

# **The Lamp-Carrier**

*Fourteen Stones, Book 1*

## Characters

### 1. The Pala Vaia

Khari: young Lamp-Carrier  
Vatiri: older Lamp-Carrier  
Pradesh: Lodestone (tribal leader)  
Radavan: brother of Pradesh  
Handan: nephew of Pradesh; hunter  
Mandhani: brother of Handan; hunter  
Rahul: young member of the tribe, esteemed for intelligence  
Dahila: wife of Radavan; Khari's sister  
Bakar: tribal elder

### 2. The Namorans

Ribas Silvaikas: *ẓhinin*, priest of the lowest rank in the Namoran hierarchy  
Maryut Ribenis: Ribas's wife  
Gedrin Silvaikas: Ribas's brother  
Virta Gedrenis: Gedrin's wife  
Raulin and Asira: Gedrin's children  
Pelayut Silvenis: Ribas and Gedrin's mother  
Silvas Jadraikas (dec'd): Ribas and Gedrin's father  
Danayut (Danya) and Jano: Ribas's apprentices (*mosevine*)  
Tayo Nevas: healer in Lida village  
Valdena (Valda) Filtraikas: second-in-command to Namora's ruler  
Tavin Ardinas: Namora's ruler  
Galvo Dendraikas: *sventin* (high-ranking priest); member of Namora's ruling council  
Lesvin Berenaikas: *sventin* (high-ranking priest); member of Namora's ruling council  
Tayo Bodin: healer in the Namoran capital Sostavi

### 3. The Lasska

Bereg Orlon: high-ranking Lasska soldier  
Nela Orlon: Bereg's wife  
Ania Orlon: Bereg's daughter  
Fisa Vasem: high-ranking Lasska soldier  
Shurik: ruler of Lassar (*Impera*)  
Mangevar (dec'd): Shurik's father; previous ruler of Lassar

## Explanatory notes, Namoran and Lasska languages:

### Namoran:

- Vowels default to long pronunciation (A = ah, E = eh, I = ee, O = oh, U = oo)
- “J” is pronounced as “Y” (Example: Jano = Yah-noh)
- All syllables, including final “e”s, are pronounced (Example: zhinine = zhee-nee-neh)
- In two-syllable names, the stress belongs on the first syllable (Example: Ribas = *Ree*-bahs); *except* as noted in nicknames with a marked accent on the second syllable (Example: Gedrí = geh-DREE)
- Namoran “last names” are patronymics, with –aikas (lit. “child of”) added to the first syllable of the father’s name. Accent belongs on the second syllable of the patronymic. [Examples: Silvaikas (derived from Silvas) = seel-VYE-kahs; Jadraikas (derived from Jadras) = yahd-RYE-kahs]
- Married Namoran women’s “last names” are derivatives of their husband’s first names. Accent belongs on the second syllable. [Example: Maryut Ribenis (Maryut, wife of Ribas) = MAHR-yoot ree-BEH-nees]

### Lasska:

- Lasska vowels are not as standardized as Namoran. Most default to long pronunciation, but vowels in final syllables, particularly, can be short:
  - Bereg = BEHR-egg
  - Shurik = SHOO-rick
- “TH” is pronounced as in “with”
- “CH” is pronounced as in “church”
- “Y” is pronounced “ee”
- “S” is often voiced (pronounced similar to “z”) before the letter “T”
  - Example of the above four notes: Thysidich = THREE-zih-ditch
- Final vowels are pronounced (Example: Silde = SEEL-deh)
- Lasska have family names, as we do, instead of patronymics

## Namoran calendar

Years are numbered “SM,” lit. *saska metai*, “count of years.” Year 1 SM is marked as the year in which formal worship of the Goddess Kenavi began.

Each of the twelve months has four weeks, made up of eight days each.

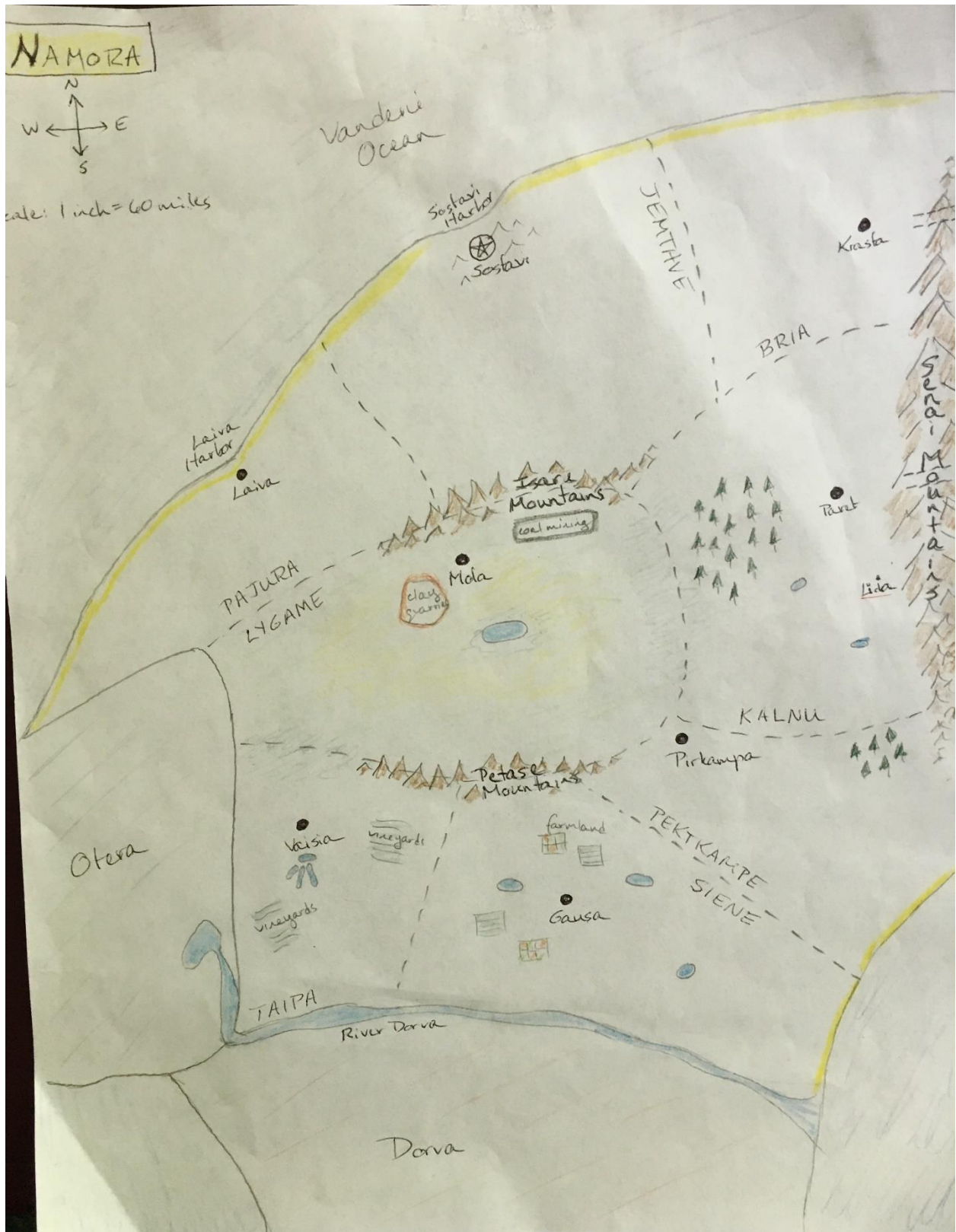
### Days of the week:

- Pirdina (First Day)
- Antdina (Second Day)
- Tretkina (Third Day)
- Ketdina (Fourth Day)
- Pektdina (Fifth Day)
- Sisdina (Sixth Day)
- Setdina (Seventh Day)
- Ashdina (Eighth Day)

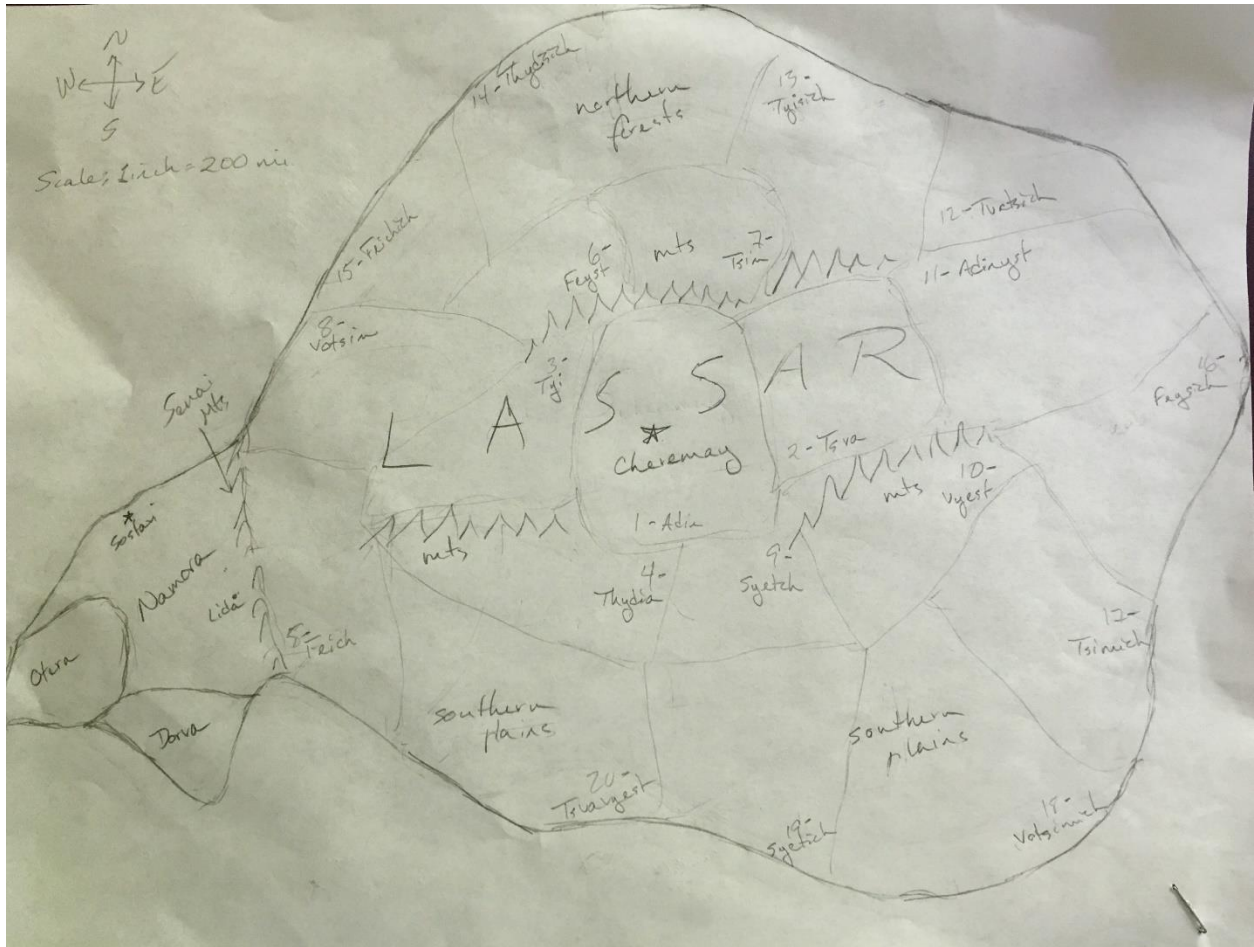
### Months of the year:

- Akena: Sacrifice (commemorating the death of the woman who became the Goddess Kenavi)
- Algima: Rebirth (commemorating Kenavi’s ascension as the Goddess)
- Ivesta: Planting (first month of spring; planting season)
- Ketva: Fourth
- Pekta: Fifth
- Jeska: Fish (height of fishing season for coastal communities)
- Vasara: Midsummer
- Ashta: Eighth
- Rudua: Autumn
- Derla: Harvest
- Vienela: Eleventh
- Tyla: Quiet (contemplative time before Akena observances)

Map of Namora



**Map of Lassar and neighboring countries**



Prologue: “Fourteen Stones,” a Namoran folk tale dating to the earliest years of worship of the Goddess Kenavi (first century SM)

Once there was a woman who wished to build a house. Not a house for her husband and children: she had no husband yet, was too young to have children, and in any case she meant to live alone a while longer. She loved the scent of the wind, the warmth of the sun, and the sound of the sea as it rushed and broke against the rocky shore of her land. While she could, she wanted to have those things all to herself.

She was a strange woman, or at least, so her people thought. She had strange eyes, the color of the sky on a cloudless autumn day, and she had a strange will, all edges and corners, without any softness. And she did not seem to understand that people must find their safety in each other. The world was an uncertain place. Enemy tribes roamed the land. Wild creatures fed on the tame goats that meant food and certainty. In such a world, people must live together behind high stone walls, with spears to guard themselves.

This woman loved to walk beyond those safe walls, fearing no strange man or creature. Her people called her Klaya, which means wanderer. She walked under the sun that browned her skin and let the wind brush her hair, let the sea lick her fingers. At those times, delight softened the proud blue of her stare, but none of her people were there to see it.

When her people built houses, they made them of stone. Stone houses clustered like eggs in a nest behind the stone guarding wall where spear-wielding men paced back and forth. The village stood on a long green hill at the end of a peninsula. To build a new house, people dug rock out of the hill or carried it from the shore. You must build your home out of the home land.

But Klaya loved the wider land. The peninsula and the village rested in her heart, but the broad mainland fanned itself out before her eyes. She walked there at will, greeting the woods,

learning the feel of the grass of the plains under her bare feet. She knew she would build her house on the green hill, but she would build it separate, touching no other walls, sharing no other air. And she would build it not only out of the stone of home, but out of pieces of the world beyond.

Houses needed many heavy rocks, carried and shaped and laid into place by scarred and callused hands. Klaya's hands were strong, toughened by years of weaving rope and working skins, of digging and planting in the earth. But her body was slender, a tall young tree. Her muscles were not hard but supple, her chest and shoulders fine and narrow.

One day, her people watched her leave behind the safety of the guarding wall and walk out to the mainland. They muttered and whispered about her strangeness, the house she meant to build and live in all alone. They asked themselves why she could not be a woman such as any other. And they watched, later, as she limped back, dragging behind her a rough-made sledge of branches that carried a single large stone.

The next day they watched her go out again. And they whispered about how she could dig stone here on the green hill, or carry it up from the shore. She wished to punish herself, surely. She wished to show how wayward she was. They said they would leave her to it.

But on the third day, as she left again, one man went with her. She did not ask for his help; she lifted her head proudly and walked alone, with him following behind. When they came back, the sledge held two stones.

That night, over his cooking fire, the man told others that, during their day of searching, Klaya had explained herself to him. That alone surprised those who heard. The explanation surprised them more: that Klaya wished to bring stone from each part of the mainland she knew – the forests, the coast, the grassy plains – and have pieces of each place she loved in her home.

What difference did it make, the people asked. One stone looked like another. Surely no one could see the difference between a stone dug from the hillside and one carried from the mainland



forest. But the next day, two men left the village with Klaya. When they came back, the sledge held three stones.

On it went. Another day, and another, and now the women of the village joined, and then the children. Always Klaya walked at the head of the group, her head held high. Each day the sledge returned with a bigger load.

On the day they brought back eight stones, they built a bigger sledge. And still they went out again, and again. On the last day, all of the tribe went. The smallest children rode on their parents' backs or in their arms. The elderly leaned on the strength of the young. When they came back to the village as the sun dipped down to the horizon, the sledge carried its biggest load of fourteen great stones.

Klaya declared herself satisfied. She could build her house out of the stones the tribe had helped her carry.

She meant to live alone, but the village did not leave her to build her house alone. The people stayed, helping Klaya cut and shape the rock with chisel and mallet, helping her lift and set each piece into place.

Then the house was finished and the village went about its business. Klaya lived on the green hillside with the freshness of the sea wind and the warmth of the sun around her, and the home her people had helped her build out of the world she loved.

Chapter 1: in Lassar, Year 1665 SM

On the morning that marked the start of her sixteenth year, Khari sat cross-legged on the floor of the tent she shared with her *amma* Vatiri, trying not to notice how strange the new fabric of her white blouse felt around her body. The tent flap hung open, letting in a ripple of breeze that still tasted of summer and the fragrance of the tall grass that ringed the tribe's camp. Early morning sunlight slanted through the open tent flap and fell across Khari's back and shoulders, so that she thought the white blouse must glow like the Moon Woman herself.

Vatiri, Khari's mother-in-truth, knelt behind her, weaving Khari's long hair into braids. The two of them had done this every morning since Khari was eight years old and began having the dreams that marked her as a future Lamp-Carrier. As of today, the tribe had two Lamp-Carriers. Vatiri had held that place since long before Khari was born, and now, with the start of her sixteenth year, Khari stepped into it too.

Vatiri's quick fingers moved through Khari's hair, smoothing and dividing it. She said, "You should wear white ribbon today."

That made Khari smile. White ribbon braided in her hair, to match the blouse that showed her rank. At the same time, nervousness curled in her stomach. Tonight, the tribe's Lodestone, Pradesh, would have a council to decide where the tribe should spend the winter. Khari would sit at that council for the first time, in her new role and her new blouse.

"Whatever you think, amma," Khari said.

Vatiri laughed, a quiet sound like birdsong. "I remember when you weren't so cooperative."

Khari remembered it too. At age eight, she hadn't wanted to leave her parents' tent and her three older sisters to live with "the old Lamp-Carrier." She hadn't cared about learning to do the work, or how important the dreams made her, and she had actually fought and kicked when her

father bodily picked her up and carried her to Vatiri's tent. For the first couple of days with the older woman, she hadn't opened her mouth even to put food in it. She'd turned her back every time Vatiri spoke to her.

But Vatiri had never given up or lost her temper. Now, as much as Khari still honored her mother-in-body, she loved her mother-in-truth even more.

"I don't think I'll be much help at the council, amma," Khari said. "I didn't dream anything last night."

The tribe's Lodestone, always a man, had to set the course for the tribe's travels and direct its daily life. To do this, he needed the Lamp-Carrier, who was always a woman and always born to the work. Most importantly, she must have and interpret the pathdreams that helped the Lodestone make his decisions.

After eight years of training, Khari knew better than to expect pathdreams every night, or even most nights. Still, on the first day that she wore the white of the Moon Woman, the second-greatest of the three Powers that guarded the tribe, she wished she'd had more to offer.

"Don't worry, child." Khari felt Vatiri finish the second braid, tying it off with the end of the ribbon she had woven into it. "Pradesh will have all the guidance he needs."

Khari thought she heard something strange in the older woman's voice: a thread of something like sadness. When she turned around to see her, though, Vatiri smiled. The autumn sunlight washed over her face, bringing out the deep tracery of lines at the corners of her eyes and around her mouth. She gently tweaked the end of Khari's braid. "Now your turn," she said.

They traded places. Exactly as Vatiri had done for her, Khari brushed out the older woman's hair. She wove it into a single long braid with a strand of white ribbon, to match her own, running through it. Vatiri's hair had once been as dark as Khari's, but now it was such a pale silver that the ribbon barely stood out against it.

For eight years, Vatiri had taught Khari how to dream with her “hidden eye” always open, watching the pictures that moved across her mind, constantly sifting them for what mattered. The Lamp-Carrier’s dreams were a gift from the Moon Woman, but it took skill to hold onto them in daylight and know what they meant. Vatiri said that Khari would soon be at least as good at that work as she was herself.

Khari had always felt proud of that. She’d liked to imagine Pradesh trusting her as absolutely as he, and the two Lodestones before him, trusted her amma. Now, though, she didn’t want to see Vatiri’s age, or think about the day when the tribe would only have a single Lamp-Carrier again.

“Amma,” she said, as her fingers worked quickly, “did you have a dream last night?”

They usually talked about their pathdreams, if one of them had one. Now Vatiri didn’t answer right away. Khari had worked her way down to the end of the braid before the older woman said, “We don’t need to think about it now.”

That same sadness. Khari tied off the braid. “But what was it?” she asked. She didn’t like the idea that she might have missed something in her own dreams. Today especially, she didn’t want to fail.

“Not now,” Vatiri said. When she looked over her shoulder, for a moment Khari saw the firmness she remembered from eight years ago, when Vatiri had finally set a clay plate of flatbread and roast venison in front of her and said that was enough nonsense, Khari wouldn’t leave the tent again until she had eaten every bite. Eight-year-old Khari had felt her stubborn anger shrivel up under those dark eyes. Besides, after two days, she’d been hungry.

For as long as Vatiri lived, Khari was supposed to obey her. “All right, amma,” she said. She held the questions in, but they still nudged at her.

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That night, while the rest of the tribe went about its usual evening work, Khari and Vatiri joined Pradesh's council around a fire at the edge of the camp.

The tribe was only one of the many groups of Pala Vaia people who lived in Lassar. Khari knew the story: how the Pala Vaia, the "First and Lost Ones," as her people called themselves, had crossed the great mountains in the west and arrived in this land, more generations ago than anyone could count. Other people, with paler skin and a different language, had come later. The newcomers had claimed the place as theirs, because they built houses, then villages, towns, and cities. The Vaia didn't leave marks on the land. They went where the seasons took them.

In summer, they looked for cooler weather, fertile land, and good hunting. In winter, when snow came to the Lasska woods and mountains, they went south to the friendlier plains. Khari's tribe had spent the summer in northeastern Lassar. Now, the year was fading into autumn, so the tribe must furl its tents, load its carts and horses, and move again.

Khari sat next to Vatiri by the fire, close enough for the warmth to hold off the chilly night breeze. With them were Pradesh's younger brother Radavan, and the old man Bakar who had marked seventy-eight years, and Pradesh's nephews Handan and Mandhani, the tribe's two strongest and, Khari thought, most arrogant men. There was also young Rahul, who had only marked eighteen years and had no ties to the Lodestone's family, but he was already known as one of the most intelligent men in the tribe.

When everyone else had settled around the fire, Pradesh came up to take his place. Khari wasn't surprised to see the Lodestone carrying the heavy chair of machia wood he had bought years ago in a Lasska village. As he set it down, the chair gleamed in the firelight, its grain a pattern of spiderweb-thin dark swirls against a gleaming silvery background.

Khari sighed. Pradesh was a decent enough Lodestone, everyone thought so, but too proud. If he had to have the chair at all – such a heavy thing to drag along every time the tribe traveled – he

should have offered it to old Bakar, whose bones probably didn't appreciate the hard ground tonight.

Pradesh settled into his chair and folded his hands against the spread of his yellow shirt. Only Lodestones wore yellow, the color of the Sun God. Khari couldn't help thinking that Pradesh seemed to want to look like the Sun God in girth, too, but she arranged her face into its most respectful expression when his eyes passed over her.

He turned to Vatiri first. "Lamp-Carrier. What do you have to tell us?"

Khari bit her lip. She had never sat at a council before, but she thought even a Lodestone ought to sound more respectful. Vatiri had marked sixty years, enough to be Pradesh's mother, but Khari knew the older woman respected the Lodestone as second only to the Sun God and the other Powers themselves. She had tried to teach Khari the same lesson. Khari had never been as good at it.

Vatiri answered with no hint of annoyance. "Last night I had a pathdream."

Again Khari felt the curl of worry in her stomach. Why hadn't she had one too? And why hadn't Vatiri wanted to talk about hers?

Then Vatiri turned to look at her. The sadness Khari had heard in the older woman's voice this morning was out in the open now, as plain on her face as the marks of her years. Khari's worry melded into a solid stone of fear.

*Amma*, she wanted to say. *What is it? Please.*

As if the two of them had been alone, Vatiri said, "I'm afraid of what's going to happen to us. Our tribe, and all the Vaia people."

All of the Vaia? What could this be? Khari had no chance to speak. Pradesh said, "Explain."

The older woman turned away from Khari to face the Lodestone and the rest of the circle. "Lassar's new ruler," she said. "Shurik."

All of them knew the name. The Vaia never settled in Lasska towns or villages, and had as little to do with the people as they could. They all knew, though, that Shurik had become Lassar's new ruler – the *impera*, he was called – at the end of the summer, after his father Mangevar died. Mangevar had been an old man and Shurik was a young one. Khari didn't know anything more.

Now Vatiri said, "He doesn't want the Vaia here."

Again Khari felt the edges of that stone of fear, deep in her gut. Bakar spoke up. "No Lasska ruler has wanted us here."

Khari looked across the circle at the old man, who sat at Pradesh's left. The tribe's younger men cut their hair short, but Bakar wore his long, the old way, in a single white braid down his back. His skin stood out dark against the bright blue fabric of his shirt. Khari thought he looked as strong as old wood, the kind that weathered so tough that if you took an axe to it, it would bite back.

Bakar said, "The Lasska have wanted us gone from the beginning, but we have more right to this place than they do."

Khari understood that. Her people had lived here since time beyond memory. But Vatiri said, "Shurik is different."

Pradesh asked, "How?"

Vatiri closed her eyes briefly. To Khari, her face looked shrunken, her white blouse too much like the cloths the tribe used in burying the dead. Then she opened her eyes again, and her words fell on the circle like the endless snow that fell on Lassar's northern forests.

"In the great city, Cheremay," Vatiri said, "Shurik is calling his fighting men to him."

Khari had never seen Cheremay, the "eye of Lassar" where the rulers lived. She had only heard about the throngs of people, the shoulder-to-shoulder houses and buildings, the sky-clawing temples the Lasska built to their bear-shaped god. It all sounded brutal and strange. Vatiri said, "He

is giving the men weapons. Swords, knives, and the powder that burns and explodes and throws balls of lead.”

Khari had heard about this too. She had never understood how a powder, apparently not much different to look at than earth, could explode. Vatiri finished, her voice still calm and quiet, “Shurik is sending his men out, with their weapons, to hunt us.”

Hunt people, the way you would hunt deer and rabbits to cook over the fire? Did Shurik’s men eat human flesh? Khari knew why Vatiri had kept this terrible, shadowy secret to herself. Mother-love, like the ritual of the braids and the matching ribbon that said that she and Khari belonged to each other. But what kind of dream could have shown Vatiri all this? And even while fear left tracks all over her skin, Khari wondered why she herself had seen nothing.

Across the circle, Bakar shook his head, whether in disgust or disbelief Khari couldn’t tell. Neither he nor Pradesh spoke.

Pradesh’s younger brother Radavan did. “Where are these fighting men now?”

Khari liked Radavan. He might be the Lodestone’s brother, but he didn’t have Pradesh’s arrogance. He knew how to listen. Six years ago, he’d taken Khari’s oldest sister, Dahila, as his wife, and they had twin girls and a boy, with another child on the way.

Vatiri said, “The soldiers are in Cheremay and other great cities. Shurik is gathering them together and telling them what to do. He will send them out soon.”

Handan, Pradesh’s older nephew, spoke up loudly. “So they’ll come and we’ll fight them. Lasska men are soft and flabby. They sit on cushions all day and nag their wives for honey cakes.”

Through her fear, Khari glared at Handan. The hunter, and his brother Mandhani, might be able to run and wrestle, but as far as she could tell, they had nothing between their ears except muscle. Everyone knew about the fierce, hard-trained Lasska soldiers. Mandhani agreed with his brother now: “We’re stronger than any of them. Let them come.”



Vatiri's voice cut through their pride. "They're well-armed. Their weapons are more dangerous than anything we have." Khari knew this was true. The Vaia had no exploding powder, and while her people were strong-bodied and adapted to hunting and journeying, they were all smaller-built than the big pale-skinned Lasska. Vatiri added quietly, "They will kill us if they can."

Handan jumped to his feet. "Let them try!" Mandhani scrambled up too, as if ready to face off against Lasska soldiers then and there. Rahul said something to Bakar that Khari couldn't hear. Radavan held his hand out as if trying to quiet the chaos.

Pradesh said, "Enough."

The word fell into the circle like a stone into water. The talk died and the Lodestone's nephews sat back down. Pradesh said to Vatiri, "What did the dream say we should do?"

Vatiri turned to Khari again. Khari knew that somehow, whatever she was about to say would be worse than anything they had heard yet.

"The dream," Vatiri said gently, as if to Khari alone, "said we can't do anything."

Handan and Mandhani started shouting again. Khari heard them from what felt like a long way away. She understood: Vatiri's dream had meant the end of the tribe.

Khari read endless grief in the older woman's eyes. She couldn't take it in. She had only marked sixteen years. She had barely become a woman, had never served as a real Lamp-Carrier or offered the Lodestone a single pathdream. How could such a thing happen to them now? But Vatiri's dreams never lied.

"Enough!"

This time the word was a shout. Pradesh had gotten to his feet. Anger burned in his face. For the first time, Khari understood how his authority could stand second only to the Powers.

"Vatiri," he said. His voice was quiet now, but deep and full of fire. "I want to hear exactly what you saw."

Asking a Lamp-Carrier to describe her dream amounted to challenging her truth. Vatiri didn't question or argue. "I saw a great bear," she said. "Too big to live in the world. And I saw a stone house that stood taller than any trees. Its roof was so high it disappeared into the sky."

Khari had trained in reading dreams long enough to know that the bear was the Lasska god Mesha. For some reason, the Lasska believed in a god they couldn't see, instead of the Sun God, Moon Woman and Mouth of Winds, Powers that actually moved in the world. The stone house, Khari knew, must be the place in Cheremay where the impera lived. Together, the house and the bear meant Shurik.

Vatiri went on, "I saw a river. Many streams came together to make it: streams out of the forests in the north, and the plains in the south, and the coast in the east, and the mountains in the west." She had closed her eyes again, and spoke as if she was drawing one word at a time out of a deep place in herself. Khari knew how hard it was for Lamp-Carriers to talk about their dreams. How much harder would it be to do it now, in front of the men, with the awful shadow hanging over them all?

Vatiri said, "The river ran fast and steady, straight into the stone house."

Handan said, "A river doesn't go into a..."

Khari spun around to snap at him, not caring that he was the Lodestone's nephew, but Pradesh got there first. "Quiet, boy."

*Boy* was an insult to a grown man and a skilled hunter. Khari was glad to see Handan's face redden in the firelight. Vatiri went on as if no one had interrupted. "The water ran through the house and came out the other side. When it came out, it formed a pool. A lake. It was burning."

Pradesh spoke quietly. "The water was burning?"

Vatiri nodded without opening her eyes. “Yes. It shone like metal, and the fire rose up from it. The bear stood waiting outside the house. It watched the pool form and spread. Then, when all the water had gathered there, burning, the bear reared into the air and pawed at the sky.”

Khari could see it: the huge bear, its massive claws raking the air, its mouth open and snarling. She shivered.

Pradesh asked, “And what happened then?”

Again Vatiri paused. Then, head down, as if speaking to her hands folded in her lap, she said, “The water began to flow again, in streams, back toward the places it came from. It burned as it went.”

Khari saw it all. The skills Vatiri had taught her told her the older woman was right: Shurik had armed his men with fire and danger, and now he would send them out, streams of them moving like living weapons through the world, destroying what they touched. Vatiri said, so quietly Khari held her breath to hear, “The last thing I saw was a field, a patch of sunlight on the grass. One of the streams came to it and burned it away. Not just the grass, but the light too. The light was gone.”

Khari knew no one could mistake the meaning of that. The sun meant the Vaia, their God. Shurik’s river had taken it. Vatiri had stopped speaking and sat very still. She looked exhausted. Khari wanted to reach out, touch her shoulder or take her hand, but the fear had frozen her.

Pradesh said, “Khari.”

Khari managed to look up. The Lodestone had taken his seat again. In the firelight, with the anger gone from his face, he suddenly looked much older than his thirty-nine years. He said, “Did you see this too?”

Khari felt sick. She didn’t wish she could say she had seen it – how could she wish for that? – but she hated having to admit her failure. It couldn’t matter now, in the face of this, but she was supposed to be a Lamp-Carrier too.

She made herself open her mouth. “No, Lodestone.” Her voice sounded strained and thin, not like her voice at all. “I didn’t see anything.”

For a moment they all took this in. Then Mandhani said, “If she didn’t see it...”

Khari hated to hear the hope in his voice. *If she didn’t see it, maybe it’s not real.* But no one should trust her over Vatiri.

Handan seemed to hear her thought. “She’s still only a girl. She’s not a real Lamp-Carrier.”

Khari couldn’t make herself argue. Never mind the white blouse or the fact that yes, today, she was both of those things.

The men started clamoring again. Handan first, insisting they could fight the Lasska, they could train and... Radavan reminding the hunter that the tribe didn’t have the right weapons. Rahul trying to make himself heard over Mandhani, who once again tried to support his brother. The noise swirled around Khari. Beside her, she heard Vatiri sigh, a sound of pure exhaustion. Her eyes still closed, the lines etched deep on her face in the firelight, she looked older and frailer than Khari had ever seen her.

Khari’s arms felt stiff as she reached out to put them around her mother-in-truth. “Amma,” she said. “Are you all right?”

The older woman’s eyes opened. In spite of everything, she smiled. “I’m fine, child. Only tired.”

Somehow Radavan made himself heard. “Khari, you and Vatiri go back to your tent. Don’t speak about this to anyone else yet.”

Khari was only too glad to get away from the circle, as if none of this would be true if only she could go somewhere else. She helped Vatiri to her feet. The two of them made their way slowly away from the fire, while behind them, Pradesh called the men to order for a debate that, Khari felt sure, would go on through the night.

She wanted to ask Vatiri why she, Khari, hadn't had the same terrible dream. She wanted to beg the older woman for answers, for some kind of hope, but what hope could anyone find tonight? Khari held up Vatiri's weight as the older woman leaned on her like a crutch. They walked back to their tent, through the camp that had settled into nighttime stillness. Khari was glad to see no one. If anyone had spoken to her, she might have let the impossible secret fly out of her mouth, so it would stop choking her.

In the tent, Vatiri lay down on her pallet without stopping to get undressed. Khari bent over her. "Do you need anything, amma?"

Vatiri smiled again, without opening her eyes. She pressed Khari's hand. "Don't worry about me. Let's both get some rest."

Khari doubted she could rest, but she closed the tent's cloth flap. She hadn't carried a lantern or lit one inside the tent, but she knew the space too well to need light.

Eight years she and Vatiri had shared this tent. Many years before that, Vatiri herself had woven the fabric for it, strong undyed wool, and oiled it with sheep fat against the weather. Most Vaia kept only what they could carry, so the tent only held a few things: two cooking pots, clay plates and mugs, a few extra clothes, the sleeping pallets. Vatiri had hung bunches of sweet herbs from the center pole. Their light clean fragrance filled the space.

Khari took off her blouse and leather breeches and folded them before she laid them on the floor next to her pallet. She unbraided and brushed out her hair, carefully unwinding the white ribbon, and pulled her light wool shift over her head.

How could she think of herself as a Lamp-Carrier after tonight? What good was she to the tribe? Khari lay back on her pallet and pulled the blanket up over her against the fall chill. She didn't think she could sleep, but her eyes ached with tiredness and her body felt like a wrung-out cloth.

After a long silent while, in spite of the worry that lay heavy on her chest, her eyes closed and shut out the empty dark. Dreams rose and lapped around her.

*You must keep your hidden eye open.* That tiny corner of herself stayed awake, watching. Probably she wouldn't see anything. Probably she would find no hope or help, none of the direction a Lamp-Carrier should find...

*...but as sleep took her, she saw something.*

*A man's face: no one she had ever seen before. Light-skinned. Hair the brown of autumn leaves, but heavily streaked with silver. Not a young face, but not an old one. A plain face, except...*

*...the eyes. Blue eyes. Deep lines at their corners, but the blue of a cloudless sky.*

Khari slept. Her hidden eye stayed open, watching.

## Chapter 2: the zhinin

Huge Lassar, newly under the rule of Impera Shurik, had three neighbors to the west, on the far side of the chain of mountains that ran between Lassar's northern and southern coasts. Those three neighbors – Namora, Dorva, and Otera – together made up less than half of Lassar's size. Only the biggest of them, Namora, shared a border with Lassar. The little country's eastern edge crouched in the shadow of the Senai Mountains.

The three small countries together were called the Fisheries, because all of them relied heavily on the rich waters of the Vandeni Ocean. Namora had farms and vineyards along with its fishing boats. Derla, Namora's Harvest Month, was the third month before the end of the year, when life sped up to a feverish pace. Everyone pulled together at harvest time to deal with the relentless work, especially in the little villages where the center of town gave way quickly to spreading fields and orchards.

One such village, Lida, sat just to the west of the Senai's foothills, almost exactly halfway between Namora's ocean coast to the north and the bay coast to the south. Lida's craftspeople and tavern-keepers had their businesses clustered around the village square. Five roads, lined with wooden houses roofed with tiles of gray-blue Namoran clay, came out from the square like the spokes of a wheel. Banks of mint took over the sides of the road beyond the village, and the gravel gave way to dirt track through open fields.

Back in the square, one building made of gray stone stood out in the cluster of white-painted shops and houses. Its shape made it unusual too: it was perfectly round, with a conical wooden roof whose point reached higher into the sky than any of the peaked tiled roofs around it.

This was Lida's Circle House. Here on Pirdina, the First Day of every week, all the villagers came together to worship the goddess Kenavi. No one able to leave their house would miss that

tribute. Throughout the week, the House's doors stood open from morning to night. Anyone in need of the Goddess's guidance, or quiet time alone in the cool circle of the stone walls, might go in and set down, for a while, whatever burdens they had brought with them.

The priest in Lida was a *zhinin*, the lowest of the four ranks of the Namoran *dagira*. His name was Ribas Silvaikas. He had grown up in Lida and served in its Circle House since he came of age at eighteen.

He was unusual in more ways than one. A childhood fever had left him with both a chronic weakness and an exceptional kind of strength. Now, almost fifteen years after he'd become a *zhinin*, he knew every man, woman, and child in Lida and the nearby villages. The life of his home felt to him like one great heartbeat: the people and the land they tended, the grasses and trees, the fields and water and mountains. Every day, the gift left by his illness let him stand guard over that heartbeat as no other priest could.

Today was Antdina, a Second Day in the middle of Derla, the harvest month. The sun had just cleared the horizon. Swatches of butter-yellow light lay across Lida's cobbled streets when Ribas and his wife Maryut left the *zhinin*'s house just behind the Circle House.

As they did every Derla, they were going up to his mother's farm on the northern edge of the village to help with the harvest for a few days. Ribas's nemesis, the heart weakness and chest pain left over from the worst time of his childhood, had kept him awake most of the night before. Maryut put her arm through his and said, "I suppose you still won't let me talk you into riding up there."

"You're right. I won't. The walk will do me good."

Maryut's mouth quirked. He knew that look and heard the word that went with it even before she said it. "Stubborn."

"Always," he agreed.



She laughed. A dozen years of marriage and more, and her laugh always wrapped around him like sunlight. Sometimes he still wondered how she could have chosen him, the plain, half-crippled farmer's-boy-turned-zhinin.

They went across the square to the road that headed most directly north out of the village. The scent of the late-growing mint blended with the dry earthiness of fallen leaves and the cool clear taste you only found in the mountains. Past the outskirts of the village, birds sang and rustled in the tall grass, late insects chattered, and to the east, the gray peaks of the Senai reached up toward the cloudless sky.

The north-running road went past three farms before it got out into the open land between Lida and Paret, the closest real town. The farthest of the three farms belonged to Ribas's mother Pelayut. He and his brother Gedrin had grown up there, in the house their great-grandfather had built almost a hundred years ago.

Gedrin. Normally Ribas looked forward to seeing his younger brother, who still seemed like a boy in spite of marriage, two children, and years of running the farm. Today, though, uneasiness stirred in the back of Ribas's mind. He hadn't admitted it to anyone yet, even Maryut, but he was starting to worry about Gedrin.

As they passed the second of the farmsteads, Maryut pressed his arm. "Will you listen if I tell you not to work too hard today?"

Her voice teased him, but he knew she meant it. She had married him knowing he would never have perfect health again, and she spent their shared life taking care of him and trying to protect him from the people who, she sometimes argued, needed him too much. He already looked older than he was, with his brown hair fading to silver, but he promised himself every day that he would make it into old age.

Now he smiled down at her. "I'll be careful."

“You’d better.”

A clean, new split-rail fence marked the edge of Pelayut’s land. The lower fields had a good crop of squash, potatoes, and tall grass for hay, but the main work of the day would happen up in the proud apple orchard that stretched from the northwest to the southeast edge of the property.

Pelayut Silvenis’s apples, and everything she made from them, were famous in Lida. Ribas’s younger brother Gedrin had taken over the orchard and its harvest when he turned eighteen, but everyone still talked about Pelya’s apples and Pelya’s cider as if she, rather than her father and grandfather, had set out the trees and tended and refined the crop until you couldn’t find a better apple anywhere in Namora. The fruit had firm pinkish-gold skin and pink-veined flesh that combined just the right amounts of tartness and sugar. When pressed, it yielded a cider so richly gold it looked like sunlight distilled into a bottle. Whether you drank it fresh or fermented it to make the hair-curling *abuwisk*, people said a drop on a dead person’s tongue would bring him back to life.

Ribas and Maryut walked up to the sprawling old farmhouse. Before they reached the porch, the front door swung open.

“Uncle Ribé!”

Gedrin’s four-year-old daughter Asira flew across the porch to them, her dark curls streaming out behind her, her little shoes thumping on the wooden boards. Ribas bent to catch her. She twined her arms around his neck and pressed her face against his shoulder as he scooped her up. Hurt and upset rose off her like steam.

“Sira, child.” He put his hand on her tangled hair. “What’s the matter?”

Her voice came up, muffled in the fabric of his shirt. “Tell Da, Uncle Ribé. Tell him it’s not fair.”

*What about your da?* Ribas didn’t like the sound of this. “What’s not fair?” he asked.

Asira lifted her head enough to see him. Her green eyes looked huge with tears. “He was mean. I’m big enough to pick apples.” She pushed out her lower lip in a pout.

If it had been any other child, Ribas might have wanted to smile, but that word *mean* lodged somewhere in his chest. And it wasn’t like his happy, confident little niece to cry. Ribas touched the cloud of hurt around her and felt something worse: a thread of fear.

No doubt Gedrin had decided Asira was still too little to help with the harvest. Fair enough. The orchard had hazards, and during the busiest season, a small child could get underfoot and get hurt. But Asira had never been scared of her father.

“Well,” he said gently, brushing her tears away, “I think we have to let your da decide what he wants you to do.”

“It’s not fair!” Asira insisted. More tears welled up. “I told him I could do it, and he got mad. He was mean, Uncle Ribé.”

That word again. Ribas’s uneasiness solidified into hard worry. When he glanced at Maryut over the little girl’s head, her face told him she had the same thought he did.

Gedrin was brisk and cheerful, full of energy. He had all the health and strength Ribas didn’t, but he had something else too. In looks, he was the living image of their father.

He had only been three months old when Silvas Jadraikas died. Ribas would have said his brother was much too young for the shadow of their father’s anger and unhappiness to mark him. He had no memory of the fear and hurt that had once filled the old house. Surely he had no reason to become the same kind of man Silvas had been.

If that was true, then what was happening here? Ribas asked Asira, “How was your da mean?”

Before she could answer, the house door opened again and Ribas’s mother came out onto the porch. Pelayut Silvenis was no longer young, but she stood tall and moved with an easy grace

that denied her age. Her hair, under her widow's kerchief, was silver rather than the wheat-gold Ribas remembered, but her eyes, like Ribas's own, were still the striking blue of a cloudless sky.

