had to laugh at the disgust in his face. ‘You are a suspicious guy, aren’t you? My client won’t have told me all, but it didn’t sound dangerous. To someone like him, a hundred giffons is nothing.’ She smiled fleetingly. ‘You have two choices. You come voluntarily and you’ll get the gold, or I will drag you to my client and you won’t get as much as a half-cent.’

‘Nice choice.’ The boy growled derisively. ‘I’ll take the money.’

‘Wise of you. Look,’ Maud patted the gun at her belt. ‘It’s loaded and I’m good with it. I want your word you’re not going to run or do anything foolish when I unhand you. If you do run, I’ll shoot you in the leg.’

‘I won’t run. You’re sure you are a girl?’ the boy said.

Maud laughed. ‘I’ll willingly prove it to you, but not here and now.’ She let go of him and handed back his knife. ‘I’m Lioness Maud of the M’Brannoe.’

‘Jurgis, son of Isaudor, thief,’ the boy said, rubbing his arm. ‘You have hard fingers, Lioness.’

‘I know,’ she said. She looked around the dead end. ‘Let’s get out of here.’

‘How did you come to Brisa? By ship?’

‘I’ve got a dirigible waiting at the field outside the gates.’

Jurgis gaped at her. ‘You’re kidding. A dirigible? To fetch *me*?’ All of a sudden he looked uncertain. ‘Who is your client?’

‘I’ll tell you when we’re on board. I’d rather not have you shitting in your pants.’

‘Oh, that’s very reassuring. Let’s go. This town and I have seen enough of each other. Besides, the money interests me.’ He looked at Maud. ‘You follow me. I know a shorter route.’

Maud lifted an eyebrow at his sudden show of force. ‘All right,’ she said. ‘Show the way, thief.’

‘Can you climb? We must go over this wall first.’

She snorted. ‘Can an eagle fly?’

‘I wouldn’t know,’ Jurgis said, studying the wall. ‘On the other side is a cemetery. I go first; I’ll call you when it’s safe.’ Without waiting for Maud to protest, the young thief jumped, gripped the top of the stone wall and pulled himself up. In a swift move, he swung his legs over the wall and sat motionless for a moment.

‘All clear,’ he whispered.

Maud backed away a few steps and then took a running jump. With the ease of a hunting wildcat, she came up beside Jurgis.

‘Hi,’ he said, with a smile that tore at her heart. ‘Well done. Let’s join the dead.’ He jumped down between two graves.

‘Stand or I’ll spit ya,’ a rough voice said from the shadows. The moon glinted off a long sword, pointing unwaveringly at the boy.

Jurgis froze. ‘Damn, a crimp!’

‘Recruiter, pretty boy. Rejoice; you’ve just joined the Brisan Privateers.’ The man stepped forward into the light of the moon. Maud saw the rusty breastplate of a sea soldier he wore over a patched blue tunic, his gaunt, dough-colored Garthan face under a dented helm, and the sword pointing at Jurgis’ breast.

‘No!’ the boy cried in a convincing show of panic. ‘Don’t take me! Please! My poor mother ... She needs me! She ...’

The crimp laughed harshly enough to frighten the dead he walked upon. ‘Then she’ll have to find a lover, little cock. Or a pander. Come here.’ He reached out for Jurgis’ arm, and the boy shrank back, trembling.

Up on the wall, Maud lifted herself on her hands and swung both legs free. She smiled to herself and pushed off. Feet first, she crashed into the crimp, who went down and out with a clatter of metal on tombstone. Maud knelt and checked the fellow’s breathing.

‘Curse it,’ she whispered. ‘The guy’s dead already.’

Jurgis looked from the spread-eagled ruffian to the girl with chagrin clear in his face. ‘Damn! I didn’t see or hear the crimp.’

‘What’s a crimp?’ Maud said.

Jurgis growled deep in his throat. ‘A recruiter for the local pirates. They drag you aboard one of their clapped-out bumboats as food for enemy cannons. They’re low; even in Brisa, they’re very low.’

