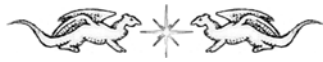


OUTPOST



The Fylking, Book One

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Prologue

Edros stepped up to the standing stone that marked the boundary of the Fylking's domain. Smooth and unadorned, the ancient monolith offered no clues as to its purpose. But it had tales to tell.

The city of Merhafr, a dense, lively port clustered around the King's Citadel, spread out behind him like shells cast over the rocky hills plunging into the Njorth Sea. Edros planted his staff with a breath and started up the path toward Tower Sor, perched on the distant crags rising from the plain. The tower's presence, normally as rough and volatile as the ocean winds, lay cloaked in silence. Gulls wheeled and cried around the height.

A shepherd appeared over a rise, driving a small flock of sheep. When he saw Edros with his warden's cloak and staff, he quickly directed the animals into the brush and stood with his head bowed. The warden murmured a greeting as he passed.

The calm that cloaked the sea at dawn had given way to the unruly rifts and white of heavy weather. Wind carried the scent of brine, heather and wild roses. The warden's Guardian Fylking, who took the shapes of watery places, began to withdraw as they usually did in the presence of the High Fylking, who ruled the towers. Unseen by all but their wardens, the immortal warriors kept their oaths and vigils by the sword. One by one, a whisper in his ear, water lapping on a shore, a cold spot in a lake, fell into quiescence.

Sor was one of ten towers that defined the realm of Dyrregin. Five inner towers, each 50 leagues apart and 35 leagues from the center of the realm, stood on the intersections of lines between five outer towers. The resulting boundary formed the Gate, a

pentacle with a diameter of 213 leagues. In the nine thousand suns since the Gate was built by the original wardens under the direction of the Fylking, the sea engulfed the granite shoals around one of the outer points, Tower Sef, isolating it from land and giving all sailors except wardens something to avoid as they might a siren's song. War took Tower Sie, a second outer point which stood in the realm of Fjorgin across the Njorth Sea. Politics, bloodshed and treaties aside, no one interfered with the wardens in their business there unless they wanted to risk being destroyed by their Fylking. Being relatively new to the Order, Edros had not yet journeyed to Fjorgin. But he had heard the stories.

Being deployed on the rugged coast for thousands of suns had given the High Fylking of Tower Sor sullen, moody dispositions. Like the sea, the warriors were rarely silent. Today, however, Edros felt only the storm. He gazed ahead, rallying his inner senses around the tower with unease. The last time he had felt such quiet up here was after he banished the Fylking for frightening a ranger so badly he had lost his footing and fallen to his death on the rocks below. Such things happened around the gatetowers sometimes. Not everyone believed the tales, and fools abounded regardless. But it was the wardens' charge to protect the citizens as much as they could—or so the high constable of the King's Rangers had needlessly reminded him.

It was said the ranger's spirit wandered the cliffs beneath the tower, cursing the Fylking. That was nonsense. The Fylking would never stand for such a thing, even if they could cross the boundaries of their dimensions and those of the mortal dead.

Silence. Nothing but the sea, crying gulls and wind in the brush. The tower gazed down with a discomfiting stare. On a parapet crowning the top crouched the shapes of dragons—so the Fylking called them—reptilian creatures with scales, long snouts and large bat wings folded against sinuous bodies. The creatures' snaky tails twined down into the stones. Their eyes were empty.

A subtle prickle touched the warden's navel as he began his ascent up the winding steps. The ground fell away, the sea grew vast and the wind quickened. Dark clouds streaked the sky like an infection. He reached the door, a tall arch of weathered oak with

iron hinges shaped like talons. Rain pelted him. As he entered, a screech echoed from the stones, followed by a rush of warm air carrying the scent of wood smoke. His mind went blank as the smell filled his lungs. An impossible smell, in this place.

Edros slipped through and closed the door. He had never entered a gatetower to anything but cold and damp—except for that time the High Fylking had greeted him with the smell of roast partridge, a jest aimed at the late King Farcas, who died last winter with a wing bone lodged in his throat. They had never liked him.

“Hail!” Edros called out, stepping from the shadow of the thick stone wall.

The interior of the gatetower was as large as a warlord’s feasting hall, a cylindrical well rising seventy feet to a ceiling glinting with quartz crystal. Narrow, steep steps spiraled up the walls to a hatch that accessed the top. Thin openings placed here and there in the heights aligned the light of the sun, stars and moon. The Fylking jokingly referred to these as *arrow slits*, though as far as Edros knew, the inaccessible windows had never been used for that.

His heart skipped a beat as he saw the source of the smoke. In the center of the floor, directly on top of the crystal circle that focused the light of the heavens for the Fylking, burned a fire. Heather and broom had been ripped from the roots, tossed into a pile and lit as if by lightning. An old man stood there warming his hands.

Stunned by this flagrant transgression of the Fylkings’ domain, Edros strode forward and yanked his hood from his face. “Are you mad?” he said, none too kindly. “What means this?”

Where were the High Fylking? They would turn a man to dust for building a fire in here! Chilled to the bone despite the heat, the warden opened his senses to the subtle murk of the rising storm. Wind whistled through the arrow slits, as cold and strange as a nightmare lost to memory.

The old man said nothing.

“How did you get in here?” Edros asked in a quieter voice. He and the man were not alone. He sensed the stormy presence of a Fylking filling the tower vaults. Immense and unfriendly, this Fylking had no care for humanity, even hidden by the lofty

ascendancy of the unseen. His antipathy was tangible.

The warden moved his hand into a Banishing sigil, his fingers curling one after the other into a fist, like a many-legged sea creature withdrawing into a shell. It had no effect.

“Don’t trouble yourself with that,” the old man said. “The Sor Fylking are dead and your Guardians scattered to the wind.” He straightened his back and shrugged his tattered cloak to the floor. He was fully armed and clad in shades of brown and green stitched with branches, marking him as a votary of the Blackthorn Guild. Once a noble order of magicians created by King Magnfred, the first ruler to claim Dyrregin’s throne after the Gate War, the Guild had been stripped of its thorns over the centuries and now comprised a harmless assortment of hedge witches and warlocks that served the Old Gods and studied the forces of nature, mapping the heavens, concocting potions for common ailments, talking to crows.

Edros had never heard of a Blackthorn warlock wielding arms or associating with the Fylking. Aside from hair the color of ashes, he was not as old as he initially seemed. He had smooth flesh and eyes like winter twilight, pale gray and ice cold. Something about him stirred the warden’s memory.

“Do I know you?” he asked.

The warlock gazed back, his expression inscrutable but for a sliver of scorn.

Blackthorn, indeed. Edros struck the floor with his staff and raised his voice to the stormy presence enveloping the tower. “Show yourself! What Fylking would disregard a sigil cast by a Warden of Dyrregin? You are bound to an ancient oath.”

The wind howled and thunder shook the earth, driving rain and snow into the tower, the spiraling frozen tears of fallen warriors, five of them, beautiful and lying on the floor like felled trees in broken armor made of stars, long hair tangled in blood, and fair eyes staring at nothing.

Dead? He had not believed the claim.

Edros broke from his trance as the warlock moved. Before the warden understood the way of this, the intruder pulled a knife from his belt and hefted it by the blade. By his side stood the

shimmering form of a tall warrior clad in black steel, wearing a helmet in the shape of the spike-crested, fanged creatures on the parapet.

Niflsekt.

It was the warden's last thought as the knife struck him between the eyes.

The Heir of House Halstaeg

The scent of baking bread followed Arcmael as he stepped from the woodsman's cottage where he had slept last night, uneasily, his gut in a snarl with the specters of domestic strife. He took a deep breath of the predawn chill, damp and smelling of the sea fifty leagues west. A storm was coming, his hosts had warned. Perhaps he would like to stay another day. Warden's staff in hand, pack and bow on his back, he closed the door and strode through the weeds. He would have better company in the gatetime, cold notwithstanding.

Tall trees with thick trunks crowded around the cottage, cloaking it in shadows. Birdsong filled the boughs. A stream whispered at the bottom of a ravine that dropped off beyond a tired garden nearly done for the season. Heading in that direction, Arcmael passed a barn alive with the restless movements of animals. A covered well near the garden shimmered on his mind as a water sprite slipped into the depths. She watched over the well, but like most Otherworld beings, she would not risk getting the attention of a warden and his Guardian Fylking.

Arcmael reached the edge of the ravine and hopped a low wall. He would follow the stream and skirt around Larfen, a township south of Tower Sol, one of the five inner towers framing the center of the Gate. He had lost his mood for people.

A shout broke him from his thoughts. A dog yelped and bounded out of the barn. Its master followed, a tall, thin man with a gravelly voice and a red cap. He carried a heavy stick.

"Get back here you ill-bred mutt!"

The dog vanished into the woods.

“Fylking take you!” As the woodsman noticed Arcmael standing by the wall, his temper fled. “Warden,” he said graciously, a nervous smile fleeing across his face. “Done run off, he has.”

Feeling the chill of the unseen, Arcmael gave the man an offhand nod and continued into the trees. The woodsman’s hand twisted into a Banishing sigil as he lumbered back to the barn, but he didn’t do it correctly. A gray, four-legged shadow slipped through the brambles on the edge of the foundation.

Wolf. Among other things, the Fylking were consummate shapeshifters and took many forms: trees, rivers, animals, elements or, rarely, the warriors they were. The Guardian Fylking appeared to their wardens in certain forms so the wardens would know them. For some reason he preferred not to contemplate, Arcmael perceived his Guardians as tricksters and predators.

We won’t take the hound, Wolf whispered close to his ear. We might take the man. He’s a brute. What say you?