Ribas remembered when Mama had been beautiful but fragile, more a girl than a woman in spite of marriage and motherhood. Now, and for a long time, the fragility had gone, replaced by strength that made Ribas think of a proud tree unbent by wind and weather.

Her eyes stopped on Ribas's face. "Ribé. Should you be here?"

The walk in the clear, cool air had eased the tightness in his chest, but Ribas knew his face probably still showed traces of last night. Maryut answered before he did. "I asked him that already, Mama."

Mama sighed. "I'm sure you did."

The two women were very different in height and features, but they looked uncannily similar as they fixed Ribas with identical looks. In spite of his worry over what Asira said, he had to swallow a laugh. "You know I can't miss the harvest," he said.

"I know you won't," Mama said. "That's not the same thing." To the little girl, who still had her arms around Ribas's neck, she said, "Lamb, Grandmama needs to talk to your uncle for a minute. Can you get down now?"

Asira protested, but Ribas gently set her on her feet, promising her he'd be back outside soon, and Maryut held out her hand to the little girl. "How about we go up to the orchard," she said. "We'll see how the work's going."

Asira obeyed reluctantly. Mama held the farmhouse door open and motioned Ribas inside. "Let's talk in here."

The zhinin's house by the village square had been Ribas's home for fifteen years, ever since he had finished his apprenticeship and been installed to serve in the Circle House. As he stepped into the farmhouse, into the front room with its dim light and the taste of the smoke of generations

of hearth fires, he felt for a moment, as he always did, as if half a lifetime or so had fallen away from him. He was a boy coming home.

Mama went over to the hearth. “Come sit.”

The great open stone hearth was the heart of the house, the oldest part of the original farmhouse and the place where every generation of the family had gathered since Mama’s great-grandfather’s time. Even the kitchen, down at the end of the narrow hallway that gave off the front room, was a generation younger, not quite as fully a part of the family’s life as this room.

Even though this place was home as no other place could be, even though the very texture of the wood and stone here had been woven into his life from birth, Ribas felt an old uneasiness as he took a seat in one of the straight-backed chairs that stood by the hearth. Once, years ago, a terrible thing had happened in this room. That night – the worst time he could remember – still reached out for him across all the time in between.

Mama sat down facing him. Again, her eyes rested on his face. “You’re sure you’re all right, my dove?”

*My dove.* If she was that worried, he must look worse than he’d thought. He made it a joke. “Mama, you’re not going to tell me off for coming up today, are you?”

Here, alone with her, he could feel the worry wrapped around her as clearly as he’d felt Asira’s hurt. *He was mean...*

His mother smiled. “No, I won’t scold you. I need to talk to my zhinin.”

Ribas held his hand out, palm up: the zhinin’s ritual, asking for a confidence. She laid her hand palm-down on his and he closed his fingers gently, sealing the contact. “Tell me,” he said. The contact of hand with hand was an ancient promise. The zhinin would tell no one what he or she heard in the next moments.

When he let go, Mama folded her hands in the lap of her brown homespun dress. “I’m worried about Gedrí.”

Ribas had known that already. Cold tightened around him. “What’s going on, Mama?”

“He seems different to me. Angry.”

It was happening, then, exactly as he had hoped it never would. Ribas knew he had to listen to everything. No matter how hard this might be for him, it was much worse for his mother, to see these changes happening to her son.

“Tell me,” he said again.

Mama looked at him steadily. She had learned so much courage during the worst times long ago. “This morning at breakfast,” she said, “Raulí was talking about how many apples he’d pick today.” Seven-year-old Raulin, Gedrin’s son, had been proudly helping with the harvest for the past three years. “Sira said she would pick more,” Mama said. “They were laughing, you know, teasing each other. Then Gedrí told Sira he didn’t want her in the orchard.”

Her face changed. In it, Ribas saw the echo of his father’s anger. The shadow his brother couldn’t remember, but that he and Mama had never forgotten.

Mama said, “She started to argue, the way she does. Talking back, you know.” Ribas did know. “Usually Gedrí laughs when she does that. This time, he didn’t.”

Ribas pictured his brother’s face. He’d been almost seven years old when Gedrin was born. He’d watched his brother grow up, watched him look more like their father with each passing year. Still, he had hoped, tried to believe, that he would never hear what he was hearing now.

Mama said, “He was cold, Ribé. Cold enough to scare her.”

Ribas knew the kind of cold she meant. Again, that long-ago night, and what had happened by this hearth, woke up in his memory. The chill that moved through his body now felt like an echo

of the fever that had taken him when he was a child, that same summer when his father died. The fever that had left him with his damaged heart and almost taken him away for good.

His father's anger had filled this old house with a chill that hadn't lifted for hours. That had been Silvas's mildest anger, the kind that didn't leave Mama in tears, or split skin open, or leave bruises that ached bone-deep.

Mama said, "I want to ask you to look at him, Ribé. Into his mind."

There it was. The other legacy from his illness.

When it first happened, he had thought it was because of the fever-dreams. He'd thought he was still imagining things that weren't really there, but then the fever left and the things he saw stayed. Around people, animals, anything with a mind, he saw lines and patterns of light. Their colors and brightness told him what the owner of that mind felt, in every detail.

He didn't know how he understood the patterns, but somehow he had, right from the beginning. As if he knew a language without having to learn the words. That alone would have been strange enough, but then he learned he could change the patterns too. He could cut pain. Ease fear. Help grief to heal.

With such a qualification, he'd had to become a zhinin. As a boy, he'd only ever wanted to work this farm, but his body wasn't up to it and the world seemed to have other plans for him. After fifteen years of using his strange gift to help everyone he could reach, he had gotten used to carrying it, but he always used it carefully. It claimed a price for what it gave.

Now he said, "I'll look, Mama. But if something's wrong, I can't promise to fix it."

"I know."

Some people thought the gift was magic, or should be. When Ribas first became Lida's zhinin, Namora's powers-that-be, in the capital in Sostavi, had wanted to bring him there and put

him to work. They'd thought it was a waste for him to stay a zhinin in a backwater village. Ribas had needed every drop of his stubbornness to weather that storm.

Mama said, "I only want you to look. If something's happening..." Her hands tightened briefly around each other, and then relaxed again. "It's best if we know."

*Maybe it's nothing.* Ribas thought the words, but didn't say them.

The two of them went outside. Mama went to the barn to check on the work going on around the farm's big cider press. Ribas went to the southeast corner of the orchard, where the picking was well underway.

High up in one of the nearest trees, Maryut's brother Darin picked apples from the upper branches and loaded them into a wicker basket tied to a rope looped over another branch. Darin and his two tall sons helped with every year's harvest. Maryut herself stood at the base of Darin's tree, holding the other end of the rope taut, ready to lower the filled basket to the ground. Seven-year-old Raulin, with a basket of his own, worked on the lower branches of the same tree. Ribas's friend Seldo, who owned Lida's Sheaf and Barrel Inn, and Seldo's wife Milya made a team at another tree. Seldo and Milya bought a lot of Mama's cider. Beyond them, Ribas saw Gedrin and Gedrin's wife Virta at a third tree.

Apparently Gedrin hadn't noticed yet that Asira, instead of staying out of the way, was scurrying around, picking up apples that had fallen on the ground and adding them to her brother's basket. Raulin made no protest. In fact, when the little boy saw Ribas, he snuck over to whisper, "Sira and I are going to get the most baskets. You watch."

In spite of his uneasiness, Ribas nodded gravely. "I believe you."

Raulin, small and serious-faced, with tousled brown hair, reminded Ribas of himself as a child. The boy said, "You won't tell Da she's picking, will you?"



Ribas watched Asira for a few seconds. She was being careful, glancing up to keep an eye on the activity in the trees above her. She checked the apples she picked up for soft spots and put the bad ones in the pile at the edge of the orchard. She knew what to do.

Ribas winked at his nephew. “I won’t say a word.” If there was any trouble, he decided, Gedrin could blame him.

Raulin grinned. “Thanks, Uncle Ribé.” As he went back to work, Ribas walked over to the base of his brother’s tree.

Virta, Gedrin’s wife, saw him coming and waved. Eight years ago, before she’d married Gedrin, she had been a town girl from Paret. Paret, a day’s journey northwest of Lida, was the closest thing to a city in Namora’s east-central Kalnu region. It couldn’t begin to compete with mighty Sostavi on the northern coast, but its *viduris*, the priests’ school, had trained generations of dagira, Ribas included.

Virta still didn’t dress like a farmer’s wife. Any time she could spare, she embroidered complicated designs on her simple homespun dresses because she loved pretty things. Ribas knew some of the villagers, especially farm women, looked down their noses at that, but he sympathized. His brother’s wife was delicate and lovely, with soft curling hair and big green eyes. The embroidery she loved suited her better than the hard, unending farm work, but she did the best she could.

“Morning, Ribé!” she called to him.

He didn’t see any signs of trouble in her face. That was hopeful, at least. “Morning, sister,” he said. “How are things?”

She pointed up toward the basket hanging from a high branch. “Almost full already. Gedri!” she called up. “Your brother’s here!”

Ribas heard rustling up above. Gedrin’s face appeared through a gap in the branches. “Took you long enough!”

Ribas felt a wave of relief. His brother sounded the same as ever. “I do the best I can,” he retorted. “These old bones don’t move too fast, you know.”

“You *are* old. It’s a fact. Wait a minute, I’m coming down.”

Gedrin shinned down the tree as easily as a boy. From a low branch, he jumped down to the ground.

Ribas knew that no one seeing the two of them together for the first time would take them for brothers. He had gotten Mama’s height and lighter coloring, while Gedrin had Silvas’s strong stocky build, and hair and eyes the color of freshly turned earth. Both their parents had been handsome. Ribas thought that, except for the blue eyes he’d inherited from Mama, he himself must have taken after some nondescript cousin or uncle lost to the past.

Gedrin grinned at him. “Glad you’re here.” Then he seemed to see something else. “Are you up for this?”

Ribas kept his voice light, not to show his brother either his worry or his relief. “Marya and Mama already asked me that. Don’t you start.”

Gedrin laughed. He put a hand on Ribas’s shoulder. “You know you don’t have to work.”

“I don’t know that at all.”

Gedrin, always barreling through life on overflowing energy, had never been able to imagine how it felt not to trust your own body. Ribas remembered, when they were boys, how upset Gedrin had gotten when Ribas gave up his claim to their mother’s farm so he could join the dagira. Ten-year-old Gedrin had insisted to the point of tears that Ribas shouldn’t do it. He had to stay on the farm, Gedrin had said: the two of them had to work the land together. He’d refused to listen when Ribas explained that he couldn’t keep up with the work. Gedrin had firmly believed that Ribas could be a farmer, if only he tried hard enough.

Now Gedrin understood Ribas's nemesis better, but he didn't know how it felt to live with such a thing. Ribas was glad for that. He said, "Seems to me you won't get all this work done by yourself."

Gedrin waved a hand at the busy workers at the other trees. "Do I look like I'm by myself?"

"You need somebody responsible here."

Virta overheard that and laughed. If Ribas was old, at least according to family rules, Gedrin was permanently young and reckless. Ribas kept a straight face, but he knew he had to look into Gedrin's mind, and soon. The gift only worked when he could look directly at the mind's owner. He said, "Where do you want me?"

"How about here? Get a basket and take the low branches." Then Gedrin looked past Ribas at something else. "Goddess hear me! I told that girl to stay back!"

He had spotted Asira. Ribas saw the change in his brother's face. Even without using the gift, he knew the truth. He had hoped for years that whatever had hurt their father, whatever had been wrong in Silvas's mind to make him the way he was, wouldn't come for Gedrin too. Now that hope was gone.

*No, Da!* A child's voice, his own, echoed in his mind. Standing up for Mama when he was far too small to help her. *No, Da! Don't you hurt her!*

The zhinin couldn't be afraid. Ribas put his hand on his brother's arm. "Gedri."

His brother looked back at him. Anger, out of place but far too familiar, twisted the face Ribas knew so well. In the moment of eye contact, Ribas reached for the gift. It unspooled the patterns for him and gave him proof of what he already knew.

Anger made a net around his brother. Too-thick, too-bright red lines wove around Gedrin's mind, trapping and gripping it tight.

Ribas had never looked into his father's mind. Silvas had died before Ribas had the gift. But if he could have, Ribas knew, he would have seen exactly this kind of anger, that could tear up anything it touched.

Gedrin's face clouded with suspicion. "Brother, I didn't ask you to do that trick of yours."

He couldn't know Ribas was looking, but he knew, as everyone did, that Ribas made it a rule never to use the gift without permission. Ribas said, "If I'm giving you a funny look, it's because I don't think you should scold your daughter for working. You want her to grow up lazy?"

He had learned to control his own feelings a long time ago, and he had offered thanks to the Goddess, many times, that no one could read him the way he read others. Gedrin seemed to believe him now. "Is it better for her to grow up disobedient? I told her not to work today."

The immediate anger was fading. Ribas knew the net was still there, but at least Gedrin's face had lost that ugly cast. Ribas said, "She's stubborn. She comes by it honestly, in this family."

Gedrin smiled reluctantly. Ribas knew he had won, for now. "Fine," his brother said. "But if she starts whining because she's tired, or if an apple falls and knocks her on the head, you're dealing with it."

"Fair enough."

They got to work. Gedrin climbed the tree again as easily as he'd come down it. Ribas got a basket and started on the lower branches.

Up above, Gedrin launched into a tune about the merry springtime. He had a good voice, rich and warm, and he belted unapologetically about digging furrows and sowing seeds until Virta reminded him that this month was Derla, not Ivesta, and maybe Gedrin should think about the little ones who could hear him singing, not to mention his brother the zhinin. Gedrin called back down that everybody here knew the basic facts of life, but all right, he'd change the words if nothing else would do, so he sang about Derla and plump apples ripening on the branches and the delights of

sweet juicy fruit until Virta shouted at him to stop, that was worse than ever. Laughter and scolding flew back and forth between them.

Ribas worked steadily, filling his own basket with the rhythm of picking that came back to him every year. Sometimes, when he came up here, he felt as if he'd slipped into the life he had imagined for himself when he was a boy. A life where he had stayed healthy, the gift had never come to him, and instead, he and Gedrin had shared the farm and worked out how to divide it between their families.

Today, though, those imaginings didn't come. The weight of the gift on him, and the zhinin's responsibility, were solid and real. The harvesting group would take a break for the midday meal. He would have to get Mama alone then and tell her what he'd seen. He knew what the news would mean to her, and how her face would change as she heard it.

She had told him, many times over the years since his father's death, that Silvas had once been different. That when he and Mama had first gotten married, Silvas had been happy. Never mind the fact that, by then, Silvas's life hadn't gone the way he'd wanted.

*If anyone turned out like him,* Ribas thought, *it should have been me.* From all he could gather, Gedrin might have their father's looks, but Ribas – as much as he hated the idea – must have had a lot in common with Silvas's mind. Silvas had studied to be a zhinin too. He had gone all the way to Sostavi, to the Great Circle House there, but something had happened that he never told his family about. He had abandoned that world and whatever success he'd found in it to come back to Lida.

Ribas had gone to the same priests' school his father had attended. All the time he'd been there, he'd pushed away the knowledge that he was sitting in the same classrooms his father had known, reading the same texts, listening to the same lessons. He'd done all he could to ignore the fact that the head teacher, Kunin Dergo, had actually been in Silvas's class. Ribas had convinced

himself it couldn't matter. His own career would be different, because he would never go to Sostavi. He would only serve in Lida.

And now he was here. And what was he going to do for his brother?

Sometime between his marriage and Ribas's earliest memories of him, Silvas had changed. Now Gedrin was changing. Gedrin, who had never carried bruises left by his father's fists, who had never listened to Mama cry at night, or crept out to the dark silent hearth to climb into her lap and hug her and wish, uselessly, that he was big and fierce enough to protect her. Gedrin, who had never tried to use his own small body as a barrier between his parents, and who had no memory of the crystallized horror of the night when Silvas died.

The sun climbed slowly higher in the sky. Ribas stayed in the rhythm of bending, reaching, picking, as the air slowly warmed around him even in the shade of the trees and Gedrin, above him, whistled another tune.

Could he help his brother? The red lines of the web burned in Ribas's mind as he worked. He knew that the gift would, at least, let him reach in and try to cut one line of the web at a time, until it loosed its hold on Gedrin. He also knew the price the gift would take. It had no strength of its own, so it would take all that Ribas had and more. And even if he could cut the net, the anger would still be there in Gedrin's mind, the lines of it like branches ready to re-grow after pruning.

Maybe if Ribas hadn't had a bad night. Maybe if he didn't feel so tired now, he would believe he could cut those lines and set his brother free. Right now, with his worn heart aching in his chest, and his muscles pushing against fatigue to carry on the rhythm of the work, he felt helpless.

The work went on in the bright, beautiful morning. Ribas pulled the fruit down and wished, with all the hurt and hopelessness he'd felt as a child, for the strength he didn't have.

### Chapter 3: the Tavo Balsa

In Namora's capital city, Sostavi, the Great Circle House rose above the clusters of white-walled buildings that clung like crystals to the high hills. Down below, the deep turquoise of the Vandeni Ocean met the shallower, silver-blue water of the harbor. The summer would see fleets of fishing boats leaving the harbor before dawn to come back in the evening riding low in the water, weighed down with their rich burdens.

Now, though, early in the Harvest Month, activity of a different kind filled the city. Tavin Ardinas, Ruler of Namora, was dying.

Ardinas lay in his bedchamber in the House of the Tavin, the tall, slender, elegant house which adjoined the Great Circle House in Sostavi's central square. The old priest had served as Namora's Tavin for over thirty years. Few people could remember him now as the young man who had arrived in Sostavi from Lygame, Namora's hardscrabble clay quarry region, a lifetime ago.

The woman who spent every hour she could spare with him certainly couldn't remember that young dark-haired priest. She was Valdena Filtraikas, the Tavo Balsa: Voice of the Tavin.

Valda, as her fellow Great House priests called her, was thirty-four, more than young enough to be Tavin Ardinas's daughter. She had come to Sostavi some fifteen years earlier, a new zhinin anxious to climb the dagira ladder, but the clawings of ambition she'd felt in those days had faded a long time ago. Now she filled her role, stepping in for the services that Ardinas could no longer perform, and listened to her colleagues murmuring and whispering about the election of the next Tavin, which couldn't take place until after Ardinas died. None of it interested her much. She went through the days behind a quiet mask that only lifted when she came into Ardinas's bedchamber, where a low fire always crackled on the stone hearth, and sat in the gentle light beside the old priest's bed.

One night near the end of Derla, she arrived at the bedchamber just as Tayo Bodin, the Tavin's personal healer, was ushering the last of Ardin's visitors out for the day. Valda knew that the Great House dagira – the zhinine, kunine, and sventine who served directly under Ardin – liked to be seen in this room, trooping in and out in twos and threes, then huddling in the sitting room outside in flocks to look mournful and whisper officiously to one another. No doubt some of the sventine, the members of the Senior Council and the highest-ranking priests below Ardin, thought showing their devotion to the Tavin now would improve their chances of winning the upcoming election.

Valda had no time for any of them. Neither did Tayo Bodin, who was older than the Tavin himself, bent-backed and white-haired. The tayo's dark eyes still snapped under his bushy eyebrows and his sharp tongue could send even the most stubborn sventin scuttling for the door. Tonight he let Valda in with the courtly flourish he always gave her, a gesture from an older time. Then he ordered the last visiting kunin out in the voice of a father scolding a troublesome child. He clapped the door shut behind the offended swirl of gray robes and set the latch firmly.

Valda, still in her brown robes of office from the evening service she had just performed, went to her usual chair by the bed. Ardin lay still, his pale eyelids closed, his age-spotted hands resting on the fine linen sheets that covered him. Valda was sure he was asleep. He spent most of his days sleeping, and she had often prayed that when death came for him, he would feel it as only the gentlest of changes.

When she sat down, though, his eyes opened. "Well," he said. "That was a fine fuss."

His voice sounded thin and weak, but she heard laughter in it. His bright hazel eyes looked straight into hers. Sometimes, even now, his eyes let her imagine the young man he must have been.

"Valda," he said, holding out a hand. She took it. His skin felt cool, as soft as if dusted with flour. He said, "Bodin here protects me very well, don't you think?"



So he'd heard the healer scolding the kunin. "Yes, Tavin," Valda said. "He does."

Tayo Bodin snorted. He stood over the low table by the hearth, his pale green healer's robes stained with the orange firelight. "You know, my lord, you could save me a lot of trouble." *My lord*, like his salute to Valda, was another of the tayo's old-fashioned formalities. Bodin set two glass vials inside the wooden case he carried. It was pain medicine, Valda knew, and probably a sleeping draught; she had never seen Ardinas take either one, but the healer would offer what he could. Bodin said, "You could sit up now and then and tell those boys off yourself."

*Boys*. Valda knew exactly what the members of the Senior Council of Sventine would say if they could hear that. She wished they could, and that she could see their faces when they did.

Ardinas smiled. Lines crossed his face in every direction, as if his skin were a piece of paper that had been crumpled and then smoothed out. He had little hair left on his head, but his beard was still a mass of tight white curls. He said, "But you do it so well, tayo. Sometimes I think you're enjoying it."

Bodin folded his arms. "How long were you really asleep today, my lord? I'm starting to think you're lying there having a good rest and laughing at us all."

For a moment, Valda let herself believe it. Ardinas was playing a joke on them and would get out of bed tomorrow, healthy and strong as ever. Longing wrapped around her so tightly it hurt.

The Tavin said, "That's for me to know, tayo. You go and rest now."

"Do you need anything before I leave?"

"Not unless you have an elixir of youth, my friend."

He was teasing, but Bodin shook his head. "If I did," he said quietly, "you'd have had it a long time ago." He put his hand over his heart and bowed. "Raimaté, Tavin."

*Peace be with you*, the salute between priests and from a non-priest to a member of the dagira. Ardinas rested one worn hand on his beard and nodded as much as the angle of the pillow would let him. “Raimaté, tayo.” Then Bodin went out, leaving Valda and Ardinas together.

Ardinas pressed Valda’s hand and let it go. His eyes looked bright and alert now. “You know what I’m going to tell you.”

He would tell her that she should rest too. She would ignore it. Ardinas had no wife, no children to stay with him during his ending time. Valda had no ties either, but she had never wished for them except once, long ago...but those memories didn’t belong here.

She would stand in for Ardinas’s family at this bedside, as she stood in for the priest himself in the Great House. “Yes,” she said, “I know what you’ll say. And you know what I’ll answer, Tavin.”

“That I do.”

He smiled, the kind of smile she had never seen on her own father’s face. “So,” he said, “since you’re determined to stay, tell me how the world is getting along.”

When she had arrived in Sostavi, she had never dreamed of wearing the brown robes of the Tavo Balsa and standing on the great dais, performing the water and salt rituals in the sumptuous Great House where, some of the stories said, the Goddess Herself had lived as a mortal woman. Now, the robes and the rituals were so familiar that she couldn’t imagine any other life. She told Ardinas about the services she had performed that day and the throngs of people who had lined up at the Great House doors afterward to ask about the Tavin’s health. “They miss you,” she said. “I’m not much of a substitute.”

Neither she nor Ardinas avoided the fact that he would never officiate in the Great House again. The Namoran faith taught that the death of the body released the *sela*, soul, to be part of the

wholeness of the world. Ardinas had told Valda that he was looking forward to finding out what that felt like.

Now he waved a hand, brushing off her words. “You’re a fine substitute. Anyone who doesn’t think so has terrible taste.”

Everyone who came to the Great House would have to listen to her until after the election and the installation of a new Tavin. No one could be sure when the election would happen, but the new candidate wouldn’t be installed until spring, in Ketva, the Fourth Month, because the long-held traditions of the faith stated that a High Installation could conflict neither with the high holy months of Akena and Algima, which commemorated the sacrifice and rebirth of the Goddess, nor with the month of Ivesta, planting season. A High Installation required the country’s full focus.

Valda would have to officiate in the Great House until spring. She was glad that her rank as Tavo Balsa, which meant she had to oversee the election, meant that she couldn’t put herself forward as a candidate for Tavin. For the same reason, she wouldn’t cast a vote.

As if he’d heard the train of her thoughts, Ardinas gave her a sidelong look. “And how are your colleagues in the Council?”

*How, indeed.* Valda couldn’t quite keep the curl of disdain out of her voice. “They aren’t saying much, Tavin.”

Ardinas laughed. Like his eyes, his laugh still seemed much younger than he was. “I’m sure they aren’t. They aren’t, for instance, discussing those sixteen votes the Council will cast, or who’s likeliest to get the nine they need to win.”

Again Valda was grateful to be the Council’s seventeenth member. She didn’t want to be Tavin, or have any reason to count votes in her head while she sat here with Ardinas. “No,” she said, “they aren’t talking about that at all.”

“And I suspect I can guess who isn’t saying the most.”

Now it was Valda's turn to laugh, in spite of the scorn she felt. "I'm sure you can. Sventin Galvo and Sventin Lesvin."

Galvo Dendraikas and Lesvin Berenaikas, both members of the Council of Sventine, certainly did sit at the heart of the discussions the Council wasn't having out loud. Galvo had served in the Council since shortly after Ardinas became Tavin. No one knew more than Galvo about the intricacies of dagira politics, and no one carried himself more confidently in meetings or spoke his views with more finely tuned diplomacy. Lesvin, meanwhile, had become a sventin only five years earlier, moving up from the ranks of Great House kunine after the death of one of the oldest Council members. Most of his colleagues still considered him young and green, but his fervent devotion to the Goddess had won him support as a possible Tavin-to-be.

Ardinas nodded. "Galvo and Lesvin. The obvious candidates. So tell me, Tavo Balsa, if you could vote for one of them, which would it be?"

"You know I shouldn't have an opinion." Valda knew perfectly well that her fellow Council members would hope for her "influence" in the election, once it was under way, but as an impartial referee, she wasn't supposed to have any.

Ardinas waved that away too. "You can tell me. I can't interfere from where I'm going."

Valda's breath caught in her throat. She tried not to think about how much she would miss this old man. "Truthfully, then," she said, "I don't much like either of them."

She knew that wasn't necessarily fair. Galvo, for instance, with his long experience, would certainly be the reliable choice. She had never met anyone smarter, though she didn't entirely trust either his flair for political intrigue or his oily diplomacy. Lesvin, younger than Valda herself, had energy and drive, but Valda wasn't sure how far she trusted him either. His fervent prayers sometimes made him seem less faithful than under the grip of an obsession.

She knew Ardinas already knew most of this. The Tavin had worked with both of those men every day for years. She said, “Both of them are too interested in themselves.”

That disgusted her more than anything else. The two of them weighing their chances and grubbing for votes, as if Ardinas’s death was only a temporary inconvenience before they could get on with what really mattered.

But the old priest said, “It’s only natural. Back in the old days, you know, three of us on Tavin Matas’s Council thought we might get the vote when he died. The poor man was down to his last breaths, trapped in bed, getting hauled out every time he had to use the chamberpot.” Ardinas motioned toward his own body under the sheet. “Sounds familiar, doesn’t it? There he was, and there we were, each of us acting like the Goddess Herself had laid Her hand on us and promised us the Tavinate. Whispering and backstabbing. Promises and insults flying all over the place.”

Valda couldn’t hide her expression. The bright hazel eyes rested on her. Ardinas said, “Fact of life, Tavo Balsa. You wouldn’t be here in Sostavi if you weren’t ambitious.”

That was true. Valda had plenty of reason to know it, but she still couldn’t picture Ardinas grubbing for votes. “I’m glad you won.”

“So am I.” He smiled. “Maybe I used the best insults, or maybe I was the best candidate after all, and the Goddess guided the vote, as we must believe she does.” His fingers, still strong despite the blue veins that showed under the skin, twisted the edge of the finely embroidered sheet that covered him. “Between the two of us, Valda, I agree with you about Galvo and Lesvin. They’re both decent enough, but...”

His voice trailed off. Valda saw his eyes move past her, toward the hearth and the tapestry on the wall above it. In this richly appointed chamber, the tapestry was the richest piece of all: an expanse of pure color, swirls of green and blue and purple that made no specific shape but called up

the shifting colors of the ocean. Valda knew how much Ardinas loved it. He wouldn't see the ocean again in life, but these colors linked him to it.

His eyes came back to her face. "The next Tavin will have a difficult job," he said. "Lassar's new impera, young Shurik. I see trouble there."

Valda wanted to lift his worry away. He shouldn't have to spend the handfuls of time he had left thinking of what might happen when he was gone. At the same time, she had been thinking about Lassar too.

No one in Namora knew much about the huge country east of the Senai Mountains. Lasska rulers since time out of mind had kept the place shut in on itself. Almost nothing from the outside world got in, and no Lasska – or so few they had been forgotten – seemed to travel outside it. Valda knew one particularly strange thing about the empire: even though it had a sea coast on three sides, it had no sailors or shipbuilders. Apparently the first Lasska impera, Curin, had hated and feared the sea. He had put his capital, Cheremay, in the middle of the country, with ranges of mountains between him and the faraway coasts, and he had ordered his people to stay off the water. He had said it was the will of Mesha, the bear-shaped god they worshipped. For generations, the Lasska had obeyed.

Lassar had no navy, but Valda knew that if rumors held any hint of the truth, their army could overmatch any military force in the world. Curin had brought scattered tribes, tiny countries, and thatch-roofed kingdoms under his heel to create the empire. He had needed a massive military to do it. These days, Valda couldn't imagine that shut-in Lassar needed such a huge force, but every impera since Curin had maintained and trained it. They probably believed their god had ordered that too.

Valda knew almost nothing about Lassar's new ruler. The Tavin had maintained a respectful, distant relationship with Shurik's father Mangevar. Perhaps once every year, Ardinas had sent

Mangevar a carefully-worded salutation from one leader to another, offering the impera his respects and assuring him of Namora's well-wishes for the Lasska country and people. The messages were always in Namoran; not even Ardinas knew much about the Lasska language. He had gotten perfunctory but reasonably polite replies, also in Namoran, and there the relationship had ended. After Mangevar's death, Ardinas had extended condolences to Shurik.

Valda said, "We haven't had trouble with Lassar before, Tavin. Why now?"

Because, of course, their relationship with Impera Mangevar had been stable, and a new ruler might be different. Valda wanted to believe that was all. Ardinas's face, though, looked gaunter than ever in the firelight, his skin almost as colorless as his beard.

"Shurik makes me uneasy," he said. His fingers worked the edge of the sheet again. "He replied to my letter, only a few lines, but they were full of *the Great God Mesha*, and *the God's directives* and *the God's will*. He sounded less like a ruler than a priest."

Valda hadn't seen Shurik's reply. She said gently, "Priests can be good rulers, Tavin. We ought to know that."

Ardinas laughed again, but it sounded tired and fitful. "We're trained for it, Tavo Balsa. Lasska rulers have always been warlords, or something like it. They rule the country while the priests fill the temples and collect the offerings to the God. Do you see what I mean? Now suppose one impera is different. Thinks he can hear the voice of Mesha in his head."

In spite of the fire and her heavy robes, Valda felt cold creep over her. "Does he think that?"

"I believe so. And now consider their God. What kinds of things do you think Mesha will tell this young impera to do?"

Valda thought of the few pictures she had seen of the Lasska bear-god. A snarling face, sharp teeth, hot angry eyes.

Ardinas was watching her. “Yes.” He sounded more tired than ever. “Mesha is far different from our own Kenavi. Shurik is young and deciding what kind of ruler to be. I think we can guess how his God might shape him.”

And tiny Namora, with no standing army, sat in Lassar’s shadow. Valda tried not to shiver. Ardinas was right about what the next Tavin might have to face.

Ardinas reached for her hand again. Valda gave it to him and swallowed past the dryness in her throat. “The Goddess will guide us.” She wished she sounded more certain.

The old priest pressed her fingers. For a few moments, the only sound in the room was the faint pop and crackle of the dying hearth fire. Then Ardinas seemed to leave their talk of Shurik and Lassar behind. “Do you know,” he said, “lately, I’ve been thinking very much about someone I’ve never met.”

Worry pooled in Valda’s chest. Were his thoughts wandering? He’d seemed lucid all evening, but...

As if she had spoken aloud, he said, “I promise you, my wits are as good as they’ve ever been.”

She shifted guiltily in her chair. He pressed her hand again and let it go. “I realize,” he said, “that must sound strange. I’m thinking of someone who caused a great fuss here in Sostavi, oh, something like fifteen years ago.”

Fifteen years. That was around the same time Valda herself had come to Sostavi, leaving the security of a Circle House in Paret willing to keep her on as a new zhinin. Ambition had driven her far. Ardinas said, “He was a young zhinin, just installed in a Circle House in a mountain village. He never came to Sostavi, but he certainly stirred a bee’s nest here.”

Valda felt the blood rising into her face. But, surely, she couldn’t be so silly after all this time.



Ardinas could only mean one person. Valda knew exactly who it was, even before Ardinas went on, “He was a farmer’s son, I think, but he had an extraordinary gift. The *dovne kenavnis*. Gift of Kenavi.”

Oh yes. Only one person matched that description. A farmer’s son, a mountain village, and that astonishing gift. Valda braced herself. Tonight was no time to give into old weakness.

“Ribas Silvaikas, Tavin?”

Her voice sounded steadier than she’d expected. It ought to be steady enough. Fifteen years ago, she had done all she could to put that part of her life away forever.

Light came back into Ardinas’s face. “That’s exactly the name. You know him?”

“I knew him well, a long time ago.” She tried to sound as if she was talking about any colleague. “We studied at the same viduris. He was a dear friend.”

The viduris in Paret. The classrooms, the dusty benches and old desks, the slow movement of sunlight down the white walls. Gray-haired Kunin Dergo, the head teacher, whose chilly presence could silence a chattering room in less time than it took to blink. Valda had put the memories away, but now they bloomed out as fresh and strong as scent from an unstoppered bottle. The village boy with the startlingly blue eyes and the kindest smile she had ever seen.

“I do wish I could have met him.” Ardinas sighed. “For some reason I found myself thinking about him recently. I’d have liked to know more about his gift. What it might be able to do.”

Valda heard the words Ardinas didn’t say. If trouble was coming, could the *dovne kenavnis* help? She couldn’t blame him for thinking it. But Ribas...the thought of seeing Ribas again, for any reason, shouldn’t make her feel so young and fragile. Not now, when so much might happen in the days and weeks to come; although, she had to admit, maybe that was why it did.

Ardinas said, “Maybe I should have listened to Galvo years ago.”

Valda started. “Galvo?”

“Oh yes. He wanted Zhinin Ribas to come to Sostavi and serve in the Great House.”

Valda had never known that. Ardinas said, “He wasn’t the only one, to be sure. The dovne kenavnis here in Sostavi...well, you can understand how the Council felt.” Yes, Valda understood. She also knew what she herself would have felt, in those days, if she had known that the Council was trying to bring Ribas here. The rack of hope and fear that would have stretched her; the misery that would have drowned her when he didn’t come. Ardinas went on, “Galvo took it on himself to write to him, several times I believe, until finally Zhinin Ribas wrote directly to me. I told Galvo to stop bothering the man and let him do his work in his village.”

Valda had never known that Ribas had written to the Tavin. The kind of courage it must have taken for a young zhinin, just starting out, to stand up to a sventin in the Council, to write to the Tavin himself...Valda cut that line of thought short, but not before she saw those blue eyes again. *Stubborn*. Her own voice from more than fifteen years ago echoed in her ears, carrying the laughter only he had been able to coax from her. *Always so stubborn, Ribé*.

Throughout their talk, Ardinas had looked increasingly tired. Now he closed his eyes. “Go and rest,” he said. “You’ve given an old man enough company for one evening.”

Valda didn’t like to leave him alone, but she knew she should sleep for at least a few hours. “I’ll come back in the morning,” she said. “Raimaté, Tavin.”

Ardinas smiled without opening his eyes. His hands lay quiet on the sheet. “Raimaté, Tavo Balsa.”

Valda slipped out of the bedchamber. In the sitting room, she made sure one of Ardinas’s two attendants was on duty. Then she left the house and went out into the dark evening.

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The dagira who served in the Great House also had houses of their own: the House of the Zhinine, House of the Kunine, and House of the Sventine. The three residences flanked the Great Circle House on Sostavi's main square.

During the day, crowds of people came to this square. Even the fountain at its center, graceful stone curves inset with a rainbow of colored glass, was one of the jewels of Sostavi. The faithful flocked here to worship and petition the dagira for prayers and help. Countless other visitors only came to admire the beauty around them.

On this clear, still night, Valda had the square to herself. Her talk with Ardinias had left her feeling wrung out, but the solitude let her breathe. She stopped by the fountain to look up at the Great House.

Heart of Sostavi, heart of Namora. After fifteen years of service here, Valda knew every inch of it, inside and out. It was built of gray stone, like all Circle Houses, with a conical wooden roof. Unlike all the others, though, the Great House had windows made of colored glass, showing images of the ocean, the mountains, and Namora's golden flatlands. In daylight, the glass glowed with all the colors of the rainbow and splashed the floor with reflected radiance. Valda felt sure that if ever the Goddess heard Her people at prayer, it happened here in the place that offered Her so much beauty.

A cool breeze, smelling of salt, drifted through the square from the harbor. Tonight the moon was only a sliver, hanging in the west. The stars seemed huge and much nearer, close enough to touch.

Valda knew that soon, the real chill would settle on Namora, as the cold northern winds came in from the ocean. By Tyla, the Quiet month, snow would hold the country still. Valda had spent every Tyla for the past six years helping Ardinias prepare for the four weeks of Akena, the high holy month that commemorated the Goddess's great Sacrifice. Then, together, she and the Tavin

had gone through the monthlong celebration of Algima, honoring the fact that after her death as a mortal woman, Kenavi was reborn as the Goddess.

This year, Ardinas would take no part in those preparations. By Tyla, most likely, his soul would have become one again with the world. Valda would go through service after service alone, until the installation of the next Tavin. The Tavin who would have to deal with whatever trouble came out of Lassar and the young ruler who thought his God spoke to him.

Someone touched her arm. Valda jerked out of her thoughts. A polite voice said, “Raimaté, Tavo Balsa. I’m sorry to disturb you.”

Sventin Galvo. Valda recognized his voice first, and then made out his white robes, gleaming in the dark. “Raimaté, sventin,” she said.

He smiled as naturally as if they were exchanging greetings in the Council chambers, rather than standing alone in the deserted square late at night. He was well past fifty, Valda knew, but age had been kind to him. He was small but strong-built, his back as straight as a young man’s, his movements graceful with no hint of stiffness. His thick silver hair swept back from a smooth, high forehead, and his fine features looked as aristocratic as they must have when he was young.

Valda had often considered him handsome, but something in his smile had never sat entirely right with her. It seemed to float on the surface to hide whatever lay underneath.

“You’ve been visiting the Tavin?” he said.

He knew she had been. “Yes.”

Galvo’s smile disappeared, a candle blown out at precisely the right moment, leaving his face sober and sympathetic. “It’s a difficult duty. You’re very kind, Valda, to spend so much time with him.”

She kept her voice polite. “I’m glad to do it.”

“Of course.” Galvo put his hand on her arm again. “You must be tired. I won’t keep you long, but I hoped I might have a quick word with you in private.”

Valda tried not to let her face show what she felt. She owed Galvo a great deal. When she had first arrived in Sostavi, taking the wild and terrible chance of coming to the capital with no real hope of finding a place at a Circle House, the sventin had taken an immediate interest in her. Valda had gone to a morning Pirdina service in the Great House. For some reason, out of all the people in the House that day, Galvo’s quick eyes had fixed on her. She had been wearing her sea-blue zhinin’s robes, but she was hardly the only one. She had undoubtedly looked bashful and countrified among the wealthy city congregants and elegantly-robed dagira.

After the service, though, Galvo had made a point of finding and speaking to her. She had been young and confused, overwhelmed by the great city after small Paret in the east, but hungry to find a place here in the capital. Galvo had been remarkably kind, asking about her training and evidently interested in news from the little town she had left. Valda hadn’t understood, at the time, why Galvo had recommended her for a place among the Great House’s zhinine, or why he had kept his interest in her ever since, shepherding and encouraging her rise through the ranks.

Now, though, she understood better. Galvo didn’t perform favors without hope of return.

“Of course,” she said. “I’m happy to talk with you.”

He took her arm and began to walk slowly around the fountain, as if they were out for a stroll together. “I wanted to tell you,” he said, keeping his voice low, “that if the Council chooses to elect me, I will of course ask you to continue to serve as Tavo Balsa.”

That didn’t surprise her. Like everyone else, he knew that Valda should neither have nor express opinions about the candidates for the Tavinate. He also knew that in reality, she could have a quiet word with her fellow Council members. As the one who had worked so closely with Ardinias for the past six years, her opinions carried weight.

He went on, “Naturally, I couldn’t mention this to you where others might hear. No doubt it would concern some of our colleagues, to think I was over-eager to step into a role that isn’t mine.”

No doubt, indeed, it would “concern” them to hear Galvo offering her a bribe. Valda swallowed her distaste. She tried to remember what Ardinas had said about *promises and insults*: this was simply the way the game was played. “That’s very kind, Galvo.”

“Everyone knows how well you’ve filled the role. Frankly, I can’t imagine any Tavin could want a better Voice.”

And, she thought, it would keep her out of the running in the next election too. She would very likely outlive Galvo, given that she was much younger. Maybe he intended to groom a successor. More likely, Valda decided, he simply thought of her as useful, and he wanted her to be useful to him. And maybe she, and the other Council members, ought to feel thankful that someone with Galvo’s long experience should be so eager to step into a role that now held unknown risks.

As she murmured thanks for his compliment, another suspicion darted through her mind. Fifteen years ago, Galvo had pressed Ribas to come to Sostavi, and Ribas had refused. Around the same time, Valda had arrived in Sostavi from Paret. She thought of that conversation with Galvo again, on that long-ago Pirdina. He had asked about her training...and she had talked about the town, and the viduris, and Kunin Dergo, the head of the school.

Beyond question, Galvo had known where Ribas had trained. Valda could believe that he had known, or suspected, that she had known Ribas at the viduris, perhaps been in his class. So suppose that by the time Valda came to Sostavi, Tavin Ardinas had already put a stop to Galvo’s “invitations” to Ribas. Had the sventin decided that Valda might be another way to get what he wanted?

Galvo was talking now, saying something about his concern that the election might be a difficult process, that Sventin Lesvin was of course also a worthy candidate with many excellent points. Valda didn't pay much attention.

If Galvo had thought she would be a link to the zhinin in Lida, he had been wrong. Valda hadn't been in touch with Ribas since her arrival here. Galvo had certainly never asked her about him that she could remember. And none of it explained why Galvo had taken notice of her at that one Pirdina service, when he hadn't even known who she was.

Even so, as they finished another slow circuit around the fountain and Galvo wrapped up whatever he had been saying, Valda said, "You know, sventin, Tavin Ardinas told me something interesting tonight. He said that at one time, you were in touch with an old friend of mine."

"Really?"

His face showed nothing but polite interest, but Valda felt certain, to the soles of her feet, that he knew exactly who she meant. She played along. "A zhinin in Lida village, near the mountains. Ribas Silvaikas. We were in school together."

Carefully measured recognition lit Galvo's face. "Oh, yes, Zhinin Ribas. Certainly. That was quite a while ago."

"Tavin Ardinas said you hoped he would serve here in Sostavi."

