

## **Prologue**

### **I: The Pledge**

One hundred men - thirty of them mounted lancers - and five sylph scouts formed up in the square before the newly reopened West Gate. Husbands and wives had said their final goodbyes, and the small army was ready to leave.

The worst of the ice had been cleared away, but sylph earpoints sometimes gave an irritable flicker as stray snowflakes found an ear tip.

Lance-Captain Dekran and Banner-Sergeant Yochan made their final checks, ensuring all was as it should be. As senior scout, Belaika glanced at his companions. The other scouts were Markans and at best only part trained. Which meant he would have to carry them most of the way out and back. Only Fhionnen could be regarded as reliable for formulating messages. The rest could pass messages, but would be of little use either as Dekran's messenger or as furthest scout. Belaika knew which of those dangerous jobs he and Fhionnen must shoulder.

Of the scouts, he was the only married sylph and felt a stab of loss as he looked across the square to Eleka. His wife was pregnant again and this time certain she carried a son.

Lance-Captain Dekran mounted.

Banner-Sergeant Yochan looked from Belaika to Eleka.

"You didn't drag her out in this?" he demanded.

Belaika shrugged. "She insisted."

Yochan shook his head. "Foolish sylphs. Selinde is expecting too. We said our goodbyes before I came out. Best for her to keep warm. Best for pregnant sylphs, too."

"We hope for a son." The scout's earpoints twitched before sagging a little.

Yochan nodded. "So do we, but after five daughters maybe Siranva has other ideas."

"I will likely miss the birth." Belaika's earpoints sagged further.

Yochan gripped the sylph's shoulder. "Us married men must look out for each other. If anything happens, I promise to tell Eleka."

Belaika blinked and bowed his head. "If you fall, Selinde will know what to tell your son when he is older."

Yochan's hand left the sylph's shoulder and he smiled. "We are pledged," he said.

"Pledged," agreed Belaika. He looked away, silently praying that nothing happened to either of them.

Yochan mounted and hefted the Vintner Standard: a gold dragon's head on a dark-blue field. He nodded to Dekran.

The captain lifted an arm and motioned ahead. The gate swung open and the small army passed out of the city.

Belaika turned to smile at his wife and held her gaze as long as possible until the city walls hid her from view.

His head turned to the front and his expression hardened. He had a job to get on with; he would meet his son when it was done.

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### **II: Homecoming**

Even snug in the folds of her cloak, Silmarila wished the late winter wind would ease its chill blast. Carts and sedans queued, patiently waiting their turn to enter Marka. She waited with them on the narrow road into the city, wanting to draw

no attention to herself. Many less patient than she walked past and ignored choice comments thrown their way by those less mobile than themselves.

She smiled wistfully at the huge pyramid dwarfing the city, a giant ruby light-crystal at its apex. Those seeing Marka for the first time stared more at this feature than any other and she overheard their awed murmurs. The city was impressive, but the pyramid overwhelmed it, dating from a time when much knowledge, now lost, abounded.

Mounted guardsmen rode down the line to break up a fight a little further along. One glanced at Silmarila; he eyed her walking staff and tried to see into the cowl of her cloak. Then he was past and she was forgotten.

Many fighting men eyed her walking staff with respect. They knew a quarterstaff when they saw one. She'd had no call for it on her journey, but these were troubled times.

"All right, that's enough!" One of the guardsmen tried to break the fight up. "Enough, or your time in Marka will be spent in a cell."

The queue surged forward before halting again after a few steps. Many were travel-worn family groups, drawn by the offer of free land. Some might even be farmers and their families.

Silmarila wondered how much "free" land was left and of what quality. Although for very different reasons, the rumors that lured these people were the same that brought her to Marka. She had no need of free land. She looked towards the city gates.

Marka had an emperor again.

Rumor that two claimants to the vacant Throne had been called to Marka caught her attention and stirred her to action a year before. She left her comfortable village to return home and hopefully reclaim her rightful place.

More rumors followed hard on the shirrtails of the first. One claimant had defeated the other; one had murdered the other after the battle; a general had gone berserk and murdered both claimants... Silmarila could hardly wait to learn the truth.

There were always rumors, but these were many and too fast to be other than truth, even if embellished.

"Break it up, I'm telling you!" The scuffle had broken out again. "Any more and you're arrested. All of you!"

She was already on the road when she heard the whisper of a no longer vacant Throne. She had initially discounted what the rumor said; she had *laughed* at such a ridiculous notion. A sylph on the Throne? A *syph*, ruling humans? But the nearer she came to Marka, the more persistent the tale and, now she was here, she had no alternative but to accept it as truth.

When stories of the siege reached her, she almost turned back. She had never flinched from advising it when necessary, but she hated war. All that suffering and pain and hunger and grief.

Then other stories came.

There was an ilven in Marka. She hadn't seen one of the sisters for, for... Well for longer than she cared to remember. But it was not the ilven who pulled her onward. There was also a young gwerin. A baby gwerin with no idea what was expected of her, alone and in need of schooling.

She shivered as the wind chewed through her cloak.

The city walls were more or less as she remembered them, with a repair needed here and there after last year's siege. Most buildings that poked their upper

levels above the walls were different, but some familiar edifices loomed benignly toward her.

*The only constant in life is change.* She smiled as she recalled her tutor's words. Sometimes it came slowly and sometimes it seemed as though change had ground to a halt, only to rush forward like an avalanche in winter. It was inexorable, but blind and not all was for the better. She wished change would affect this damned wind. In early spring, the Markan winter clung tenaciously to its empire, spiting nature's attempts to drive it away.

She grimaced at the human remains hung in a cage above the gate, picked white by carrion and weather. The placard announced to the literate that these were some of the remains of Hingast, failed invader of Marka. He was not the first to fail to take the Jewel of the World and she doubted if he would be the last. Some rumors claimed Hingast was still alive.

She pushed the cowl of her cloak back to show her face to the guard at the gate. He gave her a once-over before nodding her through. He had no reason to deny her entry, even if he knew who and what she was. Especially if he knew. She passed through the gate and into the city.

She took a deep breath, she was home.

Though the trees that lined the center of the main road were new, the streets followed a familiar layout. The bustle of Marka at work was the same and she was certain of the way to the Imperial Palace.

Sylphs thronged the crowd, as numerous as ever. If any recognized what she was, they gave no sign of it, but Silmarila increased her pace anyway. She sensed the end of her journey while drinking Marka's sounds and scents, all so painfully familiar she knew she had missed them.

Another corner and she was there.

The Coronation Building was the same; she would be shocked if that had changed. She grimaced at the ugly warehouse, built a good time ago to judge from the state of it. That would never have been allowed in Emperor Evlander's day. She left Senate Square and the Imperial Palace was before her.

Silmarila mounted the stone steps, ready for the guard's challenge.

"Halt!"

She obeyed instantly. This guard wore the uniform of a Markan soldier, which might be an advantage. She kept her voice calm. "Please send a messenger to inform His Majesty of my arrival."

A small smile played around the guard's mouth as he weighed her up, taking in her dusty cloak and somewhat travel-worn appearance. "You are expected, young lady?"

Silmarila masked her irritation, but her grip on the quarterstaff tightened. This... this *boy* dared address her as *young lady*? She almost told him that she had been born in the first year of Emperor Evlander's reign and was only three years short of completing her third century. She mentally cursed the color of her eyes; the dark-brown irises made it almost impossible for humans (and many sylphs) to tell where the pupils began and ended. Or what shape they were. Instead, she pushed her cowl all the way back and set her earpoints free. They now twitched irritably as the guard's eyes widened in recognition of what stood before him.

"My name is Silmarila-y-Marka," she told him. "Gwerin Advisor to the Throne of Mark and I believe that my presence is demanded by bonds of duty stronger and older than yours."

The guard nodded and called for a messenger; when he arrived, the young boy stared pop-eyed at her before dashing back inside. Silmarila smiled at the guard to show she meant him no harm. No matter how exalted her status, she belonged to the Throne. She was property, as surely as the sylphs dotted about.

The messenger returned moments later.

"His Majesty will see you now," he squeaked, breathlessly.

Silmarila's smile widened. Sylph or no, this Emperor at least knew not to keep gwerins waiting. "Thank you," she said. "After you."

She followed the messenger through corridors and up two flights of stairs. Servants and guards looked at her, but hurried about their business. Those who noticed her earpoints stared.

The messenger stopped and knocked at a door. He opened it, but did not enter. "In here, um, Miss."

The boy was forgotten as Silmarila swept past. Two sylphs and a human stared at her.

The human male was tall with dark-brown hair curling over his ears. His dark-blue eyes were expressionless and he studied her as closely as she studied him.

An infertile stood behind the human's chair; her silver-gray eyes held a mixture of awe and fear as she stared at Silmarila. Her tunic had a dragon's head emblazoned on one breast, symbol of the Vintner family. The other sylph in the room must be Zenepha, Emperor of Marka.

Silmarila dropped into a deep curtsey. "Your Majesty. I am Silmarila-y-Marka, Gw-"

"Silmarila," said Zenepha, "come and sit." He indicated a vacant chair at which the gwerin stared in surprise. She was allowed to *sit* in his presence? The sylph made hasty introductions. "This is Marcus Marcus Vintner and Jenn-y-Marcus and I am Zenepha."

She inclined her head toward Marcus and Jenn as they were named, but no more. Her attention was fixed on Zenepha. "Your Majesty, I hurried back as quickly as I could. Have... have any others returned? Samrita or Marasil?"

Zenepha's silver eyes were grave and his earpoints twitched once. "If you ask after gwerins, you are the only one to make herself known."

Silmarila's earpoints sagged. "I hoped others might have arrived. Even though I am the youngest, I should not be the only one." Her eyes flickered briefly to Zenepha again. "Was the youngest. I hear there is a young one here?"

"There is," replied Marcus, before Zenepha could speak.

"She will need schooling," the gwerin said. "I am happy to offer my services."

A smile played around Zenepha's mouth and his earpoints twitched in amusement. "Part of your duties as I understand them. Although Salafisa belongs to Marcus Vintner, you may teach her."

"Surprised she does not belong to the Emperor?" asked Marcus, his gaze fixed on the gwerin's face.

Silmarila was not surprised at all and she shrugged. "The Emperor is only protector of gwerins. If one is no longer needed or wanted by her old owners, the Throne has first refusal. We needed such protection. And still do, I don't doubt."

Marcus nodded.

"The Emperor never laid claim to gwerins born to wild tribes," continued Silmarila. "They usually end up leading their tribe, as wild sylphs elect the oldest as chieftain. Given our longevity, it is inevitable gwerins come to lead such tribes."

"There are wild sylphs here, if you bore of serving Zenepha." Marcus smiled.

"I am pleased you have come, Silmarila," interrupted Zenepha. "The gwerin rooms have been kept ready for your return."

Jenn came around the chair and, eyes still wide, bowed to Silmarila. "I will show you the way."

Silmarila smiled at the small infertile. Provided the correct rooms had been prepared, she knew the way, but wouldn't deflate the sylph. Jenn was nervous; infertiles usually were around adult gwerins. She had never learned why. "Please lead on. I trust the bathwater is hot? I have come a long way and..." Jenn lead her out and away.

Outside the palace, the late winter wind chilled everything in its path.

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### **III: Sandester**

The Aboras, the freezing north wind that scoured everything between the polar ice and Sandester, rattled windows and doors at the observatory. Only a few scruffy villages, soil poor but mineral rich, stood between city and icecap. Sandesterans were used to wrapping up against the Aboras, which often blew until mid-spring. Even so, the wind found its way though most things meant to keep it out.

The Vintner Palace was built into a hill, which gave good protection against the wind. Few buildings in Sandester had north-facing doors and windows for the same reason. A century before, Staflan Vintner built the observatory on top of the hill, although it was no longer used as one. It could be reached by means of a covered stair without leaving the palace. Most of Staflan's notes were still here, though the telescope was long gone. What had turned him away from stargazing was still a mystery, why he had destroyed his telescope equally unknown. But his pastime was the reason why the best lensmakers were still gathered in Sandester.

Staflan's grandson, Nazvasta Ulvic Vintner - brother of Branad Ulvic Vintner, late claimant to the no longer vacant Markan Throne - used the observatory as his study. Here he kept his most troubling correspondence. Troubling, ever since his brother had left Sandester for Marka a year before.

His library was here, row upon row of books lining every wall bar one, shelved as high as he could stretch with his arms. A couple of reading desks, three chairs and eight light-crystals completed the furniture. One wall held an impressive fireplace, the stone surround carved into every animal the sculptor's imagination could remember. Above that was a lone painting of a ship battering her way through heavy seas.

Nobody but the servants knew he came here; in truth only a few of them were supposed to know, but when one servant knew a thing, they all did. In his experience, they knew more about what went on in palaces and grand houses than the owners. Even here, his spies included servants.

Spying had always been part of Nazvasta's duties, learned from his uncle. As the potential claimant to the Throne, he had no intention of relinquishing his role of spymaster. Not yet. Siranva knew there were problems enough to keep him busy if he lived to be ninety. His hand hovered over the wooden box where he kept the most important letters.

"Will you lay your claim?"

Nazvasta glanced at his companion. Fareen was Sandester's best kept secret. His father and brother had ignored her and most had forgotten the gwerin even existed. She moved through the palace at night and was sometimes not seen even when someone looked directly at her. Useful to his uncle, now she was useful to him.

She had been the last gwerin advisor in Marka, going to the city to shelter in the Emperor's protection and arriving as the last three official gwerins left. She liked to say she entered Marka by the east gate as the other three left by the west. Emperor Rono kept her presence in the city quiet, commanding his scribes to ensure her presence was never recorded.

"The claim is the least of my worries," he replied, "yet you demand I press it. Branad renounced it. Not a good result, but it happened."

Fareen nodded. "Renounced it on behalf of himself and his descendants. You are not a descendant."

Fareen stayed in Marka for five years, leaving only as the Empire collapsed the day Rono was murdered. She took his third son with her, and brought him to Sandester. Nazvasta's potential claim originated with that young man, allegedly smuggled out of Marka in a basket.

"Branad was captured in battle by Marcus Vintner. The claim was renounced before Marka's Senate." Nazvasta shook his head. "There's no way around it."

"Even now Marcus works to secure his claim at the sylph's expense."

"Zenepha." A sylph emperor.

"Mikhan was wise to accept to post of Marshal of Marka," continued Fareen. "He helps keep Marcus off the Throne."

"The Emperor demanded Sandester's submission to his rule."

The gwerin smiled. "Which you supplied. The Senate was not pleased, but they acquiesced."

"Eventually." Nazvasta knew Sandester's Senate was unhappy at its demotion to provincial status.

Fareen's eyes flickered to the small wooden box. "You still have Marcus Vintner's letter. You are not going to accept his offer?"

Nazvasta laughed. "I have a letter offering what is already mine. Sandester has accepted the Emperor's authority, not Marcus's. My title of Steward is sufficient, Viceroy means nothing to me." Marcus claimed that his own prefectures and those of Branad were now united under one rule. His. "I've not replied."

Fareen smiled. "Good. If you accept his offer, you recognize his claim over your own."

Nazvasta never knew why this gwerin was so keen to ensure Marcus Vintner's claim was ground to dust. Perhaps something had happened to her in Marka. Perhaps she doubted his pedigree. She never responded to his questions, only stated that Sandester's claim was the best for a future Markan Empire. Perhaps she wanted to be the first - or only? - gwerin advisor in a resurgent Marka.

"Will you raise the dragon's head banner?" asked Fareen.

"Not while Zenepha holds the throne."

"He is only a caretaker. Marcus Vintner is there, politicking."

"A sylph ruling humans is a temporary aberration. I expect he's held on a tight leash."

"Nobody knows who holds the other end of this alleged leash," said Fareen.

"That suggests nobody does, which in turn indicates there is no leash."

Nazvasta changed the subject. "And the sylph scouts. Has the world gone mad?"

Fareen laughed. "Annada and Tennen were quite explicit in their report. An excellent idea."

"Several beggars were almost lynched when the story of sylph scouts mutated into a story of sylphs spying for Marcus on our streets." Nazvasta grimaced. No

matter how distasteful beggars might be, they did not deserve to be lynched on a rumor. And they were only sylphs, with no chance of defending themselves.

"You stamped down on it."

"Yes."

"And now there is a new threat?" Fareen's pale-brown eyes gleamed. She loved having problems to puzzle over.

"A threat to Trenvera."

"Our cushion."

A buffer between Sandester and Calcan, the Kingdom of Trenvera had kept the warring factions apart. That the Vintners had never fought a battle on its soil was testimony to the effectiveness of its diplomacy.

"Prince Mikel warns that Re Taura's army has grown so large that he fears Trenvera is the intended target."

"Or Calcan. Or us."

"If it's Calcan, that's their problem." Nazvasta was sharper than intended, so smiled to take the edge from his words. "I've sent Field-Captain Tennen to Maturia and other armies to our coastal prefectures. If Mikel requests assistance, I've more men to send there."

Fareen grimaced.

"I know." Nazvasta showed his teeth. "Potential repercussions from Calcan. We cannot let Trenvera fall to a third party."

"Espionage in Re Taura has failed." Fareen's eyes flickered to the small box. She had of course read all the correspondence. "Someone in Re Taura is good at unmasking infiltrators. So nobody knows the Mametain's intentions."

"If Trenvera's spies fail, I'm sure ours would fail too. I will not send men to their deaths unnecessarily."

Fareen nodded. "The risk outweighs any chance of success. I agree." She grinned again. "Isn't life fun?"

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#### **IV: Re Taura**

Tektu stared across a mila of windblown water to the City of Taura, capital of Re Taura. Her sylvan face contorted as she wrinkled her nose and twitched her earpoints. She reveled in the fresh breeze, but was unable to shake off her feeling of unease.

Castle Beren stood on what used to be the small island of Re Beren, separate from, yet all but surrounded by, the main island of Re Taura. A previous mametain had built a causeway to link the two islands. Despite this, it still felt like an island, sheltered by its larger sibling on three sides, with the Eastern Sea to the fourth.

Tektu's head swiveled briefly west, towards the mainland, before her attention returned to the harbor.

Soldiers patrolled the ramparts of Castle Beren, though none approached her. Even other sylphs - especially other sylphs - gave her a wide berth.

Let them hate, so long as they feared.

Her silver-gray eyes focused briefly as the door onto the walkway opened, but it was not the Mametain. Not yet.

Masts hid the buildings beyond Taura's harbor, betraying the presence of a large number of ships. Beyond the city walls, thousands of soldiers practiced their maneuvers, preparing for the planned invasion of Trenvera. This was intended to drive a wedge between the two branches of the Vintner family and help throw the reemerging Markan Empire into disarray. It did not matter to her that a sylph sat on

the Markan Throne. Her real masters did not want to see the Markan Empire rise again. Ever.

A hand closed on her shoulder and she turned to stare into the face of the Mametain. His dark eyes glittered at her.

"Something is wrong?" asked Nijen da Re Taura.

"A feeling," she replied. Her earpoints gave one violent twitch as she shrugged. "You should allow me to interrogate the spy Talnan again."

The sylph carrying refreshments for the Mametain stared at Tektu and her eyes widened in fright. She could sense what Tektu really was. Which did not bother Tektu in the slightest. After all, who would believe the word of a sylph over that of her owner? *She* held real power, as those who fell foul of her quickly learned.

"Thank you, Mya." Nijen smiled. At a nod, the serving sylph scuttled away, eyes still wide.

The Mametain looked down at Tektu over his drink. "I will arrange it," he promised. "This afternoon. Try not to kill this one too quickly."

Tektu managed a bow. "*Se bata, henyi.*" She licked her lips in anticipation.

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Mya crouched over the furthest privy and chewed the edge of her tunic to stop any moans. She rocked on her heels and fought tears. She had started at Castle Beren the same day as her owner, Talnan.

He worked for the King of Trenvera, the latest in a line of spies sent to Re Taura to try and discover the Mametain's plans. Now he was a prisoner.

She had no illusions; her owner would die once Tektu was done. She was more terrified for him than for herself. If he failed to keep her existence a secret, she hoped her death would come swiftly so she could continue to serve him in the next life.

Execution as a spy was a less terrifying prospect than spending the rest of her life here, under Tektu's eye. Even worse, wondering if Tektu and the Mametain knew whether she was a spy. Might they realize if she asked to be released from service? That was not unusual in itself; there was a high turnover of sylph servants here, even if the alternative work was worse than at the castle. But if anyone noticed that her start day was the same as her owner's, questions might be asked.

She dried her eyes with her tunic and stood. She forced herself to feel happy so her earpoints would not betray her true feelings. The meal break was almost over, it was time to work and she did not want anyone to find her crying here.

She must carry on as if life held nothing more for her than working for the Mametain. Mya hoped that it did.

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"They send spy after spy after spy. They obviously know something's going on." Nijen da Re Taura looked at his companion, sprawled comfortably in the easy chair opposite. They were quite alone, the loyal Tektu was still dealing with a now dead spy.

The fire burned cheerfully, banishing all cold. The study was oak-paneled to half height, the stone walls rendered and whitewashed above that. A rug was between the two chairs and a large desk was behind them.

"They're supposed to know something's going on, that's the point of your army. Last year's siege was an unfortunate setback, nothing more. We have spent the winter gathering an army large and competent enough to try again."

"The rumor is that Hingast is dead."

"Just rumor. He is alive and well, I assure you."

Nijen only just restrained a shudder. It was impossible to like the man sat in his study and equally difficult to trust him. Yet trust him he must, for without him Nijen would still be roving the lands selling his sword to the highest bidder. "It is only a matter of time before they decide they want to try to replace me, or else send one of the Gifted."

The other man snorted in contempt.

The Mametain's dark eyes sparkled with anger. "The Gifted may be easy for *you* to deal with, but not for me. I'm a swordsman, not a sorcerer."

"The opportunity was offered." Long, iron-gray hair swayed as he shook his head, his blue eyes boring into Nijen. "I have something for you."

A pocket suddenly bulged as he put his hand into it. As if something had only that moment appeared. Sorcery had just been used.

Nijen stared at his companion's hand. "A bottle."

The other man smiled. "You might call it essence of sorcery. Rub a small amount onto your hands, make a throwing motion... like so... and a ball of fire. Sufficient to defend yourself, I suggest."

"The throwing motion is necessary?" asked Nijen.

"For an adept, no. But you are not an adept."

Nijen leaned forward and took the gift. "Essence of sorcery?" He looked as if the bottle might melt into his hand.