Ever on the hunt, Wolf. Arcmael ignored him. The one and only time he had encouraged his unseen warriors, he had watched a tavern mistress slip in the mud and crack her skull on a stone trough. The woman wouldn’t likely have thrown the rock she held, mad as she was at Arcmael’s having shared her daughter’s bed the night before. But his Guardians didn’t give her the chance; nor did they heed the flawless sigil she made with her other hand—she didn’t know that a warden’s authority took precedence. Arcmael would never forget the silence that fell across the onlookers as the woman lay there in the street, her fingers loosening around the rock with a twitch, her dingy apron splattered with mud and her graying hair oozing blood. A cruel awakening for a warden not two suns on the road with his staff.

Arcmael had to assume other wardens had similar experiences with their Fylking, though to his private misery, he hadn’t heard of it. Tempting the Fylking was strongly forbidden. Even so, the folk of Dyrregin generally treated wardens with caution. For fear of the Fylking, they wouldn’t refuse a warden the hospitality of their homes or the benefits of their skills. But every warden soon learned—as Arcmael had—not to invite trouble. A Blackthorn

warlock could whisper to a farmer's horse, show his wife how to make a salve or wink at his daughter and not face repercussions—but not a warden capable of unleashing the Fylking for the asking.

You do know how to choose them, purred a crafty voice. Fox never missed a chance at a well-aimed observation. *We told you to warm your bones in the weaver's cottage over the river. A kinder woman there never was.* His tone was chiding to the point of dry.

She leaves me offerings, Raven put in with a croaking laugh.

Arcmael rolled his eyes. Devious and opportunistic as he was, Raven didn't give a stiff rat for offerings—even if they included a stiff rat.

"Her daughter is looking for a man," Arcmael said. "I needed sleep, not a family."

Idgit! Fox barked amid rumbles of laughter. Arcmael let them have their fun. He took his needs to cathouses now. Night women had a refreshing disregard for the perils of his station. He was happy to pay them from the stipend he got in Faersc every three moons.

A quiet voice as smooth as a maiden's breast crept over his scalp. *And how well did you sleep under the woodsman's roof?*

Cat was even better than Fox at making a point.

After a good fuck you'd have slept like a wee bairn, Wolf noted. Their laughter clamored in the seer's head like the sounds of a wartime forge. Wolf continued, *Heir of House Halstaeg. No stomach for blood. Now you see cruelty in all you meet. When will you let us teach you the sword?*

"When the stars explode and fall from the sky," Arcmael said, moving his fingers into the elegant shape of a Banishing sigil. The unseen predators vanished, leaving him in the silence of the forest.

Mist cloaked the stream. The air smelled of wood smoke and leaf mold. Arcmael headed upstream using a crude path cut into the side of the hill. Twelve leagues to the gatetower—a long day in a storm, with no fire awaiting him but that of the unseen.

The woodsman's temper clung to his mind like a runny nose. No wonder the dog ran off. Arcmael had no sigils for cruelty. Only walking.

Mistress Skadi, his grizzled mentor, was fond of advising him not to rely on his familiarity with humankind. *You will change*, she would rasp, one finger lifted, one cloudy eye unmoving. *They will change you*. Eight suns studying the warden's arts had not convinced Arcmael of this, even after the mountain winters froze the veils of his mortal senses to dust. It was not until he returned with his ghosts to the place of his birth, the port city of Merhafr, that he learned Skadi's words were true. Knowing he had not yet accepted his new role as a seer, the crone first dispatched him to Tower Sor on the pale cliffs outside the city. No one knew him. No one cared. Just another warden with his staff, muttering to himself.

They will change you. To the day, Arcmael didn't know if Skadi had referred to the Fylking or to people. Both had changed him; the former by association, and the latter by ostracism.

The sun rose, turning birch and aspen leaves gold amid the green of early fall. Arcmael moved along at an agile pace, focused on the trail at his feet. The Fylking's banter unsettled him. Whether by connection to his mind or by some godlike omniscience, they were never wrong. Perceiving this realm through the veils of their dimension, they wielded their observations like a sword in the grip of a blademaster who, with well-meaning yet devastating precision, pointed out his every weakness.

The Fylking were, above all things, warriors. Though they were immortal and possessed the wisdom of ages, Arcmael often chafed at the similarity between their rough ways and those of his father, Lord Detlef Halstaeg, high constable of the King's Rangers. The post, second only to the master of arms, made him especially proud. A cousin to King Farcas who, nineteen suns past, had died unexpectedly by choking on the bones of a game bird, Lord Halstaeg was a man of the sword. His heart was surrounded by oaken shields, his mind by blades.

He had no sense of humor.

Arcmael, with his noble name and all the accoutrements of a first-born heir, had long failed to live up to his father's steel-clad expectations. As a boy he had more love for woods, rivers and

stones than for swords. After a harsh, infuriating mission to impress upon his son the arts of war, Lord Halstaeg finally abandoned the gauntlet. In a strategic maneuver to save face while admitting failure, he stripped Arcmael of his titles and holdings and handed them to his younger brother Straelos. Beneath his pregnant mother's dutiful gaze, Arcmael was sent by armed escort to the Faersc Conservatory in the Thorgrim Mountains to be trained as a Warden of Dyrregin. All fifteen suns of him.

Warden was not a post desired by many; it was grueling, lonely, and put one's lot with the Fylking, which were feared and misunderstood by most of the populace. A position in the order was not easily attained; one had to be naturally sensitive to the Otherworld, and only ten wardens roamed the Gate at any one time. As fate would have it, eighteen suns ago a warden named Edros, who was last seen walking to Tower Sor, had mysteriously disappeared, casting a shadow over Merhafr and inspiring Lord Halstaeg with an idea. Being a man of particular influence, he saw to it that Arcmael was accepted to the Faersc Conservatory, sensitive to the Otherworld or not. To Arcmael's mind, it was a blatant display of power and an undisguised mockery of his wayward son's love for the wilds.

There were worse things the man could have done. But fate proved crueler, as Arcmael learned what the title of Warden of Dyrregin really meant. In the tongue of the Fylking, Dyrregin meant "gateway of the gods." But not just any gods. For the Gate enabled the Fylking to travel between the world of Math and a nearby star system. They were warriors, Math was an outpost to them and the wardens their servants, albeit willing ones. With nowhere else to go, Arcmael had had no choice but to resign himself to yet another master with a sword. No escaping it.

Arcmael walked through the forest, trees towering around him like barbicans guarding his peace of mind. Here and there, half buried in ferns or pushed up by roots, lay ancient ruins left by the Gate War twenty-five centuries ago, when the Fylking's enemy, the Niflsekt, came to Math through the Gate in order to destroy it. The Niflsekt caught the Fylking by surprise, killed them, and instructed mortals in Dyrregin whom they had enlisted to their cause to destroy the towers after the Niflsekt used them to leave.

The war left Dyrregin in ruins and its people scattered across three continents. For a thousand suns, the realm was a graveyard, cursed, and no one from Math would venture there.

The Fylking, no doubt aware of the possibility of such an attack, had hidden their knowledge in a labyrinth beneath Faersc and instructed the Wardens of Dyrregin to pass this knowledge down the generations. Hundreds of suns after the Gate War, when at last the wardens' descendants dared to venture into Faersc, they kept their oaths to their ancient order, unearthed the secrets of the Gate and began to rebuild the towers as their ancestors had eight thousand suns before under the patient instruction of the Fylking. When the Fylking returned, the Kings of Dyrregin once again took up residence in Merhafr, and with them the wary children of the realm. But the ruins remained, scattered over the realm like bones.

With a sigh Arcmael opened his mind to his unseen companions. Having earlier made their point, they didn't take form or intrude upon his mind. After a league, maybe two, the warden sensed something else. Something mortal. While often as unexpected and mysterious as the Fylking, mortal creatures had a different presence, stronger and at the same time more distant. He stopped and turned.

The red-cap woodsman's dog trotted warily along the river, slowing in trepidation as it drew near. It had a tangled pelt of dirty white, brown and black. Arcmael knelt and held out his hand. The hound approached in stops and starts, its tail tucked between its legs. It had one brown eye and one pale blue.

The warden smiled.

"Hail, Dog."

The hound stayed just out of reach.

"You look in need of a friend." As he shrugged his pack to the ground, the dog started and moved farther away, circling. Arcmael pulled out his food sack, rummaged through it and found too many strings of sausage links. The woodsman's wife, in a graceful attempt to apologize for her husband's surly disposition, had given her strange guest far more than he needed. He tore one off with his teeth and held it out. "Here. Bit spicy."

The dog crept forward and snatched the sausage from his

fingers. After gulping it down, the beast looked up and licked his jaws. Arcmael gave him another. He reached out to stroke the animal's head, but the dog wouldn't suffer his touch.

"Fair enough." He closed up his pack and rose to his feet. "You're welcome to come with me, but you might regret it before long." As *might I*, he thought, creasing his brow. This could get complicated. But he had no heart to drive the creature away. He knew what that felt like.

Raven croaked a laugh as the warden adjusted his pack and bow and set off down the path with his new friend trailing him.



The wooded rift of the stream leveled into a sea of ferns blushed with purple and gold. Towering spruce trees hung low over the burbling waters where the path turned north. The morning sun faded to gray as Arcmael left the river behind.

After hours of tromping over ferns, roots and stones, he spotted the light of a distant break in the trees. He skirted a boggy area, stepping on the large flat stones of ruins. Dog splashed through the muck, scattering birds and sending frogs and snakes fleeing over the water. Arcmael came to a pond overhung by willow trees. A small stream spilled into it, sending ripples across the glassy surface.

"Well, Dog," he said with a yawn. "This might do for a rest." His companion lapped noisily at the water. Arcmael found a dry place at the foot of a large willow and lowered himself in the ferns. As he brought out his pack, Dog came near and sat, tail thumping. Arcmael pulled out the sausage and cut off a nice meal with his hunting knife. Once finished, the dog paced for a few moments and then dropped to his belly and relaxed.