"To be sure. I thought Sostavi was by far the best place for someone of his abilities. I must admit I also thought he would be eager for the chance." Another disarming smile, gleaming in the dark. "As it turned out, I was wrong."

Nothing to see or hear there. Somehow, though, Valda couldn't shake the feeling that Galvo had never given up on his idea. Why had he held onto it for so long?

They had arrived in front of the House of the Sventine now. Galvo moved toward the front entrance. "I should let you rest. Thank you for hearing me out, Valda."

“My pleasure.”

They parted at the door with a polite goodnight. Galvo went up the stairs to his chambers, on the second floor. One of the House’s many quiet-footed attendants met Valda as she went down the first-floor hallway to her own. “Raimaté, Sventin Valderna,” he said. “Will you need anything this evening?”

She kept walking. “No, thank you.” At her chambers, she let herself in and shut the door securely behind her. Absurd though it was, she felt as if she was running from something.

Galvo wanted to be certain of her help in making him the next Tavin. That came as no surprise. But, beyond a doubt, Galvo also still had something in mind for Ribas. Valda couldn’t imagine what, or why, but the certainty was lodged in her now, hard as rock.

She changed into a linen shift and woolen wrap and unwove the red-gold braids she wore neatly coiled at the back of her head. Her hair was her one beauty, as her father hadn’t hesitated to tell her when she was a child. His only daughter had never interested him much. He’d been glad to send her to the viduris and have her off his hands.

Unbound, Valda’s hair fell to her waist. Individual strands caught the light of the low-burning fire on the hearth and gleamed: polished copper with no trace of silver in it. As she brushed it out, she couldn’t help remembering the voice she had tried to forget. *It’s beautiful, Valda.* The touch of his fingers as he drew a strand of her hair gently between them. *You know that, don’t you?*

She had tried to put all of that away. Now the longing rushed back in, as sharp as if no time had passed at all.



## Chapter 4: the Lasska soldier

After thirty years of service with Lassar's Imperial Commission of Roads, lifelong soldier Bereg Orlon asked for nothing more than the right to retire. That, and to be allowed to go home.

Bereg came from northern Lassar, the heavily forested Kovik Thysidich region. In Thysidich, the fourteenth of the twenty Kovkya, the Claws of the Bear that made up the Lasska empire, Bereg had grown up with the spicy scent of machia sap and the chill of long winters in his blood. As a boy, he'd helped his father, a master woodcutter, harvest machia trees to ship to Kovik Tyi, the Third Claw. Tyi's skilled carpenters had turned the silvery, dark-grained planks and rounds into beautiful furniture that Bereg's family could never have afforded to buy, but Bereg had been proud to have a small part in making it. Most of all, he had loved the hours he spent outside with his father, the two of them working in silent rhythm, running the great double-handled saw back and forth along rich cuts of wood.

Bereg would have been happy to spend his life as a woodcutter, but everyone knew that the army offered the best living. Most of the wealth of Lassar's forests and farms, its granaries and stockyards, went to the capital city Cheremay, to feed the impera's forces. The army oversaw everything, from the security of Lassar's coasts and the border with the western countries, to the roads and the postal service, to the empire's schools, to the personal safety of the impera himself. Lassar couldn't function without the great regiments of graycoats. Serving in the army, in any capacity, was the proudest career for any young Lasska. So although Bereg didn't want to leave the forests of Thysidich, he listened when his father told him to make a better life for himself.

When he joined the army, he reported to Cheremay, as all new soldiers did. Since then, he had spent most of his career in the middle-south regions: Kovik Adin, the First Claw, and Kovkya Tsva and Syetch, the Second and Ninth. Those regions had few trees, and the temperature never

went below middling-cool, but they offered plenty of work building and maintaining the great system of well-paved, well-designed roads that linked the twenty Claws together. If Cheremay, where the impera sat on the bear-headed throne, was the heart of Lassar, the roads were its lifeblood.

Bereg knew he was lucky to serve on the Road Commission. He got good pay, and he got to work outdoors the way he liked. In fact, he'd turned down more than one offer of promotion, which at best, would have taken him off the road crew and sat him on a horse as an overseer, and at worst, would have stuck him in an office drawing maps. He had no reason to complain about any aspect of his job. Still, when a man had grandchildren, and when his hair had been gray for so long that most people had forgotten its original color, surely he could think about putting his feet up and slowing the pace of the time that moved past him.

Bereg thought he'd earned the right to go back to his forests for good, instead of catch-as-catch-can visits of a few weeks or a month. Also, though he didn't admit this out loud to anyone, when it got to be a choice between retiring and serving under an impera more than young enough to be your son, you might be better off deciding your working days were over.

So he planned to retire. But this got upended during the summer when his third grandchild was born, after Impera Mangevar had gone to his sickbed and the country braced itself to hear that the old ruler's eldest son, Shurik, was going to take up the mantle.

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The rest of the country's eyes were on Cheremay, their prayers going up for the impera who was dying and the new impera who would take his father's place. Meanwhile, in Thysidich, another life slipped away.

Bereg's son-in-law, Torvar, died of fever at the end of the summer. Torvar and Ania, Bereg's daughter, had three children. The youngest was only a month old.

Bereg couldn't be with his daughter at either her child's birth or her husband's death. The Road Commission had sent him to Adin, the First Claw, to repair the roads in and around Cheremay. Only the best Road Commission soldiers, including Bereg, were worthy to do that work. He appreciated the honor, but his wife's and daughter's letters from home made red-hot lines across his heart.

From Ania: *Mother says I must move home, Father, but I cannot put such a burden on you.* Her precise words and clear schoolroom-taught handwriting papered over what Bereg knew was a bottomless pit of pain. She and Torvar had loved each other since they were children building dolls' houses out of twigs. *You have earned your retirement. I will find work. The children and I will be all right.*

From Bereg's wife Nela: *She can't care for those young ones alone.* Nela's handwriting was less steady, showing more of what she had gone through as she nursed her son-in-law, trying and failing to save him. *Her little ones need her and she's not strong enough to work. Tell her that, Bereg. She'll listen to you.*

Bereg wanted to tell Ania not to worry, that her old father was still more than strong enough to work and care for her and her children. He wanted to tell her that he didn't care about retirement; he only wanted her to come back to the house she had made bright during her own childhood, so she could look after her young ones, cook with her mother, and learn to laugh again.

Faced with pen and paper, the words always dried up inside him. How could lines and dots of ink on a page tell his girl how much he loved her and hurt for her grief? Helpless, he wrote, *Daughter, you will do as your mother tells you. I will continue to work.* She would listen, as Nela said, because he was her father.

He did at least put in for a transfer back to Thysidich. Those roads needed attention too. The high commander in Cheremay approved his application. In mid-autumn, once the main work in Adin was finished, Bereg would join a lesser team working near his own village. He would be able to live at home with his family.

Autumn came. Bereg counted the time until he would leave Adin. Three weeks. Two weeks. One.

The transfer was five days away, and Bereg had begun packing his bags to prepare for the long journey north, trying not to let his workmates see how he could already taste the air of the machia forests, when he got a notice at his team's work camp in Adin. It came directly from the palace, carrying young Impera Shurik's own seal. Bereg and a handful of the other most senior and experienced soldiers on the team had to report to the palace in two days' time.

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No one knew what the orders were about. Two days barely gave enough time to make the journey from the southern border of Adin, where the team was camped, to Cheremay. Bereg and the others made it in all haste and arrived in the great city on the morning of the third day.

There they met up with a similar contingent from the border of Kovkya Adin and Tyi, and another from the border with Tsva. All of them had gotten the same orders, to report at once to the palace. All of them, like Bereg, were career soldiers who had served for decades in various branches of the military. The youngest, a woman from Tyi, was over forty years old. One of the officers, a man from northern Adin, joked, "What does the impera want with us fogeys?"

Bereg didn't know. He tried not to show how uneasy the orders made him. As the impera's servant, he shouldn't worry about how this business, whatever it was, might affect his transfer, but he couldn't help it. For too long now, he'd let himself believe that he would soon put his arms around his daughter and help her carry her grief.

At the palace, one of Impera Shurik's personal guard met the contingent outside. "The Impera wishes you to breakfast in the barracks," the young woman told them. "Then join him in the Hall of the Bear when you have rested and eaten."

Bereg had never seen the inside of the palace. The Hall of the Bear was the throne room where the impera held audiences. In spite of everything, Bereg felt a thrill of pride that he was actually going to see the legendary throne where every impera since Curin had sat. He told himself that in a couple of weeks, as soon as he made the journey home, he would be able to tell Nela and Ania all about it.

In the great barracks near the palace, any soldier wearing the gray coat and army insignia was welcome to take a meal. You only had to find a seat at one of the long tables that filled each of five mess halls. Breakfast was thick fresh bread with butter and honey, fruit brought all the way from the rich plains of Kovkya Tsvavyest and Votsimich, and even cuts of broiled pork. Civilian Lasska only ate meat a couple of times a week and never for breakfast.

Younger soldiers were trained to give place to older ones and officers. Several foot soldiers who looked barely out of puberty quickly picked up their plates and cleared the end of a table for Bereg and the other “fogeys.” While they ate, the woman from Tyi said, “If this is our last meal, it’s a good one.”

Her strong-featured face didn’t relax into a smile, but Bereg and a couple of others laughed. A man even older than Bereg, who served on the School Commission in Adin, said, “You may not be wrong. Impera Shurik may want to clear out the dead wood to let the younger trees in.”

“Come on now,” another man said. He was a few years younger than Bereg and had told them he worked with the Central Office of the Post. “I’ve never heard of an impera executing officers for being old.”

The school commissioner said, “Who knows what this new one will do?”

“Careful,” the woman from Tyi said. “How do you know any of us aren’t Eyes?”

The group called the Eyes of the Impera was rumored to be the most elite force in the army. It was so secret that neither Bereg, nor anyone he had ever worked with, seemed to know for certain whether it existed at all.

The post officer leaned past the school commissioner to look the woman from Tyi in the face. “Are you one of them?”

Bereg couldn’t help laughing again, though the Eyes, if they weren’t a rumor, certainly weren’t a joking matter. Lasska military scuttlebutt said that members of the elite force could be anywhere, at any time. They were trained to watch for anything that carried even the faintest whiff of disloyalty to the impera. In the face of their testimony, rumor said that an honest man’s life wasn’t worth a dead autumn leaf.

The woman said, “For all you know, I might be one of them. I might have been ordered to join this group to watch you.”

Bereg didn’t know what branch of the service she worked in. She hadn’t volunteered the information, and no Lasska soldier asked unnecessary questions. Even so, Bereg didn’t honestly think she was an Eye, but he did wonder where her apparent sourness came from. Older soldiers didn’t have the fresh-faced eagerness of new recruits, but they mostly liked the life well enough.

He drank a swallow of the strong smoky tea the army ran on and set his thick ceramic mug down by his plate. “Well,” he said, “if Impera Shurik would like to give my job here in Adin to a younger man, he’s welcome to it. I’m leaving for Thysidich in a few days.” Saying out loud might make it true.

The school commissioner wanted to know why anyone would leave bustling, cosmopolitan Adin for frosty tree-infested Thysidich. Bereg put up a spirited defense that led to talk about the Kovkya each of them came from. All of them joined in except the woman from Tyi, who sat silent, picking at the last of her pork.

After breakfast, they walked back to the palace. Cheremay, Bereg had always thought, was a remarkably gray city, especially here at its center. Wide gray flagstones paved the square. The great barracks were gray stone, likewise the Temple of Mesha whose tower, with its capping ring of huge teeth, scraped the sky. On a gloomy day in winter, or during the endless wet spring when you wondered if the sun would ever come out again, the air itself seemed gray, as if sky and ground and buildings bled together into a haze.

This morning, though, the sky had no clouds in it. Fine autumn sunlight warmed the flagstones and softened the spires on the Temple. Bereg tried to enjoy the warmth. He tried to believe that soon, in a couple of weeks, he would be back home.

Of course, he told himself, he'd have to brace himself for the cold in Thysidich. Even on summer nights, you had to wear a coat, and he would be home just in time for winter, when you didn't dare go outside without wrapping a scarf around your face and hiding your hands in the heaviest gloves you could find. But the air would clear and spicy, without the heaviness of city air that too many people breathed. Sunlight would make the snow glitter and the sky would look like pale blue glass. And inside his warm house, there would be fires, and the rich scents of butter and dried fruit from the *tortye* Nela would make. Bereg would sit by the hearth every evening, when his work was done, with a grandchild in his lap and his daughter across from him. Ania's eyes would smile again. Bereg held onto that picture of his family, so tightly he could almost feel the warm weight of the baby against his chest, as the impera's guard escorted him and the others into the palace.

The Palace of the Impera made no display. Impera Curin had ordered it built conspicuously smaller than both the Temple of the God and the great barracks nearby, to remind all imperi that they served the God and owed their position to the military. The walls were plain gray stone, set with small square windows. The building's only ornament was the flag that flew above the heavy

wooden doors. The brown head of Mesha, sharp-toothed and angry-eyed, snarled against a bright white background.

Inside, no tapestries decorated the entrance hall. No carpet softened the chill of the stone floor. Lasska imperi refused even to keep the palace any warmer than necessary. Fires were lit when the first snow fell; until then, the bare walls soaked up the cold.

The guard led Bereg's group into the long, narrow Hall of the Bear. Here the impera held audiences, listened to petitions, and gave out judgment in those cases that required the personal verdict of the Servant of Mesha. As much of an honor as it was to enter this room, Bereg couldn't help noticing the still deeper chill of it, as if its bare empty length held onto all the cold air of all the winters since Impera Curin's day. As if, Bereg thought, all the nerves of every petitioner who had shivered in front of the impera had soaked into the stone.

This room had no ornaments either, except one. At the center of the raised dais at the far end of the room stood the great luxury of the palace: the peerless Lasska throne.

The small high-set windows above the dais let in bands of sunlight. They fell across the stone and across the gleaming, silvery-pale throne, with its unmistakable rich dark grain.

Machia wood. But no single tree that Bereg had ever seen, or that his father had ever cut, would have been broad enough for Curin's carpenters to carve out this throne in a single piece. The curved back, the wide seat, the massive arms and legs: the throne looked fit to hold a giant. The carpenters must have joined separate cuts of wood together, but as closely as he peered, Bereg could see no sign of the splices. The grain aligned perfectly. Into the back of the throne, directly above the place where the impera's own head would rest as he sat, an artist had carved a life-sized head of a bear.

Bereg wished he knew that artist's name. No Lasska, except of course for the impera, could leave his or her name on history. You gave your work to the God and the empire. Bereg would



never question the rightness of that, but here, he felt a twinge of regret that the woodworker who had done this couldn't share its immortality.

The carving had such fine detail that Bereg could make out the texture of the bear's fur. If he could have touched it, he would almost have expected it to feel rough and warm under his fingers. This bear didn't look like the flag of Mesha outside: no gaping, hungry mouth, or narrowed, vengeful eyes. This bear looked quietly out into the room, its expression watchful and, Bereg thought, somehow sad. Jagged crisscrossing lines on its muzzle – the grain of the wood – looked like a pattern of old scars. Bereg found himself imagining a wound: an enemy knife, say, laying the hide open and cutting into the exposed flesh. This was no young, hungry warrior. This was an old survivor who knew about battles and pain.

A door behind the dais opened. A guard's flat voice announced, "The most noble Servant of Mesha, his Highness Impera Shurik."

Bereg's joints protested as he quickly knelt beside the other soldiers and lowered his head. He felt the cold stone through the fabric of his pants.

"Soldiers of Lassar. I greet you in the Name of the God."

The voice sounded oddly distant, as if, Bereg thought, someone had interrupted its owner in the middle of a dream, and he was still pulling his thoughts together out of some other place. That voice didn't match the sharp, authoritative footsteps that came across the dais and stopped in front of the throne.

The formal greeting gave the group permission to look up. Bereg did so, careful not to look the new impera directly in the eye.

Bereg had never met Impera Mangevar, but he had seen him at a distance, when Mangevar had greeted his subjects from the front doors of the palace. The old impera had looked no taller

than Bereg himself, but he had been broad in the shoulder, barrel-chested, as if he, too, had spent his youth outside, doing hard work with his hands.

At first glance, Bereg wouldn't have taken Shurik for Mangevar's son. The young impera was tall and slim-built. His hands were slender and smooth, his wrists, laid bare by the rolled-up cuffs of his shirt, delicate-looking. Bereg couldn't help thinking that those hands had never dug earth or laid stone. And Shurik favored fine clothes: his shirt was dark green silk, his pants linen. His leather vest and boots looked expensively tooled. And his face – Bereg glanced quickly at it and away – looked pale, as if the young impera had never spent time outside the palace walls. A shock of dark hair fell into his eyes, which looked pale too, like shallow water.

You could not think things like *He's too young*. You did not, even in the privacy of your own head, wonder how someone who wore silk and linen and boots without so much as a scuff on them could command the greatest army the world had ever seen.

Shurik's thin hand moved, brushing the hair away from his face. "You may stand," he said.

His voice still had that oddly distant sound, but his movements – his footsteps, his hand – were quick and impatient. Bereg scrambled to his feet with the others. His knees and hips protested again.

Shurik said, "I offer you welcome and thank you for your attendance on me."

Correct words. Bereg couldn't imagine what soldier would risk his life by refusing an impera's summons. The young man stood erect, shoulders back, hands at his sides, as if he was pressing his back to a wall. Bereg risked another look at Shurik's face. He'd seen that hectic, too-bright look in the eyes of a man with fever.

*A boy. He's a boy whose father is dead.*

Shurik said, "I know all of your names, of course, but I haven't the pleasure of knowing which name belongs to which of you. Introduce yourselves." Another quick motion of the hand, this time pointing at Bereg in his place at the end of the line. "You start."

Bereg swallowed. Boy or not, he had never spoken directly to an impera before.

"Bereg Orlon, Impera." He bowed.

"Of course. Silde Orlon." The title gave Bereg his due rank as a senior soldier. "You are the one who applied to transfer to Kovik Thysidich, are you not?"

Shurik's voice sounded sharper now, more alert. Bereg felt cold seeping up from the floor, through the soles of his shoes and up into his body.

"Yes, Impera. I am due to go home in a few days."

"That won't be possible now, Silde. Your new orders will require you to remain here in Adin."

Bereg knew his face must show nothing. Especially, he must not let the impera see how his heart seemed to have dropped to the floor, leaving an empty space in his chest.

"Of course, Impera," he said.

Shurik went on down the line. Bereg barely heard the other officers give their names. He could only picture his daughter's eyes, holding all the hurt in the world.

He came back to himself when Shurik spoke again. The impera said, "I rely on all of you as experienced soldiers and faithful servants of my father." The words sounded crisp and firm. "Your new orders are of a sensitive and particular nature. That is why I wish to give them to you myself."

Bereg knew he should care about his orders. Shurik's voice went on, the words beating against Bereg's ears now like hailstones rattling on a roof. "First, I would like to know which of you have had direct experience of the tribal peoples we call *strenyi*. I believe their name for themselves, in their tongue, is Pala Vaia."

Bereg wondered vaguely why the impera wanted to know about the strenyi: the strangers, as their name meant in Lasska. He had never seen any, but everyone knew they were wanderers, uncivilized heathens who thought the sun and moon were gods. They contributed nothing to the empire.

The woman from Tyi, Fisa Vasem, said, "I once saw some of them, Impera."

Shurik turned to her. Bereg saw an odd look in the young man's face: intent, even hungry. "Tell us what you saw."

The woman kept her eyes on the floor when she answered, as was proper. "A tribe came to my village several years ago." She spoke with no particular expression, reciting facts. "One of their men bought a chair in a carpentry shop. They left after a little while."

"How many were there?"

"Half a dozen or so. I don't know if it was the whole tribe or if only some of them came into the village."

"Did any of them speak to you?"

"No. The man must have talked to the carpenter, but I didn't hear. I was outside in the road. The rest of them stayed outside the shop and kept to themselves."

"Tell us what they looked like, how they were dressed." Shurik's voice sounded sharper still, Bereg thought. Like the blade of a shovel biting into the ground, turning the soil to find something hidden.

"They had dark skin and long hair, men and women both." Fisa Vasem's voice had no more expression in it than before. "They were built small, but they looked strong and wiry. Their clothes..." She paused, gathering the memory. "They wore close-fitting leather breeches and bright-colored shirts. Some of them had bright yarn in their hair. All the ones I saw were grown. No children." She added as an afterthought, "The man who bought the chair wore a yellow shirt."

Bereg saw Shurik's face flush like a boy who'd won a prize. The shovel had turned up what it was hunting for. But why, he wondered, did any of this matter?

Shurik said, "The man in the yellow shirt would have been their leader. Only the leaders can wear yellow. Did you see any of them wearing white?"

"I don't remember, Impera."

Shurik waved that away. "It doesn't matter." The flush in his cheeks seemed to deepen. "All of this confirms what I have read. It will help us. Thank you, Silde Vasem."

She bowed without speaking. Shurik's eyes went up and down the line of soldiers. When they reached Bereg, he quickly looked away, to avoid that unsettling brightness.

"I will now explain your orders," Shurik said. "As all of you know, my honored father served Lassar well. I revere his memory, but it is not for me to grieve his death." Bereg caught the faintest shiver in the word "death." *You do grieve.* "The Great God Mesha requires a task of me," Shurik said, "and of all of you. He has told me what we must do."

Bereg couldn't help glancing up at that. *Told me.* Did Shurik mean he had heard the voice of the God?

Shurik continued, "The strenyi, the 'First and Lost People' as they call themselves, believe many wrong things. They believe, for instance, that they have more of a right to this land than the Lasska do, because their stories tell them they were here first. And they believe that the sun, the moon, and the winds are gods themselves, rather than mindless forces that answer to Lord Mesha, as all right-minded people know they must."

His voice had a new edge in it now. He said, "It is my firm knowledge that Lord Mesha does not wish to have these strangers, these heretics, here among his faithful people. So it will now be my duty, as your impera, to rid us all of this danger."

Bereg didn't understand. How could the strenyi be a danger to him, when he'd never seen them?

Someone said, "My lord Impera. Forgive my intrusion, but do you mean to say that the God has spoken to you?"

Fisa Vasem, again. Her voice, quiet as it was, hit Bereg like the lash of a whip. How did she dare interrupt when the impera was speaking? And *do you mean to say*, as if she questioned Shurik's intentions.

But Shurik didn't look at all angry. When he smiled, pride lit his face like a lamp in a window.

"Yes. I have been honored to hear the will of the God."

Impera Curin, long ago, had spoken to Lord Mesha, and the God had answered him. Mesha Himself had carried Curin's armies to victory in the battles to unify the empire. Everyone knew that history. Everyone also knew that Mesha had spoken to no other ruler since.

But this young impera believed he had heard the God's voice. Bereg saw that he believed it absolutely. The feverish, brittle look had disappeared from Shurik's face. Conviction made him look stronger, like a leader of armies.

"All of you here today," Shurik said, "along with others of my most experienced soldiers in other Kovkya, will lead your junior soldiers in a particular task. Throughout Lassar, you are to find the places where the strenyi make their winter camps."

During the winter, he went on to explain, the strenyi made semi-permanent camps, living in the same place for weeks at a time. They preferred the southern plains, where the bitterest winter weather did not come, but he wanted an exhaustive search made throughout Lassar.

"Your Thysidich will also be searched, Silde Orlon." The pale blue eyes came back to Bereg. "But I cannot ask you to lead that detachment. I want the best of my officers to go south."

Perhaps the God had spoken to Shurik. Bereg had no right to doubt it. Maybe it was the will of Mesha Himself that Bereg shouldn't go home.

"Of course, Impera," he said. His fingers ached as he let his regret go.

Shurik explained that he had taken all of the leaders of the searching detachments from non-fighting branches of the army. "I want strong, experienced leaders," he said, "who use their minds instead of force. You will have small contingents of fighting soldiers under your commands, but during the initial search, I want no violence."

The initial search would gather information. Each detachment would have a designated area to scout. The soldiers must locate all strenyi camps within a Kovik, map them, and report back to the governor of that Kovik. The reports must also include all possible information on the size of each camp, approximate numbers of adults, children, and the elderly that the camp contained, and anything the scouts might consider relevant about the condition of the people they saw.

"For example," Shurik said, "do they seem healthy? Is there hunger in the camp, or illness?" He also told them to look particularly for the yellow-shirted leaders, and for women wearing white. "These women are of crucial importance to the strenyi," Shurik said. "The tribes believe that they are some kind of witch, that their dreams can tell the future. Tribal leaders base all their decisions on what these women tell them." Bereg heard the curl of disgust in Shurik's voice. "The leaders and the witch-women are the most valuable people in each tribe. It's crucial that we know where and how many they are."

Bereg listened, from a numb place on the far side of pain, as Shurik explained that the search detachments must gather as much information as they could in order to minimize danger to Lasska soldiers and civilians, if any lived near the strenyi camps. "Ideally, I want no Lasska casualties." Once the detachments had gathered all the information they could, the second phase of operations would begin.

Based on what the searchers learned, Shurik and the Kovkya governors would send out fighting forces large enough to deal with each of the camps. Children younger than five years old were to be spared. “At that age, they can be adopted by Lasska families and raised as faithful servants to the God. The strenyi false beliefs and lies will be trained out of them. We should not squander their lives.” The fighting forces would have to make their best guesses as to which children were young enough to spare. The search detachments could help by getting rough counts. All other strenyi were to be, as Shurik said, “exterminated,” beginning with the yellow-shirted leaders and white-shirted witch-women.

Bereg took all this in without blinking. You didn’t question the impera’s orders. Especially not if they might have come from the God Himself.

Then another voice reached him. “Forgive me, Impera. May I be certain I understand?”

Fisa Vasem, again. Shurik said, “Of course.”

“So we,” she said, “your senior servants, are to lead groups of searchers to collect information on the strenyi camps. Your Lordship will then send groups of fighting forces, each assembled according to what we learn about the camps. Those forces will kill all of the people in each camp except the youngest children, who will be taken captive?”

Her voice held no more emotion in it than before, but her words cut through Bereg’s numbness like ice touching bare skin. *Kill. Captive.* Shurik hadn’t said that.

“That is direct and accurate, Silde Vasem,” Shurik said. “We must remember that the strenyi’s continued presence in Lassar is an affront to Lord Mesha Himself. The God has instructed me that we must erase what we can’t repair, and we cannot hope to change the minds of strenyi men and women who have walked in wrong ways all their lives. But second, and no less important, we must save the children who can learn the right ways and serve Lord Mesha. He wants no less.”



Silde Vasem said nothing else. Shurik added, "I also assure you all, your work in this will be finished as soon as your detachments submit their reports. You will have served me and Lord Mesha nobly, and I will reward you well."

*Reward you well.* Bereg tried to tamp it down, but he couldn't squash the tendrils of hope that woke up in him. As if Shurik had sensed it, the impera turned to him.

"For example, Silde Orlon." His smile was full of understanding. "If you serve me well in this, as I am certain you will, it will be my pleasure to send you home in the spring with all the compensation a soldier of your stature deserves. I wish you to enjoy your retirement with your family."

For a moment Bereg thought his knees would buckle. Not only go home, but to be granted his retirement and enough money to be comfortable. He saw his daughter's face as he came through the door, felt his wife's arms around him. He shut his eyes to hold the tears back and bowed so low his back ached.

"You are gracious, my lord Impera."

He barely heard Shurik explain that he and the other soldiers would stay in Cheremay for a few days, while the search detachments were organized, and then begin the southward sweep through Kovkya Tsvavyest and Syetich. As long as Bereg followed his orders, he would go home. He could follow orders. He'd done it all his life.

"May the God in His Power walk with you."

The formal blessing. Bereg repeated the response with the others: "And with you, Impera." Then, somehow, they were out of the palace in the warm daylight. Bereg felt as if he had been underground for hours. The sun dazzled his eyes.

He would go straight to the great barracks, find the quarters assigned to him, and write to Nela and Ania. He would tell them everything Shurik had said about the reward he would have as

long as he did this one last task. They'd only have to wait for him until spring. The impera knew exactly what Bereg needed and wanted, as clearly as if he were inside Bereg's head.

For an instant, barely a breath, it made Bereg uneasy. He hadn't even applied for retirement before Ania's husband died. Shurik had known so much about him...

But as young as Shurik was, he was wise enough to guess that a man of Bereg's age might want some rest in his later years. An impera should know such things. Bereg shook off his thoughts and started toward the barracks.

Someone gripped his arm. "Silde Orlon."

Bereg glanced around. It was Silde Vasem.

The rest of the group had gone off in different directions, pairs and threesomes chatting together, moving toward the barracks or the Temple or the streets that went off the square. Bereg realized that he didn't particularly want to be alone with this woman. Her gray eyes were dark and unfriendly, her mouth set in a tight line. Loose strands of her silvery-dark hair straggled across her face in the breeze.

You had to be polite to a fellow soldier. "Yes?" he said.

Her grip on his arm tightened. Her eyes moved over his face as if she was looking for something. She had to be at least ten years his junior, but something about her expression suggested that she carried anger much older than her age. For a heartbeat or two, he wondered if she really was an Eye, if she had asked those questions in front of Shurik to test her fellow soldiers, and if by some impossible chance she had something on Bereg now...though he couldn't imagine what.

Then she said, her voice so low he had to lean forward to hear it, "You seem like a decent man." Her grip was so tight it hurt. "Are you going to do what he said?"

It took him a moment to understand what she meant. His mind refused to accept it. Who would dare to disobey the impera's orders?

She must have read his answer in his face. “Silde Orlon.” Her voice made him think of a finger braced on the trigger of a vindula, a Lasska rifle, ready to pull. “He told us to kill men and women who haven’t harmed him or us. He told us to kidnap their children.”

Bereg swallowed. Her fingers dug into the gray fabric of his coat. It was treason to argue with or challenge any order of the impera’s: Bereg knew that, knew he could bring punishment down on this woman here and now, but as he looked into her face, something held him back.

*Kill. Captive. Kidnap.*

You could not question orders. He said, “We’re only leading the search parties.”

She laughed, a noise of raw disgust and rage. “You heard what he’ll do with the information we give him.”

Maybe she was an Eye after all. Maybe she was testing him. Bereg clung to the idea, though his gut told him it wasn’t true, because he didn’t want – with all his strength, he didn’t want – to hear what she was telling him.

He said, “The Lord Mesha...”

“The Lord Mesha has nothing to do with this.” Blatant heresy. “This is Shurik’s decision. I know he thinks he bought you, but you could make a different choice.”

Bought him. Ice slid down into Bereg’s stomach. He should not listen to this. He should pull his arm free and walk away.

“Ask your conscience, Silde Orlon, if you still have one. Ask it what happens to children who see their parents murdered.”

Her angry stare drilled into him. Then she let go of his arm, turned on her heel, and disappeared into a knot of people moving across the square.

## Chapter 5

The day after the tribe's council around the fire, when Khari heard her mother-in-truth's dream that meant the end of the Vaia tribes, she woke up with a light in her mind.

The man in her dream was no one she knew or had ever seen. She was sure about that. His pale skin might mean he was Lasska. He had lines at the corners of his eyes and silver in his hair that suggested age, but he didn't have the shrunken, fragile look many elderly people did. His eyes were the most striking thing about him. Some Lasska had blue eyes, she knew, but they tended to look pale and faded, like dye with too much water in it. This man's eyes had the brilliance of the ocean in summer.

Khari woke up with the man's face as clear in her mind as if she had just spent all night talking to him. The dream showed her a place, too: a perfectly round stone building, not like the square houses Lasska built or the big boxes they put up to their God. Khari woke up buoyed with certainty. The dream meant something important. She would find it.

By the time she got up and dressed, though, and mixed the aniseed-flavored dough for breakfast flatcakes, that certainty had drained out of her. She hadn't seen her mother-in-truth's dream about Shurik and his fighting men, the most important and terrible dream any Lamp-Carrier had ever had. How could Khari think her dreams were worth anything? Her imagination had probably invented some nonsense.

"What is it, child?"

Vatiri was sitting on her pallet, mending a tear in the sleeve of one of her blouses. Khari hadn't even felt the older woman's eyes on her.

She shaped the two flatcakes and laid them on the rack over the small morning fire before she answered. "Nothing, Amma."

She couldn't talk about the dream. Not in daylight, while children ran and shouted outside, and mothers called their families in for breakfast, and horses whickered for their fodder. The tribe was real and alive, and so was the terrible thing Vatiri had seen. Khari's dream felt childish and stupid.

Vatiri said, "Not nothing." Her needle moved steadily through the fabric, in and out. "I know you better than that."

The fresh morning air and sweet scent of the baking cakes filled the tent. How many more mornings like this would they have? Khari still couldn't believe the tribe's days were ending. How could they, when the trees were starting to show their autumn colors, and the air had a taste of frost in it, and soon it would be winter, with the quiet pattern of meat-curing and sewing, stories and songs by evening fires, that she'd loved all her life?

She said, "I had a dream last night."

Vatiri looked up. Khari saw surprise in her face. "I didn't."

The flatcakes had toasted enough on one side. Khari turned them over with a long wooden fork. "I thought it was a pathdream, but now I don't know. I don't see how it could help us."

Vatiri set the blouse down. "Tell me what you dreamed."

Khari made herself describe the man. It sounded even sillier out loud: *a man with blue eyes, no one we know*. Vatiri didn't say a word to question or challenge. By then, the flatcakes were ready, so Khari put them on earthenware plates and gave one to Vatiri. She sat cross-legged on the floor by the older woman's pallet. "I saw a building, too," she said. She might as well tell all of it. "A round stone building with a cone for a roof."

Vatiri took a bite of her bread and chewed thoughtfully. "Interesting," she said. Her face had the intent, searching focus Khari had seen many times when she wove meaning from dreams. As if Khari's absurd dream might actually matter.

Khari pushed down the thin ray of hope that woke up inside her. She made herself swallow a bite of flatcake. “I don’t see how it could mean anything.”

Vatiri put her empty plate aside. Her eyes rested on the open tent flap, but Khari knew she wasn’t looking at it. “The round building,” she said. “I think that means Namora.”

Namora? Khari knew the other country existed, but she had never heard of anyone who had actually crossed Lassar’s western mountains and seen it. “Why?” she said.

“They build round temples to their goddess,” Vatiri said. “Or at one time they did. It might only be a story now.”

Khari had never heard of this. “How do you know?”

Now Vatiri smiled. “I haven’t told you enough old stories, have I? We’ll have to see about that. When I was a girl, my amma told me a couple of stories about the people to the west. She said they had a woman they called a goddess. She had died, this woman, but her people built round houses to honor her.”

Khari knew the Vaia had stories as old as the Powers themselves. She couldn’t help wondering why they had stories about a country they had never seen. And how could an ordinary woman be a goddess, especially if she had died?

Vatiri said, “You had the dream even though you’d never heard of the Namoran temples. It must be a pathdream.”

Khari bit down on her hope again. “The man, though. What does he mean?”

Vatiri didn’t hesitate. “He must be Namoran.”

Khari felt more confused than ever. “I don’t understand, Amma. What is the dream telling us to do?”

Vatiri took a swallow of tea. Her calm expression didn’t change. “The only answer I can see is that we’re supposed to go to Namora and find him.”

Shock made Khari's hands shake. She set her plate down before she could drop it. Vatiri went on, "I think your dream is the answer to mine. I think it says that this man can help us."

Khari didn't dare believe it. That hope was so huge, if she let it in, it would crack her open. "We don't know who he is," she said, trying to keep her voice steady. "We don't know how to find him."

Namora. Uncounted miles away on the other side of the mountains. And if Vatiri's dream was right – and she had never been wrong – Shurik's fighting men would be coming after the tribe any day. They were supposed to get across the mountains while they were running from the Lasska army? Khari said, "Amma, it can't be right." She let the hope go before it could hurt. "If the man meant anything, you'd have dreamed about him too." Vatiri's dreams would never miss such a thing.

Her mother-in-law smiled. Somehow it had no sadness in it. "We all get older, child. You know you'll replace me one day. Maybe your eyes are already better than mine."

A different kind of ache squeezed Khari's chest. "Amma." Today of all days, she wasn't going to think about a time when the tribe wouldn't have Vatiri anymore. "I don't want..."

Vatiri touched her cheek, gently cutting her off. "We need to tell the Lodestone what you saw."

\*\*

From the outside, Pradesh's tent looked like all the others, the same undyed wool neatly draped and pinned over sturdy hardwood rods. Inside, though, he had covered the bare earth with a fine woven Lasska rug, deep red with a rich brown border. The machia wood chair stood in the rug's exact center. Normally any visitor coming to speak to the Lodestone would find him seated in his chair like a Lasska impera on his throne.

This morning, Khari and Vatiri found the chair empty. The Lodestone sat cross-legged on the floor with Radavan and Rahul. All three of them had mugs of tea in their hands and looked ashy-faced, as if they hadn't slept.

Pradesh's yellow shirt was rumpled and the lines at the corners of his mouth stood out dark, but he greeted the two women courteously. "Lamp-Carriers. What do you have to tell us?"

Khari's estimation of him went up a notch. After last night, he was dealing with a nightmare no other Lodestone had imagined, and he seemed to be bearing it bravely.

Vatiri sat down by the cooking fire and motioned Khari down next to her. "Khari had a pathdream last night," she said. "I believe it's the answer to mine."

Radavan leaned forward. Khari saw the hope in his worn face. She knew he was thinking about Dahila and the children; she'd thought about them all the time too, especially the unborn one in her sister's belly.

Vatiri described the dream. Khari knew her mother-in-truth was protecting her, giving the weight of her belief to what Khari had seen. The three men looked confused. Pradesh quickly turned impatient.

"How could we find this man, even if we knew who he was? One person out of everyone in Namora, a place we've never seen?"

Vatiri said, "I think the dream is telling us that if we go to Namora, we *will* find him. Khari saw what he looks like so that she'll know him."

Rahul said, "And he's going to help us? How?"

All the eyes went to Khari. "I don't know," she admitted. She forced herself not to twist her fingers together in her lap like a child. "I only saw his face."

Pradesh set his empty mug down hard on the rug. Anger etched his broad face. "It's impossible. We can't go chasing across the mountains, even if we could get that far, hoping we'll



find one person out of the Powers only know how many thousands. One person who can do what, exactly?”

Vatiri said, “Lodestone, Namora is much smaller than Lassar.”

“Meaning that we could comb the whole country? Do you hear how foolish that sounds?”

Khari knew he was right. Even so, a thread of anger ran up her spine. If Vatiri had had the dream, would Pradesh have called it foolish?

Radavan said, “Forgive me, Lodestone, but what choice do we have? If my sister’s dream is showing us an answer, we have to trust it.” His voice stayed quiet, but he looked older this morning than Khari had ever seen him. In the deep circles under his eyes, she saw his terror for his family. “I have to trust it,” he said.

Rahul agreed. “We can’t see anything else to do, Lodestone.” He, too, looked worn-down but calm. If Khari hadn’t known he was only two years older than she was, she would have thought he was older than hotheaded Handan. He said, “The only other way is to try to fight Shurik’s soldiers. We know we don’t have the strength.”

Pradesh looked cornered. “I want to believe this dream. But...”

“I’m too young.” Khari said it before he could. “Inexperienced.” The words burned in her mouth.

Vatiri said, “Lodestone, you know a Lamp-Carrier’s age doesn’t matter. I trust Khari’s eyes.”

“But what are we supposed to do?” Pradesh demanded. “Try to get the whole tribe across the mountains? What about the other tribes?”

Radavan answered immediately. “If we can find safety on the other side of the mountains, then yes. We have to get as many people there as we can.”

Rahul shook his head. “Khari’s dream didn’t say that. It said to find this man. I think we should send a smaller group, strong riders who could travel fast, to look for him.”

Pradesh turned to Khari. “What do you think, Lamp-Carrier?”

Khari swallowed. He was testing her, forcing her to stand up for her dream when she knew he didn’t believe it. How could she know what to do? The Lodestone had to decide how to act on a pathdream.

She glanced at Vatiri. The older woman said nothing, but her fingers moved to the sleeve of her own white blouse and rested there. Khari heard what she didn’t say aloud. *Lamp-Carrier*.

She thought as hard and fast as she could. Yes, they had to find the man. Yes, he had to be an answer to Vatiri’s dream. But Khari found that she didn’t believe the whole tribe should go to Namora. Her dream hadn’t shown her anything to say that all her people, the strong ones and the weak, the elderly and the youngest children, had to make such a journey.

She was staking lives on her answer. She could not hesitate, or the fear would swallow her voice.

“I agree with Rahul, Lodestone,” she said. “We need to send searchers.”

Radavan closed his eyes briefly. Khari ached for his disappointment. Vatiri nodded. Pradesh looked into Khari’s face, studying her, and she kept her chin up and held his stare. Her sweat-dampened blouse clung to her shoulderblades.

He sighed. “All right, Lamp-Carrier. That is what we’ll do.”

\*\*

That afternoon, Pradesh called all the tribe together. Eighteen families, some fifty people, from the oldest white-haired grandfather to the youngest child at the breast. He had them assemble in the clear ground just north of the camp.

Some had already heard the news. Radavan had told his family, and Dahila rushed to find Khari as the tribe came together in the clearing. “Sister,” she said. Her fingers caught hold of Khari’s arm. “Is this true?”

Khari could see how much her pregnancy weighed on her. Dahila wasn't young anymore; this newest child was a risk. Her eyes looked sunken in her thin face, but her belly was huge, as if the baby inside her was taking all the food she ate. She was a strong mother and a loyal wife. Khari wished she could promise her that her children would live to grow old.

Before she could say anything, Vatiri came up beside her. "Pradesh will explain," Vatiri said. She put an arm around Dahila. "We need to be patient a little longer."

Dahila let go of Khari's arm and let herself lean on Vatiri. Khari breathed out in relief, even though she could hear the whispering and muttering around her that said the news was already spreading. Then Pradesh appeared in the clearing, pulling his chair.

At the sight of him, the noise died down. He stood up on the chair to speak. The sun caught his yellow shirt, making it glow.

"People of the Sun God." His strong, deep voice carried easily. "Today we must put our trust in the Powers. They have shown us both danger and hope."

Khari couldn't help admiring him. His voice had no fear in it even as he told the tribe about Vatiri's dream and what it meant. As the people took it in, Khari heard gasps and whispers, but Pradesh held up a hand before the panic could catch fire.

"This is one pathdream the Moon Woman has given us today," he said. "Now listen to the other."

He explained Khari's dream as if he had never doubted it. He told the tribe he would assemble the search party that day and they would leave for Namora the next morning. "Our Lamp-Carriers feel certain we'll find help there."

All the rest of the afternoon and well into the night, Khari and Vatiri were at the center of a storm of questions. Khari couldn't decide whether her people's fear or hope was worse. She had

convinced Pradesh to believe her, but she was still only sixteen, barely a Lamp-Carrier at all. What if, in the end, her dream didn't mean what she thought?

She would go with the searchers, of course. She resigned herself to the fact that Handan and Mandhani were going too, though she didn't want to think about weeks of dealing with them in close quarters, without Pradesh to make them behave. Because the Lodestone, of course, was staying behind with the rest of the tribe.

Rahul was going. So was Radavan, who had insisted on it. It had taken Pradesh's direct order to make Dahila stay behind with her children. Her pregnancy meant she couldn't travel fast enough.

That night, when the camp had finally quieted, Khari begged Vatiri to go too. The two of them were alone in their tent, each on her pallet in the dark. "We need you, Amma." Khari didn't say *I need you*, but she knew Vatiri understood. "You're strong. You can travel as well as any of us."