"Only two living can make it." The smile widened. "Be warned, anything you produce can be deflected or even reflected back at you." His voice dropped to a conspiratorial whisper. "A rebounding flame made from this essence will have very unpleasant consequences." The man abruptly stood and his voice returned to normal. "Continue as before, extract information from the spies and let Tektu kill them if necessary." A small frown furrowed his brow for a moment, as if he was unsure exactly how Tektu could do the things she did. "When Marka and her allies finally move against you, I'll be ready to move against them. Be well."

Nijen saw something briefly spin in the air and glimpsed a tent interior. He looked into the startled eyes of a young woman before his companion was gone and he was alone.

He carefully put the bottle on his desk. Visits from Dervra were supposed to reassure him; he was yet to feel reassured from any meeting. If anything, he felt worse.

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## **V: The Mission**

"I understand someone wasted her winter teaching you to read and write."

Neptarik-y-Balrus stared at Morran Fynn and wondered why one of Marcus Vintner's clerks should make him so uneasy. Not wanting to speak, he nodded his head. Not only had Tahena Mithon taught him his letters, but she had also tried to find him a wife.

Sandev's own sylph - Caya - had turned her nose up at him. She had her own worries and two other male sylphs to chase her affections. Not that she seemed particularly interested in them, either.

Breeding female sylphs were often very choosy when it came to a husband; most found by Tahena knew Neptarik was a gambler and believed he could never stay with just one wife. Or two. They were friendly, but no more.

Neptarik needed no encouragement to keep practicing his letters; his literacy had opened doors to a new world. This new skill must be utilized as much as possible.

He was not alone in the clerk's study.

Staff-Captain Balnus was Neptarik's owner and stood beside the scout, together with Verdin Vintner, son of a claimant to the Markan Throne. Son of a *dead* claimant to the Markan Throne. A young man who apparently wanted to cover himself with glory while reuniting the Empire.

So long as it was only glory he covered himself with and not blood. And if blood, preferably not Neptarik's.

Fynn's desk was at the opposite end of the room from the fire and visitors had to sit facing him, their backs to the fire.

Another sylph was present, curled up on a rug before the open fire. Neptarik could not see much of her, except that she was rather plainly dressed. She probably belonged to Fynn and the scout thought she was lucky to spend her time asleep.

He glanced up as Balnus placed a protective hand on his shoulder.

"He learned well and quickly," he said, expression daring Fynn to say anything different.

Fynn nodded. "His Majesty is concerned by news received from the Overseas Office of Trenvera."

Neptarik stared. The Majesty Fynn referred to was not Zenepha, for he was always named. He spoke of Marcus Vintner.

Fynn continued. "The Mametain of Re Taura plans invasion. Given his location, there are only three possible targets: Trenvera, Sandester or Calcan. Most likely Trenvera."

Neptarik eyed Fynn as if he had never before seen him. He was not a remarkable man; anyone might pass him several times a day and never remember or notice. His expression was neutral, no threat to anyone. His clothing was clean and plain, with nothing to mark him out in any way. But he discussed these threats as if he had a right to know of them. No ordinary clerk.

Fynn continued. "Trenvera's spies in Re Taura have an unfortunate habit of disappearing. The King has decided to send no more." He sniffed. "Plans should always be reevaluated whenever an agent is lost."

Neptarik exchanged a look with his owner.

Verdin nodded. "Prince Mikel is Trenvera's spymaster."

"That may be so."

Neptarik changed his mind about Fynn's unremarkableness. Those pale-blue eyes were as flint as Verdin spoke. He looked over his shoulder at the sylph sleeping in front of the fire.

"There is something His Majesty wants us to do?" asked Balnus.

Fynn steeped his fingers. "We must establish the Mametain's intentions and to do that, we must send people to Re Taura. Infiltrating Castle Beren is no easy task and I don't recommend sending a human to do it, as they have all been compromised."

"So you will send a sylph." Balnus's eyes hardened and his grip tightened on Neptarik's shoulder. "My sylph."

Fynn inclined his head. "There is a steady turnover of sylph servants in Castle Beren. Many leave, or ask to be released from service. Some may even run away. Who knows why; they're not mistreated. But they *are* frightened of something or someone there. They prefer to work the hard way, rather than enjoy an easier time in domestic service. Either way, the turnover of sylphs is higher than of humans, which means it is easier to insert a sylph. But I need an exceptional sylph and there are not many of those."

Neptarik's earpoints twitched in pride.

Fynn smiled. "A sylph used to operating alone, which means a scout. A courageous sylph. Is that a field commendation stud in his collar? Thought so. A sylph who knows which plans to steal, so one who is literate. My list of candidates has one name on it."

"You can't have him," said Balnus.

"When do I start?" asked Neptarik, at the same moment.

Fynn inclined his head, as sylph and owner responded in opposite ways. Neptarik wondered if the man had guessed his response.

"Your protectiveness is commendable," Fynn told Balnus. "Which is why you will travel with Neptarik. You must *not* attempt to enter the Mametain's service."

"Why do you need me?" asked Verdin.

"There is unrest among the population. It seems they are not altogether happy with the new Mametain. We want to discover what happened to the old one and his family."

Verdin nodded. "You want to replace the existing Mametain."

"With the old one, yes. I'm not suggesting you claim a new throne."

Verdin spread his hands. "My loyalties are to Marka."

"Glad to hear it. If you accept this assignment, I will arrange more detailed briefings for each of you. Everything we know. Have I picked the right people?"

"When do I start?" repeated Neptarik. His eyes danced, earpoints bolt upright in anticipation of adventure.

"I'm up for it," added Verdin.

Balnus sighed. "Answer the question. When do we start?"

Fynn gave another smile. "In a few days. I'll send for you later this evening, when you will be briefed in more detail."

Fynn watched them leave his study. Only Neptarik glanced at the still sleeping sylph as he left. The clerk leaned forward on his arms.

"Well, Smudge?"

The sylph who had spent the entire time before the fire sat up the moment the door closed behind the visitors. The dark-blue birthmark after which she was named was quite prominent in this light, looking like an ink stain that spread across her right cheek from nose to ear. Spots of it were visible on her earpoint. "The boy is impressive, *enya*," she replied. "I told you he was."

Fynn's smile was warm. "How could I function as spymaster without you? You've done very well to bring those three to my attention. Choca tonight."

Smudge grinned. She had said what she must and needed say no more.

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## **VI: Shadow Riders**

Fared Amel Granton leaned forward to better hear the Wise One's whispered words.

Only a select few in Kelthane boasted a properly Markan name, instead of the more usual *that*, or son of, between given and parental name. For more than two centuries, these few and their descendants had helped protect their adopted homeland from the attentions of the less savory. They helped defend a people who sheltered and succored them in return.

Their ancestors had come from Marka, commanded to leave the city by the last Emperor, as the empire collapsed about them. They were the Shadow Riders.

Fared was their Captain, a post he would hold for life. The Shadow Riders restricted themselves to no more than six hundred. Many were now indigenous Kelthanians, as those of Markan descent grew rarer. None of the Riders had ever seen

Marka. *Honor, Service and Glory* was their ancient motto, sworn with one hand gripping a dagger until blood was drawn.

A spasm seized the Wise One and she reached up with suddenly strong arms to grasp Fared's shirt collar, watery blue eyes clear as ice.

"You must go east," she whispered.

Fared leaned further forward to catch her words. Instructions from a vision? After all, she was Gifted.

"Home?" Fared's own blue-gray eyes brightened.

"East." Those eyes were insistent. "Seek the banner-sylph."

"A banner with a sylph emblem on it?"

The Wise One shook her head. "Sylph as bannerman. Sylph with a warrior's fire. Seek him. The banner-sylph."

Fared blinked. Sylphs did not carry banners and they were not warriors. Sylphs took no part in fighting.

"I don't understand." Fared shook his head. "What sort of sylph is a bannerman?"

The Wise One wrapped herself in her blanket and fell asleep.

Fared turned to his companion. "What did you make of that?"

Samrita moved closer; her earpoints twitched and her hazel sylph-slit eyes held a thoughtful expression. Not only had the gwerin seen Marka, it was her birthplace.

"Up to you whether you follow her counsel. Her visions have always proved true before." She shrugged. "Not being Gifted, I cannot help you in your decision. She might tell us more when she wakes again."

"Just when I could use gwerin advice most, you fall silent on me." Fared admired Samrita; she remembered the last days before the Empire fell.

The gwerin grimaced. "Perhaps it is time to go home," she said. "If Kelthane can survive without us. We seek this... banner-sylph. A warrior." She shook her head in disgust. Warlike sylphs were as much a mystery to her as to Fared. "One with a warrior's fire."

"Home." Fared ignored the gwerin's spoken thoughts. He could not contain a delighted smile. "The Jewel of the World. Marka."

Samrita nodded. Unlike in Kelthane, sylphs and gwerins did not remain free in Marka.

"Yes," she replied vaguely. "Home."

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## VII: Haema

Nicolfer's carriage turned into one of the many quiet backstreets in Eldova and halted outside the music shop, unobtrusively squeezed between two warehouses. The few people out took one look at the plain black carriage and hurried about their chores. They did not want to know what business one of the Prefect's agents might have with a lowly music man.

"Wait here," commanded Nicolfer, as she stepped from the carriage.

The coachman inclined his head.

Inside, musical instruments lined the walls and a man looked up from his work. A breeding female sylph worked alongside him, her pen scratching on parchment. Her blue tongue protruded and her earpoints were bolt upright in concentration as she worked.

After a quick glance, she ignored the newcomer.

"May I help you?" The man had a pleasant expression; interested enquiry shone in his eyes and a slight smile turned his lips.

"You are Jinsla?" asked Nicolfer.

The man drew himself a little more upright. "Jinsla Renkra, composer and builder of musical instruments. I also sell sheet music. I have composed-

"Among other things, you have composed several pieces that might be construed as treason." Nicolfer smiled. "And I am told your sylph is literate."

The sylph looked up from her work and her earpoints slanted forward. As she took in Nicolfer properly for the first time, her eyes widened.

Jinsla was thrown off balance. People never came to his shop to accuse him of treason. "Haema." He gestured to the sylph. "She's not literate in the true sense of the word. But she is intelligent."

"She can read and write musical notation." It was not a question.

"Yes. May I offer alovak?"

"No need." Nicolfer's jet eyes glittered. She watched Haema blink and put her pen down. The sylph looked from Jinsla to Nicolfer and back.

"What is it you want with Haema?" asked Jinsla.

"Just to borrow her for a vital task. I'm sure His Majesty will overlook your treason when that task is complete."

A look of horror crossed the sylph's face and her earpoints wilted.

"What task?" asked Jinsla.

"Our enemies use sylphs as scouts. They communicate with each other by whistles and we need to learn what they say. Our codebreakers cannot hear the whistles as they are pitched too high for human hearing. Our sylphs can hear the whistles, but we have so far been unable to train any to break codes. So we need a sylph to write the whistles in musical notation. Then our codebreakers can work on them."

"You intend taking Haema away." Jinsla was aware of his sylph's distress.

"I'm afraid so, she must be in the field to hear the whistles. I hope she is not needed for very long."

"I can't let you take her."

"Very well. But your next visit will be from the City Patrol who want you to answer charges of treason."

"Treason?" Jinsla's eyes widened. "A piece of *music*, treason?"

Haema put a hand on her owner's arm. "I will do it, *enya*," she said, only a slight tremor in her voice. "For you."

Nicolfer smiled and lifted a purse. "There is remuneration."

Jinsla relented, more for fear of treason than because his sylph had spoken or a heavy purse was offered. "You can have her tomorrow, when I-"

"Now," insisted Nicolfer. "Anything she needs I can buy."

Jinsla and Haema exchanged a look. The composer slumped and shook his head.

"I'm sorry, but this is necessary." Nicolfer turned to Haema. "My carriage is outside. Get in it, please. I'll join you in a moment."

Haema gave her owner's hand a last squeeze before she left the shop, feet dragging. Nicolfer watched as the sylph climbed into the carriage.

"Close the blinds," suggested Nicolfer. "You never know who's watching. Don't want to be robbed of this, do you?" She hefted the purse again.

Jinsla blinked before he complied, aware of Haema's frightened gaze from the carriage. He forced a smile.

As promised, Nicolfer was not very long and she gave the sylph a compassionate look as she climbed into the carriage.

"What you are about to do may save lives and help Eldova defeat her enemies." She lifted her voice. "Drive on!"

The carriage jerked forward and Haema looked over her shoulder at her old life. She whimpered.

"You can stop that," said Nicolfer. "You'll rejoin your owner when I've finished with you, I promise."

Nicolfer, aware of what Haema was looking at, drew her cloak over her purse, as fat and heavy as before. The sylph's earpoints wilted completely. She was intelligent enough to realize that no money had changed hands.

Nicolfer forced a smile, wanting to put the sylph at ease. "We shouldn't be too long, I promise."

Behind them, the music shop was silent, and lifeless.

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## Chapter 1

### Hunting

Banner-Sergeant Yochan looked at the heavens and shivered in the pre-dawn gloom as his breath clouded above. Shooting stars whizzed through the night sky and the soldier watched with interested curiosity. Exactly one year ago, on a day as cold as this, two claimants to the then vacant Markan throne had clashed. That battle triggered events in which soldiers from both armies were now caught, this time as allies, if not exactly friends.

Done staring, he ducked into his commander's tent, the only one with an uncovered light-crystal.

"Good morning, Banner-Sergeant."

Yochan grunted what might have been the correct response. Lance-Captain Dekran's advancement from lieutenant was only confirmed immediately before they left Marka, months after his field promotion.

"News from the sylphs, Sergeant?"

"Not yet, Sir. Belaika can't be too far away from them now."

"Good."

"There has been a lot of pinging," continued Yochan. "But we're still out of contact." Pinging was the term used by sylphs for a short ranging whistle, to ensure they were still in touch with each other, and in the correct positions. It was also used to keep contact with other patrols.

Dekran grimaced. "If I'd thought our orders would have brought us this far west, I would've insisted on fully trained scouts."

Yochan nodded. "We've only got Belaika."

"Fhionnen's not bad. He can at least compose messages and not just pass them on."

"True. But all the hardest tasks fall to Belaika and that's not fair."

Dekran smiled. "You seem to have taken quite a shine to our leader's sylph."

"We have an agreement, but this is more a question of fairness."

"What can we do? It takes five years to train a sylph up to the required standard and our *emperor* was in a hurry to increase the corps' size."

Silence stretched between them. The emperor Dekran referred to was Zenepha, a surprise candidate for the vacant Markan throne. A sylph. Neither man could quite believe it. That a sylph was emperor in Marka caused consternation, ridicule and awe in equal measures everywhere they went. A sylph ruling humans was an idea so preposterous, that nobody quite knew how to deal with it, human *or* sylph. Belief systems had been stood on their heads.

"We should have asked for wild sylphs," said Yochan. "They're not too bad either. A sight more independent minded, anyway."

"And don't complain so much. That Samel was whinging something about a bath last night. Baths!"

Yochan laughed. "He was joking."

"You can never tell with city boys. And the ones left in the corps show greatest promise."

"They do. Just not trained enough, Sir. Fhionnen doesn't whine."

Dekran smiled. "Doesn't speak much either. Ever get the feeling that he ended up with us because his owner wanted to see the back of him?"

Yochan shrugged. A sylph's past was irrelevant so far as the scouts were concerned. Only the now mattered. "We need to find out what's happening further east, Sir. For all we know, Hingast's mob has already regrouped."

"Is it still Hingast's mob? The man is dead, Yochan. Forget rumor; the man's bones hang outside Marka's gates for all to see."

"Of course, Sir. But if his men believe he's alive, then he may as well be."

"If the lot in front of us turn east, then we can assume the rest have regrouped," said Dekran. "So far, they're just gadding aimlessly about the countryside."

The conversation was interrupted when a scout, barely recognizable as a sylph under his paint, entered.

"Belaika has found the men we hunt," said the newcomer.

"Thank you, Fhionnen." Dekran smiled. "What else did Belaika have to say?"

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From his elevated vantage, Belaika stared at the army. Three thousand men were difficult to hide, but these Eldovans were surprisingly good. Since learning about sylph scouts, they had got better.

Just not quite good enough.

A small smile ghosted across the sylph's face before he was serious again. These men were resting before moving on again.

So long as he avoided silhouetting himself against the skyline, he would not be seen. Gray, green and brown paint helped camouflage him, but stillness was his best defense. Vivid black slashes crossed his chest and face, but they were more for show than concealment.

He pinged to ensure Samel was still in position before sending a more detailed report. Three thousand Eldovans, with no war-machines, but certainly a lot more force at their disposal than the Markan patrol had. His message was acknowledged. Faintly, he heard it passed on. Bar perfect.

Belaika wriggled away from his place. He found better cover, from where he could keep an eye on the enemy. The Eldovans would have scouts - even if they were only humans - so he must be wary not to blunder into any. Had his sylph companions been trained to the proper standard, he would feel happier this close to the enemy. For now, the dangerous task was his alone.

Worse, they were alone. A patrol of one hundred men and five scouts could only avoid battle against three thousand, or else show how to die gallantly. Belaika was not ready to die yet, gallantly or otherwise. Dekran had brought his detachment so far west, they had lost contact with all other patrols and news of events nearer Marka.

He waited for a response from Dekran.

When it came, the whistle was stronger; Samel had closed the gap a little. Belaika hoped the instructions reached him correctly.

*Command to Belaika. Stay with target, follow and report course changes.*

Belaika scowled as he whistled. *Sounds like another night in the open for me.*

*Choca tonight*, taunted Samel.

That was surely a joke. It was not funny. *Remember to save mine*, whistled Belaika.

*Not a chance, brother.*

Then, he saw sylphs in the enemy camp.

There was nothing special about them, just ordinary infertiles. Probably officers' servants, dressed in the usual garb of plain work smocks. But that had not caught Belaika's attention.

What they were doing showed how well the Eldovans had adapted.

At the first whistle, they tumbled out of their tents. Some headed for the center of the encampment and others to the sides. A soldier was with each sylph as she pointed into the forest. Belaika stiffened.

Difficult to tell, but he suspected they pointed to where his orders had just been whistled from. Towards Samel.

He whistled a warning and another message before abandoning his lookout point. He must find another.

\*\*\*

*"Doneya!"*

Lance-Captain Dekran turned from the morning inspection of his men as Fhionnen ran to him.

"Message?" He had never seen this sylph so animated.

Fhionnen nodded. "Belaika and Samel have changed position. The Eldovans have found a way to pinpoint them when they whistle."

Dekran's eyes widened and he drew the excited scout to one side. "How?"

"They use sylphs to show our positions. They stand in different places in the camp and point."

"Triangulation." Dekran shook his head and resisted the urge to swear. Sylphs were the one advantage he had over the Eldovans. Or used to have. "They send horsemen out to run the scouts down?"

Fhionnen nodded. "So says Belaika. He and Samel have moved."

Dekran nodded. "Thank you. Keep me informed."

*"Se bata."*

Dekran stared into the distance and hoped the sylphs were capable enough to avoid capture. He could not afford to lose one.

\*\*\*

Sandev scrubbed the pot hard. Her hands were sore from the work and she wished her skin was as tough as that of the small infertiles working alongside her.

She had spent the entire winter a prisoner, but could not contemplate escape while so far from Marka. There was no guarantee her plan to break free would actually work. The block that prevented her from using the Gift held, but she had worked out how it was made and certain she could break it when needed.

She was so far west she doubted if she could easily find her way home. Except by using the Gift. It showed her captors were confident she could not break the block.

Dervra - one of those captors - was away with the bulk of the Eldovan army, doubtless working on the next part of his plot. Nicolfer came and went, but spent a lot of her time with General Mirrin's army. Sandev wished she would stay with Dervra and leave her alone.

Mirrin held frequent conferences with his officers and sergeants, which sometimes involved Dervra and Nicolfer. Tactics and plans were never discussed while Sandev was present, and if not for the sylphs, she would have less idea what was being planned.

A small smile played about Sandev's mouth.

Most officers and a few sergeants had their own sylphs; there were almost two hundred in the camp. They made themselves useful and were always discreet. Which in turn meant that the blue-skinned creatures were all but invisible to the leaders, who spoke freely where long ears could eavesdrop.

Sandev did not doubt that every sylph was loyal to her owner. But there were six exceptions, ignored even more than the rest.

Deaths were inevitable in an army. Accidents, disease and enemy action all helped whittle down numbers. Immune to most human diseases and not expected to fight the enemy, there were sometimes sylph "orphans". They were usually sent out of the way west, waiting to be sent home. As Mirrin's camp was the furthest west, it held six of these unfortunate sylphs. When Mirrin's army came into contact with Eldovan home patrols again, these six would leave.

But for now, they were useful to Sandev.

Orphaned or not, they must still work where needed and they often served alovak during meetings, because few sylphs liked to be near Dervra or Nicolfer. Not that the orphans enjoyed the proximity, but there was nobody to stand up on their behalf. At these meetings, their presence ignored, they heard everything.

Sandev had not remained idle while a captive. Seizing the opportunity to use these sylphs for gathering information, she looked after the six because nobody else did. Oh, the quartermaster ensured they were fed, clothed and kept clean, and made sure they were healthy, but that was all he did.

But these six sylphs also had emotional needs.

Sandev offered kind words, a shoulder to cry on for those recently bereaved and sometimes stole choca for them. In return, the six fed Sandev every scrap of information that came their way.

She had learned that the plan was for some "country out east" (as the sylphs put it) to attack Marka or her allies, and get a reaction. While Marka's forces were otherwise engaged, the Eldovans would fall on the city from the west and north with what was now a superior army. The plan sounded effective and Sandev was desperate to get word to the city.

She felt a gentle touch on her arm.

"I'm sorry." Sandev hastily passed the pot to Gajaran. One of the orphans, it was unlikely she enjoyed working for the sake of it. Sandev began washing the next pot.

The sylph dried the pot quickly and waited patiently for the next. Gajaran had lost her owner during the siege of Marka. Raw with grief, she had been handed over to Mirrin's group during the winter and now waited to return home. Like most infertiles, she looked eager to finish her chores.

There might be another reason why Gajaran wanted to finish quickly. The sylphs were wary of Sandev for the same reason they were of Dervra and Nicolfer. They could sense the Gift flowing through her, even if she was temporarily blocked from it. They avoided practitioners, whether sorcerers or those blessed with the Gift.

Gajaran stiffened as another sylph joined them. The newcomer carried two dirty plates which she washed herself. Shashi belonged to General Mirrin.