"Tired?" Arcmael bit into a sausage and took out some bread and a piece of hard cheese. He tore off pieces and tossed them over; Dog snapped them up. "Can you hunt?" he said with his mouth full. "You might need to soon." *I did*, he added to himself.

Not a fortnight after his arrival at the Conservatory, his new mentor, Skadi, gave Arcmael an unstrung bow and an empty quiver. She taught him to find hemp for strings, cut poplar for

arrows and fletch them with the feathers of wild geese. She taught him to shoot, and then gave him a hunting knife. He balked those lessons—too much like his past—until she took him into the mountains. Leagues she led him, her long white braid swaying on her back, brightly colored leggings tucked into her boots and the rhythm of her staff striking the ground, until they arrived at nowhere. Then she turned with one crow-black eye and left him there. *Not every step you take on the Gate will lead you to a warm house and something to eat*, the crone explained.

On his knees, then and there, Arcmael swore fealty to her wisdom, to learn how to survive in the wilds he loved so much and had dreamed about from the plush, sheltered prison of his father's house. He learned to take game, make fire, find edible plants and mushrooms, build shelter, climb crags and trees, cross rivers and to leave every place he stepped as pristine as he had found it. *You must be as the Fylking*, Skadi told him. *Silent, indistinct, moving with the softest touch.*

Dog curled up by the warden's side, eyes and ears alert but drooping to fatigue. Birds, frogs and snakes knew there was nothing silent or indistinct about this creature, but Arcmael appreciated the company.

He leaned his head back on the willow tree and closed his eyes. Emptiness stared from the black water, the space between the stars, an ageless presence. A drop spiraled from the edge of a leaf and vanished into the dark. A moth landed in a glistening web stretched between the low branches of the tree. In a mathematical flurry of movement, a large spider with long black legs and a body the color of dead flowers shot from a hidden line and descended upon her struggling prey.

You must prepare for the coming storm, she said in a crackling water-cold voice.

Spider. Swift and mysterious, she had never spoken to him before. "It's just a storm," he replied.

It will raze the land to close your eyes. Another drop fell. And those of your kind.

The moth stopped struggling.

"Those of my—what?"

Seek you a woman with a broken heart.

Arcmael opened his eyes to trickling water and a restless breeze, his gaze focusing on a spider wrapping its prey in a silken winding sheet. Light raindrops stippled the surface of the pool. Dog had moved next to his leg for warmth. The warden moved his fingers over the creature's fur, gently, ready to withdraw. The dog awoke but didn't shrink from his touch.

"There," Arcmael soothed. "Rested? We've a long journey yet."

He rose, filled his water skin and gathered his things. A short time later he emerged from the forest into a field now barren but for upturned clods of earth where the last of the season's crop was harvested. A horse whinnied somewhere in the distance. Wood smoke curled from the chimneys of a farm and hung low in the damp air. Beyond the farm rose layers of hills limned with evergreen spires and gray boughs shrouded in mist.

Dog flushed a grouse, bringing Arcmael's attention to a tall standing stone tucked into the trees on the far edge of the field. The markers had been placed centuries ago to guide wardens between the gatetowers. After ten suns walking the Gate, Arcmael no longer needed the stones, but they did exude a certain comfort. As he approached, Cat's sleek shape fled around the stone and vanished into the brush.

Arcmael pushed the hood from the nest of his curling hair. The rune carved into the top of the stone was splattered with bird droppings. As a youth he would have taken this as a sign, but leagues, practicality and the company of warriors had taken his youth. Sometimes birds just shit in places. The warden drew a deep breath, cleared his mind and set out at a brisk pace beneath the drizzling sky.

Dog finished pissing on the stone and trotted after him.

The terrain between here and Tower Sol was kind, with low rolling farmland dappled with forests, glades and rivers. The gatetower sat atop a high tor. The wind never ceased in that place; it swept across the Fasos Hills with ruthless persistence.

You must prepare for the coming storm. A web, a moth and a bottomless pool. The dream had not submerged far. Wolf had once called Spider a wisewoman, a witch of their kind. He told Arcmael that her choice to be one of his Guardians was a great

honor. Spider appeared rarely, and when she did, she was not interested in tricks or banter.

Seek you a woman with a broken heart.

Arcmael furrowed his brow. In this war-torn realm, what woman didn't have a broken heart? Too many dreams, too many questions, too many men bred to the sword like raindrops, gathering and flowing to the sea.

Arcmael made good time for most of that day. The storm kept the same tireless pace, raining lightly, its sky low and gray, wind gusting restlessly, turning north. Arcmael donned a pair of woolen leggings he had acquired in Odr, a village nestled in the shadow of Tower Sif on the northernmost point of the realm, in the Vale of Ason Tae. Whether by a particular stitch or a certain kind of wool, his leggings blocked the wind with the impossible efficacy of boiled leather.

Her name was Melisande, the woman who knit his leggings, and she was a creature of the north if ever there was one. Fair yet strange even by his standards, she had long tangles of red-blond hair, pale freckled skin and the strength of a horse. The villagers called her Millie. He had first discovered her walking close enough to the gatetower to touch it, displaying that general disregard typical of Odrians who, since the village was established centuries ago, tended to ignore warnings against settling close to the Fylkings' domain. At first he thought the knitter had banished the Fylking, but as it turned out, she didn't know how. To his further astonishment, the Fylking were silent as the knitter walked by and made no move to defend their domain from intrusion. She was allowed to pass without so much as a breeze or a remark.

Many folk throughout Dyrregin offered their work to the wardens as gifts in return for goodwill, particularly near the towers. Millie never let on that this mattered much to her. When he asked her what payment she might take for her leggings, she asked him to bring her to the top of the gatetower.

It was a bold request he was not at liberty to fulfil. The Sif Fylking were a nasty lot: wolves among hounds, owls among sparrows, panthers among housecats. Sif was the Apex of the Gate where the world of Math merged with an array of other worlds on which the Fylking waged their war. The Apex was the first line of

defense against the Niflsekt, who not only sought to destroy the Gate but also had a history of using mortals to aid them, by promising things no immortal of right mind would deliver, for fear of violating the basic laws of their kind. Given this, the High Fylking were grim and took no chances. Arcmael knew more than one tale of someone meeting an ugly end in Odr.

However, moved by Millie's pluck, he guided her to the steps and told her some history in hopes of satisfying her request. Holding his hand ready in case of trouble, he related the Arrival of the Fylking—and then he learned that Millie's seeming disregard was not simply a maddening characteristic of being Odrian. It was all he could do to continue his tale as the High Fylking of Tower Sif appeared and stood before her, respectfully, their eyes shining with unheard-of curiosity.

It was not history that interested them.

Arcmael had later asked his Guardian Fylking what *had* interested them, for in all his knowledge he couldn't guess. Silent as the moon, his predators told him nothing.

Dog stayed near and bore the weather with animal fortitude, but before long Arcmael noticed him flagging. He walked until he reached a thicket of spruce trees, beards drooping to the ground. Once sheltered there, he fed Dog and parted his cloak for company. They rested in each other's warmth for a time. Tomorrow he would close the hound in the tower and go hunting. Well-meaning as she was, the woodsman's wife had not packed for two. And her sausage gave him indigestion.

As he dozed, Arcmael thought again of his vision by the pool. *It will raze the land to close your eyes.* He didn't think Spider was talking about rain and wind. Who knew, with her? It wouldn't be the first time the Fylking had told him something weird that led him nowhere.

The storm merged with the evening, bringing darkness by the time the warden emerged from his shelter. He kept to the woods when possible to avoid the lashing wind. His sense of direction became harder to trust. When at last he reached a plain, he didn't recognize it. The weather had a Fylking-like quality of deception, altering the landscape and dissolving the veils of the Otherworld.

Look with your gut, Wolf said, startling him. The tall warrior stood by his side, gazing over the field. He wore silver armor as supple as snakeskin and covered with intricate patterns of geometric symbols and beasts woven in knots. His helmet was in the shape of a snarling wolf's head, and he wore a fine black cloak that partially obscured a longsword with an obsidian pommel. Long strands of pale hair twined on his shoulders.

The Fylking did enjoy startling him.

His throat dry, Arcmael tore his attention from Wolf and returned it to the plain. His physical senses told him nothing; his invisible senses told him something was wrong. Just as he started to ask Wolf what was happening, lightning illuminated the landscape and the gatetower beyond, just visible above the rolling horizon.

Wolf vanished.

On top of an outcropping not a bowshot away stood three mounted warriors clad in black so pitch they looked like holes in the stone. A glint of steel fled like sparks as the darkness returned, one moment after the closest rider turned his head and fixed a gaze on Arcmael that hit his chest like a knife. No prickle, no chill, only darkness. They were not Fylking.

They were not mortal either.

Arcmael, said Wolf. The calmness in the entity's voice was almost as scary as his use of the warden's name. The Fylking rarely used his name unless they wanted his full attention.

"What?"

Run.

With a growl, Dog shot out and bounded across the plain toward the riders, barking wildly.

The Knitter

Melisande lay in bed in the loft of her cottage in Graebrok Forest north of Odr. Wide awake and blinking in the dark, she listened to the mice above her head. Nearly a moon past, her swordsman had repaired a crack in the eaves before returning to the towers and yards of Merhafr, the great port on the Njorth Sea, where he served as a King's Ranger. His name was Othin, taken from a god of wisdom, trickery and war. What such a one knew of carpentry, well, that was open to question. But he knew other things. Nice things.

The thin moon wheeled over the night as the mice worked, their tiny feet pattering in the rafters, claws scraping, teeth gnawing. How such small creatures could make such a racket eluded Melisande almost as much as her lover's carpentry skills. She reached for a boot and slammed it into the ceiling, causing dust to drift onto her face. Silence fell...then the chewing started again.

"Pisskin!" she hissed. Where was that cat? Not here, if the mice knew anything.