When Vatiri answered, Khari couldn't see her face, but she could hear her smiling. "You know better than that, child. The Lodestone needs one of us to stay with him."

Khari had never spent a night away from her since that day her father had carried her to Vatiri's tent. The thought of doing it now, tomorrow, made her feel as if the ground had yawned open underneath her.

"You need to do this," Vatiri said. "Go, find help, and come back to us."

The long hours of darkness crawled past. Khari didn't sleep. At dawn, she and the rest of the search party met up at the western edge of the camp. They had the tribe's fastest horses, bows and knives for hunting, and bedrolls with the little they needed to carry. They would travel as light as they could.

The tribe gathered to see them off. Pradesh called on the Powers to guide the searchers on their way. Before Khari mounted her horse, Vatiri came up and took the girl's hands between her own.

“You’ll find him.” Her smile made Khari’s throat ache. “You’ll get help for us.”

Khari wanted to throw her arms around the older woman and not let go. She couldn’t do that with everyone watching. Vatiri let go of her hands and Khari swung herself up bareback, wiping tears away on her sleeve.

Handan led the search group. Khari was more than happy to let him. They rode away from camp, hard and fast, heading southwest for the warm plains. The rest of the tribe would follow more slowly, moving toward one of the regular winter camps. Pradesh would get them as close to the mountains as he could.

Khari rode at the back of the group. She forced herself not to look behind, but in her mind, she saw Shurik’s soldiers, rivers of graycoats riding out with their flame-throwing weapons to find and kill her people. So many of them. So small and slow-moving the tribe she had just left behind.

She wondered if she would ever see Vatiri again.

## Chapter 6

On the first day of the apple harvest, during the midday meal, Ribas took his mother aside in the old farmhouse. He told her that he'd looked into his brother's mind, the way she had wanted him to. He told her about the net of fierce, destructive anger he'd found there: the danger he'd hoped never to see.

Grief and fear shadowed her face, so briefly that anyone else might have missed them, but so clear to him that he wanted to put his arms around her the way he had as a little boy, when his father's violence had left her aching and terrified. Then she lifted her chin and wrapped her hard-won strength around her like a coat against bad weather.

"Can you help him?" she asked.

The two of them had left the kitchen, where the rest of the apple harvesters were eating a quick midday meal. They'd taken their plates of bread, sliced apples, and thick nut butter to the farmhouse's front room. Standing up made eating more awkward, but they didn't sit down by the hearth. Neither of them, Ribas knew, wanted to call up certain memories, in the middle of this new trouble.

"I don't know if I can," he admitted. He hated to say it.

"If you tried, would it hurt you?"

The gift might let him do something, but it would probably need more strength than his weak heart could stand. When it took too much, it left him dizzy and sick. Sometimes it made him so weak he fainted. Mama had made him promise a long time ago not to risk himself more than he had to. Maryut had asked for the same promise again when she married him. He couldn't always keep his word, but he tried.

"Yes," he said. "I think it would."

*Put simple words to trouble.* Mama had taught him that a long time ago. She'd said she had let Silvas hide his own trouble, the family's trouble, for too long. *Don't let it sit in the dark. Look it in the face, and then you can see what to do.* He said, "But Gedri's in a trap, Mama. What's happening to him, I'm sure it's the same thing that..."

Even now, so many years after his father's death, he never used the word *Da* to mean Silvas. That word meant things like love and protection and safety. Mama heard the rest of his thought. "Why is it happening to Gedri?" Her steady eyes searched his face. "With your father, I thought Sostavi might have done something. Whatever happened to him there. But Gedri's never had a disappointment like that, has he?"

Silvas had been disappointed in his career. *Whatever happened to him in Sostavi.* Ribas had never known what that was, or why his father had abandoned his apparently successful work as a priest to come back to Lida and help Mama grow apples. And he must have been successful, or he'd never have served in the Great Circle House.

"No," Ribas said. "Gedri's happy with the farm. He loves his family." He would have staked his own life on that.

"That's what I thought."

"His mind is doing something." Had Silvas's mind done the same thing? Had Sostavi pushed him along, or would it have happened anyway? Useless questions Ribas couldn't help asking himself. "Something's changing in him. I think it's happening on its own."

Again a flash of sadness in Mama's face. She hid it, biting into a slice of apple and chewing thoughtfully, but he knew how helpless she must feel. He felt it too.

She swallowed the apple. "I don't want you to risk yourself."

That wasn't right. The gift was all he had to offer. "Mama. If I can do anything, cut the net even a little, it would help him. It..."

“No, Ribé.” She put her free hand on his arm. “If you get sick, you can’t help anyone. Gedri would tell you the same.”

The look she gave him took him straight back to those first weeks after Silvas’s death, after Ribas himself had finally gotten over the worst of his fever. He and Mama had been survivors together, wounded and limping, struggling to shape something like a better life out of the wreckage. Every hour of every day, he’d pushed himself to be the right hand his mother needed. When she knew he was pushing too hard – and she always did, no matter how he tried to hide it – she had given him exactly the look she was giving him now. *Enough, my dove.*

She was right, of course. At its worst, his heart could leave him bedridden for days, no use to anybody. “All right,” he said. He didn’t have to tell her how much he didn’t like it. “But I’ll watch him, Mama. If there’s any chance to help, I will.”

Four days later, on Seldina, the busiest part of the apple harvest was done. The apples were gathered and sorted: some for eating and selling right away, some for drying, the rest for the new batch of cider that was already putting the big press to work. Ribas would go back to his normal duties at the Circle House the next day. On Seldina evening, his friend Seldo, who owned the Sheaf and Barrel Inn in Lida and had helped with the harvest, asked everyone down to the Sheaf for the annual post-harvest supper.

Ribas had kept a sharp eye on Gedrin through those four days. His brother seemed to be in good spirits, laughing and talking, but the anger-net around him never faded or dimmed. They rode down to the Sheaf together in the farm’s wagon. On the way, Gedrin told Ribas, “I hate to say it, but you were right about Sira. She did a good job.”

Gedrin was driving. Ribas sat up front beside him on the seat while Maryut and Virta and the children rode in the back. Mama had gone down to the village ahead of them, with Seldo and his wife Milya, to get the fires lit at the inn and start supper.



“Of course she did,” Ribas said. The chilly evening air helped him stay awake, even as the motion of the wagon and the warmth of the heavy coat Maryut had made him bring made him want to close his eyes and drift off. “See? You needed her help after all.”

Gedrin laughed. “You don’t have to be smug about it.”

From the wagon bed, Asira started singing one of her favorite songs, “I will go down to the sea.” Raulin joined in. Their light young voices sent the sweet tune up into the dark sky.

*I will go down to the sea,*

*Where the wild waves reach for the sand,*

*Where the winds cry out loud and free...*

It was a “Klaya song,” one of the many about one of the favorite characters in Namoran folklore. Ribas had always loved the stories about the free-spirited, fiercely independent girl who had lived in Namora long before the time of the Goddess, although not before the time of the round houses that would later honor Kenavi. Klaya’s stories spoke to Ribas in his bones, both her deep-rooted love for her home and her eager curiosity about the world outside.

He loved this song, too. It was funny, he thought: neither Asira nor Raulin had ever seen the ocean, and might never have reason to, but they sang as if they knew exactly how the waves frothed and pounded at the sand, and how the wind, tasting of salt, rushed along the shore. Ribas hadn’t seen the coast in years, not since he’d taken a little time to travel before he’d started his duties as Lida’s zhinin. He might never have reason to see it again, but he would never forget it.

The wagon wheels crunched over gravel. Smoke from evening hearth fires rose from the village chimneys and hung in the air. As the wagon rolled into the square, Ribas looked up at the sky. There was no moon tonight. The stars gleamed like handfuls of white pebbles, polished to brilliance, scattered on a dark cloth.

The square was quiet and empty. Most people had already settled into their houses for the night. Four lamps, each on a tall wooden post, stood on each side of the square, their wicks lit and gleaming behind their clear glass globes. The Sheaf stood on the south side of the square, directly opposite the Circle House. Its wooden sign, bright in the lamplight, showed a proud sheaf of plump yellow heads of wheat standing in a brown barrel like flowers in a vase.

Gedrin drove the wagon around to the stables behind the inn. Raulin and Sira jumped down as soon as the wagon stopped. They raced around to the front door with their mother behind, calling after them, “You two behave yourselves, now! Don’t you get in the way in the kitchen!”

Gedrin stayed back to stable the mare. Maryut put her arm around Ribas as they made their own slower way inside. “Are you sure you want to stay for this?” she asked. “You look like you should go to bed.”

It seemed strange to think about trouble tonight, with the tiredness and peace of another finished harvest behind them, and the quiet of the village around them. Home was only a couple of streets away. For a moment Ribas thought longingly about the comfort of bed and the warmth of a quilt pulled up over him.

He wouldn’t let Gedrin out of his sight until he had to. He smiled down at Maryut. “I’m all right. I promise.”

She raised a skeptical eyebrow, but then they were inside, in the warmth and light of the inn’s front room. The fire on the main hearth was lit. Lamps in glass shields hung on the walls. Mouthwatering smells of roasting potatoes and chicken floated out of the kitchen behind the bar.

The Sheaf and Barrel did steady business with travelers and villagers alike. Seldo and Milya kept a handful of plain but clean rooms upstairs and served four good meals a day. The bar, well-stocked with “Pelya’s cider,” abuvisk, ale, and wine from the vineyards in Taipa and Siene in southwestern Namora, was a constant draw in all seasons. Milya said every year that she looked

forward to the few days during the harvest when she and Seldo closed the inn. The long days in the orchard, she claimed, were nothing next to the usual round of cooking and scrubbing and serving.

Seldo had set up one of the big square tables near the hearth for the harvest supper. The inn didn't use tablecloths, but the blue clay plates and mugs were ready and waiting. Asira and Raulin laid out homespun napkins and gleaming wooden forks and spoons.

Seldo himself came out of the kitchen as Ribas and Maryut hung up their coats on hooks by the door. The innkeeper was as tall as Ribas, but barrel-chested and thick-muscled from years of hauling kegs of ale, crates of potatoes, and sacks of flour for the inn. Some years ago he'd gotten tired of his thick curly hair, so with his wife's help, he had shaved it all off and kept it bald ever since. He looked like the kind of person you might cross a street to avoid, but Ribas had also known him to cup flies that strayed into the inn between his hands and let them out the windows.

"Where's that brother of yours?" Seldo demanded. He never bothered with an apron when he was cooking or tending bar, so his rough shirt and pants were always dusted with flour and patterned with splashes of sauce and cooking fat. "My wife says I'm allowed to play Capture till supper's ready."

Capture was the most popular strategy game in Namora. Seldo, who had never left Lida or had any schooling besides the basics of reading, writing, and ciphering that every child learned at home, was one of the smartest people Ribas knew and one of the best Capture players in the village. Ribas would never play against him unless he needed a taste of abject humiliation. Only Gedrin was a match for the innkeeper.

Maryut went back to the kitchen with Asira to help with the food, but Ribas and Raulin stayed in the front room to watch the Capture game. Ribas sat at the table, grateful to lean on the sturdy wood. Seldo set up the board: seven Raiders, three Defenders, and one tiny Master stone for each player. His stones were silver-gray. Gedrin would play green.

“Someday,” Seldo told Ribas, positioning the pieces with deft fingers, “I really am going to teach you how to play right.”

“You’ve been trying for years. What makes you think I can learn?”

“You’re plenty smart enough.” Seldo sat down next to Ribas. The wooden chair creaked under his weight. “You taught me Old Namoran. Tell me I can’t teach you a simple game.”

When Ribas had gone to the viduris in Paret, Seldo had wanted to hear about everything that went on there. He never wanted to join the dagira himself, but he was curious about the school and it fascinated him when Ribas talked about learning other languages. During Ribas’s breaks during the summer and at harvest time, the two friends had sat down at one of these tables at the inn and pored over Ribas’s schoolbooks together. Seldo had, in fact, learned quite a bit of Old Namoran, and even a little Pirlevis, the “First Tongue” that had been used to write the oldest stories about the Goddess.

Gedrin came in, rubbing his hands in the chill. As usual, he hadn’t bothered to wear a coat. Seldo said, “Let’s go, Gedri.”

Gedrin didn’t need to be asked twice to play Capture. As the game started, Raulin looked up at Ribas with a shy question in his face.

Ribas understood. When he’d been Raulin’s age, trying to take over as much of his father’s work on the farm as he could, he’d started to think he’d gotten too big to sit on a lap. Not that he hadn’t still needed that comfort. And Raulin didn’t have to try to grow up too fast.

He held out a hand to his nephew. “Let’s put our heads together,” he said. “Maybe you can help me finally figure this game out.”

Gedrin laughed. Eyes on the board, he said, “Raulí, you’d better learn Capture faster than your uncle.”

Raulin climbed into Ribas's lap and rested his head on his uncle's shoulder. His hair smelled of fresh air and the dry leaves in the orchard. Ribas put an arm around him and watched the game. The goal was to capture your opponent's Master. To do that, you had to get as many of their Raiders and Defenders off the board as you could, without risking too many of your own. Seldo's and Gedrin's hands darted over the board. Their pieces hit the wood with barely a space between them. *Click. Click. Click.*

The two had very different playing styles. Seldo protected his Master and kept his Raiders out of Gedrin's way. Gedrin's Raiders charged all over the board, aiming to clear Seldo's pieces before they could come after him. Different styles but evenly matched. Ribas couldn't follow the moves fast enough to see why each player made his decisions, but the gray and green pieces came off the board in a more or less even trade.

Finally each of them had one Raider plus their Master. Masters couldn't capture each other, so your final Raider was always safe. Ribas had never gotten to that point in any game. If he managed to steal a few of his opponent's Raiders before his own Master went down, it was a triumph.

Raulin had dozed off in his lap, a warm weight against his chest. Ribas watched as the four remaining pieces tracked each other around the board. Both players were fully intent on the game, Gedrin's dark head and Seldo's bald gleaming one bent over the board, both of them oblivious to the sounds and scents from the kitchen. Gedrin had always liked this part of the game best. The more of a fight his opponent put up, the better.

After a few moves, though, something felt wrong. Ribas saw his brother's mouth tighten. His dark eyebrows drew together and his free hand, resting on the table, closed and opened restlessly. Where his moves had been quick and eager before, now they seemed sharp and impatient.

The game needed to end. Ribas didn't need the gift to see his brother's temper winding tighter with every move. Memory came back in a wave: Silvas sitting by the hearth in the farmhouse, following Mama's directions to weave straw to repair holes in the harvest baskets. Fumbling and having trouble. The rough tips of the broken straw poking at his fingertips. Laughter turning into silence, silence turning into anger, and Ribas, not quite four, feeling the cold seeping into him, welling in through the soles of his feet and all the way up into his chest.

He'd already known, at that age, not to say a word or make a sound that would push his father's anger that last tiny distance. He knew he couldn't tip Gedrin's fragile balance now. In his lap, Raulin slept peacefully. Seldo, too, didn't seem to notice anything wrong.

Then it happened. Even Ribas saw his brother make a mistake. Gedrin left his Master wide open to attack when Seldo's last Raider was much too close. As soon as Gedrin let go of his own Raider, which he'd pushed to the other end of the board, Seldo's final attacker swept forward.

The innkeeper caught Gedrin's green Master up in his hand. "Got you!" He laughed. "What happened to you, Gedri? You should have seen that coming."

Ribas knew Seldo shouldn't have said that. He knew it even before Gedrin's face darkened and twisted, even before it perfectly mirrored the same look Ribas remembered from so many years ago.

*No, Gedri. Not you too.*

Gedrin surged to his feet. His heavy chair crashed backward to the floor. Anger contorted his face almost beyond recognition. He looked like a caged beast ready to lunge at his captors.

Seldo stared at him. "Gedri." He sounded more baffled than worried. "What's wrong with you?"

The crash of the chair falling woke Raulin up with a gasp. He stared at his father, then turned to see Ribas. "Uncle Ribé, what's going on?"

In his eyes, Ribas saw the same fear he had known all too well. He and Mama had worn themselves into shadows trying to tiptoe around Silvas's anger. "It's all right, Raulí," he said, keeping his arm tight around the little boy. "Gedrin," he said. "That's enough."

He didn't know if his brother heard him. Gedrin stepped forward and swept the Capture board off the table. It landed on the floor with a clatter. The playing pieces flew everywhere, rattling as they hit furniture and walls.

Ribas heard the door to the kitchen open, heard Virta's voice asking what that noise was. At the table, Seldo got to his feet, still baffled but ready to defend himself. Ribas couldn't move, between Raulin's weight and his own exhaustion, but he knew what he had to do.

Seldo was more than a match even for strong stocky Gedrin, but Ribas couldn't let it come to that. Someone might get hurt. He reached for the gift, knowing how dangerous it would be to use it when he was this tired. The lines unspooled. There had to be a weak place in the net, somewhere, anywhere...

Seldo said, "Gedrin Silvaikas." Now he sounded annoyed. "What in the Goddess's name do you think you're doing?"

Raulin gripped Ribas's arm. "Uncle Ribé. What's wrong with Da?"

Ribas heard tears in the little boy's voice. "I'm not sure, Raulí." He closed his eyes to see the lines more clearly. "We're going to try to fix it."

For an impossibly long moment, silence, as Ribas held his breath and raced along the hot gleaming lines of the net. He couldn't find any weakness, but there must be something. Anything he could do, that might not be as dangerous as he thought, that might let him help...

Then his brother's voice reached him. "Ribé. Don't."

Two words as flat and blunt as stones hitting the ground. Ribas opened his eyes. Gedrin was looking at him, his face still too flushed, but that ugly brutish cast had faded.

“I know what you’re doing.” Now Gedrin’s voice sounded hoarse and tired. “Don’t. You’re worn out.”

Their eyes met. At the sight of Gedrin’s confusion and fear, frustration clawed at Ribas’s throat. He had to solve this.

Seldo said, “Gedrin, since when are you such a bad loser?”

Gedrin’s laugh sounded forced. “I made a stupid mistake. I guess I got upset.” Before anyone could say anything else, he bent down, hunting the Capture pieces on the floor. “I’ll clean up my mess,” he said. “I’m sorry.”

Seldo looked around at Ribas and shrugged. *Who knows? Never mind.* Raulin looked up into his uncle’s face again. “Is Da better?”

He was still uneasy. Ribas wished he could promise everything was fine. “I think so.”

The little boy climbed down. “I’ll help you, Da.”

“That’d be good, Raulí. Thank you.”

It had all happened so fast. Virta came into the room, puzzled. “What was that?” she asked Ribas. “Did they have a fight?”

Gedrin stood up with the Capture board in his hands. “No, love. I just made a bad play, is all.”

Virta seemed to accept it. “Well, supper will be ready in a minute. You all should get washed up.”

She went back to the kitchen. Gedrin set the board and a handful of pieces down on the table and put his hand on Ribas’s shoulder.

“Ribé.” He spoke quietly enough that Seldo and Raulin wouldn’t hear. “Don’t do that for me.”

*I couldn’t help our father.* “You know better than that, Gedrí. I’ll do anything I can.”



Gedrin looked worn and anxious, his boyishness suddenly gone. “I don’t want you hurting yourself. Too many people need you.”

The kitchen door opened again. Virta and Maryut brought out platters of food, calling everyone to come and eat. Gedrin squeezed Ribas’s shoulder. “Don’t talk about it with Mama either. I don’t want her worrying.”

He went to the kitchen to wash up. Ribas watched him go. The lines of the net burned in his mind.

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The next day, Setdina, Ribas met the pair of students who would help him with the work of the Circle House through the winter and spring. Students at the viduris in Paret, *mosevine* as they were called, always had a year-long apprenticeship after they finished their three years of school study. The most promising ones would be installed somewhere as full zhinine when their apprenticeships ended. Ribas himself had apprenticed in Lida, with old Zhinin Odilas, since that House was intended for him as soon as he was ready to take it.

He had been Lida’s first mosevin apprentice, but the work of the House had grown hugely since he had become zhinin and news of his skill, and the gift, had spread. Ribas had never wanted or asked for promotion, or subordinate priests to serve him. He didn’t care about that kind of politicking. But when Kunin Dergo at the Paret viduris first wrote to ask if he would train some of the likeliest mosevine, and incidentally accept some help in his House, Ribas had agreed.

Late on Setdina afternoon, Ribas and Maryut waited at the Circle House together to greet the mosevine. Ribas had just finished the short Setdina prayer service and was still wearing his sea-blue robes of office. It always took a while for the House to clear, because everyone had to stop and talk to him and Maryut. It didn’t matter that they saw him more or less every day, or that the zhinin’s house stood open whenever he wasn’t at the Circle House, for anyone who needed help or

advice or simply an ear to listen. If the village was a wheel, the zhinin was its center. Ribas welcomed every handshake and hug, especially after the few days he'd been away for the harvest.

A thin drizzle fell outside. Gray clouds hung over the village and a chilly breeze blew in from the north, carrying a taste of the winter that would come soon. Once the House emptied, Ribas and Maryut stood under the shelter of the narrow wooden awning above its front doors. Tomorrow, the square would be full of farm stands and craftspeople's tables for one of the last weekly markets before winter. No matter what the weather did, the village would turn out to chat and barter and haggle. Today, though, with no reason to linger, people hurried to get out of the chilly damp.

The coach clattered into the square, the horses' hooves ringing on the cobblestones. This was a hired coach from the viduris, sleeker and more comfortable than the bare-bones mail coach that came to Lida from Paret every Tretidina. The driver pulled up in front of the Sheaf and Barrel and went around to get the mosevine's trunks down from the roof.

"He's going to leave them over there?" Maryut said. "He can see where the House is, can't he?"

Provided the driver had working eyes, he could certainly see the Circle House. "He probably wants his cider," Ribas said.

The two students were the coach's only occupants. The boy jumped down quickly and held out his hand to the girl. The two could have been brother and sister, both slim and dark, with narrow faces. Kunin Dergo had sent Ribas their names earlier in the month; the boy was Jano Pavraikas and the girl was Danayut Matvaikas.

Ribas and Maryut started across the square. "Look at them," Maryut said. "Thin as lampposts."

"Three years of viduris cooking," Ribas reminded her.

"You'd think that school could do better, after all this time."

“Oh, but the food’s an education in itself.”

She laughed. The driver finished hauling the trunks down and wasted no time climbing back onto his seat. The coach clattered off to the Sheaf’s stables. The two mosevine stood by their luggage, looking forlorn in the gloomy weather.

“They’re not going to drag those trunks over here,” Ribas said.

“Neither are you, love.”

Unfortunately, that was true. “I bet Seldo will help.”

The boy, Jano, saw them coming first. When he said something to Danayut, Ribas saw the girl glance toward them and then duck her head quickly, as if she wanted to hide. He was sorry he hadn’t had a chance to change out of the robes. Some mosevine were shy when they first met him, and the extra formality wouldn’t help.

Jano, though, hurried to meet them. He put his hand over his heart as soon as he was in earshot and managed a half-bow in mid-walk. “Raimaté, zhinin.”

He looked excited, nervous, and incredibly young. Ribas returned the salute gravely enough, but then smiled and held out his hand. “Glad to have you, Jano.”

The boy shook hands eagerly. He was shorter than Ribas, only a little taller than Maryut. His long, well-cut woolen coat and polished shoes suggested he came from a comfortable home. “I never thought I’d get this apprenticeship, zhinin,” he said. “I hope you never see some of my exams.”

Ribas couldn’t help laughing. “You didn’t have to worry,” he said. His mosevine had to want to work. Perfect marks came a distant second. “You should have seen some of mine.”

Jano looked round-eyed. The mosevine tended to think Ribas must have been an irreproachable student, but if they’d asked Kunin Dergo, they’d have known otherwise. Even now, Ribas suspected, the kunin wouldn’t paint a particularly flattering picture of a student who’d taken

assignments in the directions that interested him most, instead of turning in exactly what his teachers expected. Some of Ribas's teachers had loved that. Kunin Dergo hadn't been one of them.

The kunin had, though, backed Ribas up in his most daring flight of stubbornness: learning some basics of the Lasska language. No viduris taught that. Ribas knew how lucky he'd been that Kunin Dergo had been able and more or less willing to help him. His own mosevine would hear about that, along with a lot more of the language than could possibly interest them, during their months in Lida.

Right now, he left Jano to Maryut's motherly greetings – "let's get you out of the cold; you look like you need a good meal" – and went over to Danayut. The girl had sat down on her trunk and was looking blankly toward the Sheaf and Barrel. Very tired, Ribas guessed, or very shy, or both.

As he came up, she scrambled to her feet. "Raimaté, zhinin."

Her voice sounded low and tight. As she spoke, she ducked her head again. She was small, a little shorter than Maryut, and wore a plain dark dress with a shapeless homespun coat over it buttoned up to her throat. Her head was bare. Droplets of rain beaded her dark braid, which she wore coiled and pinned to the back of her head in the style of a matron, or a widow.

"Raimaté, mosevin," Ribas said gently. Face to face, he could feel fear rising off her. "Danya, is it?"

He hoped using the nickname might help her relax. She nodded, keeping her eyes down. "Welcome, Danya," he said, holding his hand out. "I'm glad you're here."

She looked up then. Her eyes were startlingly dark in her pale face. She didn't smile, but shook his hand briefly. Her fingers were cold.

Shyness and fear. Ribas had seen something so similar, years ago. Another girl's face, very different from Danya's in looks, but with the same expression in it.

Valda. Ribas knew she had gone to Sostavi years ago, had risen through the ranks of the dagira and now served as Tavo Balsa, second-in-command to Tavin Ardinas himself. He'd had none of her news from herself, but through Kunin Dergo in Paret and the ever-present dagira grapevine. For a while it had felt wrong not to hear from Valda directly, after they had been so close: the kind of wrongness you felt when someone sang a familiar tune out of key. He understood, though, why she never wrote, and had always respected her wish for distance.

Now he remembered eyes much like Danya's looking up at him from a table in the viduris's dining hall. He had wanted to try to reach the girl who talked to no one and seemed so unhappy. *Good morning, is it all right if I sit with you?* He'd been surprised when she'd said yes, but not nearly as surprised as she had seemed herself.

Maryut came over now and wrapped Danya in maternal bustle. "Welcome, dear. Let's show you and Jano your rooms. Seldo's going to have a couple of his kitchen hands help with the trunks." Her glance at Ribas, as the two Sheaf workers came out to carry the luggage over to the Circle House, told him she felt the girl's discomfort as clearly as he did.

The mosevine had quarters in the building that joined onto the back of the Circle House. A passage behind the House's hearth linked the two buildings. The second building held the big kitchen, where the communal Pirdina meal happened each week, and the library. The two mosevin's quarters, identical small square rooms, had been added to the complex ten years ago, when Kunin Dergo first asked Ribas about sending apprentices to Lida.

Ribas and Maryut gave the mosevine time to settle in and rest and told them where to find the zhinin's house for supper. Over the meal, which involved no robes of office or formality of any kind, Jano talked cheerfully about the trip from Paret, passed along Kunin Dergo's greetings to Ribas, and discussed the studies at the viduris. The language classes had been his favorites, especially Pirlevis, the "First Tongue," and he'd especially liked studying the oldest stories about Kenavi in

their original language. He complimented Maryut's cooking and said, yes, the viduris's meals were still as bad as Ribas remembered.

All through supper, Danya stayed quiet. She answered questions, but kept her eyes on her plate and said as little as she could. Afterward, when the mosevine had gone back to the House for the night, Maryut said, "What do you think's the matter with that poor thing?"

She was cleaning up the supper dishes, having refused Ribas's help. "I don't know," Ribas said. Again he thought of Valda. But that had been at the beginning of their time at the viduris, when everyone was still getting used to the strange place and all the new faces. Danya had three years of study behind her. Good years, or Kunin Dergo wouldn't have sent her here.

"She's a little mouse," Maryut said, reaching up into a cabinet to put away the plates. "So shy. I hope she's not going to give you too much trouble."

Ribas got up from the table and went over to put his hands on her waist. "Trouble is my job, love." He kissed the side of her neck.

"Get away," she scolded, but when she twisted around to see him, her eyes were full of laughter. "Let me finish this, zhinin."

"Don't be too long." He bent to kiss her again, this time on the lips.

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Two days later, on Pirdina, the Circle House filled for the First Day service and the meal that would follow. More modern Circle Houses had done away with *Rane Atvire*, the old tradition of Open Hands, but Lida held onto the potluck dinner. It honored the Goddess Kenavi's wish that Her people should keep their hands open to one another, to reach out, share, and hold.

Ribas stood on the dais by the hearth, setting up the front table with the salt, glass pitcher and bowl, and basket of prayer stones. It made him smile to look out at the rows of benches steadily filling up. Mama and Maryut were here, of course, in their usual bench near the front with Gedrin

and Virta and the children. All of them had arrived early to help set up the kitchen for the meal. Gedrin seemed like himself again this morning, quick to laugh and quick to help. Ribas wished he knew how long that would last.

Every Circle House had a great hearth at the front. In Vienela, the eleventh month, Ribas would have a fire lit, but this autumn had been mild so far. In deep winter, even the fire wouldn't keep the House warm all the time, because the windows had to stay open for the prayer stone ritual. Now Ribas left the dais and began a circuit of the House, making sure each window stood open and had a basket beside it, where people would leave their prayer stones once they had made their offerings to the Goddess.

The circuit of the House always took a while. Even though Ribas wore the robes of office for the service, nobody ever stood on ceremony about stopping him to say good morning and shake hands. Parents told their children to behave and not bother the zhinin, but plenty of little ones squirmed free of the parental grip and ran up to demand Ribas's attention. He was never too busy to give it. His soul loved the peace of the service, but the real worship of the Goddess, he had always felt, happened when Her people cared for one another.

By the time he got back to the front of the House, Jano and Danya were standing in position on either side of the hearth. In their matching wine-red mosevin's robes, they could have been twins. Jano gave Ribas a quick smile that didn't hide his tension. Danya stood motionless, staring out the window opposite her. Ribas couldn't help noticing how pale she looked. Most mosevine assisting in their first service got nervous, especially on Pirdina in front of all those eyes. Ribas had never forgotten his own first service as an apprentice, in front of so many people who'd known him from birth, and had known his father too.

Ribas stepped to the front of the dais. When he held out his hands, invoking the reminder of *rane atvire*, the talk in the House died out at once.

“Raimaté,” he greeted the village.

The answer came back, a collective murmur. “Raimaté, zhinin.”

Ribas led the opening prayer, calling the Goddess’s people together, and then stepped aside for Jano to give the first reading from the *Book of Kenavi*. The village already knew the mosevine: news didn’t even need a day to spread to every house, and most people had made a point of stopping by the Circle House the day before to give the new apprentices their own welcome.

The reading told about the world as it had been when Kenavi was a mortal woman living in the place that would become Namora. Ribas listened to the familiar words, which Jano read clearly and well. The stories said that Kenavi had lived on Namora’s northern coast: some of the dagira firmly believed she had lived in a grand dwelling that later became the Great House in Sostavi, but Ribas had never been sure about that. He liked to imagine a village like the one in the most famous Klaya folktale, “Fourteen Stones.” Like Klaya, Kenavi had loved the land. As Jano read, Ribas conjured up his own pictures of the coasts and the forests, the plains rich with yellow and purple flowers, the quarries that yielded Namora’s blue clay. Unlike Klaya, though, who’d held herself fiercely apart in her village, Kenavi had been gentle-souled and devoted to her people. The stories said that the two women had lived generations apart, but Ribas sometimes thought they could have been sisters, or even two faces of the same woman. Not that he’d suggest such an idea to any other dagira.

When Jano finished, Danya gave the second reading: a familiar Old Namoran text that told one of the early stories of how Kenavi, as a mortal girl, had won the attention of the Old Gods early on for her generosity and kindness. Ribas had never lost his student fascination with Old Namoran, so similar and yet in some ways so different from the language he spoke every day. He had also always loved the idea of going back to stories written closer to the days when the Goddess was alive.



Danya read the Old Namoran text first, then Ribas's prepared translation. She spoke clearly but tonelessly and kept her eyes down on the text. Ribas thought, once she got over her nerves a little, he would speak to her about looking up now and then and giving the reading more expression. Your listeners had to know that the stories mattered to you.

After the readings came the water and salt rituals, commemorating the sacrifice of the Goddess. The faith told that Kenavi, as a mortal woman, had walked into the ocean, offering herself in surrender to the wind and waves during what later became Akena, the coldest and fiercest month of the year. The Old Gods, Sea and Wind, Sun and Moon, had become angry with Kenavi's people for their careless use of the lands they had been given. Kenavi sacrificed her life in trade for her people. The gods had both accepted the offering and, in return for her courage, allowed her rebirth as the Goddess. To her, they had given the care of the land that would become Namora.

Every Circle House service included the water and salt rituals. Every Namoran grew up watching and hearing them. Today Ribas turned them over to his mosevine, as one of the most important tests a zhinin had to pass.

Jano performed the water ritual first, pouring water carefully out of the clear glass pitcher on the table and into the glass bowl. They were the same pitcher and bowl Zhinin Odilas, and Zhinin Matevas before him, had used, long before Ribas was born. As Jano poured, he recited the simple words: "In Your name, O Goddess, we invoke the strength of the wind and the water, whose anger You tamed by Your sacrifice."

The so-familiar rituals always had to have power, no matter how often you did them. You had to give the words meaning, as you spoke them, but you couldn't exaggerate them or make them mystical or pompous. Ribas thought Jano did a decent job. The boy's hands shook as he held the pitcher, so that some water splashed onto the white tablecloth, but no doubt he felt the pressure of

all the stares. Ribas remembered feeling them himself, that first time Zhinin Odilas had turned the rituals over to him.

Jano finished, set the pitcher on the table, and stepped back with obvious relief. When glanced at Ribas for approval, Ribas gave him the shadow of a wink. Jano looked down quickly to hide a grin.

Now Danya opened the carved wooden box of salt. Its old hinges creaked in the stillness of the room. She scooped grains up between her fingers.

In this ritual, the salt was sprinkled in the glass bowl of water. The officiant then gently stirred the water by passing his or her hands through it. Danya sprinkled the salt carefully, not letting any stray on the tablecloth. Her hands moved toward the bowl. Ribas saw her looking down at the water, drawing a breath to say the words: “In Your name, O Goddess, we invoke the power of the ocean, and remember Your love as You gave Yourself up for us.”

For a heartbeat, Ribas was sure she was about to do it. Then her hands stopped in the air.

She had forgotten. Ribas didn’t look at her panic, but he felt it, solid as ice around her. *You know what to do*, he thought to her. “*In Your name, O Goddess...*”

She stood there, staring at the water, helpless. For a moment Ribas thought about reaching out with the gift to cut her fear, but it was too late for that, even if he’d had her permission to do it.

He stepped forward and touched her shoulder. She backed away from the table without raising her head or looking at him. Ribas finished the ritual, passing his hands through the water and reciting the words as if nothing had happened.

The prayer stone ritual came just before the closing blessing. Everyone in the House lined up down the center aisle and came forward to the dais to take a prayer stone out of the basket on the table. Many of the stones went back to Zhinin Odilas’s time, but Ribas had also bought some in Paret before he was installed here, choosing each one for color, shape, and gloss. All of them fit

snugly in the palm of the hand. Each one had something about it that made it satisfying to touch and hold.

The line of people moved forward. Some people picked up stones without looking at them, trusting their fingers to go to the right one. Others took a moment to find one that seemed right. Parents held little children up to choose their own. As each person chose, they moved to one of the eight lines forming at the House's different windows, to send their prayers out into the air.

This was Ribas's favorite part of the service. With everyone together, in the stillness of the silently offered prayers, Ribas felt the Goddess's presence most clearly. In spite of all his training, he always found it easier to think of Her as the woman she had been, the real person who had loved her land and a village, maybe, that hadn't looked so different from Lida. When she died, before she was reborn as the Goddess, her spirit must have gone out to touch the wholeness of everything she had cared about. Ribas could feel that easily. He trusted that the Goddess he served wouldn't fault him for using that mortal picture of her as a crutch.

He and the two mosevine offered their prayers last, at the windows closest to the hearth. Ribas chose an earth-brown stone and stood by the window to the left of the hearth to send out a prayer for his brother. *Goddess who guides us, show me how to help him.* At the window on the other side of the hearth, Danya stood pale and stiff, her head down. Ribas saw her drop her stone in the basket again and close her hand tight as she backed away. Pain hovered around her.

After the prayers ended, when everyone had gotten back to their seats, Ribas stepped down from the dais to give the closing blessing. With the final "Tebena" – "so be it" – the stillness of the service gave way to talk and bustle.

*Danya.* Ribas turned back to the dais right away to find her, but her red robes were already disappearing through the House's back door. He tried to hope she was only going back to the

kitchen to help with the meal, but when he got there himself a little while later, only Jano stood by the two big tables where everyone had set out their potluck offerings.

Every kitchen in Lida had turned something out for this meal. A confusion of rich scents filled the warm room: roast chicken and lamb, potatoes and root vegetables, lemon and mint and cinnamon, honey and the warm yeast scent of new bread. People had lined up for food and laid coats and hats on benches to claim their seats at the other long tables. There was talk and laughter, the scrape of benches against the flagstone floor, shrieks from children who raced each other around the room while their parents filled the family's plates.

Ribas made it through the press to Jano, who had assigned himself the job of pouring out cider. The mosevin looked up and grinned as he handed a mug to a waiting customer. "That went all right, didn't you think, zhinin?"

"It went very well," Ribas agreed. "Where's Danya?"

Jano's grin faded. "She went to her room. She's pretty upset."

A hand landed on Ribas's shoulder. "Ribé." Seldo. "I want to talk to you about that Old Namoran passage," he said. "Couple things in your translation I wondered about."

Seldo was probably the only person in Lida, apart from Jano and Danya, who could have followed the Old Namoran enough to have any questions about it. "Good," Ribas said, "but give me a minute. I need to find my other mosevin."

Seldo took the cider jug from Jano. "Let me do that, son. I'm sure your zhinin has other work for you."

"Not really," Ribas said. "Go ahead and eat, Jano."

The boy hurried away to get a plate. Ribas went out into the empty passage, which felt chilly after the warm crowded kitchen. The door to Jano's room stood open, but Danya's door was shut. Ribas knocked lightly.

No answer. He pushed the door open.

The room was small but reasonably comfortable. It had its own small hearth, along with a square window that looked out on the street behind the House, a desk, bookshelf, and bed, and a wardrobe in the corner with a basin and pitcher sitting on top. Danya hadn't left any books or papers scattered around on the desk, or clothes lying on the chair or floor. She hadn't lit a fire either. The grate was cold and empty.

Danya herself was sitting on the bed. Her red robes made a bright splash of color against the gray stone walls and plain homespun blankets. They looked too big on her, as if she had shrunken inside them. She sat motionless with her hands folded in her lap.

She wasn't crying. Everything about her said *stillness*, as if she might disappear if only she could stay quiet enough. Her face looked so fragile it could have been made of glass.

Ribas ached for her. He wished he could use the gift right then, to see the fear and pain that gripped her and cut her free of them if he could. "Danya," he said gently.

Her head jerked up. She actually shrank back on the bed, still gripping her hands tight together.

She mustn't be scared, certainly not of him. "It's all right," Ribas said. "May I come in?"

He would leave her alone if she said no, but she nodded, a small tight motion. Her eyes stayed on him with a kind of frightened fascination, as if she wanted to look away but couldn't.

"May I sit down?" he asked.

She nodded again. He sat on the end of the mattress, with a little distance between them. Again he found himself remembering the girl at the viduris, alone at a table with a book propped in front of her like a shield. *Good morning*. Her eyes when she looked up at him, shocked at the intrusion, as if she didn't think she deserved anyone caring about her. *Is it all right if I sit with you?*

To the girl beside him, he said, “Don’t worry about the service. That little mistake was nothing.”

She lowered her head then, staring at the floor. “I’m sorry, zhinin.” The words tumbled out, so low he could barely hear them. “I’m sorry. I know that ritual. I don’t know what happened.”

“You were nervous,” he said. “It happens.” He tried to see her face, but she kept her head down and turned away from him, so he could only see her dark hair pinned up in that single coiled braid, too old for her years. “Come now,” he said, as gently as before. “Look at me.”

*I hope she doesn’t give you too much trouble,* Maryut had said. The mosevine were supposed to help him, true; but this girl’s trouble, whatever it was, was his too.

She obeyed. The look on her face cut at him. “We all forget things sometimes,” he said. He knew this was about more than the service. “What’s bothering you so much?”

Very quietly, with her eyes on the blanket, she said, “I’m never good enough.” A simple statement of fact.

“Why would you say that?”

Her eyes flicked up to his face, then back down to the blanket. “Back home...my family...” She hesitated. Then, hard and flat, “My mother.”

In those two words, Ribas heard a lifetime of history. Now that she had started talking, Danya seemed to want to continue. “She...my mother...she said I shouldn’t go to the viduris. She said I’d never make it through. She said...”

She stopped, as if the words had dammed up again behind some a inside her. Ribas had heard family histories like this before. Parents who didn’t understand the power they had, or who were too unhappy themselves to see what they were doing to their children. He never let himself show the anger that boiled in his chest every time he heard it.

Now he said, "But you did make it through. And you wouldn't be here in Lida if you weren't good enough."

Her eyes came up to his face again. "I wanted to work with you." This time she didn't look away. The words came out hot and angry. "I wanted to meet you. I never thought I would." A tear slid down her face. "When Kunin Dergo said he was sending me here, I didn't believe it. And then I came and..." She swallowed, fighting for air, her hands twisting together in her lap. "I came here and ruined it the way I always do."

Ribas had to look into her mind. There had to be a way to ease the shame she pointed like a knife at herself. First, though, he moved over on the bed, close enough to put his hand on her shoulder.

"Danya. You haven't ruined anything."

She shook her head. The tears were coming hard and fast now. He didn't need her to tell him what kind of words her mother had thrown at her; he could guess well enough. "Listen to me," he said. "What you've said about yourself, the mistakes you make, it isn't true."

She mopped impatiently at her face with her sleeve. "You don't know me."

He didn't smile. "That's true. I don't know you very well yet, but I know the kunin. I know his standards, and he knows mine."

That got her to look at him again. He said, "He would never send me a mosevin who didn't deserve to be here." Her face said she still didn't believe him. "With your permission, I'd like to take a look at your mind."

She knew what that meant. He saw her swallow. "Why?"

"I might be able to help you. It wouldn't necessarily be permanent." He thought of the net around Gedrin. If Danya's trap was set that firmly, he might not be able to do anything, but he would still try. "It would be like opening a door," he said, "to let in some fresh air."

“Why do you think I need it?”

Some people came to him eager to see what kind of “magic” the gift could give them.

Others didn’t know what to make of that strange meddling. Danya seemed to be one of the second kind. Ribas said, “I think you need a rest from what you think about yourself.”

He saw her take that in. “You could give me that?”

It wasn’t much more than a whisper, but it decided him. He must find a way to spring her trap, push that door open, if only for a little while. “I can try,” he said.

“Please.”

She watched his face as if she hoped to see the gift working. Once it unspooled the patterns, he closed his eyes to see them better.

Fear. Harsh blue lines wove a net around Danya’s mind. Ribas had never known how ugly a color blue could be until the first time he’d seen what fear looked like: sullen and dark, like fouled water, with hints of the yellow and purple of a bruise. The net around Danya had anger in it too, hot red lines threading the blue together, pulling them tighter.