Plainly dressed in a work smock, no different from that other sylphs wore, she enjoyed as much influence among the sylphs here as Jenn did in Marcus Vintner's army. Her collar was gold and studded with several jewels, unlike the dull metal the camp sylphs wore.

"You might like to know that my owner expects Nicolfer tonight." Sympathy glittered in her eyes and her earpoints twitched.

"Thank you." Sandev saw no reason to be anything but polite to Shashi. Gold and jewels or not, that was still a collar. And it *was* useful to know Nicolfer was due to return. She'd been gone two days. No sylph dared serve Nicolfer any longer than she must, so Sandev had learned almost nothing new about her captor.

Done with her chore, Shashi nodded and left them.

Gajaran glowered. "All right for her, she is safe with her owner."

Sandev shook her head. "Nobody is safe from Nicolfer," she replied.

Gajaran stiffened and her earpoints turned. "Whistles," she said. Something akin to rage flashed across her face.

Sandev tried not to smile. The sylphs had heard whistling off and on for the best part of the day, which meant Markan scouts had found them. Soldiers friendly to her were not far away. Sadly, she knew it was unlikely to be a very large Markan army. They were too far west. But whistling meant at least two scouts.

Many of the officers' sylphs already pointed towards the source of the whistling. Horsemen rode out, hoping to run the scouts down before they had chance to move out of harm's way.

"They will catch one of the *dursanonecul* soon or late." Gajaran did not point, but it was clear that she wanted to see a scout captured. Her earpoints wilted.

The camp sylphs called the scouts *dursanonecul*: devils. They were terrified of the scouts, who were sylphs actively involved with an army. Gajaran especially reviled and feared sylph scouts, blaming them for her owner's death.

Both Nicolfer and Mirrin wanted to question a sylph scout. But to do that, they must first capture one.

Sandev hoped they never succeeded.

"They might never catch any," she murmured. Gajaran gave her a level look, the nearest Sandev ever got from an orphaned sylph to open disagreement.

There was another stir in the camp.

"Nicolfer is here," breathed Sandev.

Gajaran's look grew more sympathetic.

Four men carried Nicolfer's sedan, which was set down outside her tent.

Another of the sylph orphans stepped forward, but was curtly dismissed. Nicolfer stared around imperiously and her jet eyes glittered.

Sandev tried to remain unnoticed and for once, Nicolfer did not call for her attendance. She was usually harried all day and half the night, waiting hand and foot on her captor. The sylphs disapproved - serving was their role - but there was little they could do except offer sympathy.

The dismissed sylph crossed to join Gajaran.

"Hello, Tula." Sandev smiled at the newcomer.

Dusk gathered around them.

"Pots done already?" asked Tula.

Gajaran nodded. "And the laundry. Some of it's not fit for burning. Why don't they...?" Her head came up. She and Tula looked at each other, then at Sandev.

"What?"

"Short whistle; very short." Tula stared into the darkness.

"Like he got stopped," added Gajaran, satisfaction in her tone. "Maybe caught." Her eyes were solemn for Sandev's benefit, but her earpoints lashed with unsuppressed glee.

"Surely not?" Sandev tried to peer into the surrounding forest, without success. Like everybody else, she was forced to wait until the riders returned.

The captive scout was slung unceremoniously across a saddle before the rider. Sandev moved closer so she could see more than just a shape. Long legs - painted gray, green and brown - dangled down one side of the horse. As the horse turned, she saw black slashes of paint. Only younger scouts wore black as part of their camouflage scheme.

Her heart pounded. Surely not *her* sylph scout? They could not be so short of scouts to send Janin into the field?

A crowd of humans and sylphs gathered to watch the rider show off his prize. "Firedrake trod on 'im," said the rider. "Even then, had he not squeaked, I'd not 'ave found 'im."

He lifted the upper end of the scout and let him slide from the horse. Unable to stand unsupported, the sylph collapsed and squealed as he scrabbled in the dirt.

Gajaran looked at the captive and emotions flickered in her eyes. Sympathy was not among them. Most of the other sylphs looked at the moaning scout with a mixture of loathing and terror.

"That's a sylph scout?" General Mirrin looked inquisitively at the heap beside the horse. "Is that leg broken?"

Sandev almost stepped forward, then was pleased she had not moved. Nicolfer put her hands to both the sylph's legs. The unfortunate creature shrank back from her touch.

"Nothing broken," she said.

Sandev masked a sigh of relief. Sylph bones were light and extremely supple; even now she winced when she saw how far an arm or leg would bend. Broken limbs were rare in sylphs, but when it happened, the bone rarely broke cleanly, but splintered like green wood. The massive internal bleeding such breaks caused was usually fatal.

"Where did you find him, Camanda?" continued Mirrin.

"Closer than we'd like," said Camanda, the man who had captured the scout. "And it was luck we caught 'im."

"So you said." Mirrin gave a mirthless smile.

"Stake him out and I'll speak with him in the morning," continued Nicolfer. "Make sure he is secure."

Mirrin nodded to his yeoman. "See to it, Taved. Come, Shashi."

The yeoman gave orders and two men hammered a stake deep into the ground. The unfortunate scout was chained to it by a wrist and given water, but no food. The small crowd lost interest and melted away, though some sylphs lingered longer.

Once the humans were gone, the captive immediately began to look about. He gave the watching sylphs a savage, feral grin that drove most of them away.

"Beast." Gajaran sounded bitter. "He's in the best place now." She and Tula moved away.

Sandev stayed, if she kept her distance. A small smile turned her lips. Whatever had happened, this boy had not lost hope. Several soldiers watched the scout try repeatedly to uproot the stake. She doubted he would be succeed; these stakes secured the tents against even gales.

At least it was *not* Janin, though she suspected she knew who the Eldovans had caught.

Sandev waited until the guards moved further away, and everybody else had lost interest. She carefully picked her way towards him.

The scout's head swiveled toward her long before she thought she might be noticed, especially in darkness. Or perhaps he sensed her. His eyes glowed faintly in the gloom and grew brighter the nearer she came.

"Sandev-ya." The sylph inclined his head.

As he spoke, Sandev's suspicions were confirmed.

"Belaika?" Her voice almost squeaked. "You're the last scout I expected to get caught." She sensed his embarrassment.

"Lucky chance," he muttered.

"How's that leg?"

"Sore." Belaika's eyes glittered with wariness.  
"Wish I could do something, but I'm trapped somehow."  
"It is not broken." If anything, the scout sounded warier.  
"Are you in contact with Marka? Can you get a message out?"  
"I can try. Not in range of the city though, we moved too far west."  
"Not tonight. Not yet. Any more scouts nearby?"  
Belaika nodded, perhaps having exhausted his stock of words for tonight.  
"I have information that *must* reach the city."  
The scout inclined his head, but said nothing further.  
Sandev gripped his shoulder. "Remember you have friends here."

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Belaika's eyes betrayed nothing as he watched Sandev meander away. He remembered her of course; she had helped with the plan to break an innocent man out of jail. But she served Marka's interest only, which meant he doubted if he could fully trust her. As always, it was best to wait and see. If only the dull throb from his leg was gone. He managed to make himself comfortable and, after a whistle - quickly acknowledged - to let the others know he was still alive, fell asleep.

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Yochan listened while Fhionnen-y-Neffas reported to Dekran. He watched his commander's reaction carefully and already formulated his own plans.

Yochan was as startled as Dekran, but was better at hiding his reactions.

Fhionnen held Dekran's gaze easily; he was not easily intimidated. "Belaika is captured, *donenya*," he reported. "He is held by the enemy-"

"Yes, yes," interrupted Dekran, almost angrily, "I know what captured means."

Yochan saw Fhionnen's face go blank, though his earpoints shot upright in anger. Was this a defense the boy learned before becoming a scout? He held himself surprisingly well; most sylphs wilted before a human's anger.

Yochan stepped forward before angry words were spoken. "Sir, I suggest we take him back before they try to get information from him."

Dekran ignored his sergeant. "You have more to tell me, Fhionnen?"

The sylph nodded. "Belaika is injured and cannot walk. He was trodden on and needs to recover."

"Then we won't mount a rescue just yet."

"Sir-"

"No, Yochan. I'm aware of your foolish promise to the boy, but the needs of the hundred men under my command must come first."

Even so, Dekran looked a touch indecisive and Yochan did not blame him. Marcus would probably take a dim view of the loss of his scout, especially if he stayed lost.

"If an opportunity presents itself, I'll do something," continued Dekran. "For now, we're forced to move closer to our enemy and use our scouts more." The lance-captain turned to Fhionnen. "Can Samel take over Belaika's task, or would you rather do it?"

Fhionnen's mouth worked soundlessly for a moment. "Better if I do it," he replied.

"Summon Mezhen to take over from you."

"*Se bata.*"

Yochan waited until the sylph was gone before turning to his commander.

"I must protest, Sir. We can snatch Belaika out of their hands tonight, before they make him more secure."

"Protest noted, Banner-Sergeant. But there will be no rescue attempt until after a thorough assessment of that army. That's an order."

Offended, Yochan stiffened. "*Se bata*," he hissed.

He left Dekran's tent and looked across the few fires in the camp. There were two men here who used to be scouts, until sylphs replaced humans in the role. He doubted if their skills had deserted them. No rescue attempt. But there was nothing to stop him from getting that assessment done. Yochan would see to that tonight.

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Belaika woke from a pleasant dream about flying just before dawn. His shoulders were stiff thanks to the chain that secured his wrists and his leg ached thanks to a heavy horse. He gave a feeble tug against the stake, but it held firm.

He glanced at the dried blood on his leg and wondered if it would support his weight. While he felt around the injury carefully, he heard a pinger that showed Fhionnen was now the nearest scout.

Unless Samel had got confused again, which would not surprise him.

Belaika was tempted to whistle, but wanted no trouble. Sylphs in the camp would know who made the noise and he doubted these were sympathetic towards him.

Although there was only a hint of light in the sky, the camp was already busy. A meal was prepared while men struck tents and packed equipment away. The army was getting ready to move on.

Feeling uneasy, he glanced the other way. A pair of jet eyes, so dark he could not tell iris from pupil, met his gaze levelly. Those eyes belonged to a youngish-looking woman with hair as dark as her eyes, who crouched before him. He held her gaze just long enough to show he was not cowed.

The woman was the cause of his unease; he sensed she could manipulate the power that both Gift and sorcery used. He knew her; he had been asked to find her in Marka.

His heart pounded.

"Tell me your name." The woman forced a smile.

"Belaika." The sylph bit off the rest; better that these people never learned his owner's name. His earpoints twitched; deceit was not his strongest point.

"No owner? Most sylphs are proud to speak their owner's name, why are you an exception? I am Nicolfer."

The scout swallowed nervously. He must be careful.

"Efforts to protect your owner's identity are futile, Belaika-y-Marcus; I know exactly who he is. And now I know who you are, the rest of your secrets are mine. Or will be."

What else did Nicolfer know about him? Bad enough that she knew him at all. She was not alone; a female sylph stood behind her.

Nicolfer saw where he was looking and gestured off-handedly. "This is Haema-y-Jinsla. She reads and writes musical notation."

A small frown crossed Belaika's face. Haema looked terrified and her earpoints were wilted.

"She has written down most of the whistles we heard yesterday. We know how they go." She pursed her lips and gave an imitation of Belaika's ping, only pitched for human ears and with the sounds all wrong. Another small smile. "Of course, we do not know what they *mean*." The smile was gone as if spat away. "Which is where we need your help."

Belaika's earpoints slanted forwards and were still. His mouth firmed. "I will not aid you." He had no idea what the whistle Nicolfer had demonstrated meant either. He looked at Haema, who stared at the ground.

"Oh good, you want to resist." Nicolfer made an almost apologetic gesture with her hands. "Let me see. Torture? Humiliation perhaps?" The small smile was back. "Many here would enjoy hearing you howl. You scouts have caused people here so much trouble. But I do so abhor violence against sylphs. Usually. A pity to damage such a fine example-" She touched Belaika's cheek with a finger and he shrank back. "-and such actions would reduce your ransom value."

Determination faded from his earpoints.

Nicolfer gave a delighted clap of her hands and a small giggle. "I know! Eleka. Of course."

"No!"

"Beautiful wife you have. Acid perhaps? Missing limbs? Would you like to return to that?"

Belaika snarled at his tormentor.

"Foolish boy." Nicolfer's jet eyes were hard. "Perhaps not Eleka. I'm sure you're not too bothered about your infertile daughters - cruel of you sylphs, that - but what about Callie and Sallie? Slow, painful deaths? Salafisa perhaps? Lovely gwerin, but I never did like them, far too intelligent. They see too deeply and say too much. Unlike you full-bloods, who see deeply and keep your mouths shut. She would suffer long, boy. I would return the corpse for you to view what you caused. Yes, what *you* caused, by your own, stubborn stupidity."

*"Ne! Dson an, dson san!"*

Listening to the screamed epithets, Nicolfer sat back and giggled in pure delight. She had not expected so much pleasure today.

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Belaika was not the only one awake early. The two human scouts Yochan had sent out woke him just before dawn. They conferred in whispers in his tent.

"Belaika is held in the center of the camp," explained the older scout, Felnar. "The perimeter is closely guarded, which means they learned lessons from our raids."

Udan, the second scout, nodded. "A sylph might slip past unnoticed, but we'd have no chance."

Even though the sylphs had replaced almost all the human scouts in Marcus's army, there was little animosity about it from those forced to learn new skills. Not now, anyway. These two had been among the best scouts and had worked with Yochan for many years. Even they recognized the advantage of sylphs.

"We might force a way through, but we'd take casualties in any rescue attempt," added Felnar.

Yochan shook his head. "No rescue. The Boss has said no."

Felnar shrugged. "Probably wise. Even if a sylph slipped through, he couldn't free Belaika from that chain."

"We must think of something," insisted Yochan. "We're not going to leave him to the enemy."

"Of course not." Felnar and Udan exchanged a look that suggested they thought there was little choice but to abandon Belaika to his fate.

Yochan sighed. This would be difficult, but he always kept his promises. There would be a way.

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## Chapter 2

### Marka

Petan looked across round the table at his companion and smiled, though that smile did not touch his hazel eyes. He wore a work smock, woolen trousers and cracked boots that suggested a laborer rather than a soldier. Nothing to say that he was - or had been - a sergeant in Hingast's recently defeated army. Which was just as well considering his beard fanned to his chest, a style that no Eldovan officer would countenance.

The alovak house fronted one of the wider side streets in Marka. Petan and his companion were sat out the front, trying to ignore the spring wind. The third chair for this table had been pushed away, to deter anyone else from joining them.

His companion was unknown in this alovak house and was similarly dressed to Petan. He had used a plant sap - or possibly paint, in which case he was a fool - to dye his hair black. When he first met Councilor Brendin Jendran, the man's hair was sandy, almost red. He could do nothing about his dark-blue eyes, though these were typically Markan.

An idea the councilor had probably borrowed from the sylph scouts.

Petan tugged irritably at his beard, though the itching stage was long past. "There's no need for this," he growled.

"If not for that sylph you didn't kill last year, you'd not need it," retorted Brendin.

"I tried," said Petan, defensively.

"And failed, or else he made a miraculous recovery. I don't believe in undead sylphs."

"He looked pretty dead to me."

"He looks pretty bloody healthy now."

Petan changed the subject before he got angry. He might not have killed Janin-allegedly-no-owner, but he *was* very effective at finishing off stropy humans. "What are the latest instructions?" Most who patronized this alovak house were more sympathetic to Hingast's cause than Zenepha's, or else were plain disreputable, but discretion came easily. It was one reason they were sat outside, despite the season.

"A sylph named Tangan was left behind. He's in Sandev's house and we want him out."

Petan nodded. "You expect me to wander into the home of one of the most powerful Gifted and steal something guarded by another of the most powerful Gifted. Not to mention a man who acts as though he was born with a sword in his hands. And several sylphs in the building, including the one I believed dead, who will doubtless recognize me the moment I walk in."

Brendin's smile had remained in place too long to be genuine. "You don't have to be there in person. I'm sure you know many who are more than capable."

"And if this sylph makes a noise?"

The smile was gone now. Without it, those dark-blue eyes were very cold. "The neck arteries are in the same place in sylphs as they are in humans."

"So, an assassination. Why is this sylph important?"

"All you need know is that we want him back. Preferably alive, but dead will do." Brendin threw a coin onto the table. "For the alovak."

Petan stared at the table for some time after the Councilor had gone, his mind awhirl. Why was a *sylph* so important?

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Marcus Vintner leaned on his fists and stared at the large-scale map spread across the table. His gaze flickered all over, pausing briefly at each flag marking the positions of his own detachments and the scattered groups of Hingast's army. The map covered from Eldova in the west to Re Taura in the east; Frodger in the north to the Trading Council's lands in the south. Known positions were marked in red and estimated positions in blue. Flags marking Eldovan positions were distinguished by a black border. The further from Marka, the more blue flags.

The map was so large, that two old dining tables had been joined together to hold it. The map room now occupied one of the smaller dining halls in the palace, with room to fit in up to thirty people at a time. The paintings had been removed and replaced by maps, if smaller-scale than that on the table.

Sylph scouts were thinly spread: all available trained scouts - and many part-trained ones - were in the field and staying there longer than was really fair. Complaints and grumbles would begin soon, if they had not already. But Marcus must tolerate detachments straying out of whistle range for now.

Marcus was not alone in the room. Emperor Zenepha was far more knowledgeable about what he was looking at than six months before. Mikhan Annada, Zenepha's War Minister and Marshal of Marka, stood beside the emperor. Annada was also Marshal of Sandester and one of Zenepha's closest confidants. Too close, in Marcus's view, worried that his already too-small influence on the Emperor was slipping away.

He hoped everybody remembered who had won last year's battle on Candin Plain. Annada's influence over Zenepha rankled.

Captain Mansard, commander of the Imperial Guard, and General Kelanus, again Field Commander, were at least Marcus's men, even if Kelanus used to serve under Annada. Captain Crallin of the City Guard was also present, but his only loyalty was to Marka.

The gwerin Silmarila stood just behind Zenepha, ready to whisper in the sylph's ear, though Marcus was certain she had no concept of military tactics. Because war was the subject, the ilven Djerana was conspicuous by her absence.

That surprised him, because ilven were allegedly the sephiroths' warriors. Little wonder that Siranva always seemed to be on the back foot. Although Grayar had assured him that ilven had more growing to do once called to the Father, Marcus failed to see what difference that could make. He could not put together the image of a fierce warrior with shy, inoffensive Djerana.

Jenn, belonging to Marcus since both were children, sat cross-legged on the floor, not wanting to be any further from her owner than necessary. Whenever he was away from Zandra and the children, Jenn kept herself near.

Supreme Councilor Olista was also missing, but his duties kept him elsewhere. Discussions here were no longer his concern.

"There is little change from our last meeting," said Marcus. "The Eldovan Army is still scattered, and all the pieces are moving. But they only move around and not away. To the best of our knowledge, Janost and Hanan are alive. General Mirrin lurks further west, beyond our communication lines."

There was a small stir; people were so used to sylph scouts that they forgot their limitations. Marcus continued.

"The enemy avoids contact, despite skirmishes. We are still to learn precisely who exercises overall command, but despite the rumors, it is definitely *not* Hingast. More worrying is that these groups have been reinforced with fresh men. Which

means they must be in contact with each other. We suspect either the Gifted or, more likely, sorcerers maintain communications between the groups."

Another small stir. Everyone knew there were rare individuals, born with an inborn ability, a gift from the Father of the Benefic Sephiroth. It was not sought, nor could it be learned by those without the Gift inborn. Those who sought such powers became sorcerers and their power was no gift, but inspired by the Malefic Sephiroth. It was human nature to seek power, so there were more sorcerers than Gifted, though both types were thankfully rare. Nobody liked the thought of such a person controlling an army.

"Bringing fresh men forward suggests they want to try again," rumbled Kelanus, his bass voice quiet.

"One of the patrols presently out of range should send a sylph within distance in the next day or so." Marcus ignored the interruption. "General Mirrin has also increased the size of his force."

"How?" Zenepha's voice was quiet.

"These things happen, Majesty," explained Kelanus. "Armies on foreign soil attract recruits. Lots of farmboys get bored staring at an ox's rear all day. We gain some, so do they."

"The Eldovans refuse contact, yet do not return home," said Mikhan. "Are they just taunting us?"

"We should chase them down, Majesty," said Kelanus, speaking to Zenepha. "If you would permit me-"

"No." Zenepha's voice was light yet firm. "We need you here, General Kelanus. Perhaps the General of Lances could be sent?"

Both Marcus and Kelanus smiled. The newly promoted General Kestan had more than proved his mettle during the siege.

"Perhaps, Majesty," agreed Kelanus, after a quick glance at Marcus.

Marcus noted Mikhan's scowl. The man hated anyone coming to Zenepha's attention without his approval. Mikhan would do anything to help Zenepha continue as Emperor and deny Marcus his birthright.

Zenepha turned to Crallin. "Have we uncovered or captured any more enemy agents in Marka?"

"They have gone to ground, Majesty. Only those already known to us have been brought in. We can't rule out the possibility of more - there are always traitors ready to be bought off or turned - and only one man known to us still evades capture."

"Petan?"

Crallin inclined his head. "Him, yes."

"Might Sallis ti Ath help?" Zenepha looked unsure whether ti Ath's name left a bad taste in his mouth or not.

"He's been busy." Crallin smiled. "We've not set him onto Petan. Yet."

"What are the intentions of Eldova's new ruler?" asked Zenepha.

Marcus spoke. "We don't know if Eldova *has* a new ruler. Representatives take a while to cross the continent in unsettled times. It's unlikely that there will be any change in policy. Hingast's uncle will press the claim I feel. And we heard that one of Hingast's wives is pregnant. She'll have birthed by now. If the child's a boy..." He spread his hands and shrugged.

"The way of humans," added Silmarila. "There will always be somebody to press a claim until the question of who sits the Throne of Mark is settled."

"The question *is* settled," interrupted Mikhan.

Marcus tried not to sigh.

Silmarila sniffed. "For now yes, but there will always be those who refuse to see anything any way except their way. Your assumption is the most likely, Marcus-ya."

Marcus's dark-blue eyes met the gwerin's dark-brown. She held his gaze easily, as if passing an unspoken message for him alone. It was impossible to tell whose side she was on; she claimed to speak only in the best interest of Marka. It was not her place to comment on claims, but to serve whoever sat on the Throne. She would give the same loyal service to *whoever* sat on it. Not her place, but surely she had an opinion? Marcus was unsure how to take the gwerin. That she was involved with *his* gwerin did not make him feel any better.