‘What was he doing here?’ Maud asked, looking around at the tombstones and the sad trees. ‘I’d say he’d be combing the taverns for victims.’

‘This is a quiet spot. People like me come here to sleep,’ Jurgis said. ‘The bastard was just checking, I guess.’ He shivered. ‘Let’s go, before the night watch catches us.’

Together, they hurried from the cemetery into the maze of dark alleys beyond it.

‘You’re a lioness,’ Jurgis said after a while. ‘What’s that?’

Maud blinked at the unexpected question. ‘You don’t know? As a lioness, I’m a Queen’s adjutant. Almost, that is; I’m a trainee. Once I’m ready, I’ll command with the voice of Kell herself. What about you? You don’t look like a burglar; why are you living like one?’

Jurgis shrugged. ‘I had no choice.’ He was silent while they crossed an intersection, turning his head from left to right, alert for danger. Only when they were in the next street did he continue. ‘I was the adopted son of Isaudor the Merchant. My father was a great man, with many connections and a seat at the Table of Brisa—that’s the city council. We lived in a large house with servants. I don’t remember much of it, just that it was very grand. Then my mother died and Isaudor seemed to lose his zest. When a competitor accused him of cheating on taxes, he didn’t have the spirit left to fight back. To keep it short, they kicked him from the Table. Then the merchants’ guild fined him for all he possessed, which left us without a penny. Isaudor died not much later. That was nine years ago and ... Alert!’

They hid in the darkness of a deep porch as a quartet of city guards marched past.

‘Phew,’ the boy said when the soldiers had disappeared down a side street. ‘They know me. If they find us here, it’ll cost you days to explain what you were doing.’

Maud didn’t think so. She was a lioness of Kell, not a burglar. Besides, she carried her orders. ‘Go on. Your life story is fascinating.’

‘Yeah, sure.’ Jurgis laughed, unbelieving. ‘Well, there I was, eight years old and on the streets. An old acquaintance of Isaudor’s found me. He was a past master in the field of stealth, and he

taught me a lot, Old Ghost did. Last year he died. I stayed living in his cellar and started on my plan.’ Again he paused at a street corner, but it was a thin dog that had caught his eye. ‘There was something I had to do. And when I bumped into you, I had just done it.’ His bleak eyes belied his grin. ‘You saw that gray-haired fellow in the nightshirt running after me? That was him. The man who had ruined us. I’d crept into his house and stolen his trading book. I know he, unlike Isaudor, did cheat, and a lot more villainy than that. The book betrays all.’ They had come to a tall, narrow house, and here Jurgis halted.

‘I need to see someone,’ he said. ‘You must stay out of it. He is a suspicious sort, and a heavily armed Kell would make him nervous. I won’t be long.’ Before Maud could react, the boy disappeared around the corner.

Curse it! Maud thought. *Do I believe him?* She folded her arms and leaned against the wall of the house, all her senses on the alert.

She didn’t have to wait long, for Jurgis reappeared within ten minutes. The satisfied smile on his face widened as he saw her.

‘Glad you trusted me.’

‘Had you betrayed me, they would’ve found your pretty head on a stake in the market square,’ Maud said harshly.

Jurgis cocked his head. ‘You’re too beautiful to betray.’

Maud bit her lip. Every time he looked at her like that, her body reacted. ‘Stop that,’ she said. ‘What have you been doing?’

An expression of unholy satisfaction crossed the boy’s face. ‘I gave the trading book to this business relation. One of Isaudor’s old friends. He will make good use of it. Our false accuser will swing before the week’s end. I can leave with a clear conscience.’

Maud looked at him. Revenge was a sentiment she understood. ‘I like that. Are we finished here?’

‘Yes. Let’s get out; I hate this place. By the way, you haven’t told me your client’s name yet.’

Maud smiled. ‘I think you’re brave enough to know. The prince-warlock.’

‘Argyr of Winsproke?’ Jurgis looked at her in astonishment. ‘I know Isaudor did business with him in the past; he even visited the Winsproke tower several times. You say I’m supposed to look like *Argyr*’s son? That’ His voice died away, and it was in thoughtful silence they hurried on.