But this net wasn’t as strong as the one around Gedrin. Ribas knew he could do something here. He still had to be careful; the gift would need to borrow his strength.

He bent his mind on a single blue fear-strand. If he could cut it, the net might unravel and fall away, at least for now. He reached for it.

He could never explain this part, as often as people asked. He didn’t only see the lines: he felt them too, against his own mind and even against his body. Fear felt like the touch of ice against bare skin. Reaching in – only with his mind, he didn’t have to move a muscle – could hurt. It did now. He’d long since gotten used to that.

With enough strength, and the right intent in his mind, he could call on the gift to cut the strand. He would never forget the first time he had realized he could do that. The surge of



excitement as he'd realized, twenty-five years ago now, that he could cut through pain, that day, and stop an animal's suffering.

Now he trained his strength and intent on that single fear-strand and called on the gift again.

*Cut.*

The shock went through his body. Like a snapped bowstring, the fear-strand lashed against his mind as it gave way. He felt the stinging slice of it, but more, he felt the strength rush out of him.

The gift had taken more than he'd thought. For a moment the room whirled. He kept his eyes shut, bracing himself on the bed, waiting it out.

*The first time, twenty-five years ago. The nanny in the barn, her side torn open on a nail, fighting and screaming as Mama tried to get the halter on to hold her still. The moment when Ribas looked into the nanny's mind and saw what he could do...the wave of triumph and exhaustion when he did it...and then the look on Mama's face.*

*"No, my dove, I'm not scared."*

*And when he said, yes, you are, and she said, maybe a little..."No, Mama, I know it's not just a little, I can see it," and he had been crying by then, shivering as she put her arms around him.*

*Twenty-five years ago. Dove kenavnis.*

Now the spinning slowed enough for him to raise his head. At least the effort hadn't made his heart pound and ache, the way it sometimes did. He opened his eyes, carefully.

Danya's face told him it had worked. He knew that stunned, relieved look, when a burden someone had carried too long seemed to sprout wings and fly away.

She stared at him. "How..."

"You know I can't tell you that." His voice sounded steady and normal. "I wish I could."

All the apprentices who came to Lida knew he couldn't teach them the gift, but that didn't stop some of them from hoping. "I know," she said. "It's just, I've never..."

She had never felt that kind of relief. “I’m glad it worked,” he said. “Now, you see how we’ve opened the door. It’s going to need your help to stay open.”

He wasn’t sure how quickly the net might re-grow. Sometimes they didn’t. He suspected Danya’s would, but it might be slow enough to control.

“What can I do?” she said.

She looked ready to do anything. This wasn’t the same frightened girl he had only met three days ago. Times like this reminded him why he had to give this work everything he had.

“I need you to tell me if you start having trouble again. Any time you feel a change.”

She looked doubtful. “I don’t want to bother you, zhinin.”

“I have a feeling, mosevin, you’ll be much more help to me without that extra burden. It’s worth the bother.”

He had never seen her smile before. It lit up the room like lamplight, as if a candle inside her, almost extinguished, had caught its breath and begun to glow again.

“Thank you.”

Her face was all the thanks he needed. “Of course. Now, let’s go and get some dinner before everyone else eats it all.” The weak feeling had passed. He’d be able to trust his legs when he stood up.

Maryut met them at the kitchen door. “Sit down and eat, zhinin. I’ve got a plate ready. Seldo can’t wait to argue with you about that Old Namoran translation.” One look at Danya, Ribas saw, told her most of what she needed to know about the past few minutes. She put her arm around the girl. “You come along and get some food too, mosevin. You worked hard this morning.”

Ribas took a seat at the table with his family, across from Seldo and Milya. He and Seldo were still deep in talk, debating points about the translation of two particular Old Namoran words,

by the time both their plates were empty. Then Seldo looked over Ribas's shoulder. "Messenger for you, I think."

Ribas turned around. He didn't recognize the short, thickset boy standing behind him. He had a shock of reddish-brown hair and dusty clothes that said he'd traveled some distance fast.

He held out an envelope. "Zhinin Ribas. Urgent letter from Kunin Dergo."

If the kunin had paid to send a courier, it certainly was urgent. Ribas took the envelope. It had the familiar gray wax seal on the back, stamped with the Circle House design all dagira used. "Thank you," he told the boy. "You're welcome to have some dinner if you'd like."

Seldo leaned across the table. "What's that?"

"Letter from the viduris." Ribas unfolded the single sheet of paper. The kitchen was still full of talk and noise, but silence seemed to settle on him as he read.

Kunin Dergo's handwriting was still strong and clear, though he was old now, his hair entirely white. Many years had gone by since Ribas had pestered him with questions, turned in unexpected assignments, and asked to learn improbable languages.

Now the kunin wrote with the most urgent news any member of the dagira could receive. As Ribas took it in, the stillness settled deep in him and seemed to spread out into the room.

Someone touched his arm. "Ribé? What's going on?"

Ribas looked up at Maryut. The rest of the family was listening too, Gedrin at the far end of the table leaning as far in as he could. Ribas knew he would have to make an announcement. Everyone in this room needed to hear what Kunin Dergo had written, but for now he could say it to just these few.

"Tavin Ardinas is dead."

He saw his own feelings mirrored in their faces. Everyone knew the Tavin had served a long time, that his health had been failing since the summer, but the Tavin was the heart of Namora and

his loss brought both grief and strangeness. No one in this room had met him. Only Ribas had had any direct contact with him, and he would never forget the kindness of the priest who had supported a young zhinin in his wish to stay in his village and serve his own people.

Out of the little group at the table, Mama spoke first. "*Sela seraidit.*"

*May his soul fly.* The closing prayer said at the ceremony of release for someone who had died. "*Sela seraidit,*" Ribas answered. For a moment all of them were quiet. Then Ribas got up from the bench and went to the kitchen hearth, to ask his people to join him in praying for their Tavin who was gone.

## Chapter 7

Valda had her last conversation with Tavin Ardinas on the night when Galvo came to meet her in the square. After that evening, Ardinas slipped into a deep sleep he never fully woke from.

During the last days, Valda sat by his bedside hour after hour. Partly because she hoped the old priest might open his eyes one more time and know her. Partly because someone had to be with him when his soul set out from his body.

She and the Tavin's healer, Tayo Bodin, were there on the last night, toward the middle of Derla. No one else was with them. Together they watched Ardinas's slow, fragile breathing, the rise and fall of his chest. Valda pulled her chair up against the bed and held the old priest's unresponsive hand. The tayo sat opposite her. He had told Valda he thought the end would come that night. When it did, it was so quiet, so gentle, that it felt like nothing more than a cessation of motion they had barely seen before it stopped.

Tavin Ardinas was gone. His soul had gone out into the wholeness of the world again. Valda didn't have time to grieve, and in any case, grief didn't describe the hollow, cold feeling that filled her. As Tavo Balsa, she had to officiate at the Tavin's ceremonies of memory and release.

The ceremony of memory for Ardinas meant a packed Great Circle House, crowds spreading out into the square and the streets beyond, and the stillness of mourning like an ocean fog filling Sostavi. Valda went through the rites, standing on the Great House dais in her white sventin's robes. Today the Tavo Balsa could not fill the Tavin's empty place.

In her white robes, in front of the eyes of all the dagira and all the people who had come to Sostavi to pay tribute to Namora's leader, Valda felt as cold and exposed as a single tree in a snow-swept field. She knew her voice must hold steady and clear as she recited the prayers and read the countless tributes to Ardinas gathered from those who had served with him. The ceremony of

memory did its best to capture all that a life had meant. Valda must not blur that memory with her own sense of loss.

She wove her own voice into a curtain of words, a shield to hold up between herself and all the watching eyes. Behind that shield, in the moments of stillness during the service, she sent herself away from the Great House and down to the harbor and the ocean beyond. She asked the Goddess to guide Ardinās's soul out there, to meet the wind and mingle with the waves he had loved.

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That night, when she was finally alone in her chambers in the House of the Sventine, Valda found herself wrapped in different memories. Not of Ardinās, but he had woken them up in her, that last evening when they talked.

Those first days at the viduris. The lonely chill of that time seemed to reach out of the past now and twist around Valda's heart and mind. She'd been a fragile soul, tightly coiled on herself. She still remembered the fear that had kept her from reaching out to anyone, even her roommate, to try to be friends, in case she found that her deepest fears were right. She really didn't belong in this overwhelming place with all these clever people, all these strange faces and voices.

She'd had dreams even then. She had let herself dream about Sostavi from the first time she realized she wanted to go to the viduris. At her first classes, the teachers' words all seemed to blur together. Kunin Dergo's stern look made her want to hide in a corner. She knew she'd never see Sostavi; she could never keep up with this work.

As Valda remembered it now, her chambers seemed to fall away, and all the things that defined her rank, as if those things had been the dream and only the memory was real. She was the lonely girl in the red mosevin's robes again, with no one to talk to, no one to trust.

One morning in the viduris's dining hall, more than a week into Rudua, the first month of the school's year. The teachers enforced a strict code of behavior at meals, so there was no

rowdiness, but murmurs of talk and occasional short bursts of laughter filled the room. Outside, it was a chilly gray autumn day. Inside, the hearth warmed the bare stone floor and whitewashed walls, and there were smells of porridge and toast. Breakfast tended to be the viduris's best meal, free from over-boiled vegetables and tough questionable meat.

Valda sat alone at a table in one corner of the room, with her back to one of the tall windows. Most of the other round tables had students clustered around them, first-years through third-years, but already, people seemed to know to leave Valda alone. No one asked to sit with her, but no one bothered her either. She propped her book in front of her, determined to understand the Old Namoran teacher's last lecture on declensions. It was hard to get absorbed, because she felt as if people were looking at her, their stares like pinpricks on her skin. She told herself nobody cared what she did. She told herself she was glad.

She was staring at the chart of noun endings, trying to see the difference between accusative and ablative case, when someone said, "Good morning."

Valda almost dropped the book. She recognized the boy standing in front of her, of course. Everyone seemed to know him already. He was a tall, plain-looking farmer's boy from a little village no one had ever heard of. He wouldn't have stood out, except he was brave enough to ask Kunin Dergo questions, and he made friends so easily that Valda hadn't thought he could be a first-year too. And, she noticed now, he had the most striking blue eyes she had ever seen.

"Good morning." Her voice felt rusty, as if she hadn't used it in too long.

"Is it all right if I sit with you?"

Why did he want to? Valda gulped. "Yes," she said, and then wished she hadn't. How was she going to talk to him?

He set his bowl of porridge and mug of tea down and sat across from her. "I'm Ribas," he said.

“I know who you are.”

The words came out before she thought. Valda felt the blush surge into her face. She could have told him her name, or said “Nice to meet you.”

He laughed. There was no ridicule in it, only friendliness. “Then we’re even,” he said. “I know who you are, too. Valdena, right?”

Why would he have noticed her? Valda had no idea, but for the first time since she’d gotten to the viduris, she found herself smiling. “That’s right.”

A log shifted on the hearth in Valda’s chambers, landing with a crunch on the stone and sending up a burst of sparks. The sound and light pulled her back to Sostavi and the House of the Sventine.

*Ribé.*

It hadn’t been hard to talk to him after all. Not even a little. He’d told her about Lida, and his family, and the farm where he’d grown up, and he admitted his homesickness so candidly that she had felt safe telling him how huge and scary the viduris felt to her. They’d talked about Old Namoran declensions, and the kunin’s lecture the day before on the *Book of Kenavi*, and he had gotten her laughing about the unguessable stew they’d been served for dinner last night. She’d forgotten how good it felt to laugh. And he’d said, with the smile Valda would still know anywhere, that the viduris was a strange place sure enough, but they’d figure it out. They’d get through this together.

Looking back, Valda knew that as impressive as the dovne kenavis was, it wasn’t Ribas’s real gift. He made people feel safe. You knew you could lean on his kindness.

And now Valda was here, and Ardinias was gone, and Ribas was hundreds of miles away in that little mountain village, and she hadn’t been in touch with him in fifteen years. Tomorrow, and



the next day, and the day after that, the Tavo Balsa would have to stand in front of the dagira and do the tasks demanded of her. Alone.

*Ribé. Goddess bear me, I miss you.*

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A week after the ceremony of memory for the Tavin, Valda performed the ceremony of release for the same packed House. This second ceremony ended the week of formal mourning and sent the Tavin's soul on its way with the prayers and blessings of all his people. *Sela seraidit.*

The life of the dagira now had to continue. Valda had to take on the Tavo Balsa's next and most important duty: the election.

The day after the ceremony of release, on an otherwise ordinary Tretina, the Council of Sventine met in its chambers. All sixteen members wore their formal white robes of office to convene in the meeting room. Valda now appeared as Tavo Balsa, in the brown robes that gave her all the authority over this crucial business.

The long meeting room had wood-paneled walls, rich carpeting, and tall windows that looked out over Sostavi Harbor far below. The Council members sat around a single long oval table, made of machia wood, which was exceptionally rare in Namora. The table had seventeen matching chairs around it, with one slightly taller chair at the head. The taller chair rightly belonged to the Tavin. It was Valda's seat now. As she took it, she thought distantly that once upon a time, she would have been amazed to think of herself in this place, the only woman on the Council and one of its youngest members, leading the process that would determine Namora's next ruler.

She called the Council to order and opened the meeting with the traditional prayer. All her male colleagues, dark- and light- and gray-headed, bent their heads obediently as she invoked the Goddess's guidance on this assembly. Then she read through the rules of election laid out in the

*Rituals and Duties of the Council of Sventine*, first written over a thousand years ago during the leaderships of the earliest Tavine.

“The Council shall, with the guidance of the Goddess, select the Ruler of Namora over a period of time which shall neither exceed nor fall short of the full measure of one week.

“Day the First: the Council shall accept the nomination of worthy candidates. No sventin shall declare his or her own candidacy, but shall be selected as worthy and so named and presented to the Council by his or her colleagues.

“Day the Second: the Council shall determine, by vote, the two candidates who shall, by their devotion to the Goddess, diligence, and character, best display their worthiness to serve the Goddess and Her people as Tavin.

“Day the Third: Begins a period of deliberation neither to exceed nor fall short of five days, that the Council may consider its vote.

“Day the Eighth: the Council shall reconvene, and shall select, by vote, the candidate best qualified to accept the leadership of Namora, as the servant of the Goddess.”

Everyone on the Council knew the process, but Valda read through it in detail. Most sventine would only vote once in their lives to elect a Tavin. She also read the stipulations that Council members might abstain from the final vote if they did not feel either chosen candidate was qualified to serve, and that if neither candidate received the nine-vote majority, the Tavo Balsa, “that the Country shall not lack leadership,” would be installed as the next Tavin.

This was another reason why no Tavo Balsa could put him- or herself forward as a candidate or take part in the vote. Valda knew perfectly well that she, like every other Tavo Balsa in Namora’s history, stood a slight chance of becoming the next ruler. It had happened a handful of times, but no one wanted that outcome. The sanction of the Council vote meant the certainty of the Goddess’s

blessing. A Tavo Balsa who became Tavin by default came into the role with hands tied and authority in question.

Valda felt sure her colleagues wouldn't let the vote fail this time. They must not, because she had no wish ever to be Tavin.

When she finished reading the rules, she asked the formal question, "Does any member of the Council wish to raise a query?"

No one did. Valda said, "Then I hereby open the floor to nominations."

Instantly, the room hummed with tension. The election process formally began right now. For at least two of these sventine, and no doubt others, this was their chance to reach out for the fruit they'd tasted for years in their dreams.

Hands went up around the table. Valda had guessed ahead of time who would speak up and who would most likely sit quiet, waiting to be nominated. The Council members had debated and agreed on these maneuvers all the week before, between Ardin's ceremonies of memory and release. Valda didn't let her face show her distaste.

She chose one of the raised hands. "Sventin Eldin."

Eldin was one of the oldest members of the Council, white-haired and white-bearded. He got to his feet, no easy achievement given his girth. "Tavo Balsa, Sventine," he said, puffing a little on the words. "I wish to nominate my colleague Galvo Dendraikas."

As expected. "Thank you, sventin," Valda said. "Sventin Galvo, do you accept the nomination?"

"I do, Tavo Balsa."

Of course he did. No doubt he and Eldin had settled the nomination beforehand, and no doubt Galvo had specifically wanted his name brought up by one of the oldest, and therefore most experienced, Council members. His face showed no hint of triumph, but she knew he must feel it.

Valda chose another hand. “Sventin Rano.”

Rano was one of the younger members. He was already on his feet by the time Eldin had gotten back into his chair, and he spoke up quickly, with no formal greeting. “I wish to nominate Sventin Lesvin Berenaikas.”

Also as expected. “Sventin Lesvin,” Valda said, “do you accept the nomination?”

Lesvin was much younger than Galvo, thin-faced and pale-haired, with vivid green eyes. He didn’t try to hide either his smile or his flush of pleasure. “Yes, Tavo Balsa.”

Three other sventine nominated candidates. When everyone had spoken who wished to, Valda called on the five nominees to stand.

“Sventine,” she addressed the Council, “you must choose our next Tavin from among these worthy candidates. Tomorrow this Council will reconvene to select the two who will stand for the final vote.”

She felt certain she knew who the final two would be. The next morning, Ketdina, the Council gathered again. The vote for the two candidates was done by show of hands. It went exactly as Valda had expected: seven votes for Galvo, four for Lesvin, and the other three nominees dividing five votes between them.

“Council of Sventine,” Valda said. “Here are your candidates to serve as Namora’s next Tavin: Galvo Dendraikas and Lesvin Berenaikas.”

Again, Galvo’s face stayed perfectly calm. Lesvin’s, on the other hand, had the same excited flush on it, as if he’d gotten a gift he hardly dared to believe. The three rejected nominees did their best to hide their disappointment, but Valda felt sure everyone had more or less expected this outcome.

Now she brought out the materials for the final vote, which would take place in six days. Forty-eight round stones, sixteen pure white, sixteen deep blue, and sixteen slate gray, kept in a beautifully carved box of golden pine.

The Council had used the same stones in every Tavin election since time out of mind. Solemnity tightened in the room as Valda unwrapped the box from its cloth covering and opened it. She explained, as the *Rituals and Duties* dictated, that she would give each member of the Council one stone of each color. In this election, she said, the white stones would be used to vote for Sventin Lesvin, the blue for Sventin Galvo. The gray stones were to be used only if a sventin wished to abstain from the vote.

Each Council member must take all three voting stones with him when this meeting adjourned. He must spend time, between now and the next Tretidina, considering his vote and asking the Goddess's guidance. When the Council reconvened in six days, Valda would again open the box. Each sventin must come forward and place his chosen voting stone in it. When all had voted, Valda would count the stones for everyone to see.

Valda dismissed the Council with a closing prayer. Most of them left quickly, off to duties in the House, or a late breakfast, or to their chambers for study and reflection. Galvo hung back, looking as if he wanted to speak to her, but Valda felt relieved when Lesvin stayed too. She didn't need any reminders from Galvo that he wanted to make her his Tavo Balsa, or that she might help "guide" her colleagues' decisions between today and the vote.

When Galvo saw that Lesvin wasn't leaving, he smiled at Valda, as polite and urbane as usual, and left the meeting room. As soon as he was gone, Lesvin said, "Tavo Balsa, may I speak to you?"

She wrapped the pine box in its cloth again. "Of course, sventin."

She hoped Lesvin wasn't also going to promise that she could keep her position if she supported him now. She didn't know him well at all; he always called her by her full title, not even Valdena, much less the informal Valda, and she certainly couldn't imagine calling him Lesví. His happiness after the morning's vote had disappeared. The intensity of the look he gave her now made her uneasy.

He said, "I'm concerned, Tavo Balsa. Do you think Sventin Galvo will win the election?"

The answer was yes. Galvo had gotten seven votes today. He only needed two more to win, and Valda felt sure he could find those in the next five days, assuming he hadn't already.

She knew better than to tell Lesvin that. "It isn't for me to say," she told him. "The Goddess will decide."

He fidgeted with the belt of his robes. "I'm afraid he may not be the best guide for Namora."

*If it comes to that, I don't know that you are, either.* She remembered that last talk with Tavin Ardinas and what the old ruler had said about Impera Shurik in Lassar. *He thinks his God speaks to him.* She didn't think Ardinas would want to see Lesvin win now, but he hadn't felt much more enthusiastic about Galvo.

She said, "What would you do differently from Galvo if you were elected?"

"I would ask for the Goddess's guidance in all things." He said it immediately, with total conviction. "I would take no step without being certain of Her will. I'm afraid that Sventin Galvo thinks too much about human wills and desires."

Undoubtedly, Lesvin would make the same case over the next five days to whichever of his colleagues he thought would listen. Valda was glad, again, that she wouldn't cast a vote. She had plenty of reservations about Galvo herself, but the older sventin certainly understood diplomacy,

and the reality that people were people. He was probably best equipped to deal with whatever challenges might come from Lassar.

She said, "What would you do, sventin, if you couldn't be sure of the Goddess's will?"

She thought the question might make Lesvin angry. His answer surprised her.

"I would listen, Tavo Balsa. I would listen closely and do the best I could."

Valda picked up the pine box in its wrapper. Lesvin's answer was wiser than his years. It didn't change the fact that he would still probably have to put up with Tavin Galvo, but he might hope to outlive the older sventin and have another chance to be Tavin one day.

As kindly as she could, she said, "Then we must listen for the Goddess's will now. We must trust that She will choose Her Tavin."

Lesvin looked unhappy. "I will pray."

"So will I," Valda said. "Raimaté, sventin."

"Raimaté, Tavo Balsa." He stood where he was as she left the room.

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Valda didn't want to involve herself at all in the Council's "deliberations" before the final vote. No doubt Galvo and Lesvin were twisting every arm they could reach.

For two days after the nominations, she kept to herself as much as she could, staying in her chambers when she wasn't in the Great House. On the third morning, before she had even sat down with a cup of tea, a servant knocked at her chamber door. "Tavo Balsa, Sventin Galvo to see you."

Valda didn't let herself sigh out loud. "Very well." What could he have to tell her, aside from the promises he'd already made?

When Galvo came in, Valda thought she saw the faintest tightness in the set of his jaw, but his voice sounded as smooth as ever. "Good morning, Valda. I'm sorry to intrude so early."

"It's no trouble. Would you like tea?"

“No, thank you.”

As early as it was, he'd dressed in his robes of office. Valda had on the simple woolen dress she wore to be comfortable. She wore slippers and her hair hung in a single long braid down her back. Next to Galvo, she knew she must look very young.

She motioned him toward the two chairs by her hearth. “Please, sit down.”

“I won't trouble you long,” he said. He sat straight-backed in the chair, graceful and easy as always. Valda felt younger than she was, cupping her own warm mug between her hands like a little girl with hot milk. He said, “I've heard news I thought you would want to know as well, if you aren't already aware of it.”

Again Valda thought she saw that tension in his face, the smallest hairline crack in his usual polish. “I haven't heard any news.”

“Then you don't know about Sventin Lesvin's plan?”

The question came out as sharp as a whiplash. The accusation in it snapped Valda fully alert. She might look like a girl, but he should remember who he was talking to.

“What plan, sventin?” She injected every word with ice.

“I beg your pardon,” Galvo said, all politeness again. “I should have known you'd keep yourself apart from such things.”

Valda was in no mood for intrigue. “I haven't discussed the vote with anyone,” she said. “I'm not aware of any plan.”

Galvo leaned forward. “It seems Sventin Lesvin's supporters don't expect him to win the election. If they can, they want to keep me from winning too. They're trying to persuade some sventine to abstain in the vote.”

Valda tried to take this in. It was still early in the morning, she was tired, and the idea sounded ridiculous. Deadlock the vote because your candidate couldn't win? If anyone but Galvo,



with his long experience, had brought this “plan” to her, she would have thought they were spinning stories.

He had seven votes to begin with. Valda felt sure he would keep them. If Lesvin’s supporters – four, based on yesterday’s vote – wanted to make sure he didn’t get the last two he needed, and if they couldn’t swing more votes for their own candidate, they would have to talk five Council members into abstaining. Everyone knew how important it was to get a majority. Did enough sventine really dislike Galvo enough to throw their votes away?

Galvo said, “I came to you because you know what happens if they succeed.”

Valda’s thoughts sped up to a whirl. Of course she knew. She saw the passage in the election rules she’d read yesterday: *That the country shall not lack leadership, the Tavo Balsa shall be installed...*

“No.”

She didn’t realize she’d said it out loud until she saw the satisfaction in Galvo’s face. He said, “I hoped you would see it that way.”

Valda gripped the warm mug tightly. “You thought I knew about this? You thought I wanted them to deadlock the vote?”

Galvo held up a deprecating hand. “I hoped I knew you better than that, Valda. Forgive me for doubting. This business is...” He smiled, mocking himself. “Difficult.”

Valda fought the urge to close her eyes. Out of nowhere, she found herself remembering another face, a much different smile. Someone who wouldn’t have had any more patience with this maneuvering than she did. Someone who never, she couldn’t help thinking, would have thrown the kind of accusation at her that Galvo just had.

She said, “I would never try to sabotage the vote. I don’t want to be Tavin.”

Galvo reached over to press her hand. “I know that.” His voice sounded fatherly now. “That’s also why I thought you should know about this. A word in the right place could be a great help, to make sure we have no difficulties.”

Another ugly possibility reared up in Valda’s mind. Had Galvo created this “sabotage the vote” story to get her involved, force her to press Council members to vote for him? She fought the urge to pull away.

That didn’t make sense, though. He only needed two more votes. Even with his ambition, Valda couldn’t believe Galvo would stoop such a lie when he was already so close to what he wanted.

She did say, “How do you know about this?”

He waved a hand. “Sventin Eldin told me he overheard Rano talking to Vadimas.” Rano had been the one who nominated Lesvin. Vadimas was an older member of the Council. Valda knew he had no particular fondness for Galvo, but she doubted he would want to support someone as young and untried as Lesvin. Galvo said, “Eldin told me Rano was trying to convince Vadimas to abstain. I did some digging of my own after that.”

No doubt he had. Rumors and gossip, *promises and insults*, as Tavin Ardinias had said.

“I don’t ask you to tell our colleagues how to vote,” Galvo said, as if he’d heard some of her thoughts earlier. “I only thought you might remind them, as their Tavo Balsa, how important it is to have a majority here. And you might make clear that you, personally, don’t wish the vote to fail.”

Tiredness swamped Valda. She couldn’t believe that enough of her colleagues disliked both candidates enough to force her into the Tavin’s seat. If anyone actually meant to abstain from voting, maybe they weren’t thinking about what it would mean. Or maybe they wouldn’t actually do it, no matter what Galvo and Eldin thought they’d heard.

Still, it wasn’t worth the risk. The vote must not fail.

“I’ll speak to them,” she said. “Thank you for telling me this.”

Galvo pressed her hand again and stood up. “Thank you, Tavo Balsa. I’ll see myself out.”

Before he turned away, Valda felt sure she saw triumph on his face.

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Valda didn’t want to tell any of her colleagues, in so many words, about Galvo’s visit or what he’d said. If anyone thought he was trying to bribe or coerce her into pushing the vote for him, that might backfire and hurt his chances. As carefully as she could, she spoke with each Council member over the next two days. She used vague words about “wanting the vote to go smoothly” and “feeling sure of a majority.” As much as she could, she made it clear that she would take no responsibility for a failed vote, though she couldn’t say the words she thought every hour.

*I will not be your new Tavin.*

She couldn’t ask anyone directly how they intended to vote. With a few of the older sventine, she made a point of reminding them how young she was. “Sventin Lesvin is only a year or two older than I am. He’s achieved a great deal in a short time.” If they didn’t like Lesvin’s youth, she felt sure they wouldn’t want any chance of a still-younger Tavin. With others, she made sure to mention that she had worked with Galvo since her own arrival in Sostavi, when he had already been a sventin. Galvo meant experience, reliability, certainty.

Through the delicate dance of trying to influence the vote while saying nothing direct, her last talk with Ardinias echoed in her head. *Trouble with Lassar. Shurik.* Ardinias’s own feeling that neither of the two obvious candidates, the exact two they had, would be an ideal choice.

*Goddess bear me, neither am I.*

On the following Tretkina morning, the day of the final vote, Valda got to the Council meeting room early. The autumn fog from the harbor had come in thicker than ever this morning, dense and gray, swirling through Sostavi’s streets and leaving clinging mist on the windows. Valda’s

brown robes felt too thin to keep out the damp chill. The hearth fire in the meeting room flickered uneasily.

She took her seat and set the unwrapped pine box and the *Rituals and Duties* on the table in front of her. Alone, with only the sound of the fire, she closed her eyes and offered a prayer.

*Goddess who guides us, be with us now. Help us to choose Your servant wisely.*

Footsteps and voices pulled her back to the room. The Council members came in in twos and threes, some talking quietly, some silent. Lesvin came in alone. Valda saw he looked as pale and anxious as he had a week ago. Galvo looked solemn, but Valda felt sure she read confidence in his face too. She hoped she did. Whatever anyone might say about him, she hoped that within the hour, she would declare him the Tavin-elect. Most of the other faces had the clarity that came from a decision firmly made, but Valda did see a couple of troubled expressions.

When everyone took their seats, Valda didn't have to raise her hand for quiet. All the faces turned to her, expectant, waiting.

"Council," she said. "In the sight of the Goddess, today we ask for Her guidance as we choose a Tavin to lead Her people."

She could only hope, now, that her indirect conversations, and whatever manipulations Galvo had managed, had done enough. She led the Council in the ritual prayer. "In Your wisdom, Kenavi, help us to choose that member of our fellowship who shall most faithfully serve You, and shall most willingly carry out Your wishes for Your people. Tebena."

Her colleagues echoed the last word back to her. *Tebena*: so be it.

The vote began. The Council members came up one at a time, alphabetically by patronymic, to place their stones in the box. The lid had a round opening just large enough to admit a closed hand, so that neither Valda nor anyone else would see what color each sventin put inside: blue for

Galvo, white for Lesvin, or gray to abstain. The clatter of the stones against the wood made the only sound in the room. No one spoke a word.

The last Council member placed his stone in the box and went back to his seat. Now Valda must open the lid, lift the stones out, and count them for everyone to see. In the last moment before she did, she offered one last prayer that she would see what she hoped. Blue and white stones only, one color clearly outnumbering the other. She didn't care which.

The lid creaked as she raised it. She lifted the stones out. As soon as she saw them, her throat closed over.

Gray stones. Three. From the sounds around her, nothing as audible as a gasp but clear whispers of air as people caught their breaths, she knew everyone else guessed the same thing she did. There were not enough blue or white.

As the rules required, Valda separated the stones into three groups, naming and numbering each vote. Her voice sounded steady and clear. "For Sventin Galvo, one vote. For Sventin Galvo, two votes." Her hands didn't tremble as she moved the stones into groups. "One vote to abstain. For Sventin Lesvin, one vote."

The count went on until she gave the final tally. Eight votes for Galvo. Five for Lesvin. Three to abstain.

No majority.

No one spoke. Valda thought it might have been better if there had been arguments right then, accusations, even curses. She could not look at either of the candidates. She could only stare straight down at the stones on the table.

*No.*

The word filled her head. She wanted to close her eyes, let the word swallow her, open her eyes again and find that none of this was true.

She was Tavo Balsa. She had a duty to finish. As if watching from a great distance, she saw her own hands pick up the *Rituals and Duties* and open it to the correct page. Her voice sounded as steady and clear as before as she read the words that governed the Council now.

“If the Council shall not by specified majority determine the next Tavin, that the nation shall not lack leadership, the acting Tavo Balsa shall be installed as Tavin, thereby to serve the Goddess and Her people.”

*Goddess bear me. Goddess help me.*

She closed the book and laid it aside. Now she raised her head and made herself look her colleagues in the eye, around the table, one after the other. She saw Eldin’s anger, Rano’s triumph, Lesvin’s unmistakable relief, and Galvo...Galvo’s inscrutable stillness, his veneer holding up even under this disastrous disappointment. One vote too few. From some remote place, Valda admired him.

“Council of Sventine,” she said. “By the authority vested in me, and by the stated rules of election, I declare myself, Valdena Filtraikas, Tavin-elect of Namora.”

Into the silence she spoke the final word: “Tebena.” From around the table, sixteen voices spoke it back to her, sealing the result, echoing her own disbelief.

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That afternoon, Valda sat alone in her chambers with the door latched and a servant stationed outside, instructed to let no one in. She had a piece of paper, a pen, and her wax seal on the little table in front of her. For now, these chambers still belonged to her. Too soon, she would have to move into the ones that belonged to the Tavin, where Ardinas had lived for so long.

After the vote, after she had sealed and declared the results, the Council had shaken off its shock and buzzed like a hive of disturbed bees. Everyone wanted to know who had abstained. No

one would admit to it. Lesvin and Rano hadn't hidden their satisfaction. Eldin, and a couple of Galvo's other most outspoken supporters, hadn't hidden their anger.

At least three of her colleagues had seen Valda as the least of the evils on offer. They had disliked both candidates enough to risk putting in a Tavin who didn't have the majority or the Goddess's sanction. Valda wished it helped to know that.

Tradition said that the new Tavin must be installed in Ketva, the Fourth Month, after the high holy months of Akena and Algima, and after the busyness of the spring planting season in Ivesta. Valda would not wait that long. She wouldn't have any overblown pageantry or celebration for the result she had never wanted. She had told the Council at the end of the morning's meeting that she wished to be installed in Tyla, less than a month from now. No one argued with her, but Valda knew the arguments would come thick and fast, soon enough. Once the House of the Tavin actually belonged to her, her authority would look as fragile as an old clay pot.

Right now, she had to put the vote aside. She had to do something she had wanted to do since the instant when she'd put the voting stones on the meeting room table and known what they meant.

She dipped her pen in the clay inkpot and held the heavy paper steady. *Raimaté, Zhinin Ribas*, she wrote.

It probably wasn't wise to write to him. He might not understand hearing from her now, out of the blue, and the Goddess knew he might not welcome it, but he was there, in that mountain village. Three hundred miles didn't seem so terribly far when you thought about it as a week's journey in a good coach.

*You must be surprised to hear from me*, she wrote. *I regret that it's been so long.*

In the back of her mind, she remembered Galvo's face after the vote. She hoped he didn't blame her for what had happened. He had said he knew her better than that, but...

*I should have written to you years ago. When I first arrived in Sostavi, I thought of you more than you can perhaps imagine.*

It certainly wasn't wise to dredge up the past. She couldn't make herself crumple the paper and start over. Every hour of every day, she hid her thoughts and measured her words in front of her Great House colleagues. Now, if she was going to deal with the overwhelming reality the Council had handed her today, she would have to create a more perfect mask than she'd ever worn before. First she had to talk, the way she had talked to the boy who had sat at her lonely table and made himself her friend.

*I won't take up as much of your time, or as much paper as it would need, to tell you all the history of my time here. Try as she might, she couldn't keep the distant, formal tone anymore. I'll only say that in many ways, it hasn't been what I imagined when we were at the viduris together.*

The words came easily now. She wrote about dagira politics, about her colleagues who had schemed and grubbed for votes while their leader of so many years was dying. She wrote about the hours she had spent at Ardinás's bedside and how quietly the old priest had finally let go of life. She wrote what she had told no one else: how she ached every day for the old man who had always been kind to her.

*He was a good man. We couldn't have asked for a better leader.*

Through it all, she could see Ribas's face as if he were sitting across from her at the table again. She could see the sympathy in the blue eyes. *And now the election. I can't believe what's happened.*

She wrote candidly about Galvo and Lesvin and the failed vote. She knew how much the news would surprise Ribas; she could see him holding the letter, re-reading the last part closely, taking it in. *Sventin Galvo may still think I wanted this.* A tiny detached corner of her mind wondered if she ought to consider Galvo for her Tavo Balsa. It would be an ironic twist for them both, but no one was better qualified. On the other hand, he wouldn't want the position if he still held any hope



of becoming Tavin one day, and Valda thought wearily that she didn't know how long she might last in the job. She wrote, *I think you'll understand that I didn't want it at all. I want it even less, if that's possible, given that it happened because my colleagues couldn't agree on a candidate.* Not having the Council's sanction was bad enough. Right now she couldn't even begin to think about whatever trouble might come from Lassar.

She told him that she planned to have the High Installation in Tyla instead of Ketva. Then she found herself writing something she hadn't intended.

*Would you consider making the journey?*

She stopped and looked at the words. The first winter chill was already settling on Namora. The weather in Tyla never got as harsh and bitter as it did in Akena, but the cold still bit deep and storms could swirl up without warning. He wasn't strong. She didn't know how much, if at all, he could travel, especially in risky weather.

She let the words stay and added the exact truth. *It would mean so much to have you and Maryut Ribenis here.*

She understood the size of the honor she was handing him. The Tavin-elect personally inviting a zhinin from a backwater village to a High Installation: you could almost call it a command. What subservient dagira would refuse that summons?

He had refused something like it before. And this wasn't the Tavin-elect speaking. This was one mosevin asking a favor from another.

*Do you remember when all of us, you and Matevas and Niala and Andrin and I, had our installations in our different Circle Houses? They had been eighteen years old, close friends, finished with their apprenticeships and taking on assignments as full members of the dagira. It had been a busy, joyful, overwhelming time. I remember your installation in Lida so clearly.* She didn't write about the pang it had given her to watch him trade the red mosevin's robes for the sea-blue robes of the zhinin, or the

deeper hurt she had felt when frail old Zhinin Odilas presented him to Lida village as its new officiant. In those moments, she had fully understood how far away they would be from each other from that day on. Instead she wrote, *Those were such proud times. If you could be here for another ceremony now, I might be able to see it through.*

She had no right to send him any such thing. “Might be able to see it through,” as if he should have to help her do that, as if she didn’t know her duty. She had been the one who stopped writing to him once their lives went in different directions. She had cut off that part of herself when she came here from Paret. So-called honor or not, what made her think she could ask him to go through the trouble and hassle of a long winter journey, as a favor to someone who’d had nothing to do with him in years?

She kept writing, telling him that if he and Maryut did come for the Installation, they would be welcome to lodge in the Great House’s House of the Zhinine. Finally she wrote, *I hope your life in Lida has been all you wished for. Your people are so fortunate to have you. I send you and Maryut my prayers and all best wishes.*

She ended it using the usual form between members of the dagira: *Yours in the fellowship of the Goddess Kenavi.* Though it felt stilted and wrong, she signed it *Valdena Filtraikas.*

After she folded it, slipped it into an envelope addressed to *Zhinin Ribas Silvaikas, Lida village, Kalnu region,* and pressed her seal on the back, she thought she might not send it after all. She’d done what she needed in writing it. No doubt she’d be much wiser not to trouble him.

She still found herself going to the door of her chambers with the letter in her hand. The servant stood at attention outside. Valda handed him the envelope. “Please send this by courier at once.”

The servant bowed. Valda had closed the door again before she remembered that Galvo had seemed too interested in Ribas, that night when they’d spoken on the square. For a moment she

thought she should get the letter back. But when she thought of it on its way, flying southeast as fast as a horse could run, she couldn't bring herself to do it.

## Chapter 8

Before he left Cheremay with his new detachment, on Impera Shurik's orders to find the Pala Vaia winter camps, Silde Bereg Orlon had to write to his family back in Thysidich. He had to tell them he wouldn't be home in a matter of weeks after all.

The Commission of Roads hadn't given him any gift with words. Gravel didn't need gentle talk; stones and border planks didn't ask for sympathy and concern. In his room in the great barracks in Cheremay, Bereg could see his wife and daughter's faces so clearly that he had to stop several times while he scratched out his single-page letter to wipe the tears out of his eyes. He had almost gotten back to them. He wanted to tell Nela and Ania how deeply he felt the delay, but his pen wouldn't do what he wanted.

*Wife and daughter, I must tell you not to expect me when I said.* He at least had the round clean hand all soldiers learned in school. No one had to work to recognize his clumsy words. *Impera Shurik has given me new orders. I have to travel south for a while.*

He could have told them he missed them. He could have told them how much he wanted the crisp cool air of home instead of the too-warm softness of the southern plains. He could have said that he'd been counting the days until he would be with them, and this new count felt much too high, but he would think of his family every single day until he made it back.

Instead, his pen wrote something else. *No one can disobey orders. The Impera has given me and others an important job, and I must do it before I can come home.*

Bereg thought Nela would understand him, after all their years together. But Ania...surely Ania knew her father too. Didn't she?

*Ania, you must take good care of your children, and help your mother at home, but don't work too hard. I want to see you healthy when I come back.*

Maybe that would tell her how much he cared. He couldn't seem to find the words to say that in his mind, she was still the little girl whose laugh had wound around his heart the way her fingers used to cling to his hand. He couldn't tell her what he would give to hear her laugh again.

*Impera Shurik has graciously assured me that I'll have my retirement when I finish this task.*

That news was the real prize. Bereg had meant to write every detail of what Shurik had promised him. "It will be my pleasure to send you home in the spring with all the compensation a soldier of your stature deserves." Shurik himself had said that. Bereg should send the Impera's exact words to his family, so they could hold onto that comfort.

He couldn't do that either. Not, this time, because his thoughts felt too clumsy and heavy. Because other words kept getting in the way.

*I know he thinks he bought you, but that doesn't have to be true.*

Bereg pushed the reproach out of his mind. He should have forgotten it by now. He wrote, *Both of you take care of yourselves. Walk with Mesha's protection until I see you.* He signed it, *Yours faithfully, Bereg (Father).*

He had to obey his orders. If he wanted to go home in the spring, he must accept the detachment assigned to him and take it out of Cheremay to hunt for the Pala Vaia camps.

He had followed orders all his life. He could follow this one. He knew no harm of the Pala Vaia, that was true, but surely the impera knew best. Especially when Shurik believed so absolutely that the orders to destroy the tribal people came from Lord Mesha Himself.

Why, then, Bereg wondered, out of all the soldiers carrying out this mission, why must he have Silde Fisa Vasem as the other officer with his detachment? Silde Vasem, the only soldier who seemed to have any opinion of the orders at all.

*He told us to kill men and women who haven't harmed him or us. He told us to kidnap their children.*

Bereg could still feel Silde Vasem's hard fingers gripping his arm. He could still see her gray eyes, dark with bottomless anger.

*Ask your conscience, Silde Orlon, if you still have one. Ask it what happens to children who see their parents murdered.*

He must not listen. He must not think. Bereg mailed his letter home to Thysidich and packed for the new journey, trying not to feel Silde Vasem's words lodged like a bone in his throat.

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The detachments left Cheremay two days later. Autumn was deepening in the capital. Bereg knew that at home, the air would already have the clear sparkle that tasted of winter coming. He and his detachment headed south, into the plains, where the grass still waved tall and green and late-blooming yellow poppies looked like spilled butter under a too-open, too-wide sky.

They rode through Kovik Thydia and into Tsvavyest, one of the regions Shurik wanted most thoroughly reconnoitered. Their horses were the stocky, brown and white, strong-bodied breed the military favored. They didn't have the grace and elegance of the horses some wealthy folk kept for pleasure-riding, but they could cover dozens of miles a day, gallop with the weight of a fully armed soldier on their backs, and keep up their pace with minimal food and water if the grazing got thin.

Bereg had always liked the comradeship you got with a good mount. On this journey he knew, long before the detachment got out of Adin, that his horse's comradeship was the only kind he was likely to have until they got back to Cheremay.