"I recommend," said Mikhan, "that we leave Petan alone unless he moves against us. The Eldovan soldiers surrounding our city, even from a distance, are a more immediate concern and I strongly urge we increase our soldiers engaged in eliminating the enemy dotted about. And there is another concern."

Zenepha raised an eyebrow.

*Here we go*, thought Marcus.

"We must pay attention to Re Taura. They've raised a sizeable army and clearly intend using it."

"Marka and Re Taura have never had problems before, Marshal." Zenepha's voice was quiet.

"Re Taura believes a resurgent Marka will monopolize trade in the Bay of Plenty." Mikhan tapped the relevant area of the map. "They may wish to seize land to gain greater control in the area. Trenvera is the most likely place to drive a wedge between Calcan and Sandester."

"That would be no more than a diversion," countered Kelanus. "We denude Marka to reinforce Calcan, Sandester or Trenvera, and the Eldovans will kick the gates in here again. Leave defense of the area to the armies already in place while we concentrate on destroying the Eldovans. Ignore Re Taura."

"Re Taurans on the mainland could threaten Marka," protested Mikhan.

"How?" demanded Kelanus. "Even if they seized land they still need to resupply from overseas, which is no easy task. Both Calcan and Sandester have ships to interfere with any supply route. Trenvera is the same size as Re Taura and has as many people. No invader could reach us from there, unless they can live off the land and do without supply trains. Look at the problems the Eldovans have; look at the problems *we* have."

"Conjecture." Mikhan waved a dismissive hand. "We can't afford to ignore Re Taura. The Mametain has not built up an army of that size for no reason at all. He is a threat."

"Whoever leads the Eldovans was forced to retreat almost all the way home over the winter," pointed out Kelanus. "They've only managed to push forward again this spring. And they crossed relatively sparsely populated regions. That isn't the case to the east. Re Taurans would have to fight their way here *and* defend their supply routes." The general shook his head. "Not a chance."

Marcus added support. "Historically, Re Taura has no territorial ambitions on the mainland and they always avoided trouble with Marka. They have always treasured their independence, which would end if they attacked us and lost."

"If they attack Calcan," spluttered Mikhan, "you might not be so dismissive of them."

*If they attack Sandester you mean*, reflected Marcus.

"I suspect that the Re Taurans are working with the Eldovans," said Kelanus.

Mikhan snorted. "And how do they keep contact?"

"Probably the same way the different Eldovan groups keep contact," pointed out Marcus.

"Marka alone is the target," insisted Kelanus. "Any Re Tauran action is diversionary."

"We must track and destroy the Eldovans who infest our lands." Zenepha looked from Mikhan to Kelanus, perhaps to remind them who was really in charge.

"Yes," said Kelanus. "A policy I recommend."

"Marshal Mikhan?" Zenepha's voice was quiet.

Mikhan inclined his head, but said nothing.

"Then that is what we shall do. Should we offer Trenvera protection?"

"Let them ask for it." Silmarila pursed her lips. "They will suspect your motive otherwise."

Zenepha's earpoints sagged a little. "Not very many prefectures have returned to the fold. We may have to force them all, eventually."

Mikhan laughed. "Majesty, you rule lands from the tundra in the north to the Trading Council in the south. All of Sandester and Calcan has submitted to you. Entry to the Bay of Plenty is controlled by lands *you* rule. Your achievements are greater than any other emperor in our history."

Silmarila smiled. "That is true," she said. "If Marka expands to Frodger in the north and Eldova in the west, you will rule lands the size of the first Empire."

Zenepha sniffed, but he had flushed a slightly darker blue under the praise.

Marcus's eyes were flat. Some lands were supposed to submit to him, but Nazvasta Vintner had never replied to his letters. His instincts warned of trouble ahead from that quarter.

"Very well, we will leave it there." Zenepha smiled around the table. "If anything changes, inform me immediately."

All remained standing until Zenepha, followed by Silmarila, left the room.

Jenn almost trod on her owner's heels as he walked the opposite way.

Marcus ruffled his sylph's hair affectionately. "My duties keep me from spending as much time with you as I would like."

Jenn smiled up at him and her earpoints twitched. "We are together now," she said. "It is enough." Fatalistic, as always.

"Missing the field?" Marcus raised an eyebrow.

Jenn nodded. At least there, she had him to herself.

"The time will come when we must campaign again. But we must return to Zandra now; apologies if that disappoints you."

Jenn pulled a face, but knew that Zandra's company was better than none. Before Marcus reached his rooms, Morran Fynn stepped out to speak with him. Whatever the clerk had to say was clearly meant for Marcus only, as Smudge turned from a tapestry to engage Jenn in conversation.

"Your Majesty," began Fynn. "Is Zenepha still unaware of Sandev's disappearance?"

"To the best of my knowledge."

"He wants to know why she has not been to see him all winter. My assurances that she is about her work elsewhere are beginning to wear thin. Any news from Grayar or Stanak concerning her whereabouts?"

Marcus smiled. It must grate that Fynn was reduced to ask his employer for information. Or perhaps this was a warning.

"Nothing," he replied. "What are you trying to tell me?"

"Tell, Majesty?" Despite Zenepha being Emperor, many of Marcus's servants still referred to him as if he were the Emperor and not a cast-aside claimant. "Better Zenepha remains in ignorance, or he might panic when he discovers that Marka's true protector is a prisoner. But if he discovers the truth for himself..." Fynn shrugged.

Marcus looked over his shoulder at Jenn, deeply engrossed with whatever Smudge was saying. Sylphs saw much and let on little, but he was certain Jenn neither knew nor suspected the truth about Sandev's whereabouts.

If people learned that Sandev was a captive of the enemy... He reached a decision.

"The secret must be kept for as long as possible. Any news from the east? Mikhan is growing more concerned."

Fynn inclined his head; if he was annoyed by the abrupt change of subject, nothing showed. "Nothing yet. In fairness, Majesty, our people may only just have reached Re Taura. Far too early to expect information."

"Fair enough."

Fynn changed the subject back again. "Must the secret be kept at any cost?"

Marcus wagged an admonitory finger. "No deaths. Nobody wants that. If rumors start, we tell some version of the truth. Keep your ear to the ground."

Fynn bowed. "As you command, Majesty." He turned to leave. "Come Smudge, we have work."

After one glance at Jenn, the other sylph ended her conversation, inclined her head to Marcus, and trotted after Fynn.

"What was that all about?" asked Marcus.

"Just chit-chat." The position of Jenn's earpoints showed she knew that was a diversion to stop her overhearing the humans' discussion, but wisely kept questions to herself.

Marcus nodded. "I know where there's some choca."

Jenn's earpoints twitched fully upright and a smile spread across her face. "So do I," she said.

\*\*\*

Tired and irritable, Grayar scowled at Sandev's desk and ignored the gurgling clepsydra. He was often short-tempered, and had a reputation for it, but the tiredness was new. He had not yet fully recovered from carting an army across hundreds of milas to defeat Hingast. Despite using an aid that should no longer exist, the effort had drained him. If not for the foci, he would likely be dead.

Stanak stood beside him. His employer was the Father-knew-where, presumably a captive. If he worried for her safety, nothing showed in his gray-blue eyes. Always calm, one of the best things about him.

Certainly much calmer than Sandev's two sylphs.

Janin was a recent acquisition and had barely had time to bond with his mistress, but his worry was palpable. He continued his scout training, which helped keep his mind occupied.

Unlike Caya. Oh, the two humans did their best to keep the female sylph busy and working to her usual routine, but she *had* bonded with her owner and was terrified she would never see Sandev again. Although initially hostile to Janin, she had drawn closer to him during the winter months and even missed his company when he was out of the villa training.

Janin, rapidly approaching the age when he should marry, had already been rebuffed. Caya, so she said, was wed to her role looking after Sandev. She was happy for him to look elsewhere for a wife.

Grayar expected sulks, but the male sylph had held up quite well and continued to offer Caya moral support.

There were two other sylphs in Sandev's villa.

Salu belonged to Grayar. She offered comfort to Sandev's sylphs but trod carefully. Sandev's two were breeders and Salu only an infertile, of much lower status.

The fourth sylph concerned Grayar most. The ownerless Tangan troubled him. The sylph was unfamiliar, but not his name. A name "more-or-less" granted to him by his mother. Grayar feared the boy was lying; perhaps he was *unable* to be completely honest. A worrying thought. Something had been done to this sylph and Grayar was determined to find out what.

Sadly, the books lining the walls were of no use.

Tangan squatted in one corner, staring at the floor and apparently unaware of the unease his presence caused.

Stanak was aware of some of it, but not all. The bodyguard knew Grayar was wary of the male sylph, but had no idea why. Stanak's main concern was getting his employer back.

Dervra and Nicolfer held Sandev. Stanak knew these were among the original humans to be granted the Gift by the Father, and that they had betrayed their companions and the deity who had offered shelter.

Those two were the enemies of Sandev and Grayar.

It did not make Stanak feel any happier, but didn't make him want to give up either, which was another of his good points.

"We've done little since mid-winter," said Stanak, looking at Tangan. "That boy's been useless; enslave him or send him to the sales block."

Eyes expressionless, Tangan lifted his head and twitched his earpoints.

Grayar grimaced. "What would you have us do? We must discover where Nicolfer and Dervra are hiding themselves before I - we - can move against them. And the boy stays."

The sound of clattering pots through the open door betrayed the presence of Caya and Salu, preparing the midday meal.

"Anything could have happened." Stanak lowered his voice. Just because the sylphs clattered pots, it did not mean they weren't eavesdropping. "She might even be dead."

"No!" Grayar was sharper than intended and immediately moderated his tone. "Not that. She is basically unharmed."

Stanak's eyes were as steel. "How do you know?"

"I believe it."

"That's only what you want to believe."

"You want me to believe I'm chasing a corpse?" Grayar snapped, and immediately wished the words back.

Taller than Grayar, Caya stood in the doorway, bearing a tray with two steaming bowls of gruel and an alovak can. Her silver-gray eyes brimmed with tears, her face crumpled in grief and her earpoints tucked away completely.

Stanak moved quickly to relieve the sylph of her burden, while Grayar spoke to reassure her.

"She's still alive," he said softly, massaging one of the sylphs hands between his own. "We *will* find her."

Caya nodded, but said nothing. Pulling her hand free, she fled from the room. Embarrassed, both men looked at each other.

"This is what it's come to," growled Stanak. "Her would-be rescuers squabbling like gulls over food."

Grayar inclined his head at the unspoken apology. "We must locate Dervra and Nicolfer. They work together, so I doubt if they're far apart right now." He glanced down at Tangan, as if the sylph might lead them to their prey. "And it's time to check your health, young man. How are you feeling?"

Tangan stared back up at the silver-haired old man. "I am well, *donenya*," he replied.

Stanak sighed. They had gone over and over this since midwinter. Just as well he wasn't in this for the money alone.

\*\*\*

General Kelanus Butros met Marcus Vintner outside the maproom. The man was at least punctual. Kelanus blinked in surprise when he saw Jenn heeling her owner; he had not expected the sylph.

"Shall we go inside?" Marcus smiled.

Kelanus started. "Of course."

They went into the maproom together. Apart from one candle lantern, the room was in darkness.

"Light-crystals, Jenn," suggested Marcus.

"*Se bata*."

The infertile walked around the room uncovering the crystals.

"Have you shared your concerns with Zenepha?" asked Marcus.

"Not since the meeting," replied Kelanus.

"Mikhan?"

Kelanus grimaced. Once, he had served under Mikhan Annada; once, they had been friends. Perhaps they still were, despite everything that had happened since.

"No," he replied. "Zenepha is too much in Mikhan's hand and Mikhan works hard to keep you off the Throne."

"Just you and me then." Marcus smiled.

Both men could now see the detailed map spread across the table. The flags marking known and estimated positions of the soldiers were exactly as they had left them that morning.

Jenn stood by the door, listening. She nodded to her owner.

Kelanus crossed to one of the smaller scale maps hung on the wall, this one showing Marka and its immediate surroundings. He used the stem of his pipe to tap several places.

"Why are you looking at that?" asked Marcus. "The battles will be fought out here." He gestured to the table.

Kelanus shook his head. "Thousands of men are out there - more if we include Mirrin's mob out west - who show no inclination to go home. They are coordinated and controlled; they are waiting."

Marcus nodded. "If they combine, they will fall on Sandester. Or Trenvera. Or even Calcan."

Kelanus almost smiled. "The target is Marka."

"You sound certain."

"Because I am. Re Taura."

"What about it?"

Kelanus drew deeply on his pipe before exhaling a long streamer of gray-blue bacca smoke. "The Eldovan commander wants us to react to that threat. If we don't, he'll force action. Sandester is his likeliest target; it's harder to reach Trenvera or

Calcan from the north. Wherever, so long as we react and send our forces. Or Mikhan decides to take them home. The Eldovans are conveniently pointed toward Sandester."

"Why?"

"They might know more about the Sandesterans here than we do."

"Your point being?"

"Zenepha is in Mikhan's hand, in military matters at least. I suspect Mikhan still gets his orders from Sandester."

"Nazvasta?" Marcus's voice was quiet.

"Nazvasta. He wants you nowhere near the Throne; he would far rather see Zenepha hold it until death than let you take it."

"Thank you for the reminder. What about Re Taura?"

"A diversion. My hunch is that Trenvera is Re Taura's target. Not easy for us to send soldiers there, unless the Trenverans ask nicely. Diplomacy takes time, but the army will be out of Marka." Kelanus smiled as he lit a taper in the candle-lantern and relit his pipe. "But the Throne here is the target."

"Oh?"

"The Eldovans may or may not have territorial ambitions in the north, but what's the point in seizing lands there when Marka can so easily cut them off from Eldova itself?"

"The Re Taurans might want the Throne."

"Maybe they do." Satisfied his pipe was drawing properly again, Kelanus took a few draws. "They'll never get to it though."

"The Eldovans nearly succeeded last year."

"To get here, the Eldovans crossed lands that are either empty, in chaos or indifferent towards Marka. The Re Taurans must cross territory that will be at least passively hostile. Their supply lines will stretch and be susceptible to attacks. They must re-supply from overseas and their ships will be at risk from us and probably Sandesterans, too."

Jenn watched both men from her position at the door.

"Even so, we cannot abandon Sandester or Calcan. Neither can we afford to lose Trenvera to a third party. It would throw the east into total chaos." Marcus grimaced.

"I suspect that's the intention. But we must look first to Marka. We can drive the Eldovans away; that must remain our first priority. Even if the Re Taurans occupy lands to the east, the Eldovans must be dealt with first." Kelanus's eyes flashed. "We can drive Re Taura out at leisure afterwards. If they come."

"We have people on the ground in Re Taura," said Marcus. "They'll discover the truth or otherwise."

"The rumors will probably prove true." Kelanus smiled. "But whatever the Re Taurans do is nothing more than a diversion."

"What's in it for Re Taura? Assuming they have allied themselves with Eldova."

Kelanus shrugged. "The lucrative trade in the Bay of Plenty and perhaps some mainland territory."

"Supposition."

"True." Kelanus nodded agreement. "But if you're Janost, what would you do?"

Marcus glanced at the large map on the table. "Drive a wedge between Marka and the Vintner lands. Then drive a wedge between Sandester and Calcan. Or the other way around."

"The wedge between Sandester and Calcan first is the better way round." Kelanus tapped the wall map again. "But the Eldovans themselves cannot work it that way around because of Marka."

"But this is supposition." Marcus's smile was thin.

"True. But the Throne is here. *That* is the Eldovans' objective. First, entice troops away from Marka by having an ally drive a wedge between the Vintner lands by invading Trenvera. Then, divide Marka from the Vintner lands by falling on the city from the north. Add pressure by falling on the city from the west." He stroked his pipestem against the Candin Plain, the scene of Marcus's decisive victory the previous year. A gentle reminder of who had ensured that victory.

"I see. Any evidence to support this theory?"

"Only by omission." The pipestem moved slowly around to the west of the city. "Anybody in western Outer Marka? Or Finnan, in Dras or Elas? Senda?"

"Of course not. General Mirrin is much further west than that. Detachments are trailing him. What are you getting at?"

"Local militia aside, our entire western march is unprotected. Why haven't the Eldovans gone home? Eldovans to the north and west, Re Taurans to the east. We can't fight everybody at once. They encircle us, but we must deal with the Eldovans first, even *if the Re Taurans land.*" A finger tapped the map to emphasize each word.

Marcus stroked his chin. "Might the Imperial Republic be involved as well?"

Kelanus considered for a moment. "Unlikely. The Imperial Republic is far away and Enthan too engrossed with the south. He would never ally with Eldova unless his claim is the one to be pressed. But I don't see anyone in Eldova going along with that."

Marcus raised an eyebrow. "A bit like Sandester and Calcan."

Kelanus laughed. "Something like that."

"Still conjecture," insisted Marcus.

"Informed guesswork," agreed Kelanus. "But my outline, Marcus Vintner, is pretty much what I expect Marshal Janost to do."

"And what would *you* do to counter it?"

Kelanus grinned. "What nobody would expect me to do."

A small smile turned the corners of Marcus's mouth. "The Emperor is sending Kestan north to harry the Eldovans. Is that enough?"

"Perhaps not."

Marcus continued. "He told me this afternoon that we must reinforce Calcan and Sandester. The army we send should hover near the border with Trenvera. He wants you to command that flank."

"I'm not convinced it's needed."

"Should you decide to defy the Emperor's orders, I hope your analysis of the situation is better than Mikhan's. I'll not be able to save you this time." Marcus smiled. "Don't tell me your decision; it's between you and your conscience."

Kelanus inclined his head. "I will see you at tomorrow's meeting."

Marcus barely acknowledged the general's departure. He stared at the large-scale map and again assessed the positions of the flags. In his mind's eye, he repositioned some of the blue flags and added fresh ones to represent Re Taura attacking Trenvera. He saw the army driven from Marka, fleeing south and east, heading for Calcan because that was the only way out. He shivered when he realized

that the repositioned enemy was ideally placed to wheel around and fall on Calcan. There would be nowhere left to go. Vintner power smashed and Marka captured. Kelanus had seen it and Marcus could accept the possibility of it. He shook his head.

"What do you think, Jenn? And don't tell me you're just a sylph."

Jenn changed what she had been about to say. "You should listen to him, enya."

Marcus nodded to himself. "Why oh why, did Branad ever let you go?" he whispered.

\*\*\*

Melnea, more familiarly known as Cloudy, leaned against *Flying Cloud's* bulwark and stared morosely at the narrow strip of dirty water below. She should be thinking about the proposal put forward to her and Captain Liffen, but she worried instead about the red tea stored in the warehouse. Brought back from Emplar for the winter, it had not sold as well as last year. Cloudy feared a small trading loss on the last trip. And add to that the cost of a new ship...

With a small smile, she glanced outboard to her identical sister-ship, *Velvet Moon*. This one did not wear the horizontal gold-green-gold striped ensign of Marka, but the vertical black-white-black stripes of Hejiller. Black and white streamers looked prettier than green and gold ones.

Cloudy shook her head. She was not supposed to be thinking about bunting for the mastheads, either.

*Velvet Moon* and *Flying Cloud* had planned to travel together for this first season, then winter in their respective homeports. Sometimes plans must change and it now looked as if they would travel in company for part of the first trading trip only. The relatively inexperienced *Velvet Moon* had a great deal to master, despite the obvious intelligence of both sylph and ship.

As for the proposal, the ship remained ominously silent.

To sail to Re Taura and stay there in case Imperial agents needed to escape. Through Cloudy, the ship had asked for those agents' names, so she could tell when or if they approached.

The proposer had demanded an acceptance of the commission before he would divulge names, warning that careless talk cost lives.

The answer impressed neither sylph nor ship and the ship's initial reaction was to refuse the commission.

Cloudy glanced at the ensign now flying from the stern. Not as impressive as the old Trading Council's ensign of two black anchors, crossed and fouled on a gold field. Nor as impressive as the Imperial Ensign of a gold eagle in flight on a black field, which the ship would wear if she accepted the commission. Certainly more impressive than that she wore now. The streamers for the peak of each mast would look more impressive in black and gold.

*Small matters.* The ship spoke directly into her mind with a gentle rebuke for her continued concern over bunting. *I still say no.*

*The money is good,* retorted the sylph.

The silent conversation came to an abrupt end as Liffen's large hand closed on Cloudy's shoulder. "He wants an answer."

"It will be awkward; we already have the cargo for Beshar aboard."

Liffen winced. "We can sail in company as far as Beshar, offload there, collect the rum and sail back."

"What about *Velvet Moon*? She does not know the route."

Liffen smiled. "We'll swap Sedaro and Raldu with their opposite numbers, and some of the crew. They'll be fine."

"The ship still says no," said Cloudy.

"Then come below and tell him."

Cloudy steeled herself. She didn't want to face the man with the flat brown eyes and devil-may-care attitude. A local man named Jeckon, he was some sort of minion for the Trading Council, always fishing for information about events in other lands.

She followed Liffen down the double companion ladder and entered the main cabin that stretched from one side of the ship to the other.

"The Emperor wants a speedy response to his question." Jeckon's eyes were uncaring; hinting that if the commission was refused here, he would go elsewhere. Somehow, Cloudy doubted that; she suspected Jeckon was eager she took the commission. "One hundred crowns, the old gold standards, is a lot of money to turn away."

"The ship wants to know the names of the agents."

The other's eyes went even flatter; perhaps he did not believe ship sylphs were more than they seemed. Few people did, even some of the crew doubted.

"Or the answer is no." Cloudy turned on her heel and made her way back to the door. "Take your commission elsewhere."

"Two men and one sylph." Bluff called, Jeckon spoke quickly. "The sylph is named Neptarik. That will have to do, I can tell you no more than that."

She stopped walking. The ship was silent, but Cloudy knew she had changed her mind. Another thought came and she smiled. "In Re Taura, do they drink red tea?"