With a snuffle and a yawn, Melisande threw aside the covers and swung her feet to the floor. She dragged on her boots beneath a woolen nightshirt and climbed down the ladder into the kitchen. Tilting her head to avoid the clusters of plants drying on the rafters, she lit a fire and put on water for tea.

The earth's pulse crept into her feet and up into her hands as she regarded her latest knitting project, which she had left folded on the table late the night before. Bythe, a goatherd who lived within sight of Tower Sif, had requested the tunic in return for a pair of goats. Melisande smiled. Goats were trouble, but she liked

them.

She sat down and absently traced her tingling fingers over the oaken tabletop darkened by a century of use. Steam rose from the water in the kettle. Her hand crept to the stitches of her work, rows and rows of them, nearly finished. She picked up the tunic and studied it. Dark brown as the smoke-stained rafters of the cottage, the stitches formed gaps where the sleeve joined the yoke, much like the cracks between a wall and a roof. Deep in her mind stirred a visceral awareness of interconnection, the wisdom of the natural world, a tapestry of patterns, lines, curves and counts as perfectly cast as a well-stitched swatch.

Pattern sense, her mother once called it; at least Melisande thought it might have been her, though it could have been her grandmother or one of the old women in the village. Come to think of it, her mother had turned a blank eye on such things.

Being of a wilder mind, Melisande picked up her needles, hummed softly and wove a neat kitchener stitch over the gaps in the armpits of her work. Then she folded the goatherd's tunic into her tattered old knitting bag, removed the kettle from the fire and returned to bed.

She didn't hear the mice the rest of that night, the night after, or the night after that. Of course, Pisskin might have had something to do with it. Clever hunters, cats. So she told herself as her pattern sense curled quietly as a snake in an ivy patch, to rest with both eyes open.



The day dawned clear and cold as Melisande set out for Odr. She wore a linen shift with a woolen smock over it, her worn leather boots, leggings and a cloak that had belonged to her father. It was covered with horse hair, a welcome addition to the whisky stains he had put on it when her mother got sick. She died young, and shortly thereafter, he died drunk. A sensitive soul, her father never dealt well with the darker side of life.

Melisande stepped over a fragment of the ruins that lay everywhere in the forest, cracked by roots, cloaked in moss, some of them carved with strange patterns. Melisande's father had

claimed that most of the ruins lay underground, shrouded by centuries. Melisande's grandfather had discovered a cave on this very spot where the ground collapsed to reveal part of a chamber. Full of roots and tumbled stones, it extended some distance underground through a narrow opening on one side. After emerging quite shaken from a daylong exploration of the underground, he moved rubble over the opening to seal it. Then he built his house on top, providing him with a deep cellar in which to store food and provisions over the long winters.

On the north side of the cottage, backed up to the forest to shelter it from the wind, stood a three-sided barn her father had built to hold livestock. After her mother died, he sold their horse and pig and told Melisande it would be up to her to travel to the village for food and supplies. This she was happy to do, as it gave her a reason to escape the pall of his drunken moods. Though he had never harmed her, his company became as dark and unnerving as the hidden labyrinths beneath the forest.

Now her barn provided shelter for Othin's steed, a heavy brown warhorse bred to the mountain terrain. The village groom, who quite loved the green scarf Melisande knit for him, put hay and grain in the loft above the stall each first-quarter moon prior to Othin's visit. The mice got more of it than the horse, but Pisskin made sure they didn't get all of it. The cat also haunted the tumbled-down whisky still farther out in the woods, along with other creatures that had taken up residence there. A better use for it, Melisande decided.

A village farmhand named Rolf, in return for blankets for his children, now protected from cold and smiling in their dreams, had begun work on the barn to provide shelter for Bythe's goats. The opening of the new addition faced the inside, protecting the small area from blowing snow. After promising to bring her a cart full of fresh hay, Rolf had eyed Melisande's garden and suggested in the spring he might return and strengthen the fence. Grinning, she said she would consider that, all the while wondering if pigs or ponies might make more practical companions.

Pisskin, her one fine companion, sat on the edge of the garden. The cat wore a thin braided collar Melisande had woven to protect him from predators bigger than himself. His glossy

black fur shone in the sun as he licked a paw.

Her garden was not a tidy affair; she liked to let things grow wild. In the spring the village women gave her seedlings in return for tea cozies, placemats and shawls. Nary a puff of steam, drop of ale or chilling draft eluded her stitches, they claimed.

She slung her knitting bag over her shoulder and bit into a pastry stuffed with smoked goose and hazelnuts, a treat the butcher's wife had given her on her last visit. The woman never stopped praising the placemats Melisande knit for her, a pattern of woodland herbs reaching to an indigo sky. Swearing the mats made her food taste better, she always sent the knitter home with a basket of something tasty.

Autumn was a knitter's busy time. Melisande knit brindled patterns of drops and sky over the summer; wove strands of sky-blue wool into the edge of a belt as the hard gray line of a late frost passed her garden by; pulled threads of weeds from the stitched patterns of the vegetable patch, leaving purple violets to grace the air with Othin's favorite scent; and braided black yarn with rosemary and periwinkle to protect her cottage when the shadows grew long. Such amusements aside, she always had something to do. Folk from far around prized her work for its weird charm.

Well, most of them.

Melisande left the cottage path and entered the cool shadows of the forest. The snowy peaks of the Thorgrim Mountains glinted through the barren trees. She came to a stream running over the path and stepped over the large flat rocks she had muscled there last spring after a flood swept away the bridge and splintered it against an oak tree. The village builder offered to replace the bridge in return for socks for his wife, an Eastlander from Maan Ket. When Melisande went to his house, knitting bag in hand, his woman turned her away, muttering *Witch!* as she closed the door. Melisande had stood there a moment and then laughed like one of Bythe's goats bleating at a fenced-in garden. The builder had not said a word to her since.

Never mind. She had lost one friend but gained another. She returned home that day and had begun to drag the bridge remains to her woodpile when a bird swooped over her. Ashy gray with a

black head, throat, wings and tail, a hooded crow landed on the path at her feet with a croak. It hung around her cottage for the next three days, perching in the trees, preening on the roof, raiding the compost pile, teasing the cat. Then, as if summoned, it left her.

Beyond the mountains folk said that the Vale of Ason Tae was home to the wild, and that witches and warlocks of the Blackthorn Guild trained here amid the wicked spirits of the north from whence the winters came. Mothers told their children scary tales about it, or so Othin claimed. He said things like that to make Melisande laugh. Everyone somewhere feared something somewhere else. In the uncanny north, men like her father drank themselves to death for fear of the dark.

Melisande knew one votary of Blackthorn, a hedge witch called Yarrow who lived in the Otter River Valley between Odr and Highloc in the southern foothills of the Vale. She kept to herself, tended a mule and made remedies for everything from an upset stomach to a bad dream. She came to Odr occasionally, usually in the spring after the mud dried, walking beside her mule pulling a cart full of baskets, brooms and herbal goods she had spent the winter making. Last spring, Melisande traded Yarrow a shawl the color of snow shadows for a fine basket with a lid and a clasp, a bundle of scented rushes and a salve to soften the rough spots on her fingers. The woman took the shawl with a strange smile and a deep nod of her head, as if to acknowledge one of her own kind.

The sun had climbed above the eaves of Graebrok when she came to a glade scattered with tree stumps and overgrown with bramble, its dark berries long harvested by women and bears. She trudged through the tangle, snatching her skirt from the thorns. Through the trees, the hills of Ason Tae plunged into a green valley carved by the North River, its deep waters glinting.

Tower Sif stood directly in her path. She veered east of it, heading through the grass to a lonely trail near the wardens' cot. The villagers of Odr had built the one-room hut many suns ago to give the lonely wanderers a place to warm themselves during the cruel winter moons. For fear of the Fylking, many villages in Dyrregin did the same. Better to maintain a cot than have a seer under their roofs near a gatetower. They had all heard the stories:

bairns awakening from nightmares, fire leaping like wolves from the hearth, bread refusing to rise, horses kicking down stalls for no reason. The Fylking were as fickle and unruly as anything of the Otherworld, and while no warden worth a staff would risk letting harm coming to anyone under his or her watch, everyone knew the Fylking were not altogether under the wardens' control.

Melisande hopped from the brush onto the path, casting a glance over her shoulder at the cot huddled in the shadows. She had seen many wardens pass through Odr, but only one had ever spoken to her, late last fall. As the gatetower lay directly between her cottage and the village, she had taken to passing closer than many would dare. She never met with trouble, causing her to wonder if the stories were exaggerated or even made up to pass the long winter nights.

One day, as she had walked along the tower base, the warden emerged from the cot, ran to her in visible distress and stopped her in her path. He was well spoken, had tousled brown hair threaded with blond, bright blue eyes and a worldly manner. He called himself Arcmael. Glancing repeatedly at the tower height, he led her away and warned her about passing so near. She had to admit, his warning was scary enough to heed, but it was not until shortly afterwards that she did so.

The next day, as Melisande emerged from the baker's with a warm loaf under her arm, someone pointed her out to Arcmael. Again the blue-eyed warden approached her, only this time he asked her if she might knit him something to warm his legs. As it turned out, she had two pairs of leggings made for which she had not found homes the previous winter. One of them, black with coarse green finger yarn, crackled with pattern sense. When the warden respectfully made his request, Melisande knew the leggings were his.

She moved along, studying the tower. It stood on the rocks gazing over the valley as it had for well over a millennium, tall and forbidding, a sentinel of mystery. Carved from the land, its stones were gray as winter storms. Thin, slitted windows gazed from beneath a parapet surrounded by otherworldly creatures Arcmael called *dragons*, ferocious, wily beasts the size of a foothill.