Silde Vasem said very little to him. That, at least, came as a relief. She rode in almost perfect silence from day's end to day's end, only giving the young soldiers in the detachment a curt order now and then about breaking camp faster and not chattering so much on the road. In the evenings, while the young soldiers swapped jokes and stories about their sweethearts back home, Silde Vasem sat quiet with her supper plate on her knees and her eyes on the flames of the cooking fire. Bereg

thought with some satisfaction that she must have seen the sense of following orders after all. She must have seen they had no choice. Certainly she could follow them as well as anyone.

The young soldiers said nothing to Bereg either, other than “yes, silde” and “no, silde” in response to his commands. No Lasska soldier would try to chat or gossip with a superior. Apart from that, he was too old to interest them. They talked and laughed amongst themselves on the road, as much as they dared under Silde Vasem’s smileless presence and clear gray stare. Bereg knew that as far as they were concerned, he was the elderly parent who deserved respect but not liking.

As one long day followed another, and as the miles stretched out behind them first through Adin and then Thydia, Bereg found himself missing the old camaraderie of the Road Commission more and more. That branch of the military had as good discipline as any, but soldiers on the Road Commission were engineers and craftspeople, hard workers who knew how to use their brains and hands both. They’d all understood one another. Bereg had made any number of friends in the Commission over the years. The long days of work they had all put in, backbreaking physical labor and all, had been nothing like the days of silence he slogged through now.

Every day, the plains opened up wider around them. Every day, the distance between Bereg and home got longer.

Then came the morning they crossed the invisible line that marked the border between Kovik Thydia and Kovik Tsvavyest: the Fourth and Twentieth Claws of the Bear. Only a tiny metal sign by the road showed the change from one Claw to the other. The impera believed the search detachments would be likeliest to find Vaia camps here, in the remotest and warmest part of Lassar.

Bereg’s detachment left the road at the Tsvavyest border and struck off into the plains. The Vaia kept away from Lasska roads and settlements, so following the road farther would be no use. Bereg felt a pull of regret as they abandoned the solid pavement which, for him, was a link to the life he missed.

The young soldiers, though, were eager and excited. They reminded Bereg of the hunting dogs his grandfather had bred back home. Off duty, the dogs might gambol and play like puppies, but let them lead a hunter into the woods and they became wild creatures, sharp-eared and quick-eyed, padding noiselessly through the brush with all senses alert for prey and muscles tensed to spring.

Two young soldiers, a wiry narrow-faced boy named Dimik Kuzen and a tall girl named Lada Egem, unshipped their vinduli from their supply packs as soon as they crossed the Tsvavyest border. The vindula, the long-barreled firearm that could shoot three rounds before reloading, was a Lasska soldier's most powerful and dangerous weapon. Kuzen and Egem both slung their vinduli across their saddles, ready for action, as they led the column out into the tall wild grass.

Bereg rode up beside them. Even up here, he could still feel Silde Vasem's chilly presence at the back of the column.

"Egem," he said. "Kuzen. You know we are not to engage with the tribal people unless they attack first. Impera Shurik's orders."

Both young soldiers saluted him respectfully, crossing their right palms to their left forearms. Lada Egem said, "Of course, Silde Orlon, but we must be ready. The strenyi are treacherous."

Strenyi. Bereg had gotten used to thinking of them as Vaia. The Lasska word, "strangers," sounded odd. Lada Egem said, "Our weapons will be no use to us in our packs, if we should meet an ambush."

Reasonable enough, though as far as Bereg knew, none of them had any reason to anticipate trouble from the Vaia. The tribes wouldn't have any idea of Impera Shurik's plan.

The sun spilled down on the riders. Bereg's coat felt stifflingly heavy, and his back ached more than he liked after these days in the saddle, but the two young soldiers showed no signs of discomfort. Both of them were younger than Bereg's own Ania. Lada Egem had twisted her fair hair



up in a knot at the back of her head, the way most Lasska women soldiers did, but a few strands had escaped and blew loose in the breeze. Her face looked round and smooth, girlish. Something about it made Bereg's chest tighten.

She must have noticed his expression. "Please don't be concerned, Silde Orlon. We will keep a good lookout." She nodded at Dimik Kuzen, who sat straight and tense in his saddle. "We have good judgment."

She smiled. For an instant Bereg's heart went out to her completely: she really was only a girl, too much like the one he missed. At a second glance, though, her smile felt wrong to him. Again he thought of the hunting dogs with their eager eyes and sharp teeth.

On the third night in Tsvavyest, Silde Vasem sat guard by the embers of larger of the two cooking fires, after the rest of the detachment turned in for the night. She had taken more than her share of guard shifts since the beginning of the journey. Bereg suspected she did it not to be helpful, but because she welcomed the time alone in the dark, with her own silence wrapped around her.

Bereg turned restlessly on his bedroll. He wouldn't admit it, but his bones protested against the hard ground more than they used to. He hadn't written to Nela and Ania since leaving Thydia and the military roads. Out here, until and unless they ran across another detachment headed back to Cheremay, he couldn't send a letter or receive one. He missed his link to home like a pulled tooth.

Finally he gave up on sleep. He didn't want Silde Vasem's companionship, and she certainly didn't seem to want his, but right now she was the only creature who might listen to him. He wanted to hear his own voice before it dried up and blew away.

She sat cross-legged on the ground beside the fire pit the young soldiers had dug, her eyes on the flickering coals. He went over and sat beside her.

"Silde Vasem," he said. "Thank you for taking guard duty again."

Her head bobbed, acknowledging him. Since the journey began, she had looked exactly the same every day: the same gray uniform jacket and pants, her hair twisted in the same knot at the back of her head, the same expressionless face. He wondered if she ever smiled. He had trouble thinking she could.

Insects shrilled and rustled in the grass. The dying fire popped softly as the coals cooled. One of the tethered horses pawed the ground with a hoof.

Abruptly, Silde Vasem turned toward Bereg. The fading red firelight barely touched her face. A hood of shadow seemed to cover her, but her eyes gleamed out of the dark.

“Silde Orlon. Tell me about your family.”

The question sounded hard and angry, as if someone had jerked it out of her. She had never seemed to care about his family before. Why now?

He said, “I have a wife and daughter.” Whether Silde Vasem actually wanted to know about them or not, Bereg felt relief in just saying their names out loud. He told her about Ania’s widowhood and told her the names of his three grandchildren. When he finished, he said, “What about you? Do you have children?”

He found it impossible to imagine that, so he wasn’t surprised when she said no. “I’ve never had a family,” she said. “I never will.”

Without wanting to, Bereg remembered her words in the square in Cheremay. *He thinks he’s bought you.* Bought him because of Bereg’s love for his home. Maybe Silde Vasem’s anger came from loneliness: she hadn’t married when she was young, maybe, because the military life kept her too busy, and she regretted that now.

If that was her trouble, it might not be too late. Bereg knew she probably couldn’t bear children anymore, but some men didn’t mind that. She might find a widower who only wanted the

comfort of shared meals and a warm bed at night. He wondered if he dared to mention that possibility to her.

Then she said, "My name isn't Vasem, you know."

The flat, expressionless words caught Bereg off guard. "What do you mean?"

"My parents were Voseg and Ina Leben." She spoke to the fire, not to him, in the same tone he'd heard when she had answered Shurik's questions about the Vaia. As if she were reciting a lesson she had learned. "I was born in Kovik Feyst, in a village in the mountains. I was four when Mangevar's soldiers came."

Kovik Feyst. Bereg had thought she was from Tyi; that was what she had said back in Cheremay when they had first met. And what was this about Mangevar's soldiers? If she had been four years old, that must have been some forty years ago. Right at the beginning of Mangevar's rule.

She said, "They were a company of fighting troops. I don't know what they were doing there. They came through the mountain pass near the village and quartered with us. I remember the tall men in their gray coats."

*Why are you telling me this?* Bereg's stomach felt tight. He felt certain, somehow, that she was going to say something he didn't want to hear. He couldn't bring himself to interrupt her. He had never heard her say anything about herself before.

"It was winter," she said. "We didn't have much food in the village. Not enough to satisfy them, I suppose. To make up for it, some of the soldiers decided to have sport with the women."

Her level, steady tone didn't change at all, but Bereg felt the words like a hand gripping his throat. In all his years in the quietly busy Road Commission, he had never heard of anything like this. Soldiers were disciplined, mannerly, trained to be from their first days in the army. Trained to be, in fact, before they were soldiers, as boys and girls in school.

“My mother was pretty, you know,” she said. “I don’t look like her. I remember how she used to laugh. Once, I was scared of a picture I saw of the God Mesha, and she told me not to worry, because bears could be fierce but they could also be gentle. She said a bear wouldn’t hurt a little one like me.”

Bereg wished he could tell her to stop. He didn’t want to hear any more. He couldn’t find his voice.

With no more expression than before, she said, “That day, when the company came, I found out she had lied. The soldiers with their flags of Mesha did what they wanted. Two of them were in our house. My father didn’t want my mother used that way, so he died. When the two men were through with my mother, she died too.”

Bereg felt sick. Somehow he managed to say, “Impera Mangevar couldn’t have known. No soldier would be allowed to...”

“As far as I know, Impera Mangevar never knew or cared.” Even then, her voice held no anger, only that horrible coldness. “The company leader found me in the house, with my parents’ bodies. He felt responsible, I suppose. He lined up the company in the middle of the village and told me to point to the men who did it. When I did, he called the two of them out in front of everyone and shot them himself, one shot each to the head. Then he took me with him and said he would do right by me. His name was Arik Vasem.”

Bereg couldn’t say a word. She finished, “He was from Tyi. He took me home to his wife and the two of them raised me. The army was their life, so it became mine too.”

Bereg felt as if he were trapped in ice. He had never served in a fighting force. Maybe they were different from the men and women he’d known all his life, but he didn’t want to believe it.

*What happens to children who see their parents murdered?*

He managed to swallow. Somehow he managed to say, “Were they good to you, Vasem and his wife?”

She laughed. The bitterness in it stung like lemon juice on raw skin. “They tried to be, but they weren’t my parents. I never loved them. I never loved anyone.”

Bereg heard himself say, “You told Impera Shurik about the Vaia. You told him what you knew about the tribes.”

Her shadowed face turned to him again. “Yes. Sometimes I disgust myself.”

“You didn’t know what he wanted. We have to follow orders.”

Her eyes stayed on his face. He didn’t know what she saw there, or thought she saw. She said, “Vasem and his wife named me Fisa. They said I should have a new name so I could have a new life. My parents called me Tama.”

Tama Leben. Bereg didn’t have to ask why she had wanted him to know all this.

She stood up. “You should get some rest, Silde Orlon. We have another long day tomorrow.”

She set off to patrol the circuit of the camp. Bereg sat where she had left him, alone in the dark.

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He didn’t sleep that night. He had no idea what Silde Vasem’s –Silde Leben’s, he couldn’t help thinking – village in Feyst would have looked like, but he pictured something like his own. He saw the row of gray-coated soldiers lined up in the square, and the dark-haired little girl staring at them, raising her small hand to point to one and then another. Had she cried then, Bereg wondered? Or had the coldness he knew already settled on her for good? He saw the two soldiers step forward. Had they been frightened, or had they thought their commander would give them only light punishment, a slap on the wrist for bad behavior? He saw the faceless commander, Arik Vasem,

shouldering his vindula, and he heard the shots, one after the other. He saw the bodies crumple onto snow-covered flagstones.

How frightened had the little girl been? Bereg wondered if she had wanted to stay in her village, if she had cried or struggled when the commander lifted her onto his saddle in front of him. Maybe he'd had to hold her tight, clamp an arm around her or even truss her up in a blanket to keep her from getting loose, so he could go through with what he thought was right. Or maybe she had gone willingly enough, now that she had lost everything that mattered to her. Either way, she had left home and family behind forever.

She had been so young. Only four. Bereg thought about his own grandchildren. If they had to, could they learn to answer to new names, love other parents who tried to raise them as their own?

*I never loved them. I never loved anyone.*

Dawn came, and he still hadn't shut his eyes. Aching, he dragged himself up into the saddle. Silde Vasem rode at the back of the detachment as before. She said nothing to him, as if last night's confidence hadn't happened.

All morning, the detachment saw nothing but open grassland with a few scattered trees. Clouds sometimes briefly shadowed the sun. They heard the wind whispering in the grass and the calls of birds swooping overhead. Once or twice, a rabbit startled out of the grass and disappeared with a flash of its dark tail. Bereg began to hope that all their searching through this region would yield nothing more than what they saw now. It was much too soon to think that might happen, but if they found nothing, Bereg could take a blank map back to Impera Shurik. Orders followed with no harm done.

When the sun stood high in the sky, they stopped by a creek to water the horses and eat a few bites of dried beef and fruit. Bereg made the mistake of lying back on the grass in the shade. He didn't realize he had dozed off until someone shook him awake.

"Silde Orlon!"

Wiry Dimik Kuzen crouched beside him. Bereg pushed himself up, rubbing the sleep out of his eyes. His head felt foggy, his tongue too thick in his dry mouth. "What is it?"

"Silde Orlon, look!" The boy pointed toward the west.

Bereg shaded his eyes and followed the pointing hand. A cloud of dust rising from the grass showed, yes, a column of riders coming toward them, fast.

They weren't Lasska horses. Heavy certainty settled on Bereg as he made out the small, lightweight mounts, more like wild horses than carefully-bred work animals. He couldn't see the riders' faces, but they looked dark-skinned. Near the front of the column, one of them wore a bright white shirt.

Pala Vaia. No question. Bereg wished he could appreciate the wonder of setting eyes on a people he had never seen before.

He dragged himself to his feet. Six or seven horses, it looked like, and five riders. Not a full tribe. Maybe they were scouting for land for their camp. *Stay out of these lands*, Bereg wanted to call to them. *Don't stop here. It's not safe.*

Dimik Kuzen said, "What should we do?"

Bereg doubted the column had even seen the Lasska detachment. Certainly they made no move to attack, or even turn in the soldiers' direction. They were heading straight west as fast as they could. Bereg had the sudden strange idea that they were running from something.

Impera Shurik had made his orders clear. "We do nothing," Bereg told Kuzen. "They aren't interested in us."

The rest of his detachment had seen the riders too. The young soldiers scrambled for their weapons. Silde Vasem, Bereg saw, held her own vindula. She looked through its sights and glanced around at him.

“Vaia,” she said.

“Yes.” Bereg would have liked to look through his vindula’s sights too, to get a better view of these people, but the weapon was in his pack, on the other side of the little creek. He called out to the young soldiers. “Stand down, all of you. They don’t mean us harm.”

The column flew on, straight west. Soon they would be well past the Lasska detachment. The young soldiers obeyed Bereg and lowered their weapons.

All except one. Lada Egem stood off by herself at the edge of their temporary camp. Bereg saw her lift her vindula and sight through it.

“Egem,” he snapped. “Stand down.”

“There’s a witch-woman!”

The eagerness in her voice brought acid up in Bereg’s throat. She thought she would get a reward for killing the white-shirted rider. Bereg found himself willing the Vaia riders to go faster yet, get out of reach.

“Egem,” he repeated, making for her. “Stand down now. That’s an order.”

Either she didn’t hear him or didn’t care. She peered through the vindula’s sights, aiming. The column wasn’t out of range yet. If she shot one of their riders, no doubt she would bring trouble down on them, but the Lasska soldiers outnumbered the Vaia column more than two to one. Those five Vaia would die here.

Bereg caught his breath. Before he could open his mouth to shout another order, he heard the roaring report of another vindula and saw Lada Egem collapse.



Silence clamped down on the company. Blood spread across the back of Egem's gray coat and ran down into the grass.

The young soldiers stared at Bereg, and past him, at someone else. Bereg forced himself to turn around.

Silde Vasem lowered her weapon. Her face looked so cold it frightened him.

"Lada Egem disobeyed two direct orders from her commander." Her quiet words fell into the silence. "She disobeyed the orders of Impera Shurik himself, who bid us not to engage with the Vaia unless provoked. We will not tolerate such treason."

She was right, of course. Again Bereg pictured the dark-haired child in the village square, pointing at the men who had killed her parents.

He knew what he had to do now. "Silde Vasem is correct," he said. "You, Kuzen, and you, Ilim, will dig a grave." His hand did not shake as he pointed at the two soldiers standing nearest. "Let all of you remember this lesson today."

His voice sounded as firm as Silde Vasem's. No one would know how the little food he'd eaten threatened to climb back up his throat at the sight of the mangled body. The young men moved silently to get camp shovels from their packs. No one said a word.

The Vaia column hadn't turned. Bereg looked out over the plain and saw them still riding west, outracing the movement of the sun across the sky.

## Chapter 9

Khari gladly let her sister's man, Radavan, head the search group on their journey west to Namora. The two hunters, Handan and Mandhani, wouldn't likely have listened to Khari's orders if she had taken the lead. They respected the Lodestone's brother and gave him no trouble.

Radavan was steady and deliberate in everything he did. He set their course every morning, traveling as directly west as possible while keeping to the open plains. The Lasska hadn't settled the grassland very heavily. They seemed to favor the colder weather in the north. Radavan's southwest route let the group stay clear of towns and villages.

Khari trusted her sister's man's leadership, but she worried for him. Radavan kept himself a little apart from their evening cooking fires, sitting with his hands on his knees, quietly watching the flames. He never spoke a word about the days ahead, or Dahila and the children left behind. Khari didn't need words to hear what he was thinking. She knew that, like her, he wished he could look back to the northeast and see the shapes of Pradesh and Vatiri leading the rest of the tribe into the plains. She guessed, too, that the firelight showed him Dahila's face, and she guessed at how much he longed to reach out and cup his wife's cheek in his palm.

For twenty days, they met no Lasska soldiers. They left the region the Lasska called Vvest and moved across the one called Syetch and into Tsvavvest. The warm air of the plains, the wide-open skies and sweet-smelling grass, and above all, the fact that they'd seen no hint of pursuit, made Khari feel more hopeful.

On the twenty-first day, Mandhani rode out in front of their little column, scouting ahead. He had the sharpest eyes: he could spot a bird in flight and tell what it was, when it was so far away that the others only saw a darting shape. Radavan followed some distance behind him. Handan rode

at the back, keeping an eye out for anyone who might be tracking them. Khari and Rahul rode in the middle of the column with the spare horses.

Khari hadn't known Rahul very well before they'd started this journey. He stood out in the tribe the same way she did, young but with higher status than most of the elders. Since they'd been traveling together, Rahul had told Khari how he'd caught Pradesh's notice when he was still a child. The tribe had quartered closer to a Lasska village than usual, one particular spring, and Rahul had picked up the Lasska language just from overhearing talk between some of the villagers and some of the Vaia men. By the end of the season he spoke it fluently, much better even than Pradesh himself. A good Lodestone had to recognize ability in his people where he saw it. Pradesh had never been backward in that.

Now the tribe respected Rahul as one of its best thinkers, not just for his skill with Lasska. He took in ideas and made decisions faster than deliberate Radavan, but he had learned thoughtfulness and perspective from old Bakar, and had no trace of Handan's and Mandhani's hotheadedness. Everything he did had good sense about it. Khari liked to talk to him on days like this when they rode together.

Today the weather was clear and warm for autumn, the air fragrant with the scent of the grass and the swathes of yellow poppies that still brightened the plains. They had ridden for a little while in silence when Rahul said, "Sometimes I forget why we're out here, and I'm only glad we are."

"I'd like to forget," Khari said. "It's beautiful."

She thought about what this journey would be like without the constant fear of Lasska soldiers, and the weight of her own pathdream in her mind, and the questions she couldn't stop chewing over every night when she tried to fall asleep. *How much farther to the mountains? If we get across, will we find the man I saw? Will he know how to help us?* She had done a ride like this one every autumn,

with the whole tribe, on the way to a winter camp. She had never known, then, how lucky she was to be able to delight in the sunlight and the strength of the horse under her. Everything simple and safe.

Rahul said, "You're carrying a heavier load than any of us."

Khari understood what he meant, but she didn't think so. "Radavan misses his family," she said. "Handan and Mandhani will have to fight for us, if we run into trouble."

Rahul laughed. "Don't worry about those two. They want to meet some Lasska. They're looking forward to it." He rode up closer beside Khari. Their horses' hooves thudded in rhythm against the hard ground. "We'll make it to Namora, Khari. We'll find the man from your dream."

On the worst nights, when Khari lay beside the last coals of the cooking fire and imagined herself back in the tent with Vatiri, the idea crept into her head that there might not be a man at all. She still didn't see how her dream could save them when Vatiri hadn't seen any hope for the tribe. On those nights, she would lie awake for hours, hollow and sick.

Now she said, "I wish the dream made more sense." She hadn't let herself admit that aloud to anyone but Vatiri. "Pradesh was right. How do we think we can find one person out of everyone in Namora? We don't know who he is, or where he is." Some nights, Khari had begged the Moon Woman, sender of pathdreams, for another dream to explain the mysteries of the first. No answer came. "Even if we found him, what could a Namoran do for us?" She had thought that over too, again and again, her mind gnawing at it like a toothless old dog trying to get purchase on a bone. "A Lasska might argue with the impera, maybe. If we found one who cared enough. But Namorans don't have anything to do with us."

She shouldn't have said all that out loud. If Handan and Mandhani heard it, they'd want to turn around and ride straight back to the tribe and tell Pradesh she'd been wrong. And Radavan, who already had too much to bear, shouldn't know what Khari was thinking.

Rahul didn't seem worried or angry. He rode for a while in silence, looking thoughtfully out at the horizon. Khari found herself watching his profile. He was about a head taller than her, slimmer than the two hunters, his face still boyish but mature for his age. He sat easily on horseback, his fingers twisted in the horse's dark coarse mane. Unlike the Lasska, who used saddles and bridles and bits, the Vaia rode bareback, with no barrier between horse and rider. Not everyone in the tribe rode comfortably or well, but Rahul seemed to take the same pleasure in it that Khari did.

Eventually, he broke the silence. "Lamps don't show everything. At night, a lamp only shows you the ground in front of your feet."

"I know that." Khari heard how impatient she sounded. "How does that help?"

When he smiled at her, mischief lit up his face. "If you want to find the path, you have to carry the lamp and start walking."

Khari narrowed her eyes. *Clever*. He reached over. His fingers closed briefly around hers, where they held onto her own horse's mane. "I trust you, Lamp-Carrier."

His touch made something jump in Khari's chest. For a moment, she wasn't a Lamp-Carrier and he wasn't one of the smartest men in the tribe; they were a girl and a boy, nearly the same age, companions on this strange journey. Then Mandhani's voice reached them.

"Soldiers! A dozen bowshots ahead!"

Khari's heart scrambled into her throat. Rahul pulled his horse up. Khari did the same, barely able to make her suddenly-icy hands draw back on the horse's mane.

The hunter came galloping back toward the rest of the column with Radavan at his shoulder. Handan saw the commotion and raced up from behind. The three closed in around Khari and Rahul. To Khari, the noise of the horses' hooves and breath seemed to fill the whole world.

Soldiers. In her mind, Khari saw the Lasska graycoats. The burning river in Vatiri's dream, flowing out unstoppably from Cheremay, destroying everything it touched...

Radavan was angry. He pulled his horse up and rounded on Mandhani. “Don’t shout, boy. What were you thinking of?”

The tension in his voice woke Khari out of some of her own fear. Mandhani’s face flushed dark. Radavan said, “How many soldiers?”

Mandhani collected himself. “Not many. Maybe a dozen. Maybe fewer.”

A dozen was still far too many. Khari thought of the Lasska weapons that hurled hard metal to tear bodies open.

Mandhani said, “Two of them looked old, a man and a woman. The others all looked young. Probably fighters.”

Radavan said, “Did they see you?”

“No. I’m sure they didn’t. They were resting.”

Khari swallowed. On the flat, wide-open plains, she couldn’t believe the soldiers wouldn’t spot her group if they went past anywhere near. Seven horses would raise enough dust to get attention.

Radavan sat erect on his horse, his hands steady in its mane. “But they would see us now, if we keep on the same path.”

Handan said, “We could fight.”

Rahul spoke up before Radavan did. “We don’t have enough weapons. If your brother is right, and there are a dozen of them, we’d be killed.”

Handan’s jaw tightened. Khari knew he didn’t like getting back-talk from someone younger than himself, no matter how much the rest of the tribe thought of Rahul. “We’d have to ride too far south to stay away from them,” Handan said. “And what if there are others out there?”

Khari didn’t like to admit it, but he was right. On the smooth, flat plains, with nothing to offer concealment, the soldiers might be able to see as far as Mandhani could. Their metal-throwing

weapons could kill at far greater distances than a bowshot. Khari and the others would have to ride well out of their way to stay safe, slowing their journey west, and it was true, other soldiers might be waiting anywhere.

In a flash of terror, Khari saw Shurik's forces as pincer arms coming from every direction, trapping her group and squeezing them to death before they ever got near the mountains. Suddenly the sunlight wasn't the warm hand of the Sun God. It was a terrible danger, glaring down on the Vaia, leaving them nowhere to hide.

Radavan looked out in the direction Mandhani had come from. "We'll keep on as we are," he said. "We'll ride at full speed."

Khari felt as if her body had turned to clay, stiff and ready to shatter at a blow. Radavan formed up the column: himself at the front, Rahul in the middle with the spare horses, Handan and Mandhani behind. "If they come after us, we need you two back there ready to fight." He told Khari to ride in the middle of the column beside Rahul. Khari lifted her chin and refused. If they went straight into a front-on Lasska attack, no one would say she let anyone else do her fighting for her. Radavan looked as if he wanted to argue, but she moved her horse up beside his, keeping her eyes on the path ahead, and he let it go.

Handan and Mandhani both carried bows and throwing spears. Rahul and Radavan had the long knives used for skinning and cleaning game. Khari had a long knife too, but she preferred the short dagger she carried in her boot. With it, if she was fast enough, she could pin a darting lizard to the ground.

All of them readied their weapons. At Radavan's signal, they rode out together at a full gallop.

Vaia horses were small and tough and moved as if riding the Breath of Winds itself. Khari's fear dissolved in the speed. As the horses flew across the plain, Khari felt the distance ahead of them

melting away. If only they could travel this fast, hour after hour, day after day, she would believe they could reach Namora and find what they so desperately needed.

Then she saw the dark shapes in the distance. The Lasska camp looked tiny, but the shapes resolved into people, other horses, a couple of small trees near the line of a creek. Fear closed in on Khari again like a blanket wrapped too tight around her chest. The soldiers would see them soon. Vaia horses could outrun the heavier Lasska mounts, but nothing could outrun those metal-throwing weapons.

She heard Radavan's voice beside her, over the noise of rushing air in her ears.

“Keep going. Don't look.”

Khari gripped her horse's mane tighter and kept her eyes on the horizon. She called up the picture of the man from her dream: the silver in his brown hair, the lines at the corners of his eyes, the color of those eyes themselves, the same blue as the sky that met the plains far ahead. She would know his face anywhere. He was there in Namora on the other side of the mountains. She must find him.

The Lasska camp flashed up alongside them and fell behind. When it disappeared from the edge of her vision, Khari let herself breathe. Too soon.

A noise she had never heard before roared out behind them, louder and sharper than a clap of thunder or the crash of a falling tree. It tore the sky and left strange echoes bouncing in its wake. Khari heard Radavan shout, “Run!”

Behind her, Mandhani shouted something back, but Khari couldn't make it out. She hadn't thought they could go faster, but their horses, scared of the noise too, found another spurt of speed. The gold and green world blurred around them and the wind whipped tears from Khari's eyes.



Radavan didn't slow the pace until they were many bowshots away. The Lasska group hadn't set out after them. Finally Radavan slowed his horse to a trot and led the group to the shade of a small stand of orena trees.

Orena had soft pale wood, not much good for carving or burning, but their sap made decent pitch and their late-blooming purple flowers had a sharp sweet smell. Khari breathed the scent deep. She hoped the others didn't see how she almost fell off her horse's back. Her legs trembled so much they couldn't hold her up.

She stumbled over to one of the trees and collapsed under it. Its trunk felt comfortingly solid against her back. A little way away, Handan and Mandhani seemed to be arguing. Khari stared up at the tree's purple flowers and the amazingly calm blue sky above.

Rahul came over and sat down next to her. His dark face had an ashy cast. "It must have been one of those weapons," he said. He hugged his knees to his chest like a little boy. "I thought they'd caught us."

Khari had thought so too. She'd expected to feel the metal from the weapon tearing into her body, ripping skin and muscles apart.

Mandhani raised his voice. "I'm telling you what I saw!"

Rahul glanced at Khari. Now that she could think a little, Khari realized she didn't know when she'd heard the hunter brothers argue with each other. With anyone else in the tribe, yes, but the two of them always stood together.

Rahul got up first and held out his hand to help her. She felt so sick she didn't know if her legs would carry her, but when his warm fingers closed around hers, her head cleared just enough. Rahul kept her hand in his as they went over to the others, at the far end of the stand of trees.

They got there in time to hear Handan say, "That makes no sense. Why would one Lasska kill another?"

Radavan was listening to the talk, not interrupting to challenge or question. Mandhani said, "I don't know." His face looked hard, angry. Rahul let go of Khari's hand. "That's what happened," Mandhani said. "One of the older ones, the woman, she had a weapon and she used it to kill a young one."

One Lasska soldier had killed another? Khari didn't know how Mandhani had managed to see it when the group was moving so fast, but his eyes didn't lie. Why would a Lasska do that?

Handan said, "Then she made a mistake. She was aiming for us. They can track us here and they'll come after us in no time."

Sickness swamped Khari again. He was right. The soldiers wouldn't have any trouble following their track. She braced her feet hard on the ground; she wouldn't let her knees buckle in front of the men.

Handan said, "We have to go back and finish them."

He said it as if he actually thought they could do it, the handful of them with their few weapons. Handan had always been reckless, but to Khari, this sounded like madness.

Radavan said, "We can't go back." His voice sounded strangely sympathetic. "The Lasska didn't hurt us. It doesn't matter what the woman was trying to do."

Handan's face looked tight, but not flushed. He stood erect, face to face with Radavan, his arms rigid at his sides. "They want to kill us. You're telling me not to fight. What use am I?"

Maybe it was Khari's own fear, but something shifted then in the way she saw Handan. He wasn't only Pradesh's arrogant, bullheaded nephew. Khari looked at him now and saw the tribe's best fighter, who saw the terrible danger coming down on them all and wanted to put his own body as a shield between the Lasska and his people.

All his strength couldn't save them. Khari knew he understood that, whether or not he wanted to, and she knew how he had to feel. Out of her own sleepless nights, and the emptiness she felt when she thought her dream was nothing more than a useless fancy, she reached out for him.

"They could have come after us by now," she said. She talked straight to him, as if the two of them had been alone. "They must not be interested in us."

He rounded on her with his hands clenched into fists. "Vatiri said Shurik's men want to kill us. Why wouldn't these soldiers do it if they got the chance?"

Khari didn't know. Something in her mind nudged her, something strange and elusive, like a movement you caught out of the corner of your eye, that vanished when you turned to see it.

The older woman killing one of the younger soldiers. Khari didn't understand it any more than Handan did, but there was something about it. Something she couldn't quite catch.

No, she thought, it wasn't like a barely-seen movement. It was more like light. A pinpoint of light that disappeared when you tried to look straight at it, like the faintest stars, or the moon in its newest, thinnest sliver, so faint you could barely find it in the night sky.

Radavan said, "We won't go back. We'll rest here a little while. Then we'll keep going."

The moon.

Handan turned on his heel and went away from the group, out into the open plain.

Mandhani started to follow him, but Radavan stopped him. "Leave him alone."

Khari barely heard any of it. The moon.

Night after night, she had prayed to the Moon Woman for a new pathdream. Night after night, she had seen nothing, but something was coming to her now. She felt it, clear and brilliant, like a shaft of pure white light from the great low-hanging moon at the time of autumn harvest.

*Moon Woman. Forgive my doubt. You heard me and you are answering.*

She didn't know what else any of the men said to each other. She didn't know if Rahul stayed near her or not. She went back to the orena tree she had leaned against before and sat down. The dream came even before she closed her eyes.

A clearing in a deep forest. Khari saw the tall, strong trees, their thick branches twined together overhead. The cover was so dense that even in the clearing, no sunlight found the ground.

Khari herself seemed to stand at the edge of that narrow oval of open space, all gnarled tree roots stubbling the ground under a thin skim of moss and pale twists of grass. She knew she was dreaming, but when she made out a shape near her in the dark, she caught her breath.

A bear. An old male, stretched out at the foot of the nearest tree. His silvering muzzle had scars running back and forth across it, marks from many fights. He lay so close to Khari that she could have reached out and touched the rough fur on his flank. That flank rose and fell slowly, the only sign of life in him.

But there was more movement in the shadows. The shape of another bear loomed out so suddenly that Khari had to force herself not to step back. She must not fear her dream or do anything that might pull her out of it. Her hidden eye was wide awake, watching; she had never seen anything so clearly before, not even the man in Namora.

The second bear was female, younger and stronger than the male. She paced restlessly back and forth, back and forth across the clearing, shaking her head and growling softly as bears did when they were angry. Khari thought she felt the hot gusts of breath as the great head passed near her.

Rustling in the trees. A strong wind. Now the branches parted enough for a shaft of sunlight to hit the ground, bathing the clearing in light so bright it dazzled Khari's eyes. Every bump in every root stood out. Each individual frond of moss cast a shadow.

Movement from somewhere else, out in the deep forest. Something was crashing through the underbrush, coming toward the clearing from the opposite side. Khari made out the shape just as the newcomer stepped into the sunlight.

A third bear. A female in her prime.

The older female turned and raised her head. It seemed to Khari that she knew exactly what was about to happen before it did. She forced herself to stand perfectly still as, in one smooth motion and with no sound of warning, the older female launched herself at the young one.

The young bear was strong and healthy, but the older one was wily and savage with anger. The two fought back and forth across the clearing, snarling, clawing, tearing at each other. Their heavy paws trampled the dirt and their blood sprayed the ground. Khari did not move or breathe as the noise of their fury broke around and over her.

The male bear did. He opened his eyes and pushed his front paws underneath his stiff body, dragging himself up into a sitting position. His dark eyes followed the fight, but he made no move to stop or join it.

As suddenly as it had begun, the fight ended. The young bear lay on the ground with her throat torn open. The older female stood over her, triumphant.

The wind moved again in the trees. More branches parted. Now the sunlight pooled in the clearing and made a wide path that led away into the deep forest.

The female bear came up to the male. Khari saw her lower her head and rub her bloodstained muzzle against his scarred old face: a startlingly gentle motion after her savagery. Then she stepped back into the sunlight and followed the swath of it out of the clearing.

For a long time, the old male sat motionless where she had left him, looking away toward the place where she had disappeared into the trees. Khari knew she must not pull out of the dream. She must wait and see what he did.

Finally, slowly, he pulled himself to his feet. His legs seemed reluctant to hold him up, but he limped into the path the sunlight made. He left the body of the young bear behind and followed the older female's lead into the dark woods, which swallowed him.

Khari woke out of the dream so sharply it felt like jumping into an icy stream. Certainty, as bright as the sunlight that had filled the clearing in the woods, ran through her body.

*Moon Woman who guides us all. Thank you for what you have given me.*

She scrambled to her feet. "Handan!"

He was off by himself, sitting on the ground near the grazing horses. He'd found a stone and idly tossed it into the dirt, picked it up, tossed it again. Khari ran up to him.

"Handan," she repeated. "You were right. We have to find those soldiers again."

"What?" He dropped the stone.

The other men had heard her call out. They hurried over. "What is it?" Radavan said.

Khari no longer feared or doubted her pathdreams. Nothing had ever felt so clear to her. She didn't care that Handan looked incredulous and Rahul worried. She knew exactly what they had to do.

She turned to Mandhani. "You said an older Lasska woman killed a younger one. And you said you saw an older man too."

Mandhani looked as confused as his brother, but he answered at once. "From what I saw, the man was the oldest one there. Too old to be a fighter, really."

It all made sense. Khari said, "Those two, the man and the woman, will help us. We have to go back and find them."

Now Radavan looked as if he thought she had lost her senses. "Lasska soldiers help us? Why?"

Khari had once thought she could never stand to share a raw pathdream with anyone but Vatiri. Now, without hesitation, she told the others every detail of hers. The bears, the fight, the sunlight, how the surviving female left the clearing and the male followed her.

“The woman soldier will come with us,” she finished. “The man will come too, but she’ll have to convince him.”

All of them stared at her. “Khari,” Radavan said, “we can’t walk back into a Lasska camp. Are you sure this was a pathdream?”

His question didn’t even make her angry. “It’s the clearest one I’ve ever had. Mandhani saw the man and the woman. We know the older woman killed the younger one. The sunlight stands for the God and the Vaia. The Moon Woman is showing us what to do.”

Radavan still didn’t look convinced. Neither did Mandhani. Rahul looked simply worried, as if he thought Khari might be sick or dizzy.

Unexpectedly, Handan spoke up, from where he still sat on the ground. “I believe her.”

The others looked down at him. Mandhani said, “But she’s asking us to go looking for the people who want to kill us.”

Handan stood up. “I know what she’s asking. I don’t like it either.” His eyes moved to Khari’s face. “But I believe she’s telling the truth.”

Khari met his eyes. Suddenly he smiled, a grin of comradeship and mischief.

“Why not?” he said. “Maybe it’s harder not to kill a Lasska than kill one. If you put two old ones in front of me, you’ll have to tie me up.”

Khari found herself laughing. “That woman is dangerous,” she reminded him. “I think she could put up a fight.”

Now Radavan looked like he thought they were both crazy. “The old Lasska have young soldiers with them. Fighters,” he said. “We know what kind of weapons they have. We can’t go into their camp.”

Rahul said, “One of us could.”

Khari’s laughter stopped. Rahul said, “I speak better Lasska than any of us. I could go into their camp alone and talk to the old ones.”

Khari wanted to say, *No, let me do it*. She wanted to put her hand on his arm, physically stop him if she could. Handan said, “I should do it. If they want a fight, I’ll give them one.”

Mandhani said, “If you’re going, I’m coming with you.”

Radavan cut off the argument before it could start. “No.” He looked at Rahul. “If anyone goes, he needs to be alone and unarmed.”

He didn’t say, but Khari heard, *That’s the only chance he’ll come out alive*. She knew he was right. The Lasska wouldn’t hesitate to kill an armed enemy who looked like the least danger to them.

Again, she wanted to offer to go into the camp herself. She couldn’t. She was their only Lamp-Carrier, and besides, she only knew a few words of Lasska, nowhere near enough. In spite of the dream and everything she knew, she hated to see Rahul stake his life on her judgment.

He looked at her. His eyes told her he guessed at least some of her thoughts. “If Khari is sure about this,” he said, “then we need to do it.”

She made the only answer she could. “I’m sure.”

“Then I’ll go.”

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The group circled back and quickly picked up the Lasska trail. They found the camp again in the early evening. While the rest of them stayed well back, Mandhani went forward alone to see what



he could. As the sun set, he came back with the report that most of the soldiers had bedded down for the night, but that the older woman soldier was awake, standing guard.

They couldn't hope for a better chance. As they waited for the safety of full night, Radavan told them all to rest and eat. No one could be sure what would happen once Rahul got to the camp. They had to be ready to run, or to fight as best they could if they had to try to save him.

Khari managed a few mouthfuls of flatbread and a swallow of water. No one else seemed to want to eat much either. Rahul sat with his head down and his eyes closed and didn't touch any food at all. Khari knew he was praying. If only they could have done this in the daylight, she thought; if only the Sun God could have guided him. But if it was dangerous enough to walk into the camp after dark, with most of the soldiers asleep, walking into an alert and armed Lasska regiment would mean certain death.

The Sun God could not guide Rahul. The Moon Woman could. As the dark settled around them, the bright white moonlight made lines of shadow behind each blade of grass. Khari looked up at Her face and felt the certainty of the pathdream rising in her again.

Finally Radavan said quietly, "Go, Rahul. May She walk with you."

Rahul got to his feet. No one spoke, but Rahul met Khari's eyes again and seemed to find some kind of assurance there. Only for her, he smiled.

He swung up onto his horse. Khari and the others watched him ride away until the darkness hid him.

They waited. No one spoke. Khari stared into the night as if somehow the Moon Woman would make a path for her to see all the way into the Lasska camp. She barely felt the hard ground under her or the rough grass against her palms. In her mind, she repeated a prayer, over and over, to the Moon Woman whose white light surrounded them.

*Bring him back.*

Mandhani saw him first. “He’s coming!”

The words barely made more noise than the breeze that rustled the grass, but Khari felt them like a shock of lightning through her body and back down into the soil. Now she, too, saw the shape of the Vaia horse and its rider, and only a little distance behind them, a second rider on a taller, heavier horse.

The Lasska woman. Khari’s dream had told the truth.

## Chapter 10

On the morning of Sesdina, Sixth Day, almost a week after the news came from Kunin Dergo about Tavin Ardinás's death, Ribas attended at a birth in the village. The new weaver's young wife was having her first child.

As early as it was, and as much as he wouldn't have minded another hour or two of sleep, Ribas savored the short walk to the weaver's house. Mist rose in plumes off the gravel roads as the first yellow rays of sunlight burned off last night's hard frost. Smoke from the first hearth fires hung in the air. Ribas breathed deep, tasting the sweet darkness of the smoke in the clear cold morning.

In this part of the village, the houses stood shoulder to shoulder, each with a small plot of land behind. Their front doors gave directly onto the road. Ribas turned onto the weaver's street and saw Lida's healer, Tayo Nevas, waiting in front of the house.

The zhinin always had to attend a birth, to perform the ceremony of bringing-in that must happen as soon as a child took its first breaths. Most families only called the tayo in if there was trouble. Ribas quickened his pace.

Tayo Nevas took his short wooden pipe out of his mouth as soon as Ribas got within earshot. "'Ribé. What do you think you're doing, coming up here on foot?'"

The tayo had known Ribas since childhood and had cared for him during the illness that, as he still said, Ribas had only survived because he was too stubborn to know when to quit. Now Nevas was past fifty, his hair entirely silver-gray.

"Good morning to you too, Nevé," Ribas said. "What's the trouble here?"

The tayo, a head shorter than Ribas, frowned up at him. "It's getting too cold for you to be walking," he said. "I don't need another patient at this hour of the morning. Truth be told, I shouldn't have any patients at this hour of the morning."

“Tayo, tell me what’s wrong here.”

Nevas clamped the pipe in his mouth again. “Nothing. They need you, not me.”

Ribas relaxed. He had served at plenty of difficult births over the years, but it never got easier to wait by those bedsides. Nevas went on, talking around the pipe, “She’s panicking, and her husband isn’t much better. Some people could do with more sense.”

“Shouldn’t you be in there anyhow?” Ribas said. “They did send for you.”

“You don’t need to remind me.” Nevas drew on the pipe and blew the smoke out in a fragrant cloud. “I was waiting for you. The man’s nattering on like a distracted chicken. I couldn’t stand it anymore.” Ribas swallowed a laugh. Nevas acted as if all the villagers were troublesome children who invented illnesses and injuries to annoy him, but Ribas had good reason to know how diligent the healer really was. “And now,” Nevas said, “I find you out in the cold as if you lost the sense you were born with.”

“It’s four blocks, tayo. If I can’t manage that, you might as well start digging a hole right now.”

“We might have to do that anyway, you keep on like this.”