\*\*\*

### Chapter 3 Re Taura

*She shifted on her heels. She only had to spend her time here while the market was open for business, but she was still in a cage. Apart from a straw-strewn floor and a wooden stool, nothing else was here. Straw she replaced each morning. She could sit on the floor or the stool and she was allowed out in the middle of the day to freshen up for the afternoon.*

*She dreamed of a kind owner, but potential buyers always passed by, their attention caught by a prettier or younger sylph, or one who might be more compliant. As if sylphs were anything but compliant.*

*It was not bad here, but the longer she was unsold, the more her care cost the market's owner. Already much older than was normal for sylphs to be sold, she was even expected to do chores to earn her keep.*

*More than anything, she yearned for a proper owner.*

*She stirred; there was a customer. Always hopeful, her earpoints twitched forward as she pressed her forehead against the cage bars. The market owner was with the customer.*

*"I have many sylphs. If none match your requirements, I can find one who does." She glimpsed a hand gesturing in her general direction. "Here, we have a-*

*"I need a breeder," he interrupted. "An infertile will not do because she must have some independence."*

*"Must be a breeder, Sir? Males have independence aplenty."*

*"No. Males are needed for breeding." The customer sounded insistent.*

*"There is no need for the sylph I take on to breed, but neither will an infertile suffice for the duties."*

*She strained to see the customer.*

*"She cannot stand out in a crowd," continued the customer. "And not too pretty. Bright enough to remember details of anything she's told, or sees, or hears. Also, she must be companionable and friendly."*

*"Quite a list, Sir. Though I must point out that all sylphs remember everything they see or hear. I think just the sylph for you is right here."*

*Then, the customer stood before her. She smiled and her heart pounded. He inspected her quickly before moving on.*

*Her earpoints wilted in disappointment. There was plenty of competition for his attention. Her hands gripped the bars and she gently banged her forehead against them. Eyes shut, she shook her head in frustration and despaired of ever having an owner. About to turn away from the bars, she became aware of a presence. She looked up into the customer's eyes. He had returned.*

*For the first time, a potential buyer smiled at her.*

*Suddenly shy, she smiled back.*

*"My name is Talnan." The smile she would come to love widened. "Would you like to tell me yours?"*

\*\*\*

Mya-y-Talnan, in true sylph fashion, had finished her chores as quickly as possible and now stood at the window of the barest room in Castle Beren. She watched a ferry from the mainland as it prepared to negotiate the narrows into Taura Harbor.

She admired the beautiful spring day, and imagined she felt the fresh breeze that whipped the wavetops white and deepened the troughs between. Waves that broke and crashed onto the castle's rocky foundation.

The sun was stronger every day and already heated the stone walls; soon the only fires would be in the kitchens. Mya blinked as the ferry passed out of sight, already taking off sail and readying oars. She stared at the sea with unseeing eyes.

Never opulently furnished, several wooden stools and a couple of benches dotted the room. Once - perhaps still - admonished servants and slaves came or were sent here to reflect on their misdemeanors. It was called the Sulking Room, but Mya did not come here to sulk.

Alone here, she could mourn and pray for her dead owner.

"*Zhenya, fatil enya; enewa,*" she prayed, eyes turned upwards. "Great Father, care for my owner; he is a good man."

Talnan had been dead for weeks. Should she ask to leave the Mametain's service, or wait for the next spy? Trenvera's king might refuse to send another and leaving the castle meant working at some menial or unrewarding task. Or the next spy might be on the ferry she had just seen.

If another spy was sent, would he be told about her? Mya would feel happier if she knew what, if anything, her owner had told Tektu before he died. Nothing might happen if she asked for release, or perhaps Tektu was waiting for that request before she pounced.

She chewed her underlip and wondered what best to do.

"*Yonacen, abmerin tena,*" she prayed. "His soul, guard always."

Her waking moments were spent thinking of Talnan. They had shared a lot of adventures in fifteen years. She was proud to serve him, and he was always proud to serve Trenvera. She might now spend the rest of her life serving Trenvera's enemy.

She fought the tears that always lurked. Did she cry more for him, or for herself?

"*Abenya, ewnin tena,*" she said. "Grant him eternal peace."

Tektu had murdered Talnan. Mya shivered.

Tektu terrified her. The Mametain's faithful servant, she was rarely far from his side. She had the *appearance* of a sylph, despite a personality no sylph could or should have. Nobody knew exactly how old she was, but she had great age and the wisdom those years bestowed. All sylphs here sensed that.

When Tektu looked at Mya with those too-knowing eyes...

She whimpered and shifted on her heels.

Talnan was dead. Fifteen years of spying for Trenvera and, in the end, that job was why he died. Mya was halfway through her life and knew she did not want to spend the second half stuck on Re Taura.

But she was trapped as surely as if chained here.

"*Se, granicen suniba,*" she said. "Let him remember me."

Mya leaned her head against the lintel and prayed for herself. Some said the Father was everywhere at once. If he could see her, or hear her thoughts, she did not know. Was it wrong to pray for herself? Screwing her eyes shut, a solitary tear leaked free.

"*Zhenya, abse acacfa,*" she begged. "Great Father, send me a savior."

\*\*\*

Neptarik-y-Balrus swung his legs in the free space between the back of the cart and the ground as his transport trundled into the city. He winked at one of the gate guards, but the soldier ignored him. Thankfully, they were different guards from two days before, when he and his human companions had left the city.

The scout wore nondescript woolen breeches and shirt, a simple leather collar about his neck. Apart from short hair, there was nothing to distinguish him from any

other farm sylph. He wished his hair was longer as short hair on sylphs stood out, but he was going to wear a wig for nobody.

Safely inside the city walls, he grabbed two carrots from under the tarpaulin, stuffed one inside his shirt and chewed the other as he slipped off the cart. Hopefully the farmer would never realize he had carried a passenger. The carrots must have been carefully stored over the winter, for they tasted fresh, as if harvested only yesterday.

A sylph beggar saw him, or perhaps she was more aware of the food Neptarik clutched. He hoped it was the food, and not short hair marking him out. He intended to be done here quickly and, with luck, hitch a ride back out with the same unsuspecting farmer. Until then, he had a job to do. He hummed something tuneless as he looked back and to.

The city Taura was pretty much like all other cities he had seen. The inhabitants preferred to paint their buildings in gaudy colors, and the streets were laid out to a different plan, but the bustle on the streets was the same as any other city. Shops sold near enough the same goods everywhere: food, cloth, clothes, precious metals, gemstones, tack. People and sylphs went about their business, with soldiers dotted among them.

He saw gray and white clothes everywhere, reflecting that while people might like reds, blues and yellows for homes, their clothing was a lot less colorful.

Neptarik looked for beggars. There were always some in a city, and he felt certain that the lack in Marka was only a temporary aberration. Even so, they were not quite as common as expected; if this mametain was an enemy, Neptarik wanted to find evidence of a bad reign, but from first impressions, there was little to see. Even the streets were clean. Horse manure was everywhere of course, but the streets looked as if even this was cleared away regularly.

There were sylph beggars - mostly but not exclusively infertiles - and the occasional stick-thin human urchin moved about furtively. The city looked well run. Nothing for it but to discover what people thought. At least, what the sylphs thought. Beggars were usually a good source for information, but they were also competitive souls who guarded their pitches jealously. Not that sylphs were violent, but they could squabble in loud voices and Neptarik wanted to draw no attention to himself.

"Work?" The first beggar he asked was incredulous. "Being a boy, they will come to you. All right for some." Her earpoints twitched and her silver-gray eyes flashed briefly.

"Who will come?"

"Mametain always wants sylphs. Lots leave. Run away. They-" Abruptly, she grew defensive. "You want work, they come looking. They will ask." The beggar's eyes now held an unusual amount of fear. "Move on. Please?"

"What is wrong?" Neptarik was concerned, wondering why the sudden change of attitude, but the infertile refused to be drawn. He moved on.

"Work?" The next sylph he asked looked aghast at the prospect. "Lose freedom? You are mad! If you cannot beg, go to the city elders and they will work you for food. Cleaning horse dung maybe. Emptying human cesspits likely." The beggar shuddered. "Madness!"

"What about the Mametain?"

The other's mouth moved soundlessly and her earpoints wilted away. She looked him up and down; this one was not an infertile. "He always wants sylphs, but lots leave. Perhaps you should ask why they do so."

"Why do they leave?" There was more than a hint of wild sylph about this one; Neptarik thought she would not be out of place with Aelfina and his fledgling Free Tribe.

"They will not say." The other sylph looked in control of herself once more. "You dance or sing? Maybe you can beg along with me. If not, go elsewhere."

Neptarik grinned. "Another time," he replied. He stood and moved on again.

Most beggars refused to say anything at all about the Mametain or his household. Those who did, told him that lots of sylphs left his service and preferred to clean cesspits than work at Castle Beren any longer than they must. He asked them all what was so bad about working for the Mametain, but nobody would explain.

Before much more time passed, he realized someone was following him.

Neptarik began looking as he turned corners. At first he saw nothing out of the ordinary, but after a few more turnings, he saw the same man time after time. The shadow was an average looking fellow, with a round pink face and outwardly unassuming manner. He watched everything the sylph did. He stopped every time the scout stopped and, if he spoke to a beggar, the man copied him as soon as he moved on. Was this man the reason for the beggars' unease? It was the first odd thing he had seen in the city.

He hummed a quick snatch from *My Shadow's Never Far Away*.

Neptarik turned another corner, stepped into a convenient doorway and waited.

The pink-faced man followed moments later and his pace increased when he realized the sylph was nowhere to be seen. He was looking the wrong way as he passed Neptarik, and the scout detected a hint of panic. When he stepped from his hiding place, he was now the follower.

More people were on the streets now and this helped keep Neptarik undiscovered longer than he deserved. Eventually, the man stopped, turned and immediately spotted the sylph behind him.

Neptarik pretended he had no idea that the man had been shadowing him.

Relief chased momentary consternation from the man's face. He turned and approached the sylph. Neptarik readied himself for flight or *ebatela*, whichever might be required. There was no hint of imminent violence on the man's part, but the sylph almost jumped when he spoke.

"They tell me you're looking for work," he said, in an ordinary voice.

Neptarik nodded.

"Day after tomorrow. Sylphs' Hall." The man handed a green card to the surprised scout. "Show that on the door and they'll help you find work."

"How did you know to find me?" asked Neptarik.

The pink-faced man ignored the question. "Your choice. Go and find work, or else try your luck on the streets. But they tell me work is what you want. Your choice." He turned and strode away.

Neptarik scowled and his earpoints lashed. He hated rudeness from humans, such as ignoring his questions. Were people paid to follow other people around in this city? The notion seemed rather silly.

He hummed the opening bars of *Foolish Humans* before he could stop himself.

He glanced down at the card surreptitiously, remembering he was supposed to be illiterate. Few sylphs could read or write but there was little to read. A simple green card with black ink scrawled over it.

"Probably good enough for the castle," was all it said. He inspected it carefully to ensure he had not misunderstood any words. The castle must be the Mametain's home, which he had seen from the Calcan ferry as it entered the harbor. Smiling to himself, he tucked the small card inside his tunic.

He decided to try and discover what people thought of the Mametain's rule. People were often more careless when sylphs were about, but he heard nothing to grab his attention. He meandered slowly to the harbor.

On arrival in Taura two days before, he had been amazed. The harbor still impressed him now.

An incredible amount of activity was squeezed into such a small place. There were only six long berths and these were crammed with ships, some three or even four deep along the wooden quays. At least forty ships loaded or discharged cargo.

Yet there were lots of ships in the harbor doing nothing, and all were crewed. Some were alongside and others were moored in open water. Everywhere, Neptarik saw rather more soldiers than he expected. Beyond the quays, the natural harbor opened out. In the distance, almost a mila away, Castle Beren dominated the entrance. The channel that ships must follow passed almost directly beneath the fortress that perched like an eagle on its eyrie.

From here, Neptarik could appreciate the military thinking that had gone into Taura.

Whoever sited the city had given his choice much thought. Taura was built on a plain, so any approaching army would be seen long before it became a danger. And to reach the city by sea, any invader must first negotiate The Narrows, guarded by Castle Beren.

"If a beggar's life is too hard, do not drown yourself here," said a sylph's voice immediately behind him. "There are too many people about for privacy."

Neptarik turned to look at the infertile who now stood beside him. Humor glinted in her silvery eyes and she tugged unconsciously at a wooden button on the cuff of her wool tunic. A silver collar, white linen shirt and canvas trousers completed her attire.

"I am not a beggar," replied Neptarik. "And I am not about to drown myself, with or without an audience."

"Glad to hear it." The infertile smiled.

Neptarik turned to look out across the harbor again. "You are a ship sylph?" he asked.

"Degan, of the *Sea Dragon*," she answered.

"My name is Neptarik. I hope to get employment in there." He nodded towards the fortress.

"To work for the Mametain," said Degan. "I work for him too, though he has never heard of me. My ship belongs to him."

"A trader?" Neptarik turned to look at the infertile again.

Degan laughed. "Not exactly."

"Why are there no fortresses opposite the castle?" asked Neptarik. "A ship could easily avoid the channel."

Degan smiled. "You won't get anything much larger than a rowboat in or out, even at the highest tides. If you wait until low water, you will see the flats."

"Flats?"

"Stone ledges that come almost completely across The Narrows," explained Degan. "Every ship that comes in or goes out must pass the castle."

Neptarik nodded. If he and his companions needed to escape, he hoped it was from another port. Nobody could pass Castle Beren without the Mametain knowing.

"Impressive," he said.

"Well, I wish you luck with finding employment, Neptarik." Degan pushed out a hand in the human fashion.

Neptarik looked at it for a moment before shaking it. His eyes widened and he shuddered. "What did you just do?" He took a few quick paces away.

Degan looked at him as if she had been burned. "You are familiar with ships," she said, her own eyes still wide.

"You keep your ship out of my head," snapped Neptarik. "Keep her out!"

"I must return." Degan still looked shocked. She bobbed her head in a quick bow. "Pleased to have met you."

Neptarik stared after the ship sylph and then at his hand. What had just happened?

He moved away and kept a wary eye open for any more nautical sylphs whose ship fancied her chances at invading his thoughts. He eavesdropped on as many conversations as he could. Most were about mundane matters, others were not. Some made his earpoints twitch fully erect.

"Most ships can take three or four hundred soldiers," said one man, strolling along the quayside with a companion.

"Possibly half as many again," said the other man. "It's not as if we'll be at sea for long, the crossing will only take two days."

*So they are planning something*, thought the sylph. He filed this small snippet away to be reported later. He pretended that he stared at nothing in particular and was interested in even less. Even so, he was not surreptitious enough.

"Why you here boy?" demanded one of the men.

"Waiting for the day after tomorrow," replied Neptarik and flashed his green card.

The human smiled. "Yes, you'll be looked after then. You must have missed yesterday's roundup."

Not knowing what a roundup was, the sylph shrugged.

"Thought you were here to beg, boy. Best for you to move on. Get into the city, find somewhere comfortable for a couple of nights. There may even be some food, if you're lucky."

Now he had been asked to go, Neptarik knew he must leave. No point in overstaying his welcome. That he had been moved on suggested the authorities had something to hide, or at least something they didn't want everyone to see.

Food sounded like a good idea. There must be a fish market near the quay. Only now he noticed that of all the ships here, none were fishing boats. No smell of fish hung in the air, no piles of nets were to be seen anywhere. What sort of harbor had no fishing boats?

"Is there a fish market here?" he asked a man with gold stripes on his tunic.

"Further up," replied the man.

"Where are the fishing boats?" asked Neptarik, feeling bold.

The man smiled. "They've been gone for about two years," he said. "A row over landing fees. If it's fisher-boats you want, try Sentena, Codden or Safeford. That's where the boats are now."

Neptarik thanked the man and wandered back into the city, leaving the harbor behind.

\*\*\*

From the *Sea Dragon*, Degan watched the strange sylph, who knew at least something about ships, leave the harbor. He paused to ask Captain Naepin a question the ship sylph had no chance of hearing.

"Anything wrong?"

Degan almost jumped; she had not heard Omas, one of the sailmakers, join her at the rail. She pulled herself together and shrugged. "Just thinking."

"You can think while throwing an eye splice on the end of this." Omas proffered a rope's end.

"I want to be at sea." Degan ignored the suggestion. "The ship wants to be at sea."

"All at sea more like." Omas waggled the rope's end her way again. "Cap'n'll be back soon, with his orders."

"I know, he's over there."

"Maybe your wish is about to be granted."

"With a load of soldiers, pukin' everywhere." Degan's earpoints twitched as she grimaced.

"Eye splice," said Omas, a little more firmly.

"All right." Degan dropped onto the deck beside the sailmaker. "Cut me a piece of twine. Which thimble?"

*Sea Dragon* was eighteen years old, which was ten years younger than Degan. The ship that inhabited the sylph however, was far older than that. The wooden part of the ship was roughly two-fifty pacas in length and boasted four masts. Two rigged with traditional lateen sails and the forward two fitted with revolutionary square sails four high. There was an additional square sail under her bowsprit and eight staysails.

She could make almost fourteen knots under full sail, which meant not many ships could keep up with her, let alone catch her. Even today, twenty years since her construction began, *Sea Dragon* was one of only four ships with square sails.

Now, she was about to serve as a lowly troop carrier for the Mametain's planned invasion.

"Steady," cautioned Omas, who was watching what happened to the rope. "I keep forgetting how fast you are with those fingers. No more tucks, or there won't be enough to taper it."

"Sorry." Degan took a little more care, but she watched the gangway.

"Captain's returning!" cautioned one of the side boys. Officer-of-the-deck and ship sylph reached the gangway together.

"Well?" demanded Degan, the moment Naepin's foot touched the deck.

The Captain arched an eyebrow. "Well what?"

"When do we sail?"

"Soon. Once we've taken our share of soldiers aboard-"

"Pukers," muttered Degan.

"-and hoisted the Flag."

"Ensign," corrected Degan.

"Flag," repeated Naepin. "We won't be a private ship when we sail."

Degan swore.

"Behave," cautioned Naepin.

She made no move to apologize. "Which old fart are they dusting off for us?"

"The senior admiral." Naepin smiled. "You should remember him, unless you're even dafter than you look. Iklaus da Seppayu."

Degan's demeanor changed and her face lit with pleasure. "He'll do very nicely."

"Thought he might meet with your approval."

"What did that sylph want with you?"

The change of subject threw the Captain for a moment. "What? Oh, him."

"Begging was he?"

"Only for directions to the fish market," replied Naepin.

Degan became thoughtful again. In the back of her mind, a small voice repeated itself, over and over.

*Beware, he is dangerous. Beware...*

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Neptarik wandered back into the city. He decided the buildings painted in bright colors added character and interest. He wondered why more places didn't follow Taura's example. It was certainly better than undressed stone, or the unrelieved limewash so many other cities used.

The row of shops here all had open fronts and the sylph spotted wooden shuttering stacked to one side of each shop. He paused to stare at a woman buying rather a lot of choca and guessed she might be the owner of a stud. He had never seen so much of the dark treat in his lifetime. Even walking, he kept his ears open, but he still heard nothing interesting about the Mametain. Above, the sun passed its meridian.

Neptarik's directions were good and he soon started to follow his nose to the fish market. A large group of sylphs congregated around it. Little chance of getting anything here.

Some sylphs touted services in exchange for food, but most simply begged. Compared with them, Neptarik's appearance was smart. The stares he received were unfriendly. Earpoints slanted forwards and eyes narrowed.

"What's he doing here?"

"This is our place."

"Not enough to go around."

"Go away, stranger."

Neptarik took the hint. He turned away reluctantly, despite the tantalizing smell of fish bringing water to his mouth. The smell hung in the air, teasing him.

As the afternoon wore on, he looked for farmers leaving their market. Few would want to travel in darkness, so he guessed they would pack up soon. He poked his head into the farmers' market a few times. There were fewer beggars than the fish market, but they glared in Neptarik's direction whenever he showed his face.

*These aren't pleased to see me, either,* he thought.

He stayed out of the square and ignored what the beggars had to say about interlopers. He desperately wanted to avoid drawing attention to himself.

Spotting "his" farmer readying his cart, Neptarik wandered away from the square, now waiting in a quiet spot where the scout thought it best to hitch his lift. The cart was a lot emptier than this morning and he knew it would be harder to hide on the way out. The guards at the gates should have changed by now, or it might be difficult for the farmer to explain why he brought a sylph in and then forgot to take him home again.

Neptarik hoped the farmer never learned he'd carried a passenger.

He tried to look like he wasn't skulking while he waited. A few minutes of worry passed before the cart finally came rumbling around the corner. The farmer must have stopped for a chat.

He pulled free his second carrot and chewed it nonchalantly. A quick glance to ensure nobody saw and he pressed himself against the wall, so the cart itself would block him from view.

He grabbed the side of the cart as it passed and, with one easy motion, swung himself onto the back. He grinned at the sylph beggars who also turned the corner after the cart, hoping some remnant of the crop might fall off the back.

"He is not even a beggar," said one and her earpoints twitched indignantly.

Another shook her head. "Some will steal even our food."

Neptarik blushed and scowled. Well, he was up and the farmer had noticed nothing. He glanced at the back of the man's head and rearranged the tarpaulin so a large lump hid him, just in case the unsuspecting driver turned around.

He looked back at the beggars and finished his carrot. By sylph standards, they had proved an aggressive lot.

Thanks to being with a human, getting out of Taura was as easy as getting in. The farmer bade the gate guards a cheerful goodbye as he passed. Neptarik did not even earn a glance, which pleased him.

He resisted the urge to hum something joyful; this would give him away. Behind, the city shrank in the sylph's vision. Two milas on and the scout dropped off the back of the cart. Still wary of the farmer looking over his shoulder, Neptarik left the road and dropped into cover.

There was clear strip of perhaps two or three stridas wide on each side of the road, before shrubs and trees took over. Neptarik appreciated the military sense of this, as it put the road out of bowshot from the forest and reduced the risk of ambush.

This forest was where his companions had made their camp. Although he could easily make it into the camp unseen, Neptarik deliberately made plenty of noise as he approached.

"Enjoy your day in the city, lad?" Balnus stepped from behind a tree and only now released his grip on the swordhilt. "We expected you sooner."

Neptarik shrugged. "Found nothing out about the Mametain," he said, "but I did get this." He handed the green card to his owner, who glanced at it.

"Let's go see Verdin." Balnus pursed his lips and looked at the card again.

Once in the camp, Neptarik warmed himself before the small fire.

"Well?" asked Verdin.

Neptarik explained everything he had seen and heard. Verdin only just hid his disappointment that there was so little to tell.

"I'll have to go tomorrow," he said. "See what I can discover."

"Should I go to this?" Neptarik flourished the green card.

Verdin smiled and his eyes flickered quickly to Balnus. "If your owner agrees, then yes."

"Do it." Balnus sounded as if the decision was not easy. "You say sylphs often ask to be released from his service. Anything looks like going wrong, you get out. Understood?"