As many times as Melisande had walked by the gatetower, she

imagined standing on top to look over the Vale. She asked Arcmael if he might show her to the parapet in return for his leggings. He blinked, stunned by her request—and then refused, of course, as she knew he would. His expression gentle yet dark, he took her by the hand and sat her on the bottom step to the arched door, and then he told her a story.

The Fylking come from the stars, he began, from a rich world much like Math with vast mountains wrestling above the seas. Dragons live there. Some of the mountains breathe fire and smoke; others lay quiet, black and pale beneath three moons. In the valleys amid raging rivers and deep lakes tower ancient forests in which the Fylking built living cities of trunk, bough and stone.

Lovers of strife, song and steel, the Fylking are warriors, their empires spanning the heavens beyond their world. Being immortal, they created their civilization by the force of their hearts and minds on the fabric of time and space; eons of methods making light, heat, color, movement and sound, rendering them gods to the eyes of mortals.

Gods or not, for all their glory the Fylking are subject to the laws of nature. They can die, by the sword or other violent means, though their skills in avoiding such things are beyond human comprehension. In their world they are solid; in Math, they are not. Like light in the dark perceived only by a cat, or sound heard only by a dog, their bodies vibrate beyond mortal senses and can only be perceived by mortals through training.

War is an art to the Fylking, an exquisite tapestry of plots, logistics, weaponry and landscapes they mold to their design. The dance of good and evil occupies them utterly, one creating the other, the oceans giving birth to blood and then washing it away again. Thus do the long ages of their existence have meaning. And so, through an alignment in the stars that occurs once every twenty-two thousand suns, they arrived in Math, a singular world positioned in the heavens such that it gathered enough power to provide access to several worlds where their war had taken a bad turn. Like rangers setting up camp to study an enemy of the king, the Fylking built the Gate in order to pass to and from their new outpost without having to wait for long alignments, an impractical strategy even to an immortal.

By virtue of their stature in the dimensions of living beings, the Fylking had the ability to build the Gate using the natural materials of

the world; however, their methods would have been terrifying to humans and created unnecessary complications. Though the Dyrregins were at that time greater in number and sophistication, they would not have understood a tower being built by sound or the higher laws of manifestation, let alone ten of them in specific places over the land. And so the Fylking, having the patience of the immortal, befriended humankind by creating the Wardens' Order.

The Fylking taught their wardens the arts of interdimensional perception and the properties of light, energy, crystals and architecture. The wardens built the towers, watched over them with human eyes and maintained them over millennia, generations upon generations, gathering the relatively infinite energies of celestial bodies to provide a bridge for their immortal guests. In return the Fylking protected them, and gave them the honor of representing them to humankind. In time, when humans' natural curiosity and belligerence ran its course through enough skirmishes to make it clear the Fylking had no intention of leaving until they very well pleased, Dyrregin became the odd place that it is.

Melisande smiled. The storytellers sang this tale, in their way. But Arcmael told it with more passion and detail. It pleased her greatly, and she told him so.

Afterwards, the warden drew her gently away from the tower and explained that the Fylking were able to affect things with energy. They could contact humans in visions, dreams or a sense of unreality; or they could kill. After putting the fear of the Otherworld into her bones, he taught her how to move her hand into a shape that would protect her if the Fylking ever bothered her in some way. He explained that the Fylking were not truly under thrall by the sigil, but that they had long ago vowed to their human companions to withdraw when asked. The vow was a courtesy, something they did to put humans at ease. He maintained that no Fylking had ever broken it.

He made Melisande repeat the sigil again and again until she knew it well. Once satisfied, he laughed. "Odrians," he said, shaking his head. "Breathing distance to the Apex of the Gate, don't know the sigil, don't care." He took her hands and squeezed them gently. "You are true to your roots, Millie. But do take care. The Fylking are real." With that he left her there, walking in his traveler's pace in the direction of the mountains, cloak swirling at

his feet. He glanced back at her once as if fully expecting her to toss her sigil into a drawer like an unmatched sock.

The gatetower brooded in the sun as a breeze rose from the north, blowing cold across the field. Melisande quickened her pace.

Her friend Bythe lived in a fertile glade on the outskirts of Odr, in a small stone house his father had built. His wife Leara was pretty and rarely had three words to say, but she had a singing voice like that of a river goddess. Her husband's goats avoided her. Eldritch creatures.

The roof of the goatherd's house appeared through the trees. Beyond the river nestled the village of Odr, stone walls bright, chimneys smoking in the morning air. Melisande descended quickly over the rugged terrain. Behind her, the tower's presence grew heavier, like a night terror fed by attention. It stared at her back with its slitted windows and stone-blank dragon eyes. Wondering if the Fylking had heard her earlier thoughts and noticed her at last, she turned around.

A mounted rider stood near the tower, clad in shining black, a sword at his side and a cloak tearing in the wind. He glimmered like a mirage. From the eye slits of his strange, scaled helmet, he gazed across the distance like the tower itself, alien and condescending. A warrior, to be sure, but he was not of the Dyrregin Guard or the King's Rangers.

Where had he come from? Melisande scanned the landscape. He could have come from the other side, from the road the wardens used.

When she looked again, the rider was gone. A chill clutched her spine like a bony hand. Fylking? She shouldn't have seen him. She wove her fingers into the sigil, now grateful that Arcmael had taught it to her. She started walking. The force of the tower didn't recede behind her. She looked over her shoulder.

The rider had crossed half the distance in her direction, his horse's hooves striking sparks from the stone. The scales on his helmet took shape as a gatetower dragon. Nothing but a Fylking would wear armor like that.

Arcmael *had* warned her that the High Fylking of Tower Sif might ignore a Banishing sigil as easily as not.

Clutching her knitting bag, Melisande fled like a hare, leaping through brush and over rocks toward the shelter of the trees. Hoofbeats shook the ground; thunder tore the clear blue sky. As she reached the glade, she spotted a thicket of young hemlock trees. She dove into it, branches tearing her face and hair. She curled on the ground and pulled the needles over her head. Then she lay still as a mouse after a boot hits the wall.

Silence. A chickadee called in a two-toned song. A red squirrel released a long chittering scold. Goats bleated in the distance. Her breath shaking, Melisande parted the hemlocks and peered into the glade. No hoofbeats. No wind. No dark cloaks.

The horseman had vanished.

She climbed out of the trees, brushed herself off and chided herself for being a fool. Only the wardens saw the Fylking, and her Banishing sigil had not affected him. It was just a misunderstanding brought on by her dark thoughts. Perhaps he was a messenger or even a mercenary going to Odr, and she had simply been in his path. She would ask around once she got there.

Wan comforts in hand, she walked quickly in the direction of the goatherd's house.

Ranger of the North Branch

It was midmorning, raining lightly. Othin of Cae Forres strode out into the ring of a steeply-tiered arena built into the crags on the western side of Merhafr overlooking the sea. He drew his sword and spun it once to loosen his wrist. Then he stopped and breathed deeply to calm his mind as he awaited his third and final match of the day. He wore the seasoned trappings of a King's Ranger: a black leather tunic stitched with mail and embossed with a pentacle, black leggings and boots strapped with supple greaves. Long strands of his black hair had escaped their bounds and dripped onto his face and neck.

Cheers rippled through the crowd filling the tiers. Cold wind blew from the northeast, stirring the waters to a froth. High around the arena, royals and nobles watched from five evenly spaced balconies draped with the standards of their houses. The banners of Merhafr hung between: a starry, woad-blue background containing a gold and white goat with long, spiraling horns and the hindquarters of a fish. Throughout the crowd, people wore ornate masks of goat heads with scales and fins curling on their shoulders. The air smelled of brine, leather, wood smoke and roasting meat. Lively music filled the streets outside.

In a balcony to the southeast, dry beneath a tapestried canopy, sat nobles from House Halstaeg. In their center above the coat of arms decorating the balcony, sat Lord Halstaeg, high constable of the King's Rangers. He wore his formal dress, his expression as hard and unreadable as a crag. On his right sat his wife, dressed in green and stiff as a statue; and his son and heir Straelos, a cold mirror image of his father. On his left, dressed in twilight blue

and violet like a bruise, was his daughter Rosalie. She leaned toward her father's ear and said something that failed to change his expression.

For Othin's first match, he fought a woman from Skolvarin, nearly as tall as he was, agile and skittish as a hind. He had bested her with some effort; many others had not. He lost the second match in hand-to-hand to Captain Ingvar in the Dyrregin Guard, the army that defended the realm. Ingvar never smiled and struck like a snake. Othin had stood his ground for a respectable time and got one good hit to the captain's face before the wiry brute put him down hard, leaving him with a hurt shoulder. The captain wore this like a banner to which his men rallied; the rivalry between the Dyrregin Guard and the King's Rangers, an elite brotherhood of warriors who kept order in the wilds of the realm, was an old one. It gave Othin small comfort that none of the other rangers had bested Captain Ingvar either.

The crowd began to stomp their feet and jeer as a man emerged from a gate in the ring and approached Othin with a heavy step and a hard set to his jaw. The tall warrior grinned behind a thick brown beard and a cape of blond hair soaked by rain. He wore dull mail, heavy leather layered like scales, and baggy trousers bound with strips of hide. On his shield was blazoned a hawk in flight on an evergreen background, the standard of Valdros in the northern inlands of Fjorgin.

Othin spun his blade again and balanced his weight on his feet, ready to move.

The Fjorginan slammed the pommel of his sword on his shield. "Come little goat," he said, his teeth flashing. "I'll carve you up for my soup."

Othin circled him. They were the same height, though the Fjorginan was wider. Othin stepped aside and raised his shield to take a cut from the man's sword. Splinters flew. He thrust low, testing the man's guard, and met a parry. He eased into a series of thrusts, parries and ripostes that built in passion and gave him a clear impression of his opponent: force used to advantage, strong, accurate and reckless.

The Fjorginan struck again. "Slippery fish goat," he taunted. "Show your horns."