The route Jurgis took passed through the meanest part of town. Its alleyways were narrow and unpaved, littered with refuse and slippery with the slime of human excrements. Crooked dwellings on both sides clutched each other like staggering drunks, and the all-pervading stench was breathtaking.

Maud got the funny feeling of being watched. She glanced at her companion and saw that Jurgis, too, was wide awake. She opened her mouth but then a movement caught her eye. Three ragged men stepped from the shadows and barred their path. Feet shuffled behind them, and a quick glance told Maud that three more footpads closed off the way back.

‘You shouldn’t have come here, thief,’ the leader said. ‘This is our territory. Now you’ll die.’

Jurgis faced him calmly. ‘We were just passing through; we’re leaving town. No need to get rough, friends.’

The leader laughed. ‘Friends? Don’t think so. We’ll kill you, take your stuff and boil your bodies down for the soap makers. After we’ve had some sport with the black cow beside you, of course.’

‘You must be really ignorant to say such to a Kell.’ The amusement in Maud’s voice startled the Garthan. He opened his mouth, but before he could give an order, she had grabbed him. Without visible effort, she lifted the man above her head and threw him hard into his two mates. Then,

sword in hand, she whirled around. The second threesome closed in on her, knives at the ready, but they didn't get far. Maud's sword swept down in a large, deceptively slow arc, and the three footpads tumbled down, spurting blood all over the place. Turning back, she saw the last two Garthans taking to their heels, panic clear on their dirty faces.

'Oh no!' In a few strides Maud caught up with them. Both men lost their heads and fell kicking in the muck.

Behind her, the leader had risen to his feet and turned on Jurgis, his face a mixture of rage and despair. 'At least I'll take you with me, thief!'

'No chance, friend,' Jurgis said with a mocking grin, brandishing a knife in each hand.

The ruffian showed his teeth and sprang.

'Amateur.' Jurgis stepped aside and kicked at the man's knee. His attacker stumbled and with an underhand stab, the boy rammed his left-hand blade deep under the man's ribs. The Garthan cried out and staggered. Jurgis grabbed the man's greasy hair and dragged his head back. With his right hand, he slit the Garthan's throat, sprang back and kicked the man to the ground. 'You're dead, bastard.'

'Nice work,' Maud said, gazing around with satisfaction.

The boy recovered his first knife from the body and wiped it on the dead Garthan's sleeve. 'They're nothing,' he said, his face gray. 'Must have been desperate for money, to attack us.' Then he swallowed and shivered. 'I'm not used to killing.'

'Neither am I,' the lioness said. 'You're my first job outside Kell.' She blushed. 'To be honest, it's my superior's job. For me it's field training.'

'Some training.' Jurgis looked down his body. 'Damn, the bastard leaked all over me.' He gagged as he pulled the blood-soaked tunic over his head and threw it aside. 'Come, we're nearly at the gates.'

Maud looked at his bare chest and took a deep breath. *Divine Gorm! He is beautiful.* She clenched her fists and with a curt move of her head, motioned for him to lead the way.

The poor quarter ended in a narrow alley running past the back of the inns near the town gates. It was quiet, and for a moment, Maud wondered if her earlier action had chased all revelers away.

After a few minutes, Jurgis halted.

'Wait. I see my new shirt.' Beside a tavern was a small, weedy garden, where laundered clothes hung out to dry. He went over and waited. When nobody came, he snatched a clean shirt from the line. 'My need is greater,' he said, as he slipped his catch over his head. 'Besides, those tavern keepers are all crooks anyhow.'

'It's a bit too large,' Maud said critically. 'Bit way too large.'

Jurgis shrugged. 'It will do.'

An angry cry made him start. The fat taverner's wife had spied Jurgis stealing her clean laundry and came storming out, waving a large cleaver and screaming a series of insults as the boy spurted away. Then she snatched the other garments from the line and went back into the inn.

Maud hurried on and found Jurgis waiting for her around the corner, smiling broadly.