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

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Verdin Vintner took the head off his mug of beer, savored the taste of the unusual dark-brown liquid, decided it suited his palate and relaxed with a sigh. The fireplace was cold and empty, but the common room was warm enough. The sunny and bright spring weather was regarded by the native Taurans as summer. Compared with Sandester, this *was* summer.

For some inexplicable reason, the inn was called *The Dragon*, but instead of a sinuous serpent, the sign outside featured a man with gray eyes and reddish-brown hair. The undragonlike figure was dressed in red and black, and carried a staff in his left hand, his right arm shoved inside his tunic. Verdin wondered what the connection was.

The red and black theme continued both outside and inside the inn; it seemed there was no other color paint here.

Two men leant against the bar gave him sideways glances before resuming their conversation about how best to preserve food surpluses. The common room was full, with every table and bench occupied. Conversations were loud and topics ranged from the weather to the likelihood of good or bad crops. Nobody mentioned politics.

Verdin was easily the youngest man present, if not the only one with no gray in his hair. His blue eyes were a rarity in Taura, though not unique. His accent gave him away immediately as an outlander, but he wasn't pretending to be anything else. Being a foreigner was not a problem, which suggested plenty of outlanders were here.

One man sat alone and in silence, staring at the cold fireplace. Despite his detachment, Verdin had the feeling this man was noting everything going on around him. Graying dark hair was tied back with a cord and, when he glanced around the room, Verdin noted sharp, dark eyes.

The man was alone and apparently friendless. A spy? If so, for whom?

Verdin finished his drink and left *The Dragon*, stepping back onto the street. Here, he was forced to stop.

A large carnival parade came past, with giant puppets surrounded by dancers in streaming clothes. Hordes of children and sylphs shadowed it, many joining in the dance. Adults stopped their chores to watch.

Verdin stared.

"Something to take people's minds off the tax burden," said a voice beside him.

Verdin turned. The man sat alone beside the cold fireplace had followed him out.

"Taxes are necessary for good governance," he countered.

The older man smiled. "When people see nothing in return for taxes, good governance often turns bad. And when some of that money is spent just to entertain the people, something is *badly* wrong. Government by circus always ends in tears."

"Perhaps." Verdin turned his head to face the front again.

"A curious mind must wonder why you aren't in uniform. Most young men are in either the army or the militia, yet you are not. Even outlanders come here for the bounty. Fighting is better than starving is how many fools see it."

"I hold the rank of Lieutenant," retorted Verdin, haughtily. This was true, even if only an honorary rank conferred by his late father. There was no need to tell this man in which army he held that rank.

The older man's smile broadened. "Something might interest you at *The Green Knight*. Tomorrow evening, after the gates close. A good day to you."

Verdin blinked as his companion turned and walked quickly away. A moment later, he hurried after, but when he turned the corner, he was alone on the street. Trap, or genuine lead? How did the man know what he was looking for? What if this wasn't what he was looking for? He had a little more than a day to take precautions.

He stopped the first passer by he saw. "Can you tell me the way to *The Green Knight*? It is an inn."

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Balnus and Verdin made plans over breakfast. Or perhaps Verdin made the plans. Although Balnus technically ranked higher than Verdin - captain to lieutenant - Fynn had put Verdin in charge of the mission.

The humans enjoyed goat meat washed down with alovak, while Neptarik scooped water-soaked rolled oats into his mouth. Cooked the previous day and eaten cold now. No alovak for him, but there was plenty of water.

"You will go directly to Sylphs' Hall," commanded Verdin.

Neptarik glanced at his owner, who nodded. "*Se bata*," he replied, after a careful swallow of his porridge.

"Accept any work that gets you close to the Mametain," continued Verdin.

"*Se bata*," replied Neptarik, his tone suggesting he had already thought of this.

"Balnus, you wait outside the city. If Neptarik is successful, you keep an eye on the castle and wait for developments."

"Sounds good to me," replied Balnus. "You still want to wander into this inn?"

"Worth the risk."

"Smells like a trap."

"If it's a trap, then why give me a whole day to clear out?" Verdin shrugged. "I'm going to back my hunch. That fellow knew exactly who to look for."

"That's what worries me." Balnus shook his head. "He'd meet you *before* the gates close if this is genuine."

"If it's a trap," retorted Verdin, "I'm sure you and Neptarik will prove more successful in your tasks."

Neptarik's earpoints wilted a little and he worried his alleged superiors might disagree so soon into the mission. Comments from him would be unwelcome, so he said nothing.

"If you feel so strongly, then go. But be careful. You should have arranged a time when the gates are open."

Neptarik took the bowls and cutlery to wash them. He rinsed them in the stream, used grass to dry them and packed them away in the panniers Balnus stored in his shelter. His owner would stay here; it was conveniently private.

He looked at Balnus as his hand gripped his shoulder.

"Look after yourself, lad. Keep your skin."

Neptarik smiled. "I will," he promised. "Keeps me dry when it rains."

Balnus laughed and walked with his companions to the forest edge, the road beyond. "Good luck, both of you," he said.

Verdin clasped arms. "A quick in and out," he promised. "Should see you tomorrow."

Neptarik sniffed. "The Mametain had better be a good owner."

"Not too good I hope." Balnus grinned. "You belong to me."

Having said their goodbyes, Verdin and Neptarik walked to the road and turned towards the city.

"We should enter Taura separately," said Verdin. "Best not to be seen together in case questions are asked."

Neptarik nodded. "I will jump on a farmer's cart," he said. "There is a market every day."

"No need to smuggle yourself in," said Verdin. "Show the guards your green card and that should be it."

Neptarik twitched his earpoints and shrugged. "Prefer a cart," he insisted.

"Suit yourself."

Neptarik watched Verdin continue along the road until he was out of sight around a bend. The sylph made himself comfortable beside the road and waited.

And waited.

He was about to give up and walk to the city when his long ears caught the unmistakable rumble of an approaching cart. The sylph flattened himself and lay still.

The cart - a different one from his last visit - trundled past and Neptarik chose his moment.

He swung up onto the cart bed and ensured the driver was blissfully unaware of his passenger. The sylph bedded down on the back of the cart, well out of sight of the driver. No carrots today, but some of the potatoes and turnips that had fallen out of their sacks looked tasty.

Verdin was closer to the city than Neptarik would have credited as the cart passed. He caught the human's attention by throwing a potato at him. Their gazes locked and the sylph gave Verdin his friendliest smile. He restrained a laugh when the walker gestured rudely in return.

As Neptarik had long known, and many humans needed to learn, sometimes you must waste time to gain time.

The guards never noticed Neptarik on the back of the cart and no beggars saw him drop to the ground. The mischievous part of him had thought of waiting for Verdin to gloat at his misfortune, but the sensible part dismissed the idea. If the wrong someone saw them together, it could be dangerous. They must be careful; Verdin and Neptarik were risking their lives, even if everything -so far - seemed normal. Nobody liked spies.

He paused before a beggar. "I seek Sylphs' Hall," he said, flourishing his green card.

The beggar glanced at the card as if it might bite. Her earpoints wilted and she shook her head. "Do not go," she said. "Throw that away."

Neptarik's earpoints rose in surprise.

"Do not go." The sylph turned her head away; he was dismissed.

Neptarik went a little further into the city and next asked a female how to find Sylphs' Hall.

She looked at him and her earpoints slanted backwards. Envy shone in her silvery eyes. She shook her head without saying a word and hurried away.

Neptarik asked no more sylphs.

"*Donanya*, I seek Sylph's Hall?"

The human woman looked him up and down. "Never heard of it," she replied.

"A few streets further east," said a soldier, who also gave Neptarik a strange look. "Four or five, I think."

"Next left, third right," said another woman. She inspected him intently.

"Handsome lad like you should work for me. Got a couple of nice young female sylphs who get lonely sometimes."

Neptarik grinned and flourished his card. "If they refuse me at Sylphs' Hall, I will come looking," he promised.

The woman laughed.

The directions were good and he soon stood before the door to a rather large building. A few horses grazed the grass surrounding the building and carts were lined along one side. The letters carved above the door announced to all able to read that this was Sylphs' Hall.

Neptarik grasped his green card and steeled himself. He would do his duty.

Inside was not quite what he expected. The hall had a huge main room, the roof supported by stone arches, with some smaller chambers at the back. Tables were set up along both walls with men and women sitting on the far side. Rows of sylphs stood before each table. Some were clean and smartly dressed, others ragged and a few dusty from hard travels.

More milled in the middle of the floor, waiting to be directed to a queue. Humans circulated around this mass of unemployed sylphs.

"Have you got a card?" A human fixed Neptarik with a stare.

The scout said nothing but showed his green card.

The man took it from the sylph and turned it the right way up. His lips twitched. "That table." He pointed.

Neptarik inclined his head. "Thank you." He gave no honorific.

This table had only ten sylphs stood before it, easily the shortest queue. A human male and a sylph infertile were sat on the other side. Both wore spotless tunics with a sigil on the breast. The human's tunic was wool, but he could not tell what material the sylph wore. It was only just sufficiently darker blue to show she was wearing something. As he came closer, Neptarik saw the sigil was a red crown on the right breast. He stared at the sylph as she wrote on a parchment; this was the only other literate sylph he had ever seen. He was surprised she was only an infertile.

The sylph at the head of the queue was turned away; her earpoints wilted and a despondent look crossed her face. Neptarik waited patiently.

Successful candidates were directed outside, the rest ignored. Not many were rejected.

His turn came quickly.

"Name?" The human barely glanced up.

"Neptarik," replied the sylph.

"Neptarik-y...?"

"Neptarik," he repeated.

"Sex, male," intoned the man as the infertile scribbled away.

"You're not from Re Taura," continued the human.

Neptarik shook his head.

"Far too many outlanders come here these days," he continued.

Neptarik stared. Was the man fishing? What did he want to hear? *Yes Sir, I am here to spy on your Mametain. My masters believe he is planning to invade, so they sent me here to stop him.* Something about the man troubled him. He said nothing.

"Ever been owned?" he demanded.

"Yes. Rather not talk about it."

There was no sign of any compassion or even empathy in the man's expression as he looked up to inspect him. Finally satisfied, he nodded. "How did you get here from the mainland?"

"Stowed away on a ship."

The infertile glanced at him before resuming her scribing.

"Physically fit?"

"She seems to be," quipped Neptarik. He grinned at the sylph.

"You I mean." The human did not smile. Neither did the sylph; her expression was neutral.

The scout restrained a sigh. Scribes seemed to come from one mould and the Father missed "sense of humor" when He made it. "Very. I lift and carry and work long hours. Good work as well."

"Wait on?"

Neptarik nodded.

"Follow orders?"

Another nod.

"Obey to both letter and spirit of said orders?"

He nodded yet again.

The human scribe leaned forward. "It is required that you wear a collar. The Mametain releases those who wish to leave, but in Castle Beren, you are collared at all times. Understood?"

"Of course."

"Where are you sleeping?"

"Doorways, convenient bushes."

The scribe nodded. "Not tonight. If you got here much later, you would have missed us. Siaba."

The infertile inclined her head and stood. "This way, please."

Neptarik followed Siaba from the hall. That had been rather easy, the Mametain must be desperate for sylphs. The only mystery was why some in the queue had been rejected. He glanced at Siaba's metal collar and saw she could not remove it. He was used to removable collars.

"Is the Mametain a good owner?" he asked.

Siaba's eyes regarded him solemnly. Perhaps she had not forgiven his quip. "Good enough," she replied, cautiously. "You should have asked that question before you were accepted, no?"

They walked towards a knot of sylphs sat on their heels beside a cart. More waited beside other carts.

"Never seen a literate sylph before." Neptarik made conversation.

"I cannot speak for the mainland," replied Siaba, "but there are a few of us on Re Taura."

"Who taught you? You are an infertile."

Siaba shrugged. "The old Mametain said I could learn, so he had me taught with the human children. Jealous?"

"It must increase your value to the Mametain."

Siaba nodded. "It means work in the warm with no heavy lifting. Or mucking out stables. Or cleaning privies." She smiled at him. "Unlike some."

So much for no sense of humor, reflected Neptarik.

"Wait here, please." Siaba indicated the group beside the cart. Twenty sylphs, bound for the Mametain's service. She raised her voice. "It is not too late for you to leave, if you wish. Wait here, please." She walked back into the hall.

Neptarik dropped onto his heels and glanced at his new companions. There was no conversation, though earpoints flickered here and there. There was one other male sylph and four females. The rest were infertiles, though one or two might be young breeders. It was not always easy to tell when a sylph was young. If nothing else, the Mametain liked to employ his race in the correct ratio.

He regarded the females with open interest, though he noticed the other male kept his eyes lowered. Perhaps he was ashamed of something. The females ignored Neptarik completely, though one or two infertiles grinned at him. If anything, the females looked shocked that he dared stare at them. Tauran sylphs must have strange customs.

As the sun reached its meridian, Siaba and the human scribe returned.

The human spoke. "If anybody has had a change of heart, now is the time to walk away." He looked around, but nobody moved. "If anybody needs easement, get it over with now, or else wait until you reach the castle."

Again, nobody moved.

"All right, in the cart with you."

Neptarik leapt to obey with the rest of the sylphs. He made himself comfortable on the hard wooden cart bed. He noticed Siaba was allowed on the bench beside the human. Privileged indeed. He pretended to sleep as the cart jerked into motion. Still no conversation from the other sylphs. There would be time later. He hoped to have answers soon, then he could leave Re Taura and go home.

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## Chapter 4

### Castle Beren

Neptarik was not the only one to stare as the cart began to wind its way down the steep path. The cliffs were too smooth to be natural, and the path looked as though it had been made. Made or not, the narrow path demanded skilful driving and Neptarik hoped the man at the reins knew what he was about. Having no fear of heights or falling did not mean sylphs could not appreciate danger.

Castle Beren disappeared from view long before the cart reached the bottom of the path. It then rumbled across the causeway linking the small island of Re Beren to the mainland of Re Taura. Long and narrow, water washed both sides of it. On the seaward side, a row of stakes poked above the waves, acting as a breakwater. The cliffs ahead were also too smooth to be natural.

Siaba looked over her shoulder.

"Until a hundred years ago, we would need a boat to cross," she explained to the sylphs. "The causeway was built by filling the way with stone dug from the cliffs behind us. The castle was built by digging out the cliffs we are about to climb."

Neptarik filed the information away. The military sense of this was obvious. The causeway reduced the defensive capabilities of the castle, but digging out the cliffs increased them again. Attackers must clamber down almost five hundred paces, cross exposed ground, traverse a narrow causeway half a dozen men could defend, cross more exposed ground and then clamber up another five hundred paces.

Or an enemy might come by sea. Try to pass the castle through the channel, or make a landing on the seaward side. Everywhere down here was within easy mangonel range and mangonels could throw fire, burning any ships that came too close.

A direct assault on Castle Beren would be very difficult to accomplish.

Not that he said anything. He was just a sylph starting new employment. As they crested the next set of artificial cliffs, Castle Beren came into sight again.

The sylphs stared, some with mouths agape.

Siaba looked over her shoulder and grinned at the others' reactions. "Castle Beren," she said.

This close, Neptarik was even more impressed by the fortress. Two huge towers framed a gateway and dominated the view. The limewashed stone hulked like a giant bone and glistened in the sunshine. A glimmering moat surrounded it, though Castle Beren was not far from the cliff edge dropping into the Eastern Ocean.

The strip of land between moat and cliff edge was too narrow for any besieging army to hold it comfortably. And everything up here was within mangonel range.

"How do they get the water up here for the moat?" asked Neptarik, before he could restrain himself. He ignored the surprised stares of the other sylphs.

"There are springs," replied Siaba. "The moat is salt water."

Neptarik nodded. Salt water, so no enemy could drink it. Any army exposed to deadly ballista and mangonel fire. A lot of thought had gone into siting the castle.

The cartwheels sounded louder as they crossed a wooden drawbridge. Neptarik looked at everything. The sun was blocked as they passed through a squarish arch between the gate towers. He craned his neck and noted the drawbridge slotted in just below a window above. He glimpsed the portcullis bottom, which would drop just in front of the iron-studded oak gates. Inside the curtain wall, buildings hemmed in a cobbled courtyard, where the cart finally halted.

Behind the buildings, Neptarik saw the curtain wall looming over the roofs. Another curtain wall with a short tower in its center faced him. An inner bailey must lie beyond as a smaller gateway was to the right of the tower. And more towers rose beyond that.

Slate-roofed buildings surrounded the courtyard on three sides. Every tower had a small turret rising higher, presumably serving as lookouts. A flagpole pushed higher still, each proudly displaying a white flag, with two red stripes in one corner and some motif between them in red. As the wind snapped the flags straight out, Neptarik glimpsed the motif was a crown and saw two red crossed swords decorated the otherwise blank fly.

Wheeled war-machines of a type Neptarik had never seen before were stationed at regular intervals along the curtain walls, each with a supporting buttress of stone behind, to give extra width to prevent a machine recoiling off the walls.

Soldiers patrolled the curtain walls, and more were dotted about, not just in the gatehouse. Strange rope lines led from the two gatehouse towers to a large aperture in the central tower.

Sylphs scurried everywhere and some paused to give the newcomers curious glances. All wore sky-blue breeches and tunic, each with a dull metal collar. Some wore capes and most also had the red crown motif on the right breast. Others did not. Was the motif a mark of rank?

An infertile waited for them in the courtyard. She glowered at the newcomers, her eyes neutral and earpoints slanted forwards. She waited until Siaba and the human scribe had climbed off the cart.

"My name is Tektu," she said. "Welcome to Castle Beren."

Neptarik blinked. This infertile was not collared. She wore the same color tunic and breeches as the other sylphs, but her motif was a brown fox on a yellow field.

"This is as far as you ride," continued Tektu. "You get time to gawp later."

Neptarik waited his turn to climb off the back of the cart and took his place in the straggly line of sylphs. He began to wonder what lay ahead now. From the silent shifting of his companions, he was not the only one made uneasy by Tektu.

The human scribe took the cart to the stable, off to one side.

"One or two rules you must be aware of," said Tektu. "Here, discipline is maintained at all times. When commanded, you obey; when summonsed, you come; when dismissed, you go. You do not leave the castle except on a free day, or under escort. You may speak to each other, but not to the free unless spoken to first. To you, human slaves count as free. You may fraternize, but - and this is important - closer relationships are *not* permitted except with the Mametain's blessing. Castle Beren is a workplace, not a stud and you are employed to work, not rut."

Several pairs of earpoints rose in indignation at Tektu's tone and Neptarik resisted the urge to tell this insulting infertile that even studs were workplaces, but held his tongue. He wanted to learn what it was about this strange sylph before upsetting her.

The other sylphs had noticed it too, though perhaps they understood it even less than he did. He watched as Siaba gave Tektu sideways glances; admiration mixed with attention. Neptarik wondered what the story was there. Did Siaba *not* sense something wrong about Tektu? Perhaps used to her.

He suddenly realized that Tektu had not spoken in the sylph language, preferring to use the human tongue. He filed it away to mull over later.

Tektu glowered at them all again and nodded to Siaba, before disappearing through the inner gateway.

Once alone with the new sylphs, Siaba relaxed. "Follow me please. This is the sylphs' tower. The kitchens and laundries are here, as well as your dormitories. This is where you will be cleaned and collared."

Despite the tower's name, Neptarik saw plenty of humans dotted about. Scribes and kitchen boys, maids and housekeepers all worked alongside the sylphs. Some, he saw with a shock, also wore collars. He had never seen this before; sylphs wore collars, not humans.

"This way, please." Siaba chivvied the awestruck sylphs like a mother hen, ensuring none were left behind. "Stay with me until you have a guide. Castle Beren is large and you can easily get lost here."

*That, thought Neptarik, must be the understatement of the year.*

Even he was impressed and fortresses were familiar to him. They were led down flights of steps until they reached a steam-filled room, brilliantly lit by dozens of light-crystals. No shortage of money here, reflected Neptarik. Siaba was speaking again.

"There are two hot springs in the castle. One rises in the outer bailey and supplies hot water to the garrison and our quarters; the other supplies the inner bailey. There is also a large cold water spring that feeds the well. Here, you must strip and bathe."

The infertiles were quick to obey, but the breeding sylphs stared at each other in silence. Neptarik shrugged and wondered why these sylphs were so reticent. Must be something in the upbringing here.

"You will not be bare for long," promised an apologetic Siaba, embarrassed for them. "But you must get clean for the Mametain."

Seeing Neptarik stripping off, the others reluctantly followed his example. Siaba stuffed the old clothes into a bag. Neptarik resisted her when she tried to take his scarf.

"Old clothes must be burned," said the infertile, her eyes showing sympathy. "You will get new."

"Not this." Neptarik held the smaller sylph's gaze until her eyes flickered away and her earpoints wilted. Siaba gave it up and turned away.

Neptarik eased into the water and accepted the piece of soap. He kept one eye on his scarf, even while washing his hair and soaping himself thoroughly. He was unused to water as warm as this and reveled in it. When Siaba had said hot water, she meant it.

He grinned as he saw how shy the native female sylphs were, keeping their backs turned to him and the other male in the large communal bath. The infertiles never noticed the females' discomfort, but few things ever bothered them.

"Hurry along, please," prompted Siaba. "Towels are here."

The towels were also warm and Neptarik quickly dried himself. He wrapped the towel around his middle and the others copied his example.

"Follow me, please." Siaba left the washroom and climbed one flight of stone steps. She pushed her way through a door, where she ushered the newcomers into what was clearly a store. A man leaned nonchalantly against the counter and eyed the sylphs with bored disinterest.

"Twenty more for the Mametain?" A smile twisted his mouth as he spoke to Siaba. "Infertiles first. You, drop that towel and step forward."

Each sylph was given two pairs of breeches, two tunics and one of those odd capes Neptarik had seen on some of the sylphs outside. The material of tunic and breeches was unfamiliar to him. Pleasantly comfortable, it was surprisingly thin and light in weight. A comb and face-cloth was also issued to everybody. None of the tunics or capes had the red crown sewn into the breast.

"Right," said the man, briskly. "My name is Kurgan. Not Kurgan-ya or *doneya*, just Kurgan. There are regular kit inspections and trouble if you fail. To keep out of trouble, you bring anything with tears, rips or whatever's wrong, straight to me. It's not the end of the world; we'll swop the gear and you'll be spick and span again. But cleaning... cleaning's up to your good selves. Keep your kit clean and it won't let you down. Next."

Neptarik revised his opinion of Kurgan. It had just gone up several notches.

Once everybody was dressed, Siaba led them up another couple of flights of steps and outside.

"Farrier next," she threw over her shoulder.