Othin played him, his sword part of his body and the space around him spiraling in lines and arcs superimposed over the writhing, colorful, shouting crowd. He feigned a thrust and in a brief hesitation struck the man's ribs, glancing off mail as the Fjorginan twisted away too late.

The Fjorginan was a different sort of opponent than Othin's first two, though no less worthy. He could care less if Othin was ranger, guardsman or cutthroat. His guard was tight, his strokes sure. Othin spun his blade once and stalked casually around, noting a tattoo on the back of the man's sword hand: a circle inked blue but for a sliver on one side. It was the traditional mark of a Valdros warrior, showing the phase of the moon when he was born.

"What's that on your hand?" Othin asked, pretending to lean forward to get a closer look. As the Fjorginan moved, the ranger leapt away like a weasel, throwing up his shield in a lazy motion. Othin's sore shoulder throbbed. "Do enlighten me, now. I hear the marks tell of your ancestry." They circled each other. "Yours is mostly dark. Your mother begat you by her brother?"

The warrior grinned and lunged. Othin parried his blade to the hilt, binding him, and then shoved him back a step. "I see. Her father fucked her."

Another clash, this one without the grin. Othin stayed light on his feet, though he was beginning to tire under the man's heavy blows.

"The family bull?" the ranger threw in.

The Fjorginan roared and charged. Othin ducked beneath his blade and threw a kick into the full force of the warrior's advance, knocking his feet out from under him and putting him face-first into the mud. His shield rolled away and toppled.

The Fjorginan rolled over and up, spitting dirt, his sword parrying the ranger's assault. Then he swung his arm around. Othin twisted aside, but not before a glob of mud splattered him in the eyes. Rumbling with laughter, the Fjorginan kicked him in the chest, knocking him back onto his rump.

The crowd roared to a deafening pitch.

Othin scrambled up and lunged, slugging the man in the gut and knocking the wind out of him. As he thumped to the ground,

the ranger came down and hit him with a solid right hook. Gasping for breath, the Fjorginan passed a hand over his bloody nose and then blinked up to find the ranger's sword at his throat.

"Do you yield?" Othin said quietly, without amusement.

The man closed his eyes and nodded. Othin stepped away and raised his blade into the air. The crowd yelled, clapped and stomped. From the tallest crag, a woad blue pennon was unleashed, stiff and rippling on the wind.

Othin lowered his blade and offered his hand. The Fjorginan grunted and let him pull him to his feet. Grumbling something in his native tongue that could have been a nod or an insult, he retrieved his shield and lumbered back to his men.

His eyes caked with grit, Othin sheathed his sword, turned toward the balcony to the north and bowed his head to King Angvald, a bearded, thickset royal ensconced amid his lavishly dressed family, the House of Merhafr. Then Othin turned to the Halstaeg balcony. The high constable tilted his head forward. Thus acknowledged, Othin returned smiling to the rangers standing beneath the arches of the Pit, as they called it, the network of chambers beneath the arena. They clapped and shouted crude pleasantries.

As Othin approached, something fluttered in the air in front of him. His reflexes caught a silken scarf. Above, Rosalie leaned forward, blond braids piled on her head, hands clasped over her heart. Unable to extract himself with honor, Othin tucked the favor into his tunic and kept moving. Relief bathed him as he passed into the stony shadows, out of sight.

His companions grinned and praised him for his victory. "That'll teach 'em to play dirty, won't it," someone said. Another shouted, "Worthy match!" Someone took his shield and threw his cloak over his shoulders; another handed him a rag to wipe his face. A lanky Southlander named Tasn pressed a wineskin into his hand.

Thanking them, Othin pulled the cork and took a long draught of wine, delicate and too fine for their ilk. He lowered the skin with a raised brow. "Cae Lis. Return of the Fylking, 1014." He knew the vintage. The Vinland in the heart of Dyrregin where he was born boasted the finest vineyards over continents. He had

learned to drink there. He looked around at the rangers' grinning faces. "Where'd you rogues get this?"

Prederi, a blond-haired ranger from Merhafr, shrugged. "I might have found a cask in my travels," he said with an offhand gesture.

"In the king's cellars," Tasn added.

Someone whistled. Othin cleared his throat. "We could all lose our patrols for that." He took another long sip, smiling against the mouth.

"Na," crooned Prederi. "They'll never miss it."

Othin took off his sword and lowered himself onto a wooden bench near one of the arches. Behind him, a familiar voice said, "War God!" Othin smiled at the nickname as Bren, his best friend, sat beside him. Othin flinched as the warrior slapped a paw on his bad shoulder. "Good match, lad." Hailing from the Fomor Mountains overlooking the Wythe Strait that flowed south into the Njorth, Bren had dark red hair, pale freckled skin and sky-blue eyes. They had been friends since the day Othin arrived to Merhafr for duty, young, reckless and too good with a blade to tend vineyards.

He handed Bren the skin. "Och! good," he rumbled. He took a swig and then lowered the skin with a grimace. "Don't we have any whisky?" he complained to no one in particular. Prederi grumbled a comment about someone having drunk it all.

"Northern wolf," Othin said. "Wouldn't know a grape from a turd."

"Grapes are for birds," Bren returned, clapping the wineskin against Othin's chest.

A horn sounded, signaling the next match. Two warriors entered the arena: a tall man clad in the gray and red of the Dyrregin Guard and a stocky man covered in thin layers of dark brown armor. On his chest he wore an embossed standard of a black, rough-cut tree.

"Aoneg," Bren said. "He's far from home."

Othin nodded. Aoneg was a vast, forested realm over five hundred leagues west over the Aegir Sea. It was said the people of Aoneg lived in trees, like the Fyking in the old legends.

Bren said, "You headed north soon?"

Othin took another drink of wine, relaxing as heat spread into his limbs. “Aye. First quarter, three days hence.”

In keeping with tradition, the rangers rode out on the moons, some on the first or last quarter, others on the dark or bright. The length of their patrols varied depending on where they traveled. For the most part, the rangers had their pick of routes; the king employed enough of them to cover Dyrregin comfortably. For eight suns Othin had patrolled Dyrregin’s rugged western coast between Merhafr and the Fomor Mountains which bordered the realm in the north. Five suns past, when the rangers put in bids to change routes, he offered to take the roads to Ason Tae north of the Thorgrim Mountains. He had a mind to see the famed Jarnstrom Forge, which stood on the North River in Odr and employed some of the finest bladesmiths in Dyrregin. He had no competition: few rangers warmed to the idea of riding up there, especially in winter. Even Bren had guffawed when Halstaeg handed Othin the map.

Undaunted, Othin took his patrol in hand: east through the townships along the Taeson River, north past the Rue Hills, through the city of Vota and up into the foothills of the mountains that sheltered Ason Tae. The Wolftooth Pass was particularly bleak, icy and stark even in the warmer seasons, and usually impassable in winter, forcing him to detour west across the Blanch River and pick up the Spruce Road through Thorgrim’s slightly less formidable western range. He worked long, cold nights in remote areas that tended to breed trouble: breaking up local skirmishes, hunting down thieves or renegades from other realms and keeping the roads and passes clear of highwaymen. He was well known and respected in all the townships and villages of his domain. He often varied his patrol in random ways so that no one would be able to anticipate when and where he might be watching.

While it was common for rangers to pair up and share parts of their patrols, they mostly traveled alone, like the tower wardens. Unlike wardens, however, rangers were not protected by the Fylking. They were trained to deal with all manner of mishaps: attacks, injuries, bad weather and the like. Many of them, Othin included, had known war before joining. The rangers dealt with

trouble efficiently and employed a complex system of messaging through riders and ravens trained to scout patrol routes and recognize their rangers' appearance.

Othin worked his patrols with grim fortitude. But one fine spring two suns past, his duties took on a new light.

On the eve of the Seed Moon, he rode into Odr, a quiet yet tough little village steeped in Fylking stories. Once seen, he was immediately called upon to break up a fight. Naturally, he assumed this was happening in a tavern or some such place. He was surprised to discover two women rounding up on each other on a quiet lane lined with lupine, foxglove and the purplish spikes of tulips.

They were fighting over the treatment of a cat. Spitting and hissing like cats themselves, the woman with large breasts and dark curly hair defended her baby; and the other, tall with tangled red-blond hair and a raucous flush on her cheeks, retorted that the breath of her opponent's baby wasn't worth a stinking rat's ass to such a fine cat.

Othin recalled his amused reluctance in getting involved, mixed with some question as to why the people in that village—a village known for defying the Fylking themselves—had called on a ranger before intervening in this particular row. As Othin made his presence known, the wild girl stomped off without so much as a glance in his direction, went and knelt beside a nearby wagon and coaxed out a crouched and wary cat. She wrapped it in her cloak and departed, leaving Othin with the enraged mother, who wagged her finger at the blond woman's back and accused her of being an infertile, inbred whore. Deciding he would prefer the company of such a one to being in this situation, Othin tipped his head and turned his horse around.

There was something about Melisande. He had watched her walk up the path toward the gatetower like a mother of all things and none, free and strong, long hair blowing on the wind. Against his better sense, Othin rode after her. He had yet to regret doing so.

Since then, his duties as a ranger included a visit to Millie and her cat in Graebrok Forest north of the gatetower. His wild woman of the north, as he liked to call her, not once had she

asked him for fidelity or to put down roots. She cared nothing for such things. Near each bright moon, for as many days as his duty allowed, he stayed with her and gave her his love, which she returned in kind, gratefully, wild and laughing in his arms in the loft of her cottage.

“Three days before I leave,” he repeated, watching the match outside and not seeing it. The rain had started again. “I miss the road.”

Bren nodded, glancing sidelong. “You’re missing something else too, by the look of it.”

Othin reached up to his throat and fingered a charm Millie had given him, a hooded crow in flight, knit from flax. “The moons grow long.”