'No pursuers?'

'Not this time,' Maud said. 'The poor woman would've had a heart attack, had she gone after you.'

'Poor woman?' Jurgis lifted an eyebrow. 'She and her man Atark are recruiters for the slave trade, Lioness. They're even worse scum than that crimp, drugging travelers and selling them to the local pirates, to end up on the continent.'

'Atark? A belly with a beard?'

Jurgis grinned. 'Don't say you know him. He has a nasty reputation and most women avoid him like the plague.'

'They can rest easy,' Maud said, and her face was grim. 'He shan't bother them anymore.' She told him how she'd destroyed the big fellow's manliness earlier that night.

Jurgis stared at her. 'Gods,' he said. 'You unmanned him? With your hand?' He shuddered.

At the town gates, Maud squared her shoulders, but there was another guard on duty and unhindered, they walked out of Port Brisa.

As they crossed the field to the mooring tower, Jurgis halted and stared. 'Dammit, there *is* a dirigible.'

Maud glanced at him. 'I said so, didn't I?'

'Yes, but Keep your hands to yourself,' he added quickly. 'It's just that I'm a suspicious sort. Trusting thieves die young.'

'We warriesses are the same, so I won't blame you. Now, up with you; the veteran will want to see you.'

'What veteran?' Jurgis said, as he ran up the stairs to the platform.

'Veteran Hala, my superior. She's in charge, but she is sick; bog fever. Mind how you address her; she's worthy of respect.'

CHAPTER 4 - SABOTAGE

The veteran was asleep, snoring stertorously. Her black skin had an ominous hue that frightened Maud. ‘How long has she been like this?’

‘She passed out when you left,’ the first officer said. ‘I didn’t know what to do, so I let her sleep.’

‘We must get her to Winspoken as fast as possible. Tell the captain she can sail, will you.’

The first officer gave a small smile. ‘We’re off already.’

‘Oh,’ Maud said. ‘I hadn’t noticed.’ She wiped Hala’s forehead, still dripping with sweat. ‘Is there anything to drink on board?’ But the first officer had left.

‘I’ll ask,’ Jurgis said.

Maud looked up; she had forgotten he was there. ‘Thanks.’

A short while later, the young thief returned with an opened bottle of wine and a glass. ‘Engineer’s compliments,’ he said. ‘Not that he knows it; he was busy, so I didn’t bother him.’

Maud poured half a glass and forcing the veteran’s mouth open, poured some wine inside her. Automatically, Hala swallowed.

‘The engineer is worried,’ Jurgis said.

It took a few seconds for his words to penetrate. ‘Why?’ Maud emptied the last of the wine into the veteran’s mouth and put the glass down.

The thief shrugged. ‘His engines are acting up. He wasn’t in a talkative mood, so I didn’t ask.’

‘Curse it all!’ Maud looked at Hala’s face, and she wanted to scream with frustration. *Why now?*

Then Jurgis jumped aside as the captain rushed aft through the narrow corridor.

‘I smell trouble,’ the boy said. ‘Smelled it often since Isaudor died, so it’s familiar.’

After a while, the captain came back. ‘There will be a delay.’ She sounded as if she blamed her passengers.

‘Trouble with the engine?’ Maud said over her shoulder.

The captain hit the doorpost with her fist. ‘Sabotage! Someone’s been tampering with the wiring.’

Maud turned around to look at her. ‘How?’

‘I don’t know. Sparks lives with that cursed engine. No one can come near it without him knowing it.’ The captain got a grip on herself. ‘I’m sorry to tell you we’re on half-speed for the moment. We’ll be very late on arrival.’

‘I see. I’m sure you are all doing what you can. Only... sabotage. Has it happened before?’

‘No!’ the captain half-shouted. ‘I ...’ She took a deep breath. ‘Forgive me for asking. Could it have something to do with your mission?’

Maud stiffened. *Our mission?* ‘Not that I know. The prince-warlock didn’t tell us much, though. Just to travel to Port Brisa, pick up Jurgis here and bring him to his office. You’re not a lost heir, or anything, are you?’ she asked, and Jurgis burst out laughing.