Neptarik stiffened and his heart beat a little harder.

A farrier meant collaring. As they entered a small lean-to at one side of the stable, Neptarik knew. The smithy fires were cold, but a selection of the dull metal collars was already laid out, locking pins in a box to one side, the hammer to knock them into place atop that.

As expected, the farrier was a blocky man, if shorter than the smiths Neptarik knew in the Vintner Army. Surprisingly gentle hands fitted each collar, ensuring it was neither too loose nor too tight. Neptarik had to admit that he barely felt the collar pin knocked in. For the first time, he wore something he could not remove himself.

He must remember that these people were enemies; but he liked those he had met so far. Except for Tektu. He could not get the measure of her; she made him uneasy.

Collaring done, Siaba led the newcomers back to the sylphs' tower, where a guide was assigned to each. The human scribe who had detailed guides had not expected so many new starters at once; more and more "volunteers" appeared at a run to take a new sylph in hand.

Siaba made all introductions, asking each new sylph her name. The other male newcomer was given a male guide, but Neptarik was introduced to a sad-eyed breeder.

"Mya, this is Neptarik." Siaba needed no prompt to remember his name. "If you will show him around please."

Mya glanced neutrally at Siaba, then nodded. She gave Neptarik an equally neutral look.

"I am all yours," he said. He glanced quickly at the red crown sewn onto the breast of her tunic. *Was* it anything to do with rank?

Mya smiled.

*Pretty*, thought Neptarik.

"Best offer so far this year," she replied. The smile was gone and she was serious again. "We will start on the walls."

Neptarik obediently followed Mya up the sylphs' tower. She showed him the kitchens and laundries. The rope lines from the gatehouse towers to the sylphs' tower were to send heavy canvas bags directly to the laundry, instead of dragging them across the courtyard.

"The last Mametain thought of that one," she explained. "He saved a small fortune in laundry bags. Four sylphs had to drag bags across, and now it only needs one to hook bags to the line."

"Clever old Mametain," muttered Neptarik. "Is the hot water his invention, too?"

Mya smiled. "Not the water, that comes from a spring, but he made sure it was piped everywhere for all to use."

They continued up and Mya showed him the sylphs' dormitories. Neptarik relaxed as the familiar sinabra washed over him. Humans could never decide whether the sylphs' own smell was unpleasant or not - a fine opinion given the stink they emanated - but to Neptarik it was at least homely.

On the central curtain wall, the entire fortress was laid out to their view. Neptarik looked into the cobbled inner courtyard. A covered well was in the middle, beside a strange contraption that resembled a capstan. He pointed to it.

"For hauling cold water. Turning that, it takes an hour to pump water where it is needed. Beats carrying buckets all day. Last Mametain thought of that."

"Last Mametain thought of a lot."

Mya gave him a neutral look, unsure whether or not he mocked her.

Neptarik looked down at the slated roofs of the inner buildings. Workshops, storerooms, living quarters for the Mametain's personal guard, a smaller feasting hall for important visitors.

"The Mametain lives in the north-east tower," explained Mya, drawing it to his attention.

They then looked across the outer bailey.

"Great feasting hall is to the right, where we work most," said Mya. "The other big building is the stable, and the farrier is next to it." There were more workshops, two armories and the gatehouse towers that housed the soldiers' barracks.

Neptarik noted everything.

"Mucking out the stables is easy," Mya was saying, "one corner has a chute that leads out of the castle. The last Mametain thought of that one."

"Did you know the last Mametain?"

Mya shook her head. "Only been here less than a year."

Neptarik followed her into one of the towers and from there they followed the curtain wall. They walked above the inner bailey, which was as large as the outer bailey. The far curtain wall was higher than the others, so they had to climb a spiral stair after entering the next tower.

"This is the north-east tower." Mya spoke in a hushed whisper. "The Mametain lives here. We only go above this floor when tasked. Or invited."

They moved through the tower and onto the far curtain wall. Neptarik looked across to Taura and the opposite headland. Looking down, he could see the inflated bladders marking the channel that was the only safe way for ships. It passed almost directly alongside the castle.

Entering another tower they leaned against a wooden barrier. Beside them was the stair leading down to the normal level of the curtain wall.

"South-east tower," explained Mya. She nodded past the barrier. "This is the old Mametain's secret place."

Neptarik leaned against the barrier and looked down. The room covered the entire tower floor. Workbenches and desks were dotted all over; glass tubes and containers covered every one. Books and rolls of parchment were stuffed everywhere and shelves sagged under their weight. Two stained glass windows in the outer wall

let in light and a doorway opposite was the obvious way in. Another door was beneath him and he guessed the spiral stair led to that as well as the next wall-walk.

His eyes flickered everywhere. He was vaguely minded of another man in another city, called Aylos, who would love to work in a place like this. Two shining golden-colored shields glistened on one wall.

"A laboratory," he murmured to himself.

Mya nodded. "Yes. The last Mametain was a very clever man. We must go down, as the next wall is lower."

Neptarik obediently followed. The corridor was narrow here and curved, as it followed the line of the laboratory. Just before they stepped out onto the seaward curtain wall, Mya indicated another door.

"You should see this."

The small room was bare, with only three rope pulls. Neptarik stared, quickly read the signs attached to each, and waited for his guide to explain what he had already read for himself. It was difficult to remember that he was supposed to be illiterate.

"These connect to bells, all different. It uses buckets of water to sound the bell and when it is heard, the guards on the other towers repeat it. This one is pulled for fire, this one when under attack. And this one can only be pulled if the castle must be evacuated."

"Evacuated?" echoed Neptarik.

Mya nodded. "The last Mametain tried some dangerous chemicks I'm told, so these alarms were set up in case anything went badly wrong. They are tested once a week. At noon, on the second day. The bells sound different for fire, attack and get out. You will hear them soon."

"Interesting." Neptarik had never heard of such a system before.

Back on the curtain wall, Mya indicated the wheeled catapult beside her. "All refuse comes here and once a day, it is thrown to sea."

Neptarik inspected the trebuchet carefully, looking at the large bucket that swung free. He had never seen a war-machine like this before. He glanced at the ocean, wrinkled by waves far below.

"Next is the south tower. It has dungeons at the bottom," said Mya. "They were for misbehaving servants, but they use them to hold other prisoners, sometimes. If the evacuation alarm is sounded, even they are released."

"How humane."

"Do you take anything seriously?" Mya's eyes held his own.

"I take everything seriously," replied Neptarik. "But not too seriously."

Mya sniffed.

Neptarik's tour continued, with the outer bailey shown to him in some detail. The main business of Castle Beren was conducted here. The rooms beside the gate towers were the busiest: two workshops and two armories. The stables were populated with stable-boys and the Masters-of-Horse, who between them cared for the carts and animals. Mucking out and polishing tack were duties that fell to sylphs.

The great feasting hall was full of more sylphs who cleaned and polished everything.

"A lot of work here," remarked Neptarik.

"A lot of sylphs to do it," replied Mya. "So long as it gets done, we are allowed free time."

"What can we do with free time?"

Mya smiled. "On free days we are allowed into the city. We can go anywhere in the outer bailey, we can rest in our dormitories, we can play games." She lowered her voice to a whisper. "The Mametain does not like it, but some of us join the card schools."

This sounded more like it. "You gamble?" asked Neptarik.

Mya gave a quick grin. "Sometimes," she admitted.

Neptarik looked around and saw some sylphs with the red crown. He gestured towards his own plain tunic. "Why do some have the crown and some not?"

Mya glanced at her own tunic. "You get the crown when no longer on probation," she replied.

"How do I get the brown fox instead?"

Mya went very still and she stared into the other sylph's eyes for a long time. He wondered what she was looking for.

She sniffed. "Only the Mametain's personal sylph wears that," she replied.

That meant Tektu.

"Not even Siaba has that privilege."

"But Siaba *is* privileged?" he pressed.

Another sniff from his guide. "She is always polite," said Mya carefully, "but she is literate, and has many privileges. Tektu's favorite, too."

"I would like to learn more about Tektu," said Neptarik. "She-"

"Shall we continue?" Mya bared her teeth in a mirthless smile. "This way."

As he was shown the armories, where sylphs were expected to help keep weapons and armor clean, he wondered more and more why he was here. Might there be an innocent reason for the Mametain's large army? Those ships were in the harbor for a reason and obviously intended to carry the army somewhere. Besides, nobody built a huge army just for bluff.

But everything at the castle seemed normal. People were friendly and easy going; more importantly, sylphs were allowed more freedom than he had supposed.

Even the collars on human slaves were probably down to tradition and foreign ways, rather than anything sinister.

Then he remembered the strange sylph, the only one he had seen wearing the brown fox. The one Mya seemed so reluctant to talk about. "What is Tektu?" he asked.

Mya's eyes widened and her earpoints wilted. "It is best," she replied, "not to ask *that* question and pretend that *she* is one of us. She wears the brown fox, so she is very powerful. Let me show you where you are to sleep..."

Neptarik stopped listening. Despite outward appearances of normality, something here was definitely very wrong.

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Verdin wandered around the city. He peered into shops, narrowly avoiding unnecessary expense several times, and stopped for alovak a good half dozen times. Towards noon, he enjoyed a meal at an inn he had not visited before. He did not want to stand out too much, or arrive at his destination too soon.

People packed the streets and he heard many accents foreign to Re Taura. There were even some he heard from home and he began to fear recognition. People looked content. Even beggars looked happy. As in every city, beggars knew more about what went on than anyone else. If they were content, there was little wrong.

Yet something here jarred.

Another parade passed and he shook his head. These were paid for from tax money? Just entertainment, or a diversion?

Off-duty soldiers mixed with the crowds. But very few men Verdin's age wore civilian clothes. He was not unique, but certainly rare enough for people to stare. Men without uniforms either had completely gray hair or were too young to shave. Come to that, many of those in uniform were yet to see a razor.

Why were there were so many men under arms here, when Re Taura was quite obviously not at war?

At the fish market, the smell of fish was almost overwhelmed by the sinabra hanging in the still air. A large number of salivating sylphs waited there and not all beggars, hoping for spare fish or the bits thrown away by wasteful humans.

Verdin went to the harbor, where he saw the ships and soldiers for himself. Neptarik had not exaggerated the numbers. It was not that he doubted the scout's word, but he was still unused to sylphs doing tasks that should be left to humans.

He moved on before anybody questioned his presence and walked until he reached part of the harbor that was not built up. A gang of sylphs scoured the beach, scavenging for flotsam and jetsam, anything they might be able to sell or pass on. Others gathered huge armfuls of kelp, presumably for food, though Verdin doubted even hardy sylph stomachs enjoyed that bitter taste.

"Stuff's better dried out and used for arse-wiping," he muttered to himself. That might be the reason why they collected the kelp. Or for physicians. Wrinkling his nose, he moved back into the city.

Neptarik had reported he heard very little of interest from others' conversations and Verdin confirmed this for himself. Stares apart, he was all but ignored, and felt very alone.

After stopping for alovak again, the realization dawned that it was not easy to spend a whole day here. He should have brought Balnus for company and someone to talk to.

Even sitting in parks brought problems. Beggars came directly to him there. Humans demanded money or food, some of them quite intimidating. Verdin made to draw his dagger more than once to drive them away. He began to wish he had brought a sword, but that would stand out.

Sylph beggars sat on their heels and watched. Not so easily frightened away, aware that humans did not attack sylphs with daggers, they demanded nothing, but their patient stares were no less troubling for that, and Verdin gave up on the parks.

His frustration grew. From what he had seen, there was nothing to justify Marka or her allies attacking Re Taura. Also as Neptarik had intimated. Verdin wanted to find something - anything! - that the sylph had missed.

A suspicion that Re Taura worked with Marka's enemies, acting as part of a large pincer movement, was not proof. A large army did not always mean there was any intention to use it, if certainly indicative.

Finding the truth was why he was here.

Re Taura might feel threatened by a resurgent Markan Empire. Its larger neighbor had used cajolery and even threats in the past, but had never consumed it. The army might exist to deter the claimants from snaring Re Taura in their schemes and, if any claimant decided to take more direct action, it was ready to throw any invader back into the sea.

Perhaps the Mametain needed to counter residual instability after the old Mametain was deposed. The new man's grip on power might not be as firm as it seemed. What better way to bring a people behind a throne than to invent an enemy? Or pay for entertainment, or provide employment through public service?

And yet, and yet... Neptarik had sensed that something was going on. He had overheard men discussing how many soldiers would fit into the ships. This army existed for one reason only; Fynn was right.

While thinking, he walked and reached the wealthy quarter of the city. People were still out, and sylphs scurried about their chores, but everybody was better dressed and sylphs' collars were more likely to be silver than base metal. Buildings were larger here, better painted - if no less brightly - and well tended. Grass even grew along the center of the street, fenced off so no cart would mar its smooth surface, nor a hungry horse graze. Verdin was pleased to be not too shabbily clothed. Then, surely he would be shown back to the scruffier parts of town. Here, children played rather than worked.

Time dragged until, several hours later, Verdin stood outside *The Green Knight*, just as the spring day faded to dusk. Trap or not, he would order food once inside; it was always better to face whatever came with a full stomach. Forcing down tension, he pushed the door open and went inside.

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Balrus held the spyglass (borrowed from Verdin, who had no need for it in the city) to one eye and resisted the urge to hum as he swept it from one side to the other.

The soldiers were nearly finished for the day, and most had already left the training field, but he guessed two or three thousand still exercised. A sizeable army by any standard, and this was only one city. Neptarik had reported more troops in the city and on the ships at the quays.

He had watched the cart with his sylph sat in one corner on its way to Castle Beren, and hoped Neptarik would keep out of trouble. The lad was perfectly capable of looking after himself, so Balrus returned his attention to the scene before him.

Morran Fynn was right; something was going on and it was a matter of when, not if, the Mametain of Re Taura decided to act. But against whom?

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Tektu paced restlessly around her small chamber, eyes vacant and earpoints quivering. She always hunted for patterns and worried that she saw nothing now.

Trenvera had sent spy after spy to infiltrate the castle and now there were none. She knew Trenvera wouldn't just stop sending spies, only change tactics. Everybody who had started at Castle Beren since Talnan's exposure and death had proven loyal, if not always effective.

Tektu was uninterested in the efficiency of those working at Castle Beren, or in the spies who came to Taura. Re Taura's enemies already knew about the army; young men were drawn to Re Taura from overseas, hoping to make a fortune fighting for a good paymaster. Word would spread. That was intentional, but the plans for that army's use were in the castle. Unless it was infiltrated, their enemies would learn nothing.

Might Trenvera send troublemakers to foment rebellion?

The people of Re Taura were kept as happy as it was possible to keep humans, so that plan would get Trenvera nowhere. Keeping the people happy was one reason Nijen was unenthusiastic about eliminating his predecessor and family. If the people were content, there could be no trouble.

"Wrong," she muttered.

She had begun to hunt for the old Mametain, until her owner forbade her from pursuing it. The man was in the city, but she was obedient. The man she had tasked with the hunt was told to keep his discoveries to himself and keep watching. Until needed, he must keep silence.

She always obeyed her owner's orders.

She shook her head. "We could have them today."

Nijen believed the people would revolt if he took the lives of the old Mametain and his family; Tektu said she would see to it if he was too squeamish.

He replied that he would not oversee the murder of women and children.

She would never understand why people balked when the disposal of women and children was necessary. Human females were no less dangerous than human males and today's children were tomorrow's avengers.

Tektu preferred to tie off loose ends permanently.

The number of sylphs asking to leave the Mametain's service was troubling. Rumors might spread why. Most transferred to duties outside the castle, but others asked to be released altogether and eked pathetic existences as beggars.

She had never learned why so many left; sylphs here were not badly treated. If anything, her master genuinely liked and respected them. At least those who left preferred not to talk about their experiences. They started no silly stories.

Tektu stared at her comfortable cot, which was three feet above the floor, to keep drafts off. The mattress was well padded, had clean sheets and plenty of blankets that, even in spring, were needed at night. A useful chamber pot was underneath, rarely used but convenient if one wanted to avoid long walks to the privies at night.

Her clothes were no different from any other sylph, except for the brown fox sigil and that she wore no collar. She had no need to show off her ownership; indeed, she would infinitely prefer not to be owned at all, but be free to...

That line of thinking would get her nowhere; she should be used to her status by now. She glanced around her small chamber. Time to go for a short walk, that always helped her think.

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Verdin Vintner enjoyed his meal in *The Green Knight*. The beef was tender, green vegetables cooked so they crunched in his mouth. All washed down with an ale with a distinctive flavor he had never tasted before.

As he ate, he felt someone was watching.

Not the innkeeper, who cleaned and moved things around his casks. Nor the serving-sylphs, who certainly kept an eye on all the customers, in case anyone wanted more ale. But they watched him no more than any other.

It wasn't the other customers either. Sure, as a stranger he had earned glances, but no more than that. All were much older than he, few with hair its original color. Or even any hair left. Maybe they had few teeth left; perhaps they could manage one set between them...

He pulled away from the rather foolish thought. None of these people watched him; the watcher could not be seen. Verdin caught the eye of one the sylphs.

"More of that ale, please," he called.

"The heather ale, Spruce," cautioned the innkeeper.

Spruce, who had almost gone to the wrong cask, filled a fresh tankard and brought it across.

"Thank you." The sylph scampered away again.

Verdin took the opportunity to try and see the watcher. Still nothing. He had a suspicion that, if he did anything to frighten or anger the watcher, he was unlikely to leave the inn alive.

Tapping against the windows caught his attention and he grimaced at the raindrops running down the glass. Hopefully, that would pass before he left.

An older man entered the inn and shook raindrops from his cloak. The innkeeper straightened and nodded, serving the man personally. The newcomer swept a look around, then left the main room by a small door.

More men trickled in, all dusting rain from cloaks and hats. Some stayed in the main room; lean, hard-looking men who tried to look inconspicuous. Others left through the small door. Verdin began to take an interest. The men left behind had the look of bodyguards.

And bodyguards looked after rich or important men.

There must be a back room, the other men didn't walk in just to leave immediately. Verdin's heart thumped in excited expectation. This many wealthy men suggested a gathering. A gathering held out of sight suggested privacy. And privacy suggested conspiracy.

If Verdin asked about them, he was certain that sylphs and innkeeper would deny their existence.

Next to enter was the same man who had spoken to Verdin the previous day. He stamped his feet to catch his attention. He accepted his ale, looked straight at Verdin and smiled.

"You may as well come up," he said. "Oh, Mirten will want paying first."

Verdin paid his bill and followed the other man through the small door. He climbed a flight of wooden stairs that creaked under their weight.

The room the stairs led to was brilliantly lit by carefully placed light-crystals. Verdin had seen eleven men enter - he and his companion made thirteen - but there was another man in the room. Verdin suspected he was the owner of the watching eyes.

Everybody in the room looked suspicious of Verdin.

"Relax gentlemen," said Verdin's contact. "Our guest has more to fear from us than we do from him."

If the men relaxed, Verdin saw no sign. Comfortable chairs were dotted around the room, but nobody sat. All gazes were fixed on the interloper.

Verdin ignored them and turned to his contact. "I feared a trap, but you clearly want to remain hidden. From the Mametain?"

The men laughed.

Verdin's contact smiled. "We have nothing to fear from the Mametain. They work for him."

"So this *is* a trap?"

Another laugh. "Come and sit, young man. We are not here to trap you."

"Sit," said one of the men.

Verdin sat and the other men followed his lead. He noted several chairs were left empty.

Another man fidgeted with an empty pipe. "I understand the sylph in Marka has proved an excellent Emperor," he said.

"I am not -"

"Do not insult our intelligence," said his contact. "You are Verdin Branad Vintner, son of the late Branad Ulvic Vintner, claimant to the Throne of Marka. You hold the honorary rank of Lieutenant and you were sent here by Emperor Zenepha."

Verdin held his tongue. The man's intelligence wasn't quite as good as he thought - Marcus Vintner's spymaster had sent them here, not Zenepha - but how did he know any of it?

The older man smiled at what he thought was Verdin's confusion. "Permit me to introduce myself. My name is Steppan da Kanpura and until six years ago, I was the Mametain of Re Taura."

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## Chapter 5 Shadow Riders

Captain Fared Granton held the ancient spyglass to an eye and surveyed the village below, a gentle breeze ruffling his black cloak and light-brown hair. The rest of the Shadow Riders stayed in the forest, with the families and camp followers. Fared had done his best to ensure only single men marched to Marka, but this was not possible for everybody, including himself. Although scouts would be nearby, only Samrita had ridden out with him.

The journey east had not been easy. Too many villages filled with people terrified of armed riders. Fared always paid for what his small army needed; village mayors or headmen stared in surprise when he did and looked like they wondered when the slaughter would begin. He feared most soldiers who passed through simply helped themselves, and not just to food. The Empire had fallen into moral as well as political decay.

Some Riders recommended summary execution for those caught pillaging villages and perhaps a hand lopped off for lesser cohorts. Samrita pointed out that revenge would be taken against the villagers once the Shadow Riders were gone. And they would earn the enmity of every faction and petty lord along the entire route. Not what anybody wanted, given how far they must travel and how small their army was in comparison.

Fared swung the spyglass this way and that.

"How is Nynra?" he asked, to make conversation.

"Holding up well so far," replied Samrita.

Nynra was the small infertile who attended the gwerin's needs. A servant rather than a slave - Kelthane did not practice slavery - she had always served Samrita. The Shadow Riders and their families had no sylphs with them. As sylphs were gregarious and enjoyed the company of their own kind, Fared worried Nynra would be lonely. Samrita did not quite count - and the humans not at all - as company.

"What do you see?" asked Samrita.

"A wooden palisade, but if those are trained soldiers down there, you can take the command from here on. Nynra can." He sniffed disparagingly. "So much of the world is not how it should be."

"The palisade probably deters raiders." Samrita sniffed in disapproval. "Who are probably no better trained than the villagers."

"All these petty aristocrats, seeking to carve empires for themselves." Fared looked and sounded outraged. "All with ideas above their station."

"People act for what they believe is for the best, or to survive." Samrita's earpoints twitched back and forth. "We will trade here?"

"Trade?" Fared snorted derisively. "Buy. Or beg. We need take nobody except you and me. And Nynra to act as your maid."

"Not much acting needed there." Samrita smiled. "I hope this time that their meat is good."

Fared grunted and hid a smile. The last village tried to cheat them, a mistake he doubted they would dare repeat next time a small army called. Angry soldiers knew how to vent frustration better than anybody. Even so, the villagers had escaped lightly. There were no killings and no injury worse than a broken bone.