They sat in silence amid the talk and noise of the men around them watching the match. Prederi reached over Othin’s shoulder and took the wineskin from his grasp with a surly comment. Bren lifted his chin toward the arena. “I hear you have an admirer.”

Othin didn’t bother to ask him what he meant. Everyone knew the high constable’s daughter favored him—she made sure of that. He gazed up through the underground shadows at the Halstaeg balcony. Rosalie had returned to her father’s side, and leaned her chin on one hand, looking bored. “She flirts with every warrior under Halstaeg’s command. I’m just the latest.”

Bren tilted his head. “I hear it’s more than that.”

“Heard what, where?” Othin returned tiredly. He turned on his seat and held out his hand. “Oi!” After a moment, someone returned the skin to him.

“Two days ago,” Bren said, “I had a nice time with Teelie in the kitchen. You know she can—”

“Bren.” Othin lifted the skin to his lips.

“Right. She asked me if you and Lady Rosalie were betrothed yet.”

Othin spewed the king’s wine all over the dirt. “Betroth—” He coughed the wine from his throat like flies. “I’d sooner marry that tree-barked Aonegian out there.”

Just then, the guardsman outside took a hit, causing the crowd to moan. The Aonegian claimed the match.

Othin leaned on his knees with a cough. “Next time you’re

playing with Teesie—”

“Teelie.”

“—tell her I’m already taken. Let her spread that around like an itchy asshole.”

Bren wheezed a laugh. “Aye, I will.”

Othin cleared his throat and took another pull of wine. Cheers and drums shook the arena as the spectators awaited the next round. The rangers in the Pit talked, laughed and collected bets. Othin stretched his back. A shadow had fallen over him, a sickly foreboding emanating from the violet bruise sitting above the Halstaeg banner. Three days. He would see an end to it.

Time passed as they awaited the next match. Behind him, Prederi commented loudly on the delay. Someone told him to shut up.

“Something comes,” Bren said. He stood up like a hound at the arrival of someone no one else heard. Othin twisted around, as did Prederi, peering into the shadows of the interior passages. No one who knew Bren ignored his spooky comments. The northerner had a sense for things.

Othin stood up and leaned outside, gazing upward through the dripping shadows. The seat by Rosalie’s side was empty.

A commotion stirred the men milling around in the Pit. “Rangers!” a voice rang out. “Attend!” Murmuring, the men gathered as Genfawr, captain of the rangers who patrolled the Western Branch of the Gate, strode among them with an expression of official urgency. “You’re all to report to Lysalfheim at once.” With that he departed, ignoring the questions and groans of displeasure in his wake.

“Something’s not right,” Bren said softly.

“Aye,” Othin said. He picked up his sword and slung the strap over his shoulder. “Halstaeg left.”

The two men fell in behind the others as they began to move inside. Bren gestured to the wineskin in Othin’s hand. “You might want to lose that.”

The men in front of them began to file into a tunnel. Sensing the gravity of whatever would cause Halstaeg to call the rangers to a meeting in the middle of a tournament, Othin pulled the cork and took a long drink, and then turned and handed it to Tasn,

who walked behind him. "Pass this around. It needs to disappear." The Southlander took it with a nod.

The King's Citadel stood in the center of Merhafr, which over the centuries had grown beyond the original walls and now included a second ring that formed a semicircle from the northern side of the harbor to the Taeson River that bounded the city to the south. Leagues of crypt-like passages wound beneath the city, linking the major points and other, shadier locations known only to thieves, spies, murderers and lovers.

As the rangers moved through the tunnel that joined the arena to the citadel, others came from adjoining passages and merged into the ranks. They talked quietly of the tournament, the lines at the citadel forge, and the weather. Some speculated as to why they were being called. It was worth knowing. The high constable of the King's Rangers would put his weight behind just about anything if it suited him.

The tunnels widened, and the men climbed the steps into the familiar corridors of the Rangers' Square, a dense yet comfortable hive of rooms, baths, kitchens and training yards in which the rangers lived between patrols. The garrison was strategically positioned on the eastern side of the citadel closest to the gates. Lysalfheim Hall, named after a midwinter constellation which aligned with the upper three points of the Gate pentacle, was used by the rangers for meals, companionship, gatherings and official meetings.

The warriors fell silent as they entered the hall. On one side was a massive stone hearth with an oak mantel carved into elaborate hunting scenes with horses and hounds. Above the hearth hung a large painting of the rangers' coat of arms: a sword and arrow crossed over a pale moon with an embossed interlocking pentacle spanning the diameter. Beneath it, in Old Dyrregian, was the motto: *We keep the balance when the gods turn away.*

Above, from rafters darkened to black by centuries of wood smoke, crystals arranged as the stars in the midwinter sky turned and glittered in the light sifting in through windows that looked out over yards and gardens. A central glass dome with high curved rafters illuminated the center of the hall.

Chairs and benches were scattered around tables and firepits. Ornate wood and iron racks held torches, weapons, cloaks and casks. Statues of the Old Gods adorned alcoves in the walls: Balder, a sun god of hope; Freya, a beautiful goddess of fertility, gold and war; Hel, keeper of the realms of the dead; Thor, a god of war and thunder; and others Othin didn't know. The hall appeared to have been cleaned and straightened in a hurry; the chairs sat at cocked angles and there were remnants of food and spills on the tables.

A gray and black-striped cat wandered along the wall with a bony scrap in its mouth. As the men poured in, the cat vanished through the open door to the kitchen.

Through a tall arched entrance on the other side of the hall, Lord Halstaeg strode in accompanied by his son Straelos, Captain Genfawr of the East Branch and Captain Ageton of the North, to whom Othin reported. Genfawr was dressed in formal attire; Ageton in the travel-worn shades of the road. His cheeks were ruddy and his blond hair, thinning on top and braided long in the back, crept from its bounds. Behind them came two more men: Lord Coldevin, Master of Arms for the Dyrregin Guard, and Captain Ingvar, his first in command, whom Othin had fought earlier in the day. A bruise from Othin's fist swelled and colored on Ingvar's cheekbone.

"What are they doing here?" someone muttered. The Dyrregin Guard didn't attend the rangers' meetings as a rule.

With closed faces the commanders moved into the center of the hall beneath the dome. Halstaeg lifted his chin and glanced around as if to size up the assembly. Dispensing with formalities, he said, "It has come to our attention that a band of ruffians attacked Fjorgin near the ruling seat of Earticael. They killed a woman from the House of Minos. A royal. It is claimed they were Dyrregian."

The rangers stirred. Two centuries ago, after the Sie War in which Dyrregin was finally forced to give up Tower Sie, Fjorgin and Dyrregin drew up the Njorth Treaty, a pact of peace between the realms. Old tensions still stretched across the sea like a drawn bow, causing trouble now and then—but it was dealt with swiftly. The bigger question, which lay on every face there, was why the

rangers had been called from a tournament for this news. It would normally be the Guard's concern.

Halstaeg continued: "Lord Coldevin has dispatched a company to Fjorgin to discover the truth and, if need be, bring these men to justice; however, the seriousness of this claim has us looking to our borders. Reprisal is likely."

Someone asked, "How was the woman killed?"

Halstaeg and Coldevin exchanged glances. In his gravelly voice the master of arms said, "They raped and beheaded her. So it is claimed."

The hall erupted in outrage. "That's a lie!" someone called out. "Blaming us to hide the crime!" said another.

Othin rubbed his face. He had seen enough of what men were capable of to believe almost anything; though he had to admit, this smacked of the kinds of exaggerations the winds created as they blew old hatred over the waters.

"Until we find out," Halstaeg said, "we must concern ourselves with what the Fjorginans *believe* is true. Loyalty to Earticael is patchy; there are lords who may act without the king's knowledge or consent, lords who hold grudges that precede his rule." He reached into his tunic and pulled out a thin scroll. "As we are not at war, as yet, we don't want to raise alarm in the populace by sending guardsmen on anything but routine missions. Through peace and war, you men are familiar and know our lands as no others, save wardens. Our duty calls." His gaze settled on Othin briefly.

Bren leaned close. "He's going to reassign patrols. Doesn't look good for you, lad."

"Nor you," Othin returned, gazing ahead. Closest to the fire, a statue of his namesake Othin, the Allfather, wanderer, warrior and poet, stood in his alcove, hood cocked over one eye, ravens perched on his shoulders and wolves sitting at his feet. Briefly, Othin considered a prayer, thinking the tricky god might favor love over duty. But why complicate things? The wine he had drunk soured in his stomach as Halstaeg uncurled his paper and began to call out names.

"Heige of Sibor. Egil of Tak Lear..."

Bren was right. Othin had not only manned the coastal patrol

for eight suns, he had served in the Skolvarin Guard four suns prior to enlisting with the rangers, defending the southern coast from invasion by the Catskolls. Halstaeg gave him the Thorgrim patrol to expand his experience and close a gap, but the assignment came with an understanding.

“Prederi of Merhafr. Giles of Dovrar. Bren of Ottersun...” Halstaeg paused, taking a breath. Othin closed his eyes and bowed his head as the commander finished, “Othin of Cae Forres. You men come with me. The rest of you stay alert. We keep the balance when the gods turn away.”

“We keep the balance when the gods turn away,” Othin repeated with the others, reciting the rangers’ motto. He fell in line as Bren put a comforting hand on his back.

As he strode from the hall to receive his orders, Othin envisioned Millie the last time he saw her, kneeling in her garden with her boots in the mud, her smock clinging nicely to her waist and hips as she leaned forward to pet the cat.

Three days. A war fought over a woman could go three suns as easily. Or three hundred.