‘Go on; that would be fun. No; I always knew I wasn’t Isaudor’s son, but I was my mother’s child. And she hadn’t been married before. What does that make me? Some accident, probably.’

The captain sighed. ‘Well, it’s a matter for my superiors. I must return to the bridge. Rest assured we’ll do everything to get you in Winspoken as soon as possible.’ With a curt nod, she hurried forward.

Maud rose. ‘I’m going to see the engineer. You sit down here and watch the veteran. Call me if she speaks or anything.’

Sparks was the ship's engineer's nickname. He was a Thali; one of those reclusive people from the icy south, who spent their lives tinkering and inventing the most marvelous contraptions. The few Thali Maud had met were imperturbable technicians; for the dirigible's engineer to show his worry, things must be seriously wrong.

'There is something playing snowdance with my wires,' he said. 'And I haven't a notion what it is.' He looked up, the strain clear in his face. 'I know this blasted engine inside out, and I'll swear there is nothing wrong with it. Nothing at all. Ahh, I'm going mad.'

'Son of the Thi-a-Yuuk,' Maud said formally. 'Could it be magic?'

The Thali looked up from his cross-legged position. 'The Great-Grandmother would know; I don't. I'm only a bliddy engineer. Yet there's no other possibility left. Someone is sabotaging my engine with magic.' He rose groaning and stretched his legs. 'I'm sorry, Lioness,' he said and he managed to make it sound true. 'But I must ask the captain to halt the airship. The first officer and I will have to conduct a full search of her.'

Thus, ten minutes later, the sound of the engine dimmed to a whisper, giving just enough power to keep the dirigible stationary. The first officer opened the outer door and kicked the rope ladder to the ground. Then he climbed down to fasten the mooring lines.

Maud looked at Hala's face. The veteran was still out, and her breathing sounded forced. The captain came from the bridge and halted at their cabin.

'More delay,' she said, and her eyes were anxious. 'The engineer needs time to find whatever is interfering with his engine.'

'So I understood,' Maud said. 'Where are we?'

'It's a rotten place to stop—we're right over the Lornwood.'

Maud had heard the name, but in what way, she couldn't remember. She didn't care, either. 'I need something to ease the veteran's breathing. Do you mind if I go down to search for some herbs?'

'Here? In this cursed forest?' The captain shivered. 'Well, it's your life. But I suggest you take your friend to watch your back while you search.'

The girl thought it over. She had wanted to leave Jurgis with Hala, but her training agreed with the captain.

'Give us a hail when you're ready; I'll not leave the ladder hanging out. The gods know what monsters would try to board us.'

Monsters? Mentally, Maud shrugged. *A couple of wolves perhaps, or at most a bear. Those don't climb rope ladders. But monsters? This isn't the continent, for Otha's sake.*

'Get your things,' she said to Jurgis. 'We're going down. I need herbs, and you're going to stand guard. Got any weapons?'

'Only my knives.'

'You can take the veteran's spear. Her sword is bound to her; I wouldn't even dare to touch it. But the spear is just that.'

'Ah, what do I do with it?' Jurgis turned the weapon around in his hands.

Maud stared at him. Then she grinned. 'You stick them with it. Like this.' She made a few rapid passes. 'Don't try to throw it; you wouldn't hit a bear if it was five feet away from you.'

'To be sure. But I'm not going to stick this thing into a bear either,' Jurgis said firmly.

'Don't worry; I don't think we'll meet any in the Lornwood.'

Jurgis' pale face reddened. 'You said ... Lornwood? Is that where we are?'

'According to the captain, yes.'

'Blast! It's supposed to be a bad place.'

'Why?'

‘Spooks. Witches, wyrms, wolves.’

Maud snorted. ‘Old men’s tales. Now, come on. The captain wants to raise the ladder.’

‘Why?’

‘Because of the wyrms and the witches.’

It was at the break of dawn, and raining. The branches of the trees around the clearing were heavy with water.

Jurgis shivered. ‘Chilly.’