Nevas opened the door and pointedly stood aside. Ribas heard the order the tayo didn’t give him out loud: *Get yourself in the warm.*

The house had the same layout as all the others in this part of the village. The front door opened into a small hallway with a staircase leading up to the second floor. Off to the side, a single brick-floored front room connected to a kitchen at the back, with a door that gave out on the yard. Most villagers had vegetable plots, a few had fruit trees, and all had herbs and flowers that would turn the yards into a patchwork of color in the spring. The weaver’s house had plain furnishings, but the walls were impeccably whitewashed, bright curtains hung at the window in the front room, and a warm fire in the front room had taken the morning chill out of the house. Ribas saw a clay vase of

late-blooming ramunas, the starlike pale blue flowers with deep purple hearts, on the fireplace mantel.

The weaver himself came running down the stairs as soon as Nevas shut the door. Luvo Azulaikas was in his early forties, small and thin, with quick hands and shoulders starting to show a permanent hunch from all the time he spent over the loom. He and his much-younger wife, Alayut, had moved to Lida from Paret only a few weeks earlier. Luvo had told Ribas that town life had gotten stale for them. They wanted to raise their child in a place where they could hear the birds in the morning and the crickets at night. Ribas suspected the weaver had wanted that considerably more than his wife, but she wouldn't deny him.

“Zhinin,” Luvo said now. “Goddess be thanked.”

In spite of the warmth in the house, Luvo's hands felt icy as he caught hold of Ribas's. Out of the corner of his eye, Ribas saw Nevas shake his head and cast a long-suffering glance at the ceiling.

“I've been so worried,” Luvo said. “Please, come right up.”

Ribas followed Luvo up the narrow stairs, with Nevas coming behind. The house was a couple of generations old and the wooden planks creaked underfoot. As they went up, Ribas said gently, “The tayo tells me there's no trouble.”

Luvo stopped in the upstairs hall. His eyes looked hunted. “I hope so,” he said. “But Alya...well, she's having a hard time.”

The upper floor had two bedrooms, a larger one for the family and a smaller one for a guest. A homespun runner covered the length of the short hallway. Luvo went into the larger bedroom.

“Alya, love,” he said. “We're all right now. The zhinin's here.”

*They need you, not me.* Some people thought Ribas had even more power than the healer, but he couldn't do anything to make sure a birth went the way it should. He hoped Nevas was right today, that his skills would be enough here.

The bedroom was as plain as the downstairs, but bright and warm with its own small hearth fire. The single window looked out into the back yard, now bare except for the straggling frostbitten remnants of the summer's flowers. The big bed in the middle of the room dwarfed the small, dark-eyed woman who lay propped up there on a thick pillow.

Alayut Luvenis was barely twenty, young to have a baby. Ribas knew that Luvo, who had at one point resigned himself to dying a bachelor, thought himself extraordinarily lucky that she'd agreed to have him. She reminded Ribas of his sister-in-law Virta, with darker eyes and hair but the same delicate prettiness.

She wasn't crying, but Ribas could see that she had been, very lately. "Zhinin," she whispered.

Ribas felt her terror, thick as fog in the room. He sat down in the straight-backed chair beside the bed and took her hand between both of his.

"Everything's fine, Alya. The tayo says you're doing well."

She and Luvo were still getting used to the life of the village. Ribas knew she was shy, and doubly withdrawn because of her pregnancy. She hadn't made friends yet. Her eyes filled with tears again when she heard him use her nickname; probably no one else in Lida had yet.

Her fingers tightened around his. "Zhinin, I..." A spasm of pain crossed her face. "I miss home."

Luvo was hovering by the foot of the bed. "Alya, love. This is our home."

Ribas caught Nevas's eye. The healer said, "We'll wait outside."

He took the weaver's arm and marched him to the door. From the hallway, Ribas heard Luvo protest and Nevas say, "The zhinin will take care of this. He'll call if he needs us."

At births and deaths, the times of greatest upheaval, people couldn't hold onto any masks they wore. Ribas knew what kinds of truths could come out at those bedsides. Alayut's feelings had weighed on her more than the child inside her.

She was crying now. "Luvo doesn't understand," she said. "He loves it here. I can't tell him I'm so lonely."

Ribas held her hand in one of his and rested the other on her hair, the way he would have comforted a sick child. "We're glad you've come to Lida," he said. "I know it's very different from what you're used to. Paret's a beautiful town, isn't it?" She sobbed agreement. Ribas said, "But I've lived here all my life, and I can tell you, it's the finest place in the world."

Her sob turned briefly into a laugh. "Is it?"

"I promise it is. You don't see it at its best this time of year, but just wait for spring, when everything's in bloom. And we'll have you feeling at home long before that."

"I wish my mother could have...but my father's not well." She swallowed hard. "He couldn't travel, and she couldn't leave him by himself."

Of course she wanted her mother here now. Ribas said, "We'll take good care of you, Alya. Your mother and father will be so glad to hear about their grandchild." He felt her clinging to the words as tightly as she gripped his hand. "And in a few weeks, we'll have the ceremony of welcome at the Circle House." That was the first public ceremony of a child's life, when the whole community turned out to greet a new arrival. "Everyone will be there for you and Luvo and your baby."

That idea made her sob again. "They will?"

“Of course.” Ribas smoothed her hair. “We take these things very seriously in Lida. If anyone missed a welcoming, they’d hear about it from me.”

She met his eyes and tried to smile. Ribas saw the same trust in her face that he saw in Asira’s, when she was frightened or hurt and came to him for help.

*Goddess above, let me always be able to help.*

Pain washed over her. Her fingers dug into Ribas’s hand. “Zhinin. I’m so scared.”

He didn’t often have to use the gift at a birth, but Alayut needed more than words now. “May I help?” he asked.

She understood the question. Her face gave him the permission he needed. He called on the gift and closed his eyes.

It showed him a mass of fear, exactly as he had expected: bruise-blue lines intertwined with the hot orange of hurt. This cut would take a lot from him. More than he should give, maybe, but he had to help.

He called on as much strength as he dared. When he made the cut, the room spun, but he opened his eyes and saw the wonder in Alayut’s face. “Zhinin.” Her voice sounded stronger already. “I...”

The pain came back. The baby was coming. She didn’t want to let go of his hand – “please, zhinin, stay right here” – so he called for Nevas’s help with the delivery. The tayo came in pretending to grumble about “perfectly simple births,” but Ribas knew how glad he was to make himself useful. The healer told Luvo in no uncertain terms to stay where he was in the hall.

Ribas cut Alayut’s fear twice more before the baby, a healthy girl, arrived into Nevas’s waiting hands. The tayo bathed the squalling baby in water warmed over the fire and swaddled her in the waiting blanket.

“A fine child,” he said. “Healthy lungs.”



Alayut didn't let go of Ribas's hand until he had to take the baby from Nevas for the bringing-in. The tayo stuck his head out into the hall.

"Luvo Azulaikas. Come meet your daughter."

The weaver came in looking as if he'd survived several lifetimes over the past hour or two. Ribas didn't feel much better himself. The three cuts certainly had taken more than he should have given. His heart raced and a dull, throbbing ache radiated out from it, through his chest and up his spine. He hoped no one noticed how much effort it took him to reach out for the baby and settle her in the crook of his arm.

The Namoran faith said that, before a child was born, its soul waited out in the wholeness of the world. It must be welcomed in and joined with the body at birth, in the same way that it would later be released back into the world after death. The baby quieted in Ribas's arms. He asked the ritual question: "What is this child's name?"

Alayut's tired face was full of light. "Tiesa."

Ribas put his hand on the tiny head. "Tiesa Luvaikas, by the authority vested in me as a servant of the Goddess Kenavi, I welcome you into Her earthly family."

He had done this shortest, most powerful ceremony so many times. The wonder of welcoming a new soul never faded. Ribas heard the weaver catch his breath at that word "Luvaikas," the name that told the world this was his child.

The baby squeezed her eyes tight shut and pursed her little mouth, as if she wanted to tell the zhinin to hurry up with this business. Ribas smiled. "Long may you thrive, daughter of Kenavi," he said. "Tebena."

Alayut, Luvo, and Nevas all answered, "Tebena." Ribas put Tiesa into her mother's arms. The sun stood well above the horizon now. A warm shaft of light fell through the window and across the bed.

Alayut looked as if she didn't remember what loneliness meant. She took her eyes off her daughter's face long enough to say, "Thank you, zhinin."

This family would be all right. Ribas got to his feet and managed not to hold onto the chair for support. He and Nevas made their goodbyes and saw themselves out.

Out in the street, with the door safely shut behind them, Nevas gripped Ribas's arm. "You look terrible."

He'd been right after all. Ribas shouldn't have walked up here. "I didn't think I'd have to do that," he said. Nevas knew that meant the gift.

"You didn't have to do it. You decided to."

"It's only four blocks home." That seemed much farther than it had this morning.

"You're not going alone," Nevas said.

The village was awake now. Full daylight warmed the streets. The smells of baking bread, the voices of neighbors calling out to each other, and the clop of horses' hooves filled the air. Ribas didn't like people to see him when he felt this weak. Everyone knew about his heart, but the zhinin ought to be strong.

He tried not to lean too heavily on Nevas. The healer said, "Don't be an idiot. I can't fix that heart, but I can be a crutch." Ribas knew how much it frustrated him that he couldn't "fix that heart." He had wanted to since Ribas was a child. "I don't know what Marya's going to say to you," Nevas said.

Ribas had a feeling he did. When they got to the priest's house, Maryut was out front sweeping the porch. She took one look at her husband and dropped the broom. "Goddess hear me."

"I'm all right," Ribas said.

In two steps she reached him and took charge of him from Nevas, wrapping her arm around his waist, leading him up to the house as if he were an ancient grandfather. “Tayo,” she said, “how bad was the birth?”

“It wasn’t,” Nevas said. “Your husband did more than he had to. As usual.”

“Nevé,” Ribas began.

“Don’t you deny it,” the tayo said. “Marya should scold you as much as she wants. Alayut Luvenis could have managed all right.”

*I couldn’t let her suffer like that.* Ribas didn’t have the energy to argue. Nevas told Maryut about the delivery, the healthy baby, and how much Ribas had done to help the scared mother. In the front hall, Maryut looked up at her husband with the love and exasperation he knew so well. “Ribas Silvaikas, you’re going to bed this minute. I’m closing this door and latching it.”

“Marya...”

“I don’t care who wants what from you this morning. You need to sleep.”

Nevas said, “Do what she says, Ribé. And take that pain medicine.”

Ribas tried to look stern. “I do have some sense, you know.”

“Then try to act like it,” Maryut said. “Go upstairs right now, or do you need help?”

Ribas wouldn’t accept help to get up the stairs in his own house. He heard Maryut and the tayo still talking as he made it to the bedroom and measured out a dose of the willow bark tincture Nevas made up for him. He swallowed it and pushed off his shoes. Then the room, the daylight, the voices, and the angry ache in his chest all faded as he sank onto the bed and let sleep claim him.

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He woke at midday when Maryut sat down on the bed beside him. “Love. Danya’s here with some sort of letter.”

Ribas sat up cautiously. His chest had stopped hurting. “Letter?”

“She said it came by courier. If you don’t open it soon, she’s liable to turn inside out.”

Danya had changed quite a bit since the Pirdina service. She wasn’t a frightened little mouse anymore. Maryut sized him up. “You’ve got some color back.”

“I’m fine.”

“So you say. When are you going to stop doing too much?”

He touched her face. “I’m sorry.”

He did try to be careful. He knew he shouldn’t take more risks than he had to, but he didn’t know how to walk away from trouble he could solve.

Maryut said, “I think I know you by now.” She drew his head down and kissed his forehead. “You need to eat something too. Come on.”

In the kitchen, Danya was sitting at the little round table with a mug of tea. “Raimaté, zhinin,” she said.

Ribas bowed, mock-solemn. “Raimaté, mosevin.”

She had kept her promise to tell him when she felt her troubles closing in. Since he had cut the net around her, she had started looking people in the eye, moving around the Circle House with assurance, chatting with the villagers, and – best, to Ribas’s way of thinking – laughing often. She and Jano were becoming quite a pair. Sometimes Ribas had to remind them to quit joking around and get their work done.

His greeting made her laugh now. She held out a heavy parchment envelope. “A courier came to the Circle House a little while ago. He said this needed to get to you right away. It’s from Sostavi.”

Sostavi? Ribas took the letter with a new feeling of misgiving. He hadn’t had any communication from Sostavi in fifteen years, since Tavin Ardinan had put a stop to Sventin Galvo’s letters.

Maryut said, “Zhinin, you don’t open that until you eat something.” She put a plate of cheese and warm new bread on the table, along with a mug of strong tea with a spoon of honey in it. “Sit.”

Ribas obeyed. Danya said quickly and unconvincingly, “I should go back to the House.”

She didn’t take her eyes off the letter. Ribas couldn’t help smiling. “No, you can stay, mosevin. We’ll find out what this is about.” Surely, he thought, Sventin Galvo hadn’t decided to renew his requests to have Ribas come to Sostavi, now that Tavin Ardinias was gone. The sventin wouldn’t think it was worth his while to open up that old discussion again.

As he ate enough to satisfy Maryut’s watchful eye, he looked at the seal on the back of the envelope. No, it wasn’t Sventin Galvo. Ribas had never seen this seal before, but he knew who used it. The amber-colored wax seal with the Great House insignia belonged to the Tavo Balsa.

A strange quiet settled on him. Valda? After so many years?

Ribas put empty the plate aside, broke the seal, and took two closely-written sheets of parchment out of the envelope. Sure enough, on the second page, he saw her signature. *Yours in the fellowship of the Goddess Kenavi.*

Maryut said, “What is it, Ribé?”

She had sat down next to Danya. Ribas said, “It’s from Valdena Filtraikas.”

Danya gasped. “The Tavo Balsa wrote to you?”

“Yes.”

Maryut’s jaw set. “What does she want?”

Ribas put the letter down and reached over to touch her hand. “Marya, it was, what, sixteen, seventeen years ago? I think you can forgive her. And me,” he added.

She smiled reluctantly. “I forgave you a long time ago.”

Danya did look as if she might turn inside out with questions. Ribas said, “The Tavo Balsa and I were students at the viduris together. We were close friends in those days. For a little while, we were more than that, but it didn’t last.” He glanced at Maryut. “Somebody made it clear that I was hers.”

Danya blushed. “You and the Tavo Balsa...you were...”

“We were both mosevine then, remember. Younger than you and Jano are now.”

Maryut said, “I straightened him out. He had no right to look at another girl.”

Danya’s cheeks looked ready to ignite, but she laughed at that. Ribas said to Maryut, “You were furious, as I recall.”

“You deserved it.”

All the sting and confusion of that time had long since blown away. They had all been so young. Ribas had been sixteen, Maryut fourteen, with her pick of the village boys. Ribas couldn’t have imagined life without her any more than he could imagine losing a hand, but he’d always assumed she would go on being the sister he’d never had. She deserved a healthy, strong husband.

When his friendship with Valda trembled briefly into something new and strange, Maryut had set him straight. His first visit home, after his letters had mentioned Valda in the new way, Maryut had given him a massive serving of ice and then dished out all the fire her naturally quick temper could muster. At first, he had been baffled and hurt. Then, one afternoon, she had cornered him alone in the apple orchard, taken his face between her hands, and stood on tiptoe to administer a kiss that left him breathless. Afterward, she looked him in the eye. “Now you know, Ribas Silvaikas.”

He had known, all right. He belonged to her, then and always.

Now she gestured at the letter. “So why is the Tavo Balsa writing to you?”

She still didn’t sound terribly forgiving. Ribas let it go and picked up the letter.

*Raimaté, Zhinin Ribas,*

*You must be surprised to hear from me. I regret that it's been so long. I should have written to you years ago. When I first arrived in Sostavi, I thought of you more than you can perhaps imagine.*

Those words brought back the girl she had been. He had hated knowing how much he hurt her, when he'd had to explain that he'd made a mistake and his heart wasn't his to give. He was sorry to see she had carried that hurt to Sostavi. As he read on, though, the other news of the past fifteen years sank in. Her rise through the ranks of the dagira, her service as the Tavin's right hand, her disappointment and disgust with her colleagues during Ardinás's last illness.

*I was ashamed of them. Scheming and grubbing as if his life and death didn't mean a thing, except that his death left an open place they were ravenous to fill.*

Sostavi bred its own brand of snakes. Ribas had certainly gotten a taste of that in all those letters from Sventin Galvo. And that was putting aside whatever had happened to his own father in the Great House, long before Ribas was born.

*Many people do grieve for Tavin Ardinás and remember him as he deserves, she wrote. They miss their leader, as they should, but I must tell you that the person I grieve for is the old man who was unfailingly kind to a young woman trying to find her place here. He was a wise ruler. He was a good man.*

Ribas felt her sadness as if it had seeped into the paper along with the ink. He could guess, after all, why she'd written to him now. But then she mentioned the election. *I can't believe what's happened.*

Maryut said to Danya, "I wish he'd read faster." Danya laughed, a quickly stifled sound. Valda had written about the vote. Ribas had to read it twice before he could take it in.

Eight votes for Sventin Galvo. Five for this Sventin Lesvin that Ribas had never heard of. Three to abstain.

A deadlocked vote. Ribas knew what that meant. Every member of the dagira did.

Maryut said, “What is it? Goddess hear me, Ribé, tell us.”

He looked at her and managed to say it. “She’s Tavin. Valda is the next Tavin.”

Her mouth dropped open. Ribas couldn’t take the time to explain. He handed her the first page of the letter and went on to the second. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Danya lean over to read over Maryut’s shoulder.

Valda wrote, *Sventin Galvo may still think I wanted this. I think you’ll understand that I didn’t want it at all. I want it even less, if that’s possible, given that it’s only happened because my colleagues couldn’t agree on a candidate.*

Of course she didn’t want it. What a position to find herself in. Suddenly she was Namora’s new leader, but she hadn’t chosen that, or reached for it, or had any real reason to believe it would come to her. And now she had to accept it not because the Council had approved her, or the Goddess had blessed her, but because the vote had failed.

She told him she wouldn’t wait until Ketva or hold a great celebration for her Installation. She wanted to have it in Tyla, as soon and as quietly as possible.

*Would you consider making the journey? It would mean so much to have you and Maryut Ribenis here.*

He put the page down. Maryut had flipped to the other side of the first page. She and Danya were scanning it intently, but she felt his eyes on her and looked up. “What is it now?” she demanded.

“She wants us to come to the High Installation.”

Danya gasped. Maryut snatched the second page from him and read as if her eyes would suck the words off the paper. “In Tyla,” she said. “Goddess hear me. Of all things.”

Danya said, “Of course you have to go, zhinin. Jano and I can take care of things here.”



“I know you can,” Ribas said automatically. Technically, what Valda had written wasn’t an invitation so much as a summons. No backwater zhinin had the right to refuse the Tavin’s personal request. And who in his right mind would turn down the chance to see a High Installation?

Maryut finished reading and looked up at him, wide-eyed. “What should we do?”

The Great Circle House Ribas had never seen loomed up in his imagination. Sventin Galvo was there, to be sure, the man Ribas had managed to avoid meeting fifteen years ago. Worse than the living sventin, Ribas thought, there might be shadows hiding in the great city. He didn’t want to stumble on any memories of his father.

“You should go,” Danya said again. “You can’t miss that.”

“We’ll have to think about it,” Ribas said. “Danya, thank you for bringing this over. When you go back to the House, please don’t say anything about it to Jano yet.”

She understood he was dismissing her. “Yes, zhinin.” She bowed to him and Maryut and left the kitchen.

Maryut still held the second page of the letter. “A High Installation. But...”

She could guess about the things Ribas didn’t want to find in Sostavi. She didn’t know, yet, how serious things were with Gedrin. The evening at the Sheaf and Barrel, and that terrible Capture game, stood as sharply in Ribas’s memory as if they’d happened yesterday. Could he leave Gedrin here alone?

“I know,” he said. He took another swallow of tea, remembering the lonely girl at the viduris who had looked up from her book with frightened eyes. *If you could be here for another ceremony now, Valda had written, I might be able to see it through.*

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That evening, Ribas and Maryut went up to the farm for supper. They hadn’t told anyone else about Valda’s letter, though Ribas knew it couldn’t be long before the news about the next

Tavin spread from Sostavi out into the farthest reaches of the country. No doubt he would get a letter from Kunin Dergo soon, telling him what he already knew. Whether or not Valda had won a vote, Ribas could imagine the old kunin's pride at the thought of one of his students moving into the House of the Tavin.

At the farmhouse, Ribas kept a close eye on his brother. Gedrin talked and laughed, swung Asira up on his shoulders when she asked him to, sat down at the Capture board with Raulin before supper. Ribas sat with them and saw no signs of impatience while his brother reviewed the basics of Capture with the little boy and played a short easy game with him, letting Raulin do moves over when he made mistakes. Gedrin didn't believe in losing deliberately, but Raulin didn't get frustrated or disappointed when his father scooped up his white Master. After the game ended, Raulin examined the pieces and reviewed moves with a seriousness that reminded Ribas of himself at that age. Ribas told him, "You'll be able to beat me in no time, Raulí," and Gedrin joked that he hoped any child of his could do that.

Supper was Virta's barley and vegetable stew, with biscuits Asira had helped roll out and cut. After everyone had pushed their empty plates and bowls aside and settled back to enjoy the warmth of the fire in the old farmhouse kitchen, and after Raulin and Asira had run down to the front room to play, Ribas told the family that he and Maryut needed their advice.

Gedrin propped his elbows on the table, cheerfully curious. "What's going on, brother?"

*Wait till you hear.* A lot of this decision would depend on how Gedrin took the news. Maryut had brought the letter. She took it out of the pocket of her dress and set it on the table while Ribas told the family about the election.

Mama looked stunned. "Valda Filtraikas as Tavin."

She remembered Valda very well. Virta, too, looked astonished. She had never met Valda: she'd been a little girl when Ribas was at the viduris, and hadn't met Gedrin until several years later,

but she was from Paret too. Ribas saw her taking in the fact that a girl from her own town was going to be their new leader.

Mama reached out and picked up the letter. She skimmed it as Ribas explained about the Installation. “Valda wants Maryut and me to go,” he said. “That’s why we need advice.”

On the one hand, he said, it would mean him leaving the Circle House for weeks, longer than he’d left it since his installation, and winter would be on them soon. On the other, it was a High Installation, and Valda was asking with the right of an old friend who needed help.

Mama glanced up from the parchment. Her eyes met Ribas’s. He knew she had many of the same thoughts he did, not only about the trip and the possible risks, but about Sostavi itself. The same shadow hung over the city in her mind. She had never known what had happened to Silvas there. Ribas didn’t think she wanted the past woken up any more than he did.

Gedrin said, “I don’t think you should go.”

Ribas looked at his brother and saw exactly what he had hoped he wouldn’t. Gedrin’s face looked hard, his jaw tight. He spoke quietly enough, but his voice had a dangerous undercurrent in it, like a fishing line pulled to the snapping point.

Ribas kept his own voice calm. “Why do you say that?”

“Because of everything you just said. You’d be gone too long. It’s almost winter. It’ll be Akena soon and that’s your busiest time.”

The edge in his tone got sharper with every word. Mama heard it too. Ribas saw her pass the letter back to Maryut. She sat still, her hands quiet on the table, but her eyes went back and forth between her sons.

Ribas knew he had to see for himself how far this would go. He wasn’t a child anymore, facing down the father who had turned into something else. “My mosevine can take over at the

House for a while,” he said. “We’d be back before the end of Tyla. There would be plenty of time to get ready for the Akena services.”

A dark flush climbed up into Gedrin’s cheeks. Virta was watching him closely, Ribas saw. In her eyes he read a fear he’d never seen before.

*No, Gedri. Not you.*

Maryut said, “It’s a High Installation. We may never get another chance to see one.” Ribas heard her impatience. To her, Gedrin was acting like a spoiled child.

Gedrin said, “My brother’s place is here.” His hand came down flat on the table. “Here, where we need him.”

He wasn’t shouting, not yet, but anger thickened and curdled his voice. Virta looked very pale. Ribas said, “What’s worrying you, Gedri?”

Then it came. Ribas was ready for it, thought he was ready for it, after what he had seen at the inn so recently, but when Gedrin surged to his feet, when his hand swept his empty bowl off the table to smash on the floor, every instinct Ribas had screamed at him to back away, to run.

He had not run from Silvas, no matter how much he had wanted to. It took every ounce of his self-control to sit still now.

“Don’t you talk to me like I’m a child!” Gedrin snarled, and it was a snarl. Rage twisted his face. “You belong here, not in Sostavi, not someplace else where we can’t reach you! I don’t care what this woman wants! You shouldn’t either!”

Beside Ribas, Maryut drew a sharp breath. Ribas knew she wanted to give Gedrin a piece of her mind. Without breaking eye contact with his brother, he touched her arm and shook his head.

Gedrin saw it. “Why do you always think you know so much? You always know what’s best for everyone, you always...”

Mama started to say something, but Ribas got there first, gently but firmly interrupting his brother. “I’m supposed to know,” he said. “What kind of zhinin would I be if I didn’t?”

He held onto a picture of much-younger Gedrin, a little boy, wanting to know why his brother couldn’t stay and work the farm. He held onto the memory of that little boy’s tears. This was still the same Gedrin. Ribas must not forget it.

At the Sheaf, Gedrin had pulled himself out of the fit, or it had stopped on its own. This time it didn’t stop. Ribas had time to see that Virta was crying, and then his brother was coming around the table with his anger like a fire around him.

Seldo could have defended himself if he’d had to. Ribas was no match for Gedrin. His brother would never try to hurt him, but his brother wasn’t thinking now.

He got to his feet. Mama stood up too. Ribas had time to see the vivid blue of her eyes in her too-pale face.

A long time ago, a child had tried to protect his mother from hurt. He hadn’t been able to do it, he had been too small, too weak, and his father’s anger had ripped the world apart. Now Ribas had to let his brother’s anger fall on him so it wouldn’t touch anyone else in this room. The zhinin couldn’t be afraid.

The gift showed him the livid red lines of the net. They seared against his own mind, too hot and strong. He should not do this. Gedrin had told him not to, before, but now he had no choice.

The lines had no weak places he could find. Knowing what the gift would take this time, he reached in with all the strength he could call up.

*Cut.*

One line snapped. The net began to unravel. As it fell away from Gedrin, the strands lashed against Ribas’s mind, burning.

He had one moment to know it had worked. Gedrin stopped, his face frozen in confusion. Then pain came for Ribas and the room went dark.

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He opened his eyes to see a very familiar ceiling. His bedroom, when he was growing up; Raulin's now.

His chest throbbed again and his body felt cold and clammy, as if he'd been sick. He knew he was lucky he didn't feel worse. He shouldn't have used the gift that way, especially after this morning.

Maryut's icy voice reached him. She told someone, "Don't you dare. You've done enough as it is."

Ribas tried to sit up on the bed, but the room started to spin. That felt worse than the pain. Someone put a hand on his chest. "Lie still."

He leaned back against the pillow and turned his head enough to see Mama sitting by the bed. The lines on her face and the silver in her hair stood out in the lamplight.

"I'm all right," he said. It hurt to talk, but he knew that would pass. After so many years, he ought to be resigned to his weakness. It still frustrated him every time. "I'm sorry your boys were fighting," he added, to see if he could make her smile.

She didn't. "Gedri didn't mean it."

"I know."

"You shouldn't have done that, my dove. Gedri wouldn't forgive himself if you got hurt."

"I'm fine, Mama. Besides, he'd have taken it worse if he'd hurt me himself."

Her face told him she knew that too. Her hand stayed on his chest and he willed his still-racing heart to slow down. She said quietly, "What are we going to do about him?"

He didn't know. From somewhere outside the door, he heard his brother saying, "I need to know if he's better!"

No doubt Maryut wouldn't let him in. Ribas managed to speak up enough for her to hear him.

"Marya."

She was beside the bed in an instant. "How are you feeling?"

"I'm all right. I just need to rest a while. Let Gedri come in."

Her face tightened. "Please, Marya," he said. "I need to talk to him."

Maryut glanced across him at Mama. Mama looked intently into Ribas's face before she nodded and stood up. "Let's let them talk." To Ribas she added, "If you need anything, my dove, you have your brother call us."

"I will."

The two of them went out. Ribas heard Mama say, "He wants to talk to you. Be careful, now, and don't tire him out."

Gedrin rushed in. He took Mama's chair and caught Ribas's hand. "Goddess hear me, Ribé. I'm so sorry."

Ribas checked carefully in on his brother's mind. He had guessed what he would see, but that didn't stop the pang of new frustration when the gift showed him the lines of the net still there, slack and drooping, like the tendrils of a hardy vine that only needed water and light to flourish again. How long before they did? Could he stop it?

He smiled up at Gedrin. "When you want to cause trouble, you do it right. Breaking things, shouting at people. I thought you had some manners."

"I told you not to do that for me."

"I was going to let you knock me into next week? I don't think so, little brother."

Gedrin didn't smile back. "I'm scared, Ribé."

He hadn't been willing to admit that much at the inn. Now Ribas heard the tears in his voice. Of the two of them, Gedrin had always been much quicker to let everyone see what he felt, laughter or sadness or anything else. Mama said that was like their father too.

Ribas said, "What do you think happened there in the kitchen?"

"I don't know. I don't know why I got so angry. Goddess hear me, I wanted to hurt you. I felt like I had something inside me..." Gedrin motioned helplessly at his chest. "Something biting at me, tearing into me. It wouldn't stop."

Ribas found himself wondering if Silvas had felt the same thing. How much strength had it taken for him to manage his anger, however much he could? Had he felt the same shame Gedrin so clearly did?

The fear in his brother's eyes hurt Ribas more than the pain in his chest. He reached up to touch Gedrin's face. "You didn't hurt anyone."

"I would have, if you hadn't stopped me. I'd have hurt you."

"But you didn't. What do you think made you angry?"

They could have been boys again. Gedrin had grown up without a father, but Ribas, almost seven years older, had filled that place as well as he could. Gedrin had always trusted his brother to make things right.

He said, "You were talking about going away. I thought I couldn't stand it if you did. I..." He broke off, staring at the opposite wall, still gripping Ribas's hand. "Something's wrong with me," he said. "I know that. And I still don't want you to use that gift on me. But I thought, if you weren't here..."



Ribas understood. Gedrin looked at him again. "If you want to go to Sostavi, you should." He tried to sound cheerful. "Marya's right. When would you get to see another High Installation? And you knew Valda at school. I shouldn't stop you."

"You're not the only one around here who needs their zhinin. A lot of people might not like me going away."

"That's because you spoil us. You help us too much."

That was so exactly what Nevas and Maryut had said that morning that Ribas laughed, which made his chest hurt more. To keep Gedrin from noticing, he said, "What do you mean, something's wrong with you?"

He thought he knew what the answer would be. He was right. Gedrin said, "I'm turning out like Da."

The hopelessness in the words cut at Ribas again. He and Mama had always been very careful of what they told Gedrin about the father he didn't remember. After Silvas's death, everyone in Lida knew how he had been treating his wife and older son, and everyone knew what had happened because of it. Mama and Ribas hadn't wanted Gedrin to grow up with the shadow of old grief on him. They had tried, as much as they could, to protect the boy from the darkest things.

Now the dark had come for him anyway. "I know you and Mama were better off after Da died," Gedrin said. "I know I was, too. I don't want my family to have to say that about me."

"Gedri," Ribas said, "no one will ever say that about you."

He still didn't have any answers. The best the gift could do, or the best he could do with it, couldn't fix his brother's trouble for good. *Goddess*, Ribas thought, *what am I to do here? How can I take care of him?*

Valda's letter came back into his mind. Sostavi: the one place any new member of the dagira would be expected to visit, but the one place Ribas had avoided when he'd traveled north to the

coast before his installation in Lida. And Sventin Galvo, the man Ribas had barely been able to tolerate with half the country between them. In spite of the reasons to avoid all of it, a new, startling idea took shape.

*If you could be here for another ceremony now, I might be able to see it through.*

He decided to take it as an answer. “I can tell you what you’re going to do over the next few weeks,” he told Gedrin. “You’re going to come with Marya and me to Sostavi.”

“What?” When he realized Ribas was serious, Gedrin laughed: a warm, real laugh. “Go with you? I didn’t get an invitation.”

“You just did. I’m inviting you.”

“But I can’t...”

“You can.” Ribas called up all his older-brother authority. “The farm’s quiet this time of year. If my mosevine can take care of the House, Mama and Virta can take care of things here. We’ll be back by the end of Tyla. And you could use the change.”

He saw Gedrin’s thirst for adventure waking up. Gedrin had so rarely left Lida that Sostavi felt like another world. Of course he’d want to see it. “I’ll talk to Virta,” he said.

Ribas had a feeling his sister-in-law wouldn’t stand in Gedrin’s way. Maryut might be another matter. She wouldn’t especially like Ribas making this decision without her, and she might not like the idea of the two of them having to look after Gedrin for three weeks, but he felt sure it would be worth it.

“You do that,” he said. “Now I’m going to take a rest before we head home.”

Gedrin went out and shut the door quietly, leaving Ribas with his tangled thoughts. *You and Mama were better off after Da died. I don’t want my family to have to say that about me.*

*After Da died.* Irresistibly, the words brought back that horrible night. Gedrin had never heard all the details of it. He had only grown up knowing about an accident and an injury their father had never recovered from.

Well, it *had* been an accident. Gedrin didn't need to know it had only happened because, that night, Silvas had decided to attack his six-year-old son.

Gedrin's life would never devolve into the same darkness. *Not you, Gedri.* Ribas thought the words as if they were a prayer. *Not while I'm living.*

## Chapter 11

During the two weeks after Valda sent her letter to Lida, the news of the election results spread through Sostavi and out into Namora. Soon, everyone in every town and village heard that Valdena Filtraikas would be the next Tavin only because the Council had failed to agree on a candidate.

Valda didn't let herself think about her letter once it had gone. She didn't expect Ribas to come to Sostavi and couldn't allow herself the weakness of hoping for it. The most she might get would be a return letter, a few lines from him, with a taste of the kindness she remembered. That would be more than enough of a gift.

Meanwhile, she must prepare herself for what was coming. As she went through the days, still serving in the Great House as Tavo Balsa, standing in for Tavin Ardinas, she kept herself rigidly calm. She told no one how surreal it felt to know she would soon wear the brown robes permanently. As a concession to her new role, she ordered two new sets of brown robes made: one woolen and the other linen, both richly embroidered, to maintain the right appearance. No one must see fear or uncertainty from the Tavin-to-be. No one should know how the hours slowed to a crawl for her every night, when she shut her chamber door on colleagues and petitioners and sat alone with only her thoughts for company. No one must ever guess at how often she cried during her prayers.

She prayed to the Goddess, of course, asking for help and strength and guidance in the days to come. Just as often, she found herself talking to Tavin Ardinas. Kenavi, Mother of Namora, was somewhere beyond human knowing, and the woman she had been had died centuries ago, but Ardinas had sat in the same chambers Valda did and stood on the dais in the same House. His hands

had held the same crystal pitcher and bowl and the same richly carved box of salt. Maybe he hadn't entirely left the place he had served for so long. Maybe he could still hear her.

Sometimes she talked to him about the Installation. "I wish I had seen yours, Tavin. I wish had asked you how it felt to get ready for it." His Installation had come as the culmination of months of planning, during which all of Sostavi and the rest of Namora had eagerly looked forward to welcoming their new leader. She wanted hers to be over before most people had a chance to notice.

She could have handled it differently. She could have stepped into the role as proudly as if she'd won it with the Goddess's blessing. After all, she had served so close to Tavin Ardin as for the past six years; she had at least as many qualifications as Lesvin, though she didn't have Galvo's long experience. Lesvin's Council faction had apparently preferred her to Galvo. But she didn't want the role. Not this way, not now or ever.

Early on Setdina morning two weeks after she sent her letter, a servant knocked at Valda's chambers. "Letter for you, Sventin Valdena. Came by courier."

Letters arrived all the time. The most practical dagira in Sostavi and nearby towns had started angling for the Tavin-to-be's attention, knowing that a Tavin was a Tavin, no matter how she got there, and they should lay groundwork for alliances as soon as they could. Valda took the envelope. It was plain thin-pressed paper with a sea-blue wax seal on the back, the standard Circle House seal that countless zhinine used.

A courier, though. Valda tamped down on the hope that rose in her: this could still be anything. "Where did the courier come from?" she said.

"I don't know, sventin."

"Very well. You may go."

Valda took the letter into her sitting room. She broke the seal and took out the contents, one page, front and back, written in a strong, fluid hand. Her eyes moved on their own to the signature.

*Yours in the fellowship of the Goddess Kenavi, Ribas Silvaikas.*

The page blurred. Valda swallowed hard. For a moment she was thirteen again, looking up into a friendly face.

She sat down in the chair by the hearth. The page cleared as she read.

*Raimaté, Sventin Valdona,*

*I am honored to receive your letter and your invitation to the High Installation. I write this as a zhinin to his new Tavin, but to go on, I'm afraid I must set formality aside.*

She could already hear his voice in her mind. This was exactly the gift she'd hoped for, and she was so glad he'd addressed her by name instead of as "Tavo Balsa."

*I must tell you, first, how much I admire everything you've accomplished in Sostavi. When you were named as Tavo Balsa, I was so glad to hear that news. Even in a place as difficult as Sostavi must be, it seems that sometimes, those who deserve rewards receive them.*

That made her smile. She could see him smiling, too, as he wrote it. And he admired what she'd achieved? Those words made a glow around the rank that she had long since accepted as a burden.

*Tavin Ardinás's loss must be very difficult for you, who knew him so well and worked with him so closely. I'm very sorry for your grief. And I am most sorry that you've had to face it alone, with colleagues who haven't been able to share it with you.*

The page blurred again. *Yes, Ribé. I wish you were here.* She wished it so immediately and fiercely that she wanted to skim the letter in the desperate hope he might tell her he was coming to the Installation. But she must not think that, or rush through what he had written.

*I have good reason to remember the Tavin's kindness to a young zhinin he had no particular call to notice. Please know that I grieve with you for the loss of the leader who was, as you say, a good man, who guided us and Namora surely and well. My thoughts are with you always, for whatever comfort that might bring.*

That was exactly like him. Valda had to dry her eyes on her sleeve before she could keep going. She wondered if he had any idea that she would understand his reference to Ardinas's kindness to him. *He didn't have reason to notice you, Ribé? Oh yes, he did.*

Now he came to the election. Valda tried not to notice how her heart sped up.

*The news about the vote of course comes as a shock. It must feel terribly daunting to step into such a role under these circumstances. At the same time, I can't help thinking that if the vote had to fail, we are very fortunate to have such an intelligent, discerning, and strong-hearted Tavo Balsa. We couldn't ask for anything more in our next leader.*

Was he trying to make her cry? He might as well be. *Drat you, zhinin*, Valda scolded in her head, mopping at her eyes again. The Tavin-to-be shouldn't act like this. Thank goodness no one else was here to see it. But she had told him off the same way at the viduris when he'd made her laugh at the wrong time, for instance during one of those solemn Akena-month dinners when they were supposed to eat their mystery fodder in reverent silence. Ribas had never had to say a word out loud. His eyes, as he prodded a serving of some indeterminate casserole – *let's see if it grabs the fork* – held all the wicked humor in the world. Thinking of it now, she laughed again through the tears.

And then...

*Maryut and I will be honored to come to Sostavi for the High Installation.*

Valda stopped reading. She went back and looked at that sentence again. *Honored to come to Sostavi*. As the truth of it sank in, a great blaze of gladness swept over her, as if the sun, walled in for too long behind banks of clouds, had burst free.

Somehow she kept reading. *If I may risk an impertinence, may I ask the great favor that my brother Gedrin also be allowed to attend? Family concerns have made it necessary for him to come with us to Sostavi. He would be most gratified to see the ceremony.*

Of course. That would be no trouble at all. She raced through the rest. *If all goes smoothly on the road, we should arrive in Sostavi about two weeks after I post this letter. We will be glad to accept lodging in the House of the Zhinine, if that won't inconvenience our hosts. As one mosevin to another, I will be so glad to see you again; and as a member of the dagira, I will be honored to serve our Tavin.*

*Yours in the fellowship of the Goddess Kenavi,*

*Ribas Silvaikas*

Two weeks from his posting the letter. It would have taken about a week for it to reach her. Another week, then, and she would see him again.

It was more of a gift than she had dared to dream about. Valda folded the letter carefully and slipped it back in the envelope. *I thank You, Kenavi, Mother of us all. I thank You with all that is in me.*

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Valda notified the heads of the House of the Zhinine that they would host three guests of hers during the week of the High Installation. When she gave them Ribas's name, she knew Sventin Galvo would probably hear the news within a matter of hours. She still didn't understand his interest in Ribas, but she found she didn't care about it, any more than she would have cared if someone had objected to the House of the Zhinine hosting three people from a backwater village at such a busy time.

In the days after she got Ribas's reply, she felt as if no impertinence, annoyance, or difficulty of any kind could touch her. Her younger self, the one who had believed in all the possibility and beauty of Sostavi, seemed to come to life again. More than that: she felt as if she had actually found the life she'd hoped for when she had arrived in the capital.



On the evening of the same day when she spoke to the heads of the House of the Zhinine, Sventin Galvo came up to her after the Great House service. Ever since the vote, his manner to her had been unfailingly friendly and polite. If he still held her at all responsible for the result, he never showed it in his words or behavior.

“Tavo Balsa,” he said. Lately, he had used her formal title more than usual too, stressing his respect. She had no doubt he was working out how to turn the situation to his advantage, and intending to use that respect as leverage. He said, “I understand you’re expecting visitors for the High Installation.”

“Yes,” she said. “I invited my old friend from the viduris and was delighted he accepted.” No need to mention Ribas’s name; they both knew who she meant. “He and his wife and brother will arrive in the city soon.”

The Great House had emptied after the service. Subordinate dagira had gathered the prayer stones and cleared away the water and salt. Valda and Galvo stood alone on the dais, where only one lamp still burned next to the great hearth. Darkness lay over the rest of the House. Galvo’s white robes and silver hair gleamed in the dim light. By contrast, in her brown robes, Valda felt as if she could have become part of the shadows and the holy quiet of the building.

Galvo said, “I would be honored to meet Zhinin Ribas. I do hope we can arrange it. There’s so much I’d like to ask him about his work.”

“I’m sure he would be pleased to speak with you.” Valda couldn’t help feeling sure of exactly the opposite, given what Ardinias had said about the many letters Galvo had sent to Lida. “I suspect,” she said, “he might have to limit his engagements during his stay here. His health may not be very strong.”

“Yes,” Galvo said. “I remember his heart trouble. Most regrettable. How fortunate, though, that he’s able to undertake a journey at this time of year.”

If he wanted to know why Ribas would do such a thing for her, Valda had no answer, except that she'd asked for help and he had given it. She said, "Yes. I'll be very glad to see him again."

She didn't know what Galvo might have gleaned from the conversation, but he seemed satisfied. He gave her a correctly respectful good night and left her alone in the House.

The following days passed too quickly. The Installation reared up ahead of her like a wall too high to scale. All the Council together would perform the ceremony in the Great House. They would choose a representative to recite the same prayers and questions that made part of every installation ceremony in every Circle House in Namora. Valda would repeat the same words she had spoken when she first traded her red mosevin's robes for the blue ones of a zhinin, but this time, in trading her white for the newly made ceremonial brown, she would take a step only a handful of Tavo Balsai had ever taken in Namora's sixteen-hundred-year history.