A cacophony of talk, laughter, clinking mugs, shuffling chairs and music filled the low-ceilinged, smoke-blackened room of the Full Moon, a tavern in view of the King’s Citadel. In the center of the room, a fire blazed in a pit ringed in stones. Rangers and guardsmen filled the benches around, eating and drinking with abandon on the last night before the rangers chosen for the coastal patrols rode out of the city.

Bren slapped a card on the table. Painted in bright colors, it had a sky blue background and a golden eagle perched in a crag. “Hah!” the red-haired ranger barked, leaning forward at his companions with a grin. “I out-see you and out-travel you.”

Prederi, Tasn, Heige and three other rangers threw down their cards. One card showed a wolf; another, a hare. Heige, a blond warrior and adept archer, held a card with a mountain cat. He flicked it across the table with a scowl.

Othin put his frog card onto the deck and reached for his

whisky. It was not his night for wildcards or wine, not here in this place so aptly named for the moon under which he had planned to spend in Millie's arms. Lord Coldevin didn't believe the episode in Fjorgin would come to war after two centuries, even given the violence done to one of their women in Dyrregin's name. Othin had doubts. All he could imagine was what he would do if something like that happened to Millie. It wouldn't end with justice to the perpetrators.

If nothing else, he could dedicate himself to his new assignment with the intention of preventing such things here.

The musicians in the corner of the tavern responded to a shout by tearing into a merry tune about a mouse and a grain bin. Men began to clap to the sound of flute, drums and fiddle. Someone at the next table stood up and shoved another from his chair, planting his rump on the floor. Heige and Bren jumped up to intervene.

Othin sipped his whisky, his forehead comfortably buoyant. He lost count of how many glasses he had put down. Not enough to ease his lust, unfortunately.

The tavern doors swung open, letting a blast of cold, damp air into the room. A woman entered, cloaked with her cowl down, hiding her face. By her side was a man dressed in plain clothes of expensive weave in deep colors of fine dyes. A nobleman and his lady. Othin returned his attention to his drink. Such folk would avoid most of Merhafr's taverns, but the Full Moon, frequented by rangers and guardsmen and in close proximity to the citadel, was not one of them.

Bren returned to the table and picked up his mug. Tasn said something about the weather. He pushed the scattered cards together and began to throw them sloppily by the edges to shuffle them. Bren slammed his mug on the table, splashing ale. "Och," he said to Othin, leaning forward. Tasn tossed a card before Othin, face down. "Still skulking over your woman?" He cast a look over his shoulder. "Plenty of women here would bed you tonight, my friend."

Othin took a drink and said nothing. He pried up the edge of his wildcard to reveal the head of a hooded crow.

The nobles who had just entered now stood between the

musicians and a row of casks. A woman clad in a scanty red scarf edged in shining gold and green threads sauntered around the musicians and approached the nobleman with a sultry smile. As his gaze moved over her, she took his hand. Firelight glistened on her breast and caught in the dark curls of her hair. The nobleman could have his pick of women in court, but coming here for his fun wouldn't expose him to politics and talk.

The noblewoman who had accompanied him didn't respond as he vanished with the prostitute up a flight of stairs tucked into the murk on the far side of the room. Strange. Why would she suffer being brought on such a mission and then abandoned to a tavern full of drunken warriors? Now alone, she cast her gaze around the room as if looking for someone. A tall captain of the Dyrregin Guard named Diderik, a blademaster with whom Othin trained occasionally, approached her with a raised brow and a respectful tilt of his head. She smiled beneath the edge of her hood, raising the hackles on Othin's neck.

Then she laughed, ending all speculation.

Othin put his drink down and pushed himself from the table in a half-drunk but eerily alert daze. Ignoring his companions' comments, he moved through the crowd and approached Lord Halstaeg's daughter in no good mind.

"Othin!" she piped, pushing back her hood. Her blond hair was bound lightly on the nape of her neck, tendrils carefully draped on her shoulders. She smelled of gardenia, an expensive fragrance made in the south. "What a surprise!"

"Lady Rosalie," he said in a low voice. "Should your father hear of this—"

She silenced him with a "Tsk!" and tossed her head, making sure to include Diderik and whoever else might be watching with a look of confident poise. Like a gap in a swordsman's guard, Diderik's expression showed he was not comfortable with Othin's arrival. Few guardsmen missed a chance to woo Halstaeg's daughter, and by the forces of bad rumor Othin stood in their path like a wolf. Well over twice her age, Diderik won her attention occasionally by his position in the ranks. But the sinewy blademaster couldn't compete with her latest interest. She knew Othin would be here and now expected him to escort her home.

With an ostentatious air of distress, Rosalie continued, “I was returning from a supper with my cousin. He wanted to come here and”—she waved a hand in the direction of the stairs—“he abandoned me.” Her eyes, brownish green like a garden pond, brightened with foolish hope. “I did want to see you, Othin, ere you ride.”

Othin had more whisky in him than honor, but not so much that he didn’t consider the danger of a royal woman exposing herself, given what had happened in Earticael—or that she had put him in a position where he *had* to consider it. As Diderik cleared his throat and turned to leave, Othin gripped the man’s shoulder. To Rosalie he said, “You shouldn’t be here, milady. You must return at once to the citadel.” He touched the captain’s gaze with a knowing plea.

“You can’t order me about!” Rosalie complained a bit too loudly. Several men turned to see what was happening.

Diderik was not one to pass up an opportunity. “Come milady,” he said with gracious formality, his dry glance clearly revealing his understanding that the rumors he had heard of Othin’s romantic entanglement were exaggerated. He took her by the arm.

“But I—” she protested.

“Ranger Othin is right,” the guardsman said, herding her toward the door. “This is no time for you to be out. Your father would not approve.”

Making a personal note to repay the blademaster with a fine favor the first chance he got, Othin headed back to his seat. He paused by the casks, where he plucked up an unused glass and filled it with whisky. As he returned and slid onto the bench, the rangers sat with their cards in hand, looking down, and up, and at each other, pursing their lips, raising their brows and holding in wisecracks.

Othin took a long draught, half draining his glass. Then he picked up his card and tossed the gray and black crow into the center of the table. “Trickster,” he said. “I win.”

The rangers roared with laughter. “That’s our war god,” Bren said, throwing his card on the table. The others followed suit.

“Right,” Tasn said. “What’ll it be now?” He gathered the cards

and mixed them up.

“Forest,” Heige suggested. He took a long drink from his mug.

“What kind of forest?” Prederi said.

“Och! Who knows? Any forest.”

“Graebrok,” Othin put in, leaning against the wall.

Bren laughed. “Graebrok is haunted by ghouls. We’ve no cards for those.”

“Pah,” Tasn smiled. “Graebrok it is.” He began to deal.

The night wheeled away in a blur of music, voices, faces, fire, smiling barmaids, painted animals and the glint of light on the surface of drinks until, at the arrival of Captain Ingvar and his ugly bruised face, the rangers staggered into the street. The moon was past high, and stars glittered on a bitter chill. Too drunk to stand, Othin leaned on Bren and Prederi, who put their shoulders under him on either side and half dragged him along. His head spun in great, sweeping arcs that caused the stones, trees, windows and roofs to slam over and over into the ground.

“Bloody hell,” Bren laughed, half singing. “Ageton’s going to eat our balls”—he belched—“for breakfast.”

“Sod ‘im,” Othin slurred. “Putting me on the coastal patrol had to be his idea.”

Prederi snorted. “Na, Halstaeg’s doin’ it to get you off his girl.”

Othin tried to swing his fist up to clip the blond-haired ranger in the face. “I’m gonna kill you. I hate that bitc—”

“Oi!” Bren said. “Careful with that.”

“She’s always setting me up.”

Prederi’s laugh echoed from the walls on either side of the street. “Good thing you were drunk.” Conscious enough not to risk dragging Othin through the main gates, they hustled him down an alley between a linens merchant and a saddlery until they reached a low door in the wall. Bren tried the handle.

“Shit. Locked.”

“Get outta the way,” Prederi growled. Othin stumbled back against the wall as the ranger got out from under his armpit and kicked the door in. It made a terrible racket in the closeness of the alley.

Bren laughed. “Idgit.”

He and Prederi stumbled over the broken door and packed

into the lightless tunnel. As Othin staggered in behind them, he struck his head on the doorframe with a shocking crack. It threw him back and around on wobbly legs before he fell with a crash onto the door, breaking it into more pieces.

“Och! Poor lad.” Prederi loomed over him, helped him up and leaned him against the wall. Othin held his hand to his forehead, feeling sick as Prederi somehow pieced the door up over the opening. “Onward.” He grabbed Othin’s arm and slung it around his shoulder, causing him to choke as it stretched the injury Ingvar had put on him in the tournament. They moved along with Bren a short distance ahead.

“Nik’ll roast us for that,” Prederi said, referring to Nik, the citadel’s master carpenter.

“He’ll roast *you*,” Bren threw over his shoulder.

“It’s never been locked before.”

The three men continued thus until they reached Othin’s room, where they dropped him face-first on the bed. Prederi stomped to the small firebox and rekindled the coals as Bren removed Othin’s sword and pulled off his boots. A wool blanket settled over him.

“Pleasant dreams, War God.”

The door closed, and silence fell.

The room spun in rhythm with the pounding in his head. The fire crackled and clinked in the stovepipe. The dim, flickering light in the kitchen below the loft warmed the cottage beneath a blanket of snow. Wind whispered in the chimney, drawing a cold draft over the bed. The cat jumped down with a thump.

Othin groaned as a warm hand crept under his tunic and found his heart. He rolled over and gathered her soft limbs to his. With his rough sword hand he pushed the fabric from her thigh, parting her. Firelight glinted in the blond lengths of her hair. “Millie...”

She said nothing, her breath catching as he bore down with his lust. His head throbbing and his stomach pitching with unease, he sank into a river of heat, hands and limbs as she slipped away, a vixen vanishing into the shadows of a hedge.

Darkness enveloped him, leaving behind the scent of gardenia.