‘You’re afraid,’ Maud said teasingly.

‘I’m not. When I’m burgling a house, I am afraid. Now I’m not ... at least not yet. Which herbs do you need?’

‘Kornullia and everline. Won’t be difficult; they’re common enough. While I’m searching, you watch my back.’

‘Gladly,’ the boy said. ‘It’s very pretty.’

Maud’s breathing faltered for a second as sudden desire exploded in her belly. ‘Don’t say that!’ she snarled.

‘Hey! Don’t be mad, I’m not Atark! I didn’t mean anything,’ Jurgis said, stepping back. ‘It was a compliment.’

A deep sigh escaped her, and she unclenched her hands. ‘It’s all right. You have much to learn about Kells.’

‘Tell me what I said wrong.’

Maud looked at him; the boy seemed earnest enough. ‘Another time. It’s rather personal.’ She felt embarrassed by her feelings and went tight-lipped around the clearing, searching the high grass and underneath the bushes for the herbs she needed.

At last, with her hands full of stems and leaves, she stretched. ‘We’ve got quite a haul and all fresh. She’ll’

‘What’s that?’ Jurgis’ puzzled voice interrupted her and she gazed at the sky.

‘I thought I saw a bird,’ Jurgis said.

Maud looked at him. ‘So?’

‘A giant bird. Red-spotted green. Breathing sparks.’

‘You’re trying to be funny?’

‘Only it isn’t a bird, it’s a lizard.’ Jurgis waved upward. ‘Gosh, look at those teeth!’

Now Maud saw it, too. A great winged reptile, child of a salamander and a crocodile. With a tail easily twice its body length, and four taloned limbs. It grew larger as it came near, its body undulating as if swimming in the air. The spots on its green scales were blood red and its toothy mouth smoked as if fires stoked its flight.

‘Divine Otha! That’s a wyrm!’ Dropping the herbs, Maud put her hands to her mouth and cried, ‘Hallo, the boat! Alarm! Alarm!’

The dirigible’s captain appeared in the cabin door, and Maud pointed. At that moment, the wyrm dove. The captain slammed the door closed, but whatever she planned to do, she didn’t make it. With a roar, the wyrm attacked, spitting lightning. The balloon’s outer cover wasn’t made to withstand fire; it crackled and melted, and with an indescribable sound, the gas compartment burst into flames. Then, while the wyrm climbed higher for a second dive, the clearing became bright as daytime as the floatgas in the balloon turned the whole dirigible into a ball of fire.

Maud lifted up her head and uttered a cry of bone-chilling rage.

‘Back!’ She felt Jurgis gripping her biceps, but she couldn’t move. ‘It’s goin’ to crash.’ His excited voice tugged at the rage that shook her. Deep in her mind, a small spot of sanity agreed with the thief, and she didn’t resist as he dragged her into the forest’s edge.

The boat came down in a mass of flames. Instinctively, Maud wanted to run toward it, but Jurgis still clutched her arm and with all his strength held her back. ‘Stay! You can’t!’

Again, she let his voice overrule her impulses and she watched from a distance as the airship burned. The heat was so intense that the leaves on the nearest trees shriveled and died, the ground mist boiled away, and the grass blackened.

The great shadow of the wyrm darkened the ground where they stood. Lightning crackled, and flames spat everywhere.

‘Wake up! It’s coming for us!’ Jurgis tugged at Maud’s arm, and she turned to face him.

‘What?’

Another beam uprooted a copse of young firs, broke them and sent them flying.

‘We must run!’ Jurgis screamed in her face.

At last, the shock cleared from her mind and allowed her training to take over. *Danger!* She turned, dragging the boy around with her. ‘Come,’ she snarled as she pulled him with her into the woods. Together they ran, zigzagging from tree to tree. The wyrm followed them, hidden by the canopy of the trees. Its fiery breath struck around them, as if it couldn’t see them either.

Bless the rain, Maud thought, as another beam struck a tree behind them. *Or we’d have a forest fire on our heels as well.*

‘Ratla-Mother-of-Thieves!’ Jurgis jumped as a tall tree splintered and crashed down in his wake.