From what he had seen since leaving Kelthane, few others would act with such restraint.

"We'd better get ready," he said.

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Fared did not think much of the village's defenses as he approached the palisade. The wooden wall aside, the villagers had dug a ditch and filled it with sharpened stakes. A wooden bridge, intended to be pulled away if the village was attacked, crossed the ditch. But any experienced soldier would immediately see the flaws.

The chains that led from the bridge were half-buried and no horses were in sight to pull it away from the ditch. The stakes in that ditch were too close together, so a few horses thrown in would make a bridge, and there was no sign of oil to be set alight if enemies attacked. These villagers had grown over-confident; their ditch and wall would not save them from a determined enemy.

Samrita wore a cap to hide her earpoints, so she could pass as human at first glance. She rode carefully across the bridge, perhaps fearing it might collapse under the horse's weight. Fared waited until the gwerin was across before following. He had wanted to ride in first, but Samrita insisted this would look wrong to the villagers and - reluctantly - he eventually agreed.

They had had this discussion at every village.

Fared was less happy about Nynra sat immediately behind the gwerin, but the sylph would slow them if she walked. As at every village before, the sylph showed no inclination to ride and persuasion was needed to get her up behind Samrita. Typical sylph, frightened of large animals. Nobody would think twice about a sylph not having her own animal to ride. Even so, it would look wrong to have her sat behind Fared.

The moment they were across the small bridge, Nynra slipped to the ground and held one of Samrita's stirrups. They halted at the gate, which was shut. Fared sensed, rather than saw, hidden watchers.

A rough voice called out from behind the gate. "Welcome to Woodend, strangers. What is your business here?"

Samrita had proved herself a skilled negotiator, so she answered. "We are here to trade, by barter or purchase."

"What are you after?"

"Contact with your merchants, or local ruler, whoever is nearest to negotiate with."

A short silence, then one of the wooden gates swung open to admit them. The man stood there was the challenger.

He introduced himself. "My name is Shiorj. I am mayor here. We have no merchants, nor a local lord. Only villagers and farmers. And out there..." He gestured helplessly.

*Bandits*, thought Fared.

Shiorj stared at Nynra. "A mist-child," he said, a touch of awe in his voice.

Fared grimaced. Nynra's coloring had attracted attention before. Coming from Kelthane, he was used to seeing sylphs like Nynra, hair and eyes almost white, and skin so pale there was only a hint of blue.

Nynra came from the far north, where the sun left the sky for part of the year and was weak when it did shine. Sylphs living there had... adapted.

"My servant is not for sale or trade, Mayor," said Samrita.

Nynra gave the human a contemptuous look. She had been demanded as the price before. People here were barbarians if they thought she was a chattel that might be bartered for.

Shiorj pulled himself together. "Of course not. Come on inside." He swung the gate wider for them to pass through. He caught the bridle of Samrita's horse as she passed through. There wasn't much to the village: perhaps thirty thatched, mudbrick dwellings and a couple of log common houses. Shiorj led them to an open-sided log-hut, sheltered from the elements on three sides.

Samrita and Fared dismounted, and boys came to take the horses.

"I am Samrita."

Shiorj looked curiously into the gwerin's eyes as he shook hands. Her cat-slit pupils stood out against her hazel irises.

The mayor drew breath sharply. "You're not human! You're-"

"A gwerin." Samrita smiled. "Apologies if my appearance startles you."

"Mist-child and gwerin." He looked from Nynra to Samrita, before turning to Fared. "What surprises do *you* hide?"

"Knowing one end of this sword from the other," growled the Shadow Rider, one hand already resting on the hilt.

Samrita smiled and laid a hand on Fared's arm.

Sylphs - with more usual silver-gray hair and eyes, and a deeper hue of blue to their skin - paused to stare at the strangers. They eyed Samrita with respect, and Nynra as if she was somehow dangerous.

"Forgive the sylphs their ignorance, mist-child," said Shiorj, "it is rare to see any like you this far south."

Nynra looked at her distant cousins with some pity and then ignored them.

Shiorj gestured to Fared. "Your man may remain armed, but I trust he won't be used as a threat in your negotiations?"

Fared did not react to this insult.

"His sword remains sheathed unless he feels danger." Samrita smiled. "He is quite tame otherwise, I assure you."

Fared's bared teeth gave lie to her words.

Shiorj indicated seats and took one himself. A glance warned Nynra that the invitation was not extended to her. The sylph gave a small sigh and sat on her heels beside Samrita.

A scruffily-clad sylph eventually served alovak. Samrita noted that sylphs here were also not collared. Perhaps their status was displayed by the species they were, as in many other places.

Samrita knew Nynra was in for a shock further east and wondered how she might react when she reached Marka.

She closed her eyes and breathed in the alovak's aroma. Fared did not even look at his earthenware cup. His attention was fixed on Shiorj.

"I've never dealt with a gwerin trader before," remarked the mayor.

Samrita opened her eyes and spread her hands. "We all do what we must to survive in turbulent times," she replied.

"I would still have expected you to be advising some powerful lord or ruler; but you wander the countryside, trading. Whatever. Strange times we live in."

"Dangerous times to judge from the stockade," added Fared, calmly.

Shiorj nodded. "We had trouble a couple of years ago. We generally what make do for ourselves, there is no local lord and the Prefect is many milas away."

"Troubling times indeed with no emperor." Samrita sipped her alovak.

"But there *is* an emperor. Have you not heard?"

"No." Samrita and Fared looked at each other.

Shiorj's eyes widened and he snorted. "Have you not left the far north for the past year? Where *do* you trade? Everybody knows there is an emperor in Marka. Or so I thought."

Samrita inclined her head sideways. "Do you know who took the Throne? And from which faction?"

Fared leaned forward in interest.

Shiorj shrugged his shoulders at the questions. "He's from none of the factions as far as we know. His name is Zenepha."

"Unusual. That name sounds-"

"Sylvan." Shiorj nodded. "That's because he is a sylph."

Nynra looked up at Samrita, who simply stared.

Fared barked a laugh. "Rumor," he snorted. "A sylph ruling humans? Ridiculous!"

"Ridiculous or no, the Throne is occupied. Some prefectures have recognized him, others haven't. Prefect Tomo is still to make his mind up. I've heard a messenger from the Emperor has arrived in Hakon, but that *is* only rumor."

"A sylph." Fared shook his head. His mirth faded under Nynra's level gaze.

Shiorj shrugged. "They say his council is made up of wild sylphs, who wear green and brown paint, but nothing else."

Samrita and Fared exchanged a look, and Nynra gave them both a sylph's slow blink. Samrita pulled herself together.

"Your news is surprising," she said, eventually. "But that does not change the reason we are here. We would very much like to purchase from you five weeks' supply of salted meat for one hundred mouths."

They had learned some time ago that it was easier to ask for several weeks' worth of food for a smaller number of people. Asking for a week of food for five hundred people frightened most folk off. Perhaps they feared unfair terms. Asking for only a hundred over a longer period made them happier.

"Five weeks." Shiorj's tone was carefully neutral. "Meat only or do you also require wheat and oats?"

Fared watched everything as Samrita and Shiorj bartered. The village sylph kept them supplied with alovak. The world had just grown a new dimension of strangeness.

A sylph, ruling humans?

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With a lighter gold chest and fuller food wagon, the Shadow Riders continued their journey southeast, hoping to reach a home none bar Samrita had ever seen.

Fared rode with the gwerin on one side of him and his wife, Telisa, on the other. Nynra walked behind Samrita's horse.

"If a sylph sits on Mark's Throne," Fared said, "then a banner-sylph no longer seems so strange. There might be hundreds of them."

Samrita smiled. "Assuming it is not rumor. News gets twisted as it travels."

"What do you think?" Telisa's voice was quiet, as she pushed dark hair out of her eyes.

The gwerin considered. She had never seen the Shadow Riders' captain so off balance. "It is so ludicrous that it must be true."

"Might even make a better job of it than most humans," added Nynra, from behind.

Fared glanced quickly at Nynra and chose to ignore the comment. Telisa scowled, though the sylph was as free as anyone else to speak her mind.

Fared changed the subject. "The villagers did not try to swindle us."

"Woodend is clearly inhabited by honest folk." Samrita smiled. "That seems a rarity these days, everywhere."

"Indeed," replied Fared. "Especially in lands where a stranger could easily be bandit or other lawbreaker."

"There is something you have not told me." Samrita's earpoints twitched. "Are you going to enlighten me?"

Telisa looked at the gwerin, her gray eyes thoughtful.

Fared shrugged. "Our scouts report we're being followed. We don't know who yet, but he - or they - is too good to be one of the villagers. We assume hostile intentions."

"Probably wise." Despite herself, Samrita felt nervous and her earpoints lay back in her hair. Nynra also looked around fearfully and her earpoints mirrored the gwerin's.

Telisa looked unconcerned.

Fared gave a tight smile. "We won't draw blood until absolutely sure."

Samrita nodded. "Have you seen anything?"

"Only plants moving that should be still. They are good, very good."

Coming from Fared, Samrita supposed this was high praise. There were few to equal or better the Riders, not that she had heard tell of. "I suppose you have put more scouts further out?"

"Ahead and behind." Fared made it sound like *of course*. If he was annoyed at having his professional judgment called into question, he gave no other sign of it. "We'll soon find out who it is."

Samrita nodded. With nothing more to say, she turned to Nynra and tried to reassure her. The sylph's earpoints remained wilted and she clung to the gwerin. Samrita had forgotten how nervy many infertiles were, that they demanded protection in return for their service.

Telisa watched the display, face expressionless.

It was only after the Shadow Riders halted for the night that their shadow made a mistake. One of the scouts, dagger drawn, forced a young man into the camp ahead of him.

"Captain, Sir!" called the scout. "We've caught him."

"Just a boy," remarked Telisa, at her husband's side.

Samrita hurried out of her tent to see. Even Nynra peeked out, until she saw the cause of her fear. She then withdrew.

"Well done, Deren," said Fared.

The captain eyed the newcomer up and down. He was at that difficult age when he believed himself to be a man, although really still a boy. He wore clothes little better than rags, if clean and tended to. But still more patch than original cloth. Deren carried the boy's weapons: a short bow, a long knife and a sling.

"Why do you follow us?" asked Fared, calmly.

"Thieves!" Rage twisted the boy's face. "You murdered my family, took everything you could carry and burned the rest! You-"

Fared held up a hand. His gray-blue eyes locked with the boy's brown. "We ride to Marka from Kelthane. We rob and harm nobody who does not first try to harm us. You are from a nearby farm?"

"You should know," snarled the boy, righteous anger overriding any fear he might also feel. "You pillaged and burned it!" He struggled against Deren's steady grip.

Fared and Telisa exchanged a look. "Have you got a name, boy?" asked the captain, more gently than deserved.

The boy stared and Fared sighed.

"I am Fared Granton. This is my wife, Telisa. The gwerin is Samrita. The shy one who keeps sticking her head out of the tent is Nynra and the scout here is Deren. We have nothing to do with your tragic loss."

"No?" The boy was still defiant. "You think I don't recognize those casks of salted meat you carry?"

Fared looked at Samrita and mouthed *honest folk?* silently at her, before turning back to the boy. "We bought them from a village named Woodend. We cannot know where they came from before that." *Or even if your claim is true or not*, he thought.

"My parents, brother and sisters died before you took it from us! Our animals driven away or killed, even the farmhands and their families murdered. Don't deny it!"

"We had nothing to do with it," insisted Fared. "Your loss pains me."

"If not you then those people in the village would know."

"They may have traded for it fairly, also." Fared fixed the boy with an auguring gaze. "Are you going to tell me your name or not? You have the courtesy of ours."

"Peytor." It was given reluctantly, as if the boy feared he was giving away something precious.

Fared nodded to Deren. "Escort Peytor from our camp, return his weapons and send him on his way."

"Is that wise, husband?" asked Telisa, in little more than a whisper.

The boy stared at Fared in surprise. "Why aren't you killing me?"

"You have done me no harm and, whatever you think, neither myself nor my men have harmed you or yours." Fared nodded to Deren. "If you are thinking of going down to Woodend, remember that they are many and you are one. Siranva loves a trier, but He will not aid you in this. And the villagers might not be aware they traded with bandits."

Peytor looked even more amazed that his thoughts had been read. "You will not help me?"

"No." Fared was abrupt and emphatic. He gestured toward the cart that held the casks of meat. "We paid for that honestly and my conscience is clear." His eyes were uncharacteristically cold. "Go as you will Peytor; may the Father cradle and shelter you. Escort him from the camp, Deren."

As Deren and Peytor left, Telisa rounded on Fared.

"Do you think it is wise to send a boy out there at night?" she asked.

Fared sniffed. "The lad seems more than capable of looking after himself. Looks like he's done all right for himself so far."

"Such an angry young man; I wouldn't put it past him to go to Woodend and get himself killed."

Fared nodded. "They'll deal with him if he gets there. Personally, I think he'll stick around us for a few days, until he's sure we mean no harm."

Telisa gave a disapproving sniff.

Samrita laughed. "Going to try and recruit him?"

"Maybe; from what I've seen, he'll make an excellent scout."

Telisa shook her head. "We don't need recruits until after we reach Marka," she countered. She stared into the darkness. "Even so, I am not happy about sending him out there alone."

As the boy walked out of the camp, he stared down anybody who dared meet his gaze. His expression softened only for the children in the camp, who looked curiously at the stranger.

At his side, Deren laughed. "Arrogant young pup," he chortled. "You could teach our lads a few things 'bout scouting!"

Peytor's attention was caught by a group playing *Knife In*, when one man threw a piece of wood into the air and the others took turns to throw a knife into it.

The boy remained silent and Deren was happy to let the silence grow. He kept a careful eye on his younger companion, ready for foolish moves. He kept hold of the boy's weapons, unsure why the captain was letting this obviously skilled youngster leave.

They finally reached the camp perimeter, but Deren kept walking until they were well clear of the camp. The scout handed the bow, knife and sling back to their rightful owner.

"On your own from here, lad."

Peytor looked back at the scout and his eyes glittered in the gathering darkness. Without a word, he turned and disappeared into the forest. Deren remained still for a moment until the noise of the boy faded.

Only when all was quiet again - apart from usual nocturnal noises - did he move. The boy knew where he was and Deren had no intention of feeling that knife, or sensing an arrow or rock heading his way at the last moment.

He made a quick round of the perimeter and warned the sentries about Peytor. Deren hoped the boy would leave them alone; he was a problem they could do without.

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Samrita stared into her small chest. Never opened in Nynra's presence, as the contents might disturb the small infertile, it held very little. A sheet of parchment identifying the gwerin and her role. A bracelet gifted by a grateful monarch.

And something she'd had no right to remove from Marka. That was what might distress Nynra, if she knew.

Samrita lifted the collar out.

Made from gold, jewels of every hue studded it. Worth a small fortune, she knew that if Fared ever learned of its presence, he would appropriate it to buy supplies. But it was not hers to give.

Like her, it belonged to the Markan Throne.

When worn, it marked the gwerin as property.

She sighed and shook her head. This was a circle she could not square. Nynra was free, yet in Marka she would serve a slave. Samrita had been gifted infertiles before, but they were themselves slaves and she did not think it was permissible in Markan Law for a free sylph to serve a slave.

On the other hand, Samrita could not let Nynra go, as the sylph had served her all her adult life. Or what passed as adult life for infertiles, anyway. Ever since her wound - this happened when parents stopped caring for their infertile offspring - she had served Samrita.

Nynra was bonded, her ties impossible to break. She would never bond with another and the gwerin was still young enough to outlive the sylph.

Under Markan Law, no free sylph could be enslaved, a protection for the many tribes of free sylphs within the old Markan Empire. But, even if Nynra wanted slavery - which Samrita very much doubted; there was a difference between a bond and outright ownership - she could not belong to Samrita.

Even in Kelthane, sylphs certainly served humans - or infertiles did, anyway - but they were not property. Nynra was Kelthanian and would never tolerate a collar like her eastern cousins.

She would never understand why Samrita would be collared in Marka.

Samrita dropped the collar into her chest, snapped the lid down and locked it again. Just in time, as Nynra returned that moment.

Samrita must find a solution to the problem before they arrived home.

Anything else would be unfair to Nynra.

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Over the next few days, the Shadow Riders moved slowly southeast. They passed heavy merchant trains traveling between villages and towns, guards eyeing the Shadow Riders with suspicion. Fared had three hundred fighting men with him and almost that again in camp followers. From a distance even women and children might be mistaken for more soldiers. Five hundred was a sizeable army.

However other people viewed them, the Riders were left alone, and Fared was more than happy to return the favor.

Gathering parties were sent out every day to supplement the food they already had. Birds or animals too slow to recognize danger ended up in cooking pots before sunset, often with plants gathered during the day.

The Shadow Riders remained alert, but there was little to interest Fared and less to threaten his Riders. Even the relative excitement of Peytor's sudden appearance was forgotten before many days passed.

They passed signs of old trouble. Wagons burned out and pushed off the road; others left to rot away. Scattered bones of horses and people, slaughtered and then left to decompose where they died.

The roads were no longer maintained and sometimes only deep, muddy ruts showed the way ahead. At irregular intervals, they passed clusters of farms that had come together for mutual protection. There were buildings around for the livestock to be herded into, in case of trouble. The Riders recognized defensive measures against potential enemies.

Fared avoided the hamlets, except when he must buy supplies. He wanted no trouble and had no intention of fighting these people, clearly wary of armed men. If they were wary, they were afraid, and frightened people could turn violent very quickly if they felt threatened.

If not already burned out, buildings were long abandoned to the elements. Few were still complete. Livestock, gone feral over the years, was much in evidence and treated in exactly the same way as most wild animals: killed for food.

There were no inhabited farmhouses out here. The abandoned homes provided some shelter at night for his men, particularly when the Riders found whole villages, deserted long ago. It was better than terrorizing the countryside merely by their presence. Apart from the occasional merchant caravan, the Riders might well have been alone in the world.

Even the land showed signs of abandonment. Native forest and scrubland reclaimed pastureland and once-cultivated fields. Without repair or reconstruction, boundary walls tumbled down.

Sad-eyed, Samrita looked around her. "To think it has come to this," she muttered. "Gone, deserted. Nobody caring for the land."

Nynra looked at everything with innocent curiosity. Though she shuddered at signs of past violence, she did not shrink from them. And coming from the icy north, wildernesses were no shock to her.

"Even the bandits have moved on," Fared said to Samrita one morning, as they passed the remains of a wagon. Only rusty metal parts showed. "That is at least a decade old."

"Nothing left to steal," replied the gwerin. "Easier pickings to be had elsewhere."

"Some may wait to ambush caravans." Fared sounded hopeful that they might appear at any moment.

"Where have they all gone?" asked Nynra. "They cannot *all* be dead."

"To the nearest village or town," replied Samrita. "Which means fewer people are farming, so less food and more hunger."

Fared felt a twinge of guilt when he thought of his full food wagons.

Occasionally, the scouts showed themselves. Cover was sparse, but none were foolish enough to stand against the skyline. They only showed themselves to the Riders. Had anyone else been about, they would have been more circumspect.

"Highly unlikely that we'll find a sylph bannerman here," said Fared.

"Still a long way to Marka," replied Samrita and her earpoints twitched. "Plenty of time yet. The nearer we come, the more people and sylphs we will see."

"It's getting late," said Fared. He nodded towards some abandoned buildings. "Those'll do for tonight."

After sending a couple of scouts ahead to ensure the buildings really were empty, the Shadow Riders halted to make camp for the night. Downhill - and downwind - men dug latrines, while others hunted through the old buildings, in case anything useful could be salvaged.

Other men, watched by some of the wives, began to play *Knife In*. They had taken their turn scavenging or digging privies before. Fared always insisted every man - officers included - took their turn at the dirty work. Thanks to their late stop, the light was already fading.

A shout from one of the diggers caught Fared's attention and he headed downhill to see what the problem was.

"Captain, Sir! Look at this!"

A knot of men had gathered around something on the ground, while more erected screens around the latrines for privacy. Fared looked over the shoulders of the nearest men to see the cause of the excitement. A box, almost rotted away to expose lead lining that showed green through what was left of the wood.

"Leyen found it."

"Open it," said Fared.

A spade was pushed against the rusty hasp of the box and twisted. With a snap, the lid flew open. The same man used the spade to break open the leather bags contained within.

"Silver!"

"And gold!"

In good condition thanks to the lead lining, old coins spilled free from the small bags. Coins, but no jewels. The owner of the farm must have sold his animals and crops, buried the proceeds here and left. He doubtless intended to return at a later date. That he had not was the Riders' gain.

Fared looked uphill at the abandoned farmhouse, all but tumbling down. It must have been empty for at least a quarter of a century. Nobody would return for this; at least, not tonight.

He held one of the coins up, but the markings meant nothing to him.

"Not from the Empire," said Samrita.

Some of the men looked around; they had not heard her approach.

"They will be worth something," continued the gwerin, inspecting one of the silver coins.

"Should buy us some supplies, Captain?" Leyen grinned up at his commander.

"All donations gratefully received," said Fared.

The men laughed.

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As the dark deepened, Deren took his turn at *Knife In*. He exchanged a quick look with his wife, Kwenby, before hefting the knife. His first throw took the piece of wood cleanly in the middle, to applause.

Crin and Gorst took their turns, but Crin missed. Down to him and Gorst. Again the piece of wood sailed upward and again Gorst's knife skewered it.

"Getting too dark to see," said Deren.

"If you can't see, you can always resign. Coming second ain't bad." Gorst showed his teeth in a mirthless grin.

Deren looked at the thrower. "Send it up," he said. He held his knife, ready to throw.

The wood was dutifully sent into the sky once again and Deren threw his knife and cursed as it missed. Another knife sailed through the darkness and skewered the wood.

"Who the...?" The men turned.

Kwenby, dark eyes concerned, stared into the darkness.

Deren recognized the knife that now stuck out of the wood. He grinned and stared into the darkness.

"Peytor," he called. "You may as well show yourself. I know it's you."

Dressed no different than before, the young man strolled arrogantly towards the men. He grinned at Gorst humorlessly. "Looks like you got new competition," he said.

Deren interrupted. "How did you get so close without the scouts seeing you?"

Peytor grinned. "They were busy with that box you dug out the ground. Just picked my moment and strolled in."

Deren sucked at his teeth as he pulled the boy's knife free. "You and me had better go and see the boss," he said.

Peytor's smile widened. "Sure. Just let me and your friend finish this game first."

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