‘The forest is protecting us. It’s keeping us out of the wyrm’s reach.’ Maud’s mind was clear. The dirigible, Hala’s death; all filed away for later. Now she had to keep Jurgis safe from the monster overhead. The little thief was a city boy; agile enough, but not used to the wilderness. She heard him pant and stumble behind her.

‘You all right?’ Jurgis’ answer was an expletive, and she smiled, pleased at his defiance. ‘Keep going, mate; we’ll outrun the beast yet.’

After a while, the ground became stonier, and the undergrowth changed to grass-covered rocks that made the going hard. Jurgis’ breath came in gasping sobs now, and Maud wondered how much longer he would keep it up.

She spied a massive outcropping of rock with a dark opening. For three hundred feet around it, nothing grew but sparse grass, so they’d be in full view. She grabbed Jurgis’ shoulder and pointed. ‘Over there! A cave. We must make a run for it.’

The boy’s face was red and sweaty, but his eyes returned her glance unwaveringly. ‘I’ll manage.’

‘Now! Fast as you can!’ They spurted over the open ground, hearing the wyrm’s triumphant screech. The wind from its wings blew dust and rubble in their faces as the beast maneuvered into position, and there was a distinct smell of sulfur in the air. Maud heard the beast’s intake of breath. She gripped Jurgis around his waist and dove with him into the cave. Behind them, fire cascaded off the solid rock, and the wyrm bellowed in anger.

‘Y’ alright?’ Maud said.

Jurgis groaned. ‘Crushed.’

She laughed and rolled off him. ‘You’ll live.’

For over an hour, the wyrm circled around, spitting bolts of fire until it had had enough. With a cry of frustration, the beast changed course and winged away, trailing smoke and fire.

‘We’ll stay here,’ Maud said as she watched it go. ‘I want to be sure the beast won’t come sneaking back.’

‘A wyrm,’ the boy said, and his voice quavered. ‘A flippin’ wyrm.’

Maud reached out in the narrow space and patted his leg. ‘You did all right, mate.’ For a moment, she was silent. ‘Better than I,’ she said. ‘My rage overcame my training. I reacted like a novice, dammit!’ She looked at Jurgis. ‘You saved the day.’

The boy gave a shaky smile and curled up. After a while, she heard him snore. She lay down beside him in their small hiding place, her head resting against his thigh. *Dammit, girl*, she said to herself. *You must do better. With Hala gone, you’re in charge now.* She growled deep in her throat, a lioness’ growl. *I’ll show them.*

CHAPTER 5 - YARWAN

‘Captain Darquine!’ The ship’s master met them at the gangway with a broad smile. ‘How’s ya doing?’

‘Captain?’ Basil said, surprised.

‘We’re old friends,’ the girl said. ‘I’m fine, Naching. I see you’re sailing soon?’

‘Aye, on the top of the tide. Why? Was you thinking of goin’ a-piratin’ with us?’

Darquine grinned. ‘It would be fun. Alas, I only want to go home.’

Captain Naching frowned, serious now. ‘I’m bound for Towne. Are you sure?’

‘At least for a while,’ Darquine said. ‘After a year in Winsproke, I need a change. The Spellwarden is coming with me.’

‘Your father will be delighted. He’s running out of people to fight.’

The girl snorted. ‘Well, I’m in the mood for a good quarrel.’

The captain roared with laughter. ‘All right then. Get on board, you two. We’ll sail in twenty minutes.’

On the high tide, the *Willowdrake* left Winsproke harbor. Basil stood in a quiet corner of the deck and stared at the town of his birth growing smaller. For the first time in his seventeen years, he was leaving the security of his father’s tower. The thought laid frozen knots in his stomach. Basil didn’t see himself as an adventurous type. Experimenting with magical spells was exciting enough, and not without danger. The outside world he would gladly leave to daredevils like Darquine. His eyes teared up. Those fools on the Council with their humiliating summons! They had forced him from his nice rooms. *Curse you, Volaut, with your tricks*, he thought. *And to the hells with you, impostor guy with your ten toes*. In impotent fury, he slapped the railing.

Behind him, someone gave a polite cough. Basil turned with a start and stared at a Chorwaynie of his own age, wearing the uniform of a ship’s officer. Basil felt hot blood rushing to his face, and he snapped, ‘Yes?’

The young man saluted. ‘Excuse me, Spellwarden, sir, but might I ask you to move two paces to the left? I must make my daily sightings.’ He lifted a copper contraption that Basil didn’t recognize.

‘Your sightings?’ He stepped aside, and the other took his place. ‘What are these?’

‘I am checking the position of the ship, sir.’ The young man put the copper object to one eye. After a few minutes, he jotted down some numbers on a slate.

‘Explain, please.’ Basil considered himself an experimentalist, and he liked to tinker with things, combining apparatuses with spells and seeing what came from it. ‘What is that thing you’re using?’

‘It’s a sextant, sir, a most modern instrument. I use it to measure the angle between the sun and the horizon.’ He stopped.

‘Go on,’ Basil said impatiently.

‘It will be rather technical, sir,’ the young man said. ‘I don’t know’

‘I love technical things. Tell me.’

Obediently, the young man began to explain the intricacies of celestial navigation. When he noticed his listener’s interest wasn’t feigned, he warmed up and after a while the two talked away as if they’d known each other for years.

‘Now you’re using the sun,’ Basil said. ‘But what about when it’s dark?’

The young man smiled. 'We use certain stars instead. I can show you tonight, after sundown, if you want to see it.'

'Of course I want to.' It was a new field of discovery and Basil felt excited at the thought of delving into it.

'I will be back at two bells of the first watch. That's at nine tonight, sir.'

'I'll be here. What's your name?'

'Apprentice Yarwan, sir; of Towne-Harbor.'

Basil nodded. 'Right, then; two bells it is.' That sounded nicely nautical to his ears. He touched Yarwan's hand and saw the young man lower his eyes. Unusually pleased, the Spellwarden walked away.

'Watch it, little bird,' a sailor said as he passed.

Basil frowned, puzzled, and looked at the man. 'You were addressing me?'

The sailor leered and made a kissing sound.

Disgust flamed hot in Basil's face. He lifted his hand, and dark flames dripped from his fingers. 'Keep your dirty mind to yourself, lowborn,' he snapped. 'Or by the gods, I'll incinerate you on the spot!'

The man blanched and backed away. His stammered excuses died unheard as Basil limped away without another glance.

Captain Naching must have overheard the sailor's vulgarity, for he was fuming when Basil returned to the afterdeck. 'The honorless dolt!' he spluttered. 'I'll send him home in disgrace for this.'

Basil shrugged. 'It was nothing. A stupid joke, no more.'

'You're a guest, and such behavior insults both of us. Besides' Naching hesitated. 'Young Yarwan is my nephew, the son of my brother's widow. He gets harassed enough already and to have his failings affect you because you were so kind as to speak with him makes it extra painful.'

Darquine joined them. 'What in the world were you and Yarwan talking about? You seemed quite happy all of a sudden.'

Basil sniffed. 'I was quite happy, thank you. We were talking about positioning. Yarwan explained how to, eh, work a sextant. He seemed to know quite a lot about it.'

'He's got the makings of a good ship's officer,' Naching said.

'He is that.' Darquine smiled. 'I've known him a long time.'

'Well,' Basil said decidedly. 'I like him. Tonight at two bells we're going to do it with the stars. I'm getting all kinds of ideas.'

'Yeah?' Darquine said, raising an eyebrow at the Spellwarden.

'Yes,' Basil said, oblivious to her sarcasm. 'When I bombard something with fire, I tend to burn much more than what I'm aiming at. Perhaps positioning could help me be more precise.'

His friend sighed. 'For a moment I thought you meant something else. But yes, not burning your enemy's neighbors would be nice, too, I suppose.'

'Is it?' Basil said absently. 'I am more concerned with the loss of fire power.'