She didn't know if she could have gone through with it without Ribas's letter. His words made a lamp in her mind. She would admit that to no one, intended to say nothing about it to him either, but she followed their light forward, one step at a time.

Two days before the Installation, a servant from the House of the Zhinine arrived in Valda's chambers in the late afternoon to tell her that her guests from Lida had arrived. Valda sent him back immediately with a message. "Please ask Zhinin Ribas if he and his wife and brother will join me for supper in my quarters this evening." Galvo would doubtless hear about that too. Valda didn't care what he made of it.

The servant came back in short order and said that yes, the zhinin said they would be honored, they would look forward to waiting on her that evening. As Valda made arrangements for supper, her joy struggled against an increasing and unwelcome flush of memory.

That last year at the viduris. Valda didn't remember whether the summer before it had already felt different. She and Ribas would have written back and forth then, the same way they had

during other breaks. Had she missed him more, that summer? Had he had started to intrude on her dreams?

She did remember seeing him again when they came back to school that fall, in Rudua. She remembered noticing exactly how blue his eyes looked against his sun-browned skin, and how the same sun had bleached his hair a shade lighter, and how much – oh, how very much – she found herself wanting to smooth that tousled hair with her fingertips, and touch the exposed triangle of his chest where his shirt collar lay open.

All long over and done with now. When it came time to dress for supper, Valda chose a simple dark-green sheath with lighter green embroidery at the neck and waist. Green, she felt, suited her as no other color did. She slipped the dress on and belted it, promising herself that the choice of color would be her only concession to the chaos inside her head.

She was the Tavin-to-be. Ribas was a well-respected and no doubt much-beloved zhinin who, as if Valda could forget it, had also been married for many years. Valda brushed her hair out and braided it with quick, impatient fingers. Time had no doubt changed him, in looks if nothing else. She coiled the braid and pinned it at the back of her head, slipping the pins in as if they could spear and extract her wayward thoughts. She had no time for nonsense. She would be grateful to see him again tonight as an old and dear friend, who had done her a great favor in coming here. That was all.

Two servants brought the meal in and set it out on the table in her front room. Valda made up the fire without help. It had just glowed into warm life when the knock came.

“Come in,” Valda said. She linked her hands together behind her back, and then lowered them to her sides. She would not stand here like a mosevin waiting for an examination.

The door swung open. One of the House of the Zhinine's servants, a young blonde woman, stood outside. "Tavo Balsa, I have with me Zhinin Ribas Silvaikas, Maryut Ribenis, and Gedrin Silvaikas."

"Thank you."

The servant stepped aside and the three guests came in. Valda's eyes went to him at once. Goddess hear her, she would have known him anywhere.

He had new lines on his face, yes, and too much silver in his hair. He ought to be too young for that, he was no older than Valda, but no doubt his illness had caused it. He wore his hair shorter now too. Cropped closer, it looked less unruly than it used to. But his eyes. Nothing had changed those eyes, or his smile.

He bowed to her with his hand over his heart. "Raimaté, Tavo Balsa."

The same voice. *Then we're even. I know who you are too. Valdena, right?*

She wanted to say, *No, don't bow to me, not you!* She wanted to run to him and catch his hands in hers and prove to herself that he was real. Instead, with an effort that seemed to make every muscle ache, she bowed correctly in return. "Raimaté, zhinin." In some corner of her mind, she understood that whatever battle she had tried to fight tonight, she had already lost.

But she had a duty to perform. Now she could take in all three of them clearly: Ribas, and his wife, and the strong-built dark-haired man who must be Ribas's brother. Valda barely remembered Gedrin Silvaikas, whom she hadn't seen since he was a young boy. Ribas was saying, "Tavo Balsa, you remember my wife Maryut," and Valda stepped forward to shake hands first with the small vivid woman whose face she remembered very well. Her mind carried her back to Ribas's installation in that little village Circle House, and to the dark-haired girl who had run up to him after it was over, while Valda watched, and flung her arms around him in his new sea-blue robes, her face a study in joy and pride. That day, Maryut and Ribas had already been promised to each other.

Time had made small changes to Maryut too, but she still looked very much like the girl Valda had known. Tonight she wore a deep red dress, probably homespun but beautifully embroidered with interlaced rings of white flowers at the neck, sleeves, and waist. She returned Valda's handshake, head lowered politely. When Valda released her hand, Maryut stepped closer to her husband as if he were a shield.

Valda shook hands with Gedrin too. Both he and Maryut looked overawed; only Ribas seemed relaxed and easy, as though this place felt familiar to him as his own zhinin's house in Lida. Valda said, "None of you must call me Tavo Balsa." To Ribas she added, "You can't use my title when we were mosevine together." She was glad he hadn't worn his robes of office tonight, as a visiting dagira member might. They would have stressed the distance between him and her, which his simple, neatly-pressed shirt and pants didn't.

He bowed again. She heard the humor in his voice, clear as light. "As you wish, sventin."

That made her laugh, and now, finally, she let herself put her hand out to him. When he took it, she couldn't resist holding his, briefly, between both of her own. Yes, it was warm and strong and real. "Not that either, zhinin," she told him. "First names, please." She heard herself add, "I can't tell you how good it is to have you here. It's been a hard few weeks."

That wasn't the Tavo Balsa speaking anymore. He answered with the gentleness she remembered so well. "I can imagine. I'm glad to see you too, Valda."

Later, when she was alone, she would give her unruly feelings the punishment they deserved. Now she held herself together out of long habit. "You and Maryut haven't changed at all," she told Ribas as she led the way to the supper table. Ribas joked about his gray hair: "I didn't have that at the viduris, not for lack of trying on Kunin Dergo's part." Valda apologized to Gedrin for not knowing him as quickly. "You were a little shorter, I think, the last time I saw you." Gedrin sat stiffly at the table as if afraid to brush the fine cloth or touch the delicate pottery servingware. Valda

was glad she hadn't asked any servant to help with the meal. After she'd been in Sostavi for so long, she'd forgotten that people in other places did things much more simply.

Supper was roast chicken with potatoes and a dressing made of brown bread, apples, and nuts. Valda passed the serving dishes around the table. Gedrin took tiny portions, as if he thought that was the only way he could be sure not to spill or drop anything. Ribas served Maryut and then himself. After he had set the last dish down in its place, he reached over and closed his hand briefly around his wife's. Valda couldn't see his face, but she caught Maryut's fragile smile and could picture the look Ribas had given her. *It's all right, I promise.* In spite of herself, her heart twisted.

She had never had his gift with people, but she pushed herself to try to help her guests relax. She asked about the trip; it had been uneventful, apparently, but Ribas said he'd been glad to see some of the country again. Since becoming a zhinin, he hadn't traveled farther from Lida than Paret. He talked a little about the route they had taken, more or less straight across the Kalnu region's northwest corner, east of the Isare Mountains in central Namora, and into the Jemtave region where Sostavi was. "I thought the trip might be hard, you know. My body doesn't always cooperate." He said it lightly, but Valda remembered how much trouble his heart had given him even at school. "Traveling seems to agree with me," he said. "Maybe it's good to get away from work for a while."

Valda was glad to hear it. She said, "I wrote you too much about what I've been doing. Tell me how everything's been in Lida."

He smiled. "Busy. Always."

Maryut said, with her eyes on her plate, "That's your own fault, Ribé."

Valda remembered Maryut as quick and outspoken. It surprised her to see her so shy now. Ribas said, "I don't know about that. Someone always needs something."

Maryut cut into a slice of chicken. “You don’t always have to give it to them.” She raised her head and her eyes met Valda’s. “People come from all over to see him, you know. Not just people in Lida. He works much too hard, but he won’t turn anybody away.”

Valda heard her defiant pride. *You shouldn’t be jealous of me, Marya. You won him long ago.* She knew how absurd that sounded. Maryut probably didn’t feel jealous at all; Valda couldn’t trust her own thoughts tonight.

She said, “I’m not surprised anyone would go to him if they could. He always was the easiest person I ever knew to talk to.”

He said, “I’m glad.” Those eyes. Valda couldn’t make herself look away from them. At least her blush didn’t rush into her face to humiliate her. He said, “Listening is one of my few skills.”

Gedrin said what Valda was thinking. “Few? You’ve got more than a few.”

Valda thought of the *dovne kenavis*, the mysterious gift Ribas had never used during their time at the *viduris*, that only his closest friends, sworn to secrecy, had known about back then. She’d have liked to ask how he used it in his work now, but he had never liked to talk about it much. Besides, she saw something in the look that went between the two brothers.

Ribas said, “Sometimes I do.” He seemed to be talking straight to Gedrin. “Sometimes I don’t have quite enough skills, but you know I keep working on it.”

Beyond question, the two of them shared some kind of trouble. Valda remembered what Ribas had said in his letter. “Family concerns” had brought Gedrin to *Sostavi*. She wished she could ask what was wrong.

Ribas turned back to her. “*Tavo Balsa*, since I can listen, I wonder if you’d like to talk.”

She laughed. “What did I tell you about titles, Ribé?”

The nickname came out before she thought. She might have heard an intake of breath from Maryut, but Ribas had already used her own nickname, and just for now, she wanted to let go of ranks and titles and the tangled mess her life had become.

His eyes were full of mischief. “Pardon me.” Then the laughter disappeared. “From your letter, I thought you might need someone to talk to. I’d be very glad if I can help.”

Of course he had understood what she needed. “I don’t want to bore you.”

“I can’t imagine you would. It sounds like life here in Sostavi can be a little too exciting.”

Valda couldn’t resist the invitation. She had worn a mask for so long that she hadn’t realized what a prison it had become. Now, as she told him all the details from the past weeks that she hadn’t included in her letter, she felt as if a suffocating blanket wrapped around her had loosened. She hadn’t known how badly she needed to catch her breath.

When she told him everything about Galvo’s accusations, his face tightened. “He thought that? Does he know you at all?”

The anger under the words warmed her. “I wondered the same thing.”

Maryut had been listening closely. She said, “I remember when this Sventin Galvo was bothering Ribé years ago. He sounds terrible.”

Sventin Lesvin and his cronies apparently thought so. “He has a good side, believe it or not,” Valda said. “He’s been very kind to me over the years. The way his mind works, I suppose it’s natural he’d think I’d want to steal the election if I could.”

“Because that’s what he would want,” Maryut said. “He would think of cheating, but he had no right to say those things to you. If I see him here,” she said with a glance at her husband, “I might have to give him a piece of my mind. Of course, somebody will have to point him out to me.”

That made Valda smile, but something about it made her eyes sting too. Ribas said, “If you do that, love, I don’t think he’ll know what hit him.”



“He’ll deserve it.”

Valda didn’t miss that word *love*, or the look that went between husband and wife. She said, “I’ll tell you something else. It’s not easy for a Tavin to resign, but it can be done. I’ve been thinking about what I’d have to do.”

Maryut said, “Don’t let them make you do that.”

Now she seemed like the confident girl Valda remembered. “I don’t know,” Valda said. None of her colleagues could know she had thought about it, of course, until and unless she decided to do it. “Maybe it would be best.”

Ribas said, “You know what kind of a leader I think you’ll be. I’m pretty sure I’m right, if I say it myself.”

*Intelligent. Discerning. Strong-hearted.* Valda didn’t know if she dared to tell him how much those words had meant. Gedrin helped her pass it off. “You’re always pretty sure you’re right, Ribé,” he said.

Ribas’s face looked perfectly innocent. “That’s because I usually am.”

Gedrin and Maryut laughed. Valda joined in, but a new thought seized on her mind.

She still needed to choose a Tavo Balsa. What if Ribas would do it?

At first glance, it looked impossible. He was a zhinin in a backwater village. But suppose she had him, the one person she trusted absolutely, as her right hand here in Sostavi. She had considered Galvo for the position. That seemed laughable now.

*You shouldn’t think of it. You know what you feel for him.*

Valda pushed that voice away. Her Installation as Tavin would leave a gap in the Council. No one could object if the new Tavin made a strongly-worded recommendation that a particular sventin get the vacant Council seat. Ribas wasn’t a sventin yet, but she could make sure he became

one in time. As soon as she became Tavin, she would have the authority to promote him directly to that rank.

Plenty of the Great House's own dagira had spent years slaving for a chance at the Council, but they could go on waiting. A zhinin of Ribas's ability more than deserved such a high promotion. And he had the dovne kenavnis. The dovne kenavnis on the Council: who of her colleagues would object to that? For the first time, Valda considered exactly how much her new authority might achieve. If he would agree to it. If he would so much as consider it.

She wouldn't say anything to him about it yet; not until she had thought everything through in detail. While they ate dessert, a dense sweet nut cake flavored with honey and cinnamon, they talked about Sostavi. Valda said, "I hope you'll enjoy the city when you have a chance to explore. It's very different from Paret, of course, but it's really quite lovely." Ribas mentioned that his and Gedrin's father had lived in the city years before. He said Silvas Jadraikas had actually served as a zhinin in the Great House. Valda didn't remember him ever talking about that at the viduris. She wanted to hear more now, but Ribas changed the subject right away, as if he didn't want to say anything else.

After they finished dessert, Ribas apologized for the tiredness he couldn't mask anymore. "I think I'd better get some rest. I'm not as young as I used to be."

He made it a joke, but Valda wished his illness didn't drag on him so much. "Certainly," she said. "I really can't thank you enough for being here. It felt..." She let herself say it. "It felt like home again."

Maryut offered her hand first. "We'll see you again soon." Valda caught an unmistakable sense of fellowship from her, one woman to another. She couldn't have been jealous after all. Gedrin, too, shook hands more easily than he had at first.

Ribas bowed to Valda, another correct salute. Before she could stop herself, Valda held out her arms to him. “For old times’ sake?”

His smile twisted her heart again. “Gladly.”

She told herself not to feel this too much. Especially, as she let her head rest briefly on his shoulder, with the smooth fabric of his shirt against her cheek and his arms around her, she must not think about how safe she felt. She must not think about how very, very much she had missed him, for so long.

After her guests had gone, Valda closed and latched the door. Servants would clear away the dishes in the morning. She had asked not to be disturbed tonight.

One clear thought stood out from the fog in her head. *My Tavo Balsa.*

It made good sense. She needed someone. She trusted him. The Council of fifteen years ago had apparently wanted him here, very much. Would they want him any less now? They would all realize soon that he wouldn’t care about the position’s downside. If he was still the man she remembered – and tonight had proven he was – he would have no interest in being a candidate for Tavin.

His health and his deep loyalty to Lida were both considerations. As a member of the Great House dagira, he would have attendance from the best healers in Namora. That could only be a benefit. Granted, to move to Sostavi, he and Maryut would have to uproot themselves in a way neither of them, especially Maryut, had ever experienced. Even if Ribas were willing to do it himself, he might not want to put his wife through it. As to Lida, no doubt losing him would leave those people in a serious bind, but Valda tried to believe they could find another good zhinin to put in that House. Ribas had apprentices already. Maybe one of them could do it, someone he had trained himself.

*You shouldn’t try this. Think of what you’re doing.*

Valda knew what she was doing. She knew exactly how dangerous it was, when she still felt his arms holding her. But that did nothing to make her stop wishing for the words that would convince him to stay where she needed him.

## Chapter 12

After the death of Lada Egem, the young soldier who wanted to kill the Vaia rider, Bereg and the rest of his detachment spent the rest of the day traveling farther south in Tsvayest. Bereg rode ahead, apart from the rest. The group of young soldiers behind him traveled in thick, curdled silence. Behind them came Silde Vasem, her presence as heavy and cold as stone.

The grass of the plains seemed to blur around Bereg. The afternoon sun beat down too hot; the blue sky looked hideously bright. He let his horse carry him and tried to look busy scouting a path, but he felt as if his brain was trying to crawl out of his skull.

The Vaia group they had encountered had kept riding west, in a straight line, as fast as their horses would carry them. Lada Egem, brought down by Silde Vasem's vindula, lay in the grave her fellow soldiers had quickly scraped out for her. The grave had no marker on it. Her family, if she had any – Bereg didn't even know that much about her – wouldn't know where to find her body. They wouldn't come to pay tribute to her if they did. Traitors deserved no honor or memory. Every Lasska knew that.

Bereg told himself to forget what had happened to her and focus on the job at hand. The light and heat around him made him feel sick. The sun felt like a monstrous eye boring into him.

*None of this is right.*

He should have stopped Silde Vasem. Somehow, he thought through the clouds of nausea, he should have realized what she was going to do, and he should have stopped her. How? Shot the weapon out of her hand? Cut her down, the way she had killed Egem?

Egem had disobeyed two direct orders from her commander. By extension, she had disobeyed the orders of Impera Shurik himself. That was treason. Traitors died.

*None of this is right.*

Bereg rode on, clutching the reins between his fingers. The leather strips, wrapped tight around his hands, dug into his skin. The rough pain kept him anchored.

He only had to see this job through. He felt sure the young soldiers wouldn't try to kill any more Vaia. They wouldn't risk Silde Vasem's immediate justice. Bereg simply had to finish the task in front of him. Then Impera Shurik would give him the promised reward and he would go home to Thysidich and his family, the business done, his hands clean.

He had never hungered for other men's blood. He had spent all his working life building roads, linking towns and cities together. Lassar's soldiers kept the empire's great heart beating and its people fed and cared for, but many of them had other skills too.

Afternoon slanted toward evening and the sunlight turned from hot yellow to deep gold. Bereg's mind wandered beyond his control, spinning out pictures of the second stage of Impera Shurik's campaign.

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A thicket of tents in an open field. Dawn, maybe: a frosty winter dawn with the first light making splashes of rose and gold on the glittering grass. Cook fires sending smoke into the air. Pots bubbling; meat sizzling on spits.

Small-boned, dark-skinned women with long dark hair, tending the breakfast as it cooked. Men cleaning weapons, perhaps, and chatting together. Children running about: small dark children with bright laughing faces. Bent-backed, silver-haired elderly, sitting near the warmth of fires or in the shelter of tent flaps. Some enjoying pipes; some working at whittling with age-roughened fingers. Some, maybe, corralling a grandchild to lift into a lap, to savor the nearness of warmth and laughter and young breath against an old cheek.

The Lasska fighting force wouldn't ride straight up to the camp. They would stay out of bowshot range, keep to whatever cover they could find. They would surround the Vaia. Form a net around the camp.

*The yellow-shirted leaders and the white-shirted witch-women first.*

Silde Vasem hadn't said a word of warning. Lada Egem hadn't had the chance to put her weapon down or ask for mercy.

*What happens to children who see their parents murdered?*

"Halt!"

The word sliced through the noise in Bereg's head, the shattering report of dozens of imagined vinduli. Reflex made him rein in. In his mind, Vaia bodies bled on the frozen grass. Women screamed. Children stared, hollow-eyed, emptied out with fear.

*What happens to children...*

Someone rode up beside him. "Silde Orlon. It's getting late."

Silde Vasem. Bereg noticed, vaguely, that the afternoon light had faded. How had evening come so quickly?

The woman's face made a pale oval in the twilight. "We should make camp," she said.

"Yes." His voice seemed to come from somewhere else. Not out of his own living, breathing mouth.

The young soldiers worked quickly and silently, setting up cook fires and laying out bedrolls. Bereg sat off to the side, letting Silde Vasem keep everything under her eye.

*A little girl raised her hand to point to two soldiers, one after the other.*

He must obey orders. His thoughts felt as sluggish as fish in a half-frozen stream. He must not argue or question. Not if he wanted to go home.

*None of this is right.*

Mechanically, he ate the food one of the young soldiers brought him. Mechanically, he agreed when Silde Vasem offered to take the first watch again. He lay down and wrapped his blanket around him and tried to send himself back to Thysidich in his mind. Nela and Ania. The new grandchild he would hold in his arms, the small face he would look into for the first time.

In his mind, a Lasska soldier picked up a Vaia child who did not scream or struggle. The Lasska mounted his horse and held the child on the saddle in front of him and rode away from the camp. Maybe the child tried to twist around for one last look at the home and parents she had lost. Maybe she stared straight ahead, as the huge unknown world roared forward to meet her and the cold wind whipped tears from her eyes.

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Someone shook Bereg's shoulder. He jerked out of a dark hazy dream to see Silde Vasem leaning over him with her finger to her lips.

“Come with me.”

Bereg got up stiffly. She led him away from the fire and the cluster of young soldiers in their bedrolls. At the edge of the camp, beyond the firelight, she stopped and pointed.

Following her hand, Bereg made out a dark shape. Two. The moon hung full and round and a spread of stars glittered, showed him the outlines of a man and a horse.

Vaia.

Silde Vasem whispered, “He came into camp. He wants to speak to me. You’ll come too.”

A Vaia wanted to speak to them? Bereg didn’t understand. He thought this might still be part of the nightmare.

“He was one of the ones we saw today,” Silde Vasem said. “He says he’s unarmed, but his friends may be out there.”



Bereg tried to wake up. Maybe this Vaia and his friends had tracked the Lasska detachment and decided to mount an ambush. Bereg imagined a net of them, spread out around the camp, ready to move forward at a signal. But then, why would one of them walk in to give warning?

Silde Vasem moved away from the firelight, toward the man. Bereg followed her as if pulled along by an invisible rope. Neither of them had a vindula. Bereg did have a short knife in his belt.

The man stood quiet, waiting. As he and Silde Vasem got closer, Bereg made out that the Vaia was slim and young, not tall, about Bereg's own height. He wore leather breeches, leather boots, and a dark-colored shirt. His dark hair hung long and loose, past his shoulders. His horse looked small but strong-built, with a thick thatch of mane and a dark heavy forelock. Bereg couldn't see any saddle or bridle.

This man came from a world that intersected with Bereg's own, a world that Bereg had never looked into before. Bereg knew he ought to see him as an enemy. He shouldn't feel such a flash of wonder.

Silde Vasem spoke first. "This is Silde Bereg Orlon," she told the Vaia. Her low voice barely rose above the sound of the breeze moving through the grass. "Whatever you have to say to me, he will hear too."

"I am glad to know him," the Vaia replied. He spoke correct, strangely accented Lasska. "If he is the person I think he is, my message is meant for him too."

What message? How could the Vaia know who Bereg was, or have anything to say to him? Bereg wished his head would clear. He wished he had his vindula, something solid to grip and remind himself that he was a soldier and the Impera's servant.

Silde Vasem led the small group farther into the dark, away from the camp. Under cover of a small cluster of trees, little more than shrubs, she stopped. "Now," she said. "Tell us who you are and what you have to say."

The Vaia seemed perfectly composed. He couldn't be more than nineteen or twenty, Bereg thought. His dark-skinned face looked smooth, unlined and unbearded. He stood quietly, making no restless or nervous movements, resting one hand lightly on his horse's neck. The horse, too, stood still; no uneasy snorting, pawing, or head-tossing. For all the young rider knew, both Bereg and Silde Vasem could have weapons, and he knew their cohorts in the camp certainly did. It didn't seem to worry him. As if he and his horse owned these plains, Bereg thought, and the Lasska only meant temporary trouble, like biting flies.

The Vaia said, "My name is Rahul. My tribe winters on these plains, but this year, we are riding farther west. We know what your Impera Shurik plans for us."

Silde Vasem said, "What is it you know?"

The Vaia's calm tone didn't change. "Shurik is sending his soldiers out to find our winter camps and kill us. He wants to rid this country of the Vaia people."

Cold flooded Bereg. Shurik's plan depended on secrecy. Silde Vasem asked what he couldn't: "How do you know this?"

"Two of the women in our tribe are...in your language I think you would say Light-Bearers. Their dreams tell them what's coming for us. One of them saw Shurik's plan."

Bereg swallowed. *Witch-women*. No mortal person should be able to see the future. The Vaia people must have some dangerous dark magic. But why would this Vaia tell him and Silde Vasem this? Had they walked into an ambush after all, and this young man, Rahul or whatever his name was, only wanted them to know why they were going to die?

It occurred to Bereg he should deny what the Vaia said. He should say Shurik had no such intentions. Above everything else, the Vaia tribes must not have the chance to prepare for the Lasska attack. In fact, Bereg realized, it was his duty to kill this young Vaia here and now. The man should not have the chance to spread his information any farther.

Silde Vasem said, “Why are you going west?”

“Our younger Light-Bearer had another dream.”

Bereg should not listen to this. He didn’t want to hear any more, but he couldn’t make himself cut the young man off. He listened in increasing bewilderment as Rahul explained that his tribe’s older witch-woman had seen the coming destruction, but the younger one had seen possible help. Rahul and a small group from his tribe wanted to get to the western mountains and across them into Namora. According to the younger witch-woman, they would find a man there who could help them.

What man? How could any Namoran help them? None of it made sense to Bereg. The Vaia’s words buzzed in his head like bees trapped in a jar. He only knew that he and Silde Vasem had to do something: tell the Vaia his witch-women were lying, tell him Shurik didn’t mean the tribes any harm, or else they should cut the young man’s throat so he would never get back to his people. Bereg realized with slow and mounting horror that he couldn’t do any of those things. He couldn’t open his mouth to lie, and he knew beyond a doubt that even if the much younger, stronger Vaia stood still and let him do it, Bereg could never take out his knife and kill him.

Silde Vasem was listening carefully to everything the Vaia said. Surely, Bereg thought, she couldn’t believe it. The Vaia did not honor the only true God. What had Impera Shurik said? The Vaia were primitive people who worshipped the sun, the moon...beings that weren’t gods and never had been. Even the most faithful Lasska never got to glimpse the future. How could people who knew nothing of Mesha claim to have that kind of sight?

He realized Silde Vasem was speaking again. “What do you believe this man will do to help you?”

“Our Light-Bearer’s dream did not tell her that,” the Vaia said. “We only know he is our best hope. Probably the only hope.”

“And you don’t know his name, or where to find him,” Silde Vasem said.

“Khari says we will find him if we can only get into Namora.”

This Khari must be the “Light-Bearer,” the witch-woman. Bereg couldn’t picture the white-shirted rider Lada Egem had wanted to bring down; he had seen her too briefly, moving too fast. He did know that if the Vaia had to get to Namora to find help, then this man and his tribe, or however many were with him, had to be stopped. They could not reach the mountains.

*Yes, a treacherous thought whispered to him. But what will you do about it, old man?*

Silde Vasem said, “Why did you need to speak to me about all this?”

“This afternoon, we saw you kill the other Lasska.”

Bereg had thought the dreamlike horror of all this couldn’t possibly hold him any tighter. Now he listened to the Vaia tell how one member of his search party, someone with keen eyes whose name Bereg didn’t catch, had gotten a good enough look behind, even as they fled, to see Silde Vasem shoot Lada Egem.

They should not have seen that. It shouldn’t have happened. Bereg relived the afternoon again, all the worse and more sickening as the Vaia told it in his calm voice. Then the young man said, “Afterward, Khari had another dream. It showed her that you, Fisa Vasem, and you, Bereg Orlon, would leave your people and join us in our ride west.”

The Vaia pronounced each of their names perfectly, inclining his head politely as he said them, as if he were a servant in Cheremay receiving them for an audience with the Impera. To Bereg, the quiet voice felt like a noose tightening around his neck.

*Impossible.*

He would not believe it. This girl, this witch-woman Bereg had only seen as a fleeing flash, could not know anything about him or his life or future. This was some sort of trickery, some sort of evil primitive magic meant to snare him.

Probably she couldn't see the future at all. Probably none of these witch-women could. Bereg clung to that thought like a drowning man clutching a slippery thread. Granted, they knew somehow about the Impera's plan, but they must have come by that knowledge another way.

*What way?* The small voice in his head woke up again. *Who would have told them?*

Bereg shoved the questions aside. He didn't care. Even if they did have some strange magic, even if this girl had seen something in her dreams, Bereg wouldn't listen to it. He would have nothing to do with this Vaia or his party. He would never abandon his detachment or aid the Vaia in any way.

*None of this is right.*

*Ask your conscience, Silde Orlon...*

Silde Vasem said, "How do you believe we can help you?"

She should have sounded incredulous, or angry, or dismissive. She should have told the Vaia she would listen to nothing he had to say. Instead, to Bereg's disbelieving ears, she sounded like a starving person being offered a meal.

The Vaia said, "Khari did not see that either, but she was very sure you can help us. She told us she has never had such a clear dream."

Bereg told himself that if these witch-women did have real dreams, the information they got from them had such big holes in it that it couldn't do any good. A road with holes that size would be dug up and re-laid. He said it to drown out the memory of his own dream, or vision, that evening, of the Lasska soldier carrying the Vaia child away from the ruined camp.

Silde Vasem said, "What do you intend to do to Shurik, if you can?"

The question came out as sharp and fierce as a whip crack against tender skin. When had the Vaia said they meant to do anything to Shurik?

“We don’t intend to have anything to do with your impera. We hope we can find safety for the tribes, somehow, and that this man in Namora will help us. That is all we want.”

“You people aren’t fighters,” Silde Vasem said.

The Vaia laughed, a surprising, warm sound. “You can be glad my tribesman Handan isn’t here to hear that. He would want to prove you wrong, but it’s true. We are not fighters, not like you Lasska.”

When he finished speaking, silence wrapped around them. Insects sang in the dark. Bereg tried desperately to think what to do. He and Silde Vasem had to get away from this man and get back to the camp. He must remember the work. He must remember home.

Then Silde Vasem said, “I’ve served Shurik, and his father, because I had no choice. Now it seems I have one.” Bereg stood frozen and silent as she finished, “I will help you. I will fight what Shurik is doing, every way I can.”

She had just promised treason against the Impera. Bereg knew that if he had brought his vindula out of the camp, he would have had to take it up now and give her the same justice she had given Egem. He should still pull out his knife and do what he could, in the name of the Impera and Mesha Himself...but oh, Mesha guard him, he was old. He had no strength to stand against this fierce woman and her lifelong anger.

“Silde Orlon,” she said. “You have a choice now too.”

Bereg must tell her he had no such thing. He had to serve Shurik if he wanted any future at all.

*I know he thinks he bought you...*

The Vaia said, “The old bear will also come with us.”

It took Bereg's torpid mind several seconds to realize he himself was the old bear. For no reason, he remembered the face of the bear on the throne in Cheremay. The scarred muzzle, the sad eyes.

*No*, he wanted to say. He did not want to harm Silde Vasem. He did not want to see Vaia die or know that Lasska soldiers had murdered parents and grandparents and dragged helpless children off into a world where they didn't belong. He did not want any of this to happen, but if he tried to stand against it, he would never see his home again.

Silde Vasem told the Vaia, "Silde Orlon and I are different. I have nothing to lose. He has people waiting for him."

The Vaia looked at Bereg, dark eyes shadowed in the dark face. "Then he understands that I do too."

Bereg understood, but he couldn't do anything about it. If only he had left the army long ago. If he had found a way to retire sooner, Shurik wouldn't have summoned him to Cheremay, and he would never have been part of all this.

Silde Vasem said, "If you won't come with me now, at least you'll let me go."

Bereg knew he couldn't stop her. In silence, he went back to the camp with her, watched as she quickly and quietly gathered her things and mounted the horse that would carry her away to the Vaia. She took three vinduli with her: Lasska weapons she would give to Shurik's enemies. Bereg knew that by letting her do all this, he had already made himself a traitor.

From the saddle, she leaned down. "Silde Orlon, if it helps at all, know that Silde Vasem isn't leaving this company. She doesn't exist anymore."

Bereg understood she was taking her old name back. She was Tama Leben now. She said, "I'll see you again when you want to find us."

He had never heard such joy in her voice before. He wanted to say, *I will never want to find you*, but he still couldn't open his mouth to say anything at all. She reached down from the saddle and briefly touched his shoulder. Her smile, the first time he remembered seeing it, gleamed out in the dark.

Then she touched her heels to the horse's sides. Bereg stood alone and watched her ride away into the night.



## Chapter 13

Khari thought she had never known what relief felt like until she saw Rahul riding back toward them, out of the dark, with the Lasska woman on her own horse behind him. She offered a prayer of thanks to the Moon Woman out of the core of herself.

Handan got to his feet as the two riders came nearer. Khari saw he held a spear. The blade gleamed in the moonlight. Khari scrambled up, ready to put herself between him and the Lasska if she had to.

Rahul and the woman dismounted and came up to the group. Rahul's eyes found Khari first. "Lamp-Carrier," he said. "This is Tama Leben. She will help us."

The Lasska woman stood much taller than Khari, taller than any of the tribe. Only Radavan came close to her height. Her skin looked pale in the dark, and her strange stiff clothes, the gray coat and gray pants the soldiers wore, looked like the color of the night itself. Her hair, twisted up in a tight knot, had streaks of silver in it.

By speaking to Khari first, Rahul had given her permission to approach the Lasska before anyone else. Even Handan, still gripping his spear too eagerly for Khari's taste, watched quietly as Khari stepped forward and held out her hand, the way she knew Lasska did with each other.

"I am glad to see you," she said in Lasska. The words felt clumsy and awkward in her mouth.

The woman, Tama Leben, took Khari's hand and said something Khari couldn't follow. Her hand felt like any other hand: the skin a little dry, the fingers lean and strong. Khari could smell the dust and sweat on the woman's clothes and the musky scent of the fabric itself.

Rahul translated the woman's words. "She's asking if you are the one who had the dream."

Khari said she was. The woman said something to Rahul and went back to her horse. From the saddle, she took down three of the strange Lasska weapons, the ones that hurled metal. They

looked long and awkward in her hands, like heavy branches. Khari knew this must be at least part of the help her dream had promised the Lasska would give. The sight of those tools of killing still made her feel sick.

Rahul said in Vaia, “Tama offers these weapons” – he carefully pronounced the Lasska name for them, *vindula* – “as gifts.”

With no prompting from Rahul, Tama offered the first one to Handan. She could tell a hunter when she saw him. Khari tensed. Handan wouldn’t know how to use it, but it felt like a mistake to put such a dangerous thing in his hand as he faced a Lasska.

He laid his spear on the ground to take hold of the new weapon. Hefting it, he stroked its long neck and peered along its length. Khari saw admiration in his face. When he looked up at Tama and jerked his head in a nod, the briefest possible thanks, Khari let out her breath in relief.

Tama did consult with Rahul about the second weapon, which went to Radavan, as the ranking member of the tribe and the closest they had to a Lodestone. Radavan took the weapon more cautiously than Handan had. Khari had a feeling he saw these Lasska things the same way she did: risky and dangerous, like a half-tamed horse that might turn on you and bite or throw you to the ground. Like Handan, though, Radavan admired the weapon, examining the wooden neck and the metal rods where, Khari guessed, the exploding powder went. In careful, formal Lasska, he said to Tama, “This is a fine thing. I thank you.”

Khari expected the third *vindula* to go to Mandhani, as the tribe’s other best hunter. To her surprise, Tama brought it to her instead.

Khari didn’t want to take it. Her skin crawled at the thought of touching that smooth wood and cold metal. Tama looked into her face and said something. Khari shook her head. She would have to learn to speak better Lasska.

Rahul translated for her. “She says the Lamp-Carrier’s dreams are a great gift. She says that such a woman deserves another gift to help her.”

Khari heard his surprise. No Vaia would expect a soldier to offer a fine and valuable weapon to a girl, rather than one of the men, and especially to pass over a hunter like Mandhani. Khari felt all the men’s eyes on her. She ought to accept the gift and show her strength, but she didn’t want this thing. Mandhani should have it.

She looked up at Tama and tried to think of the right Lasska words to make the woman understand why she couldn’t take the weapon. The soldier spoke first, this time slowly enough for Khari to follow.

“A strong woman needs a strong weapon. You must not be afraid.”

Khari had the strange thought that Tama didn’t just mean afraid of the vindula. Though the Lasska was nothing like Vatiri, Khari found herself thinking of her mother-in-truth. *Go, find help, and come back to us. You must do this.*

She reached out. The weapon did feel smooth and foreign in her hands. It was heavier than she’d expected; the metal gave it extra weight. Khari ran her hand along it.

Tama said, again slowly enough for Khari to understand, “I will teach you to use it.”

Mandhani muttered, “What about the old man? Her dream said there would be two Lasska.”

No doubt he felt sullen about the weapon and wanted to challenge the pathdream. Khari didn’t much care, but Tama heard it. She looked to Rahul to translate and answered in a quick rattle of words. The Lasska language sounded much tighter and more cropped than Vaia, with strange dark vowels and sticky consonants.

Rahul said, “The man didn’t choose to come tonight, but he let Tama go when he could have tried to stop her. She says she’s sure he will follow. She says he stands against Shurik too, in his heart, but he doesn’t know it yet.”

Khari thought Tama must be wise, to understand what was in another person's heart. She wondered why this soldier wanted to help the Vaia. Khari thought she would have liked to ask her many questions, if only she could find the words.

Radavan said, again in slow and correct Lasska, "We must camp for the night. In the morning we go west."

They made their camp near the same stand of orena trees where Khari had dreamed of the Lasska soldiers. Tama made herself comfortable on the ground as easily as any of the Vaia.

*In the morning we go west.* Khari lay on her blanket with the new weapon, the vindula, near her. The next steps of the journey looked bright and clear.

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For the next three days, the search party pushed on carefully. The time gave Khari a chance to learn more about Tama.

The Lasska woman had a strange darkness in her. She was quick to anger, ready to fight. On the second morning, Handan, who had watched her through the hours with the eyes of a hunter waiting for a predator's charge, demanded from her in broken Lasska why she would leave her own people to join his. His tone made it clear that the gift of the vindula hadn't changed his distrust.

Tama flared up at once. She challenged Handan to one-on-one combat – "or two on one," she said, and Rahul translated; "me against you and your brother both" – if he wanted to know whether she was a coward who would sell out the people she had come to help. Her temper, even hotter than Handan's, didn't stop the two hunters from wanting to take up the challenge. Radavan stepped in. "We must trust each other," he said in his careful Lasska. "Our Lamp-Carrier tells us this is right."

Khari did tell them so. She had her own suspicions about how the fight would have gone. She was glad Radavan hadn't let Handan and Mandhani make fools of themselves, but part of her would have liked to see it.

On the second evening, after they made camp, Tama took her and Radavan and Handan aside for their first lesson with the vinduli. Handan had already made some experiments on his own, blasting holes in the ground when the group stopped to rest, until Radavan told him to quit scaring the horses and stop wasting the black powder and the metal balls the vinduli threw. Khari knew the hunter didn't want to admit he had anything to learn from Tama, but he grudgingly imitated the Lasska in loading and unloading the vindula, then raising it to his shoulder and firing it at a distant shrub.

Of course he mastered the new weapon first. Radavan handled it more cautiously, but he, too, could soon hit the target shrub. Khari had more trouble. She could load the powder and ball into the chamber, but when she pulled back and released the piece of metal Tama called a trigger, the noise of the explosion made her jump and the vindula slammed back against her like a kicking horse. She lost her aim and the vindula jerked toward the sky and spat its metal ball harmlessly into the air.

Handan laughed at her. Even Radavan suggested that Khari might be too small and light to control the weapon, and a man would do better with it. Khari knew he was thinking of Mandhani. Tama didn't listen to him. She sent the two men away and worked with Khari alone while they still had the orange and gold light of sunset to see by.

"The vindula has a mind of its own," Tama said. "Sometimes you need to tame it." When she spoke slowly enough, Khari could follow her. Tama said, "A spear or a bow only has the strength you give it, but the vindula has its own strength too."

Khari found herself liking this idea. Tama said, “Sometimes you must set your strength against it. When you fire, the vindula will try to push you, but you must not let it. You must stand firm so its strength and yours will work together.”

She had Khari set the weapon down and face her. “I will try to push you backward,” she said. “You must not let me.”

Khari didn’t think that was fair. Tama was much taller and stronger. She could easily knock Khari off her feet if she wanted. Khari squared up as best she could, but Tama suddenly thrust forward and shoved her with both hands. Khari stumbled back.

“No,” Tama said. “You must brace yourself.”

Khari squared up again, clenching her hands at her sides. She and Tama faced each other. Then the Lasska again stepped forward and pushed, harder this time. Khari barely caught herself before she fell.

“No,” Tama said again. “You are strong. You must show me.”

*Maybe I’m not strong enough.* Khari could have pieced the Lasska words together, but something about the other woman’s face stopped her from saying it. Tama was looking at her as if she wanted something, as if she was searching for something in Khari and she was determined to find it.

Again Khari thought of Vatiri. Vatiri, that morning in Pradesh’s tent, fingering the white fabric of her own blouse to remind Khari who she was. She squared up again. This time she watched Tama’s eyes and knew exactly when the push was coming. When it did, instead of trying to hold herself still, Khari pushed back against the woman’s hands, forward and up like a rearing horse, with all the strength in her body.

This time Tama stumbled backward. Khari couldn’t believe she had made the stronger woman lose her balance. Tama’s smile lit up her face. “That’s right,” she said. “Now you have it.”

She had Khari pick up the vindula again. Now Khari knew exactly what to do when she pulled the trigger. *Push back. Don't be afraid.* When the explosion came, she ignored the shock of the noise and set herself against the vindula's recoil. The shrub shuddered as the metal ball slammed into it at the base.

"Now you have it," Tama said again. Khari couldn't help grinning in triumph, though her body ached as if she'd taken a beating.

Tama touched her shoulder. "A strong woman deserves a strong weapon." The same words she'd said when she gave Khari the vindula. In her face now, Khari saw something unexpected. The older woman was proud of her.

The next morning, Tama came up to Khari as the group sat eating a quick meal of tea and flatbread before they broke camp. "I am worried for Silde Orlon," she said. "I would like to look for him."

Khari hadn't expected that. Tama didn't seem like the kind of person who would worry about a fellow soldier with a mind and will of his own. Handan overheard what she said. "Look for him?" he demanded, in Vaia. Like Khari, he understood Lasska better than he spoke it. "You mean you want to go back to those soldiers, and take us with you?"

Khari glared at him. He wasn't a complete fool, she knew that by now, but he never stopped testing Tama and didn't bother to control his tongue. Tama didn't ask Khari to translate what he had said. "Would you come with me?" she said. "Two of us could travel fast. The rest of the group could continue west and we would catch up with them."

She had chosen Khari instead of one of the men. Khari felt a quick thrill of pride at that. Handan, of course, didn't take it the same way. "Don't go with her," he told Khari in Vaia. "You're the most valuable person here. It could be a trap."

It must have been hard for him to call her that. “It isn’t a trap,” Khari said. “If she wants to look for the man, she has a reason. I’ll help her.”

Radavan gave his permission, reluctantly. He knew Khari trusted the Lasska soldier. When they broke camp, Khari and Tama turned back east, while the others went on toward the mountains.

It was a fine, clear morning. Tama had generally stayed quiet with the Vaia group, but now she seemed to want to talk. As they rode through the bright grass, she said, “Did I understand right that when you were a child, they took you from your parents?”

Rahul had explained a little to her about Lamp-Carriers. Khari shaped the Lasska words carefully. Already she could speak the language more easily. “I had to train with another Light-Bearer.” She didn’t know the exact translation of the word any more than Rahul did. “You have to...” She hunted for the right way to say it. “Give yourself to it. You have to learn to be a Light-Bearer, always. So I lived with Vatiri. She became my mother.”

“Did you miss your real mother?”

“When my father took me to Vatiri’s tent, I...” Khari couldn’t think of the word for *struggle*, so she pantomimed kicking out with her feet and flailing at the air with one hand. Tama laughed. “And,” Khari said, “I was not easy for my Amma. But I still saw my mother in the tribe, because everyone is together. And I soon loved Vatiri.”

That thought brought her mother-in-truth’s face up in her mind so clearly that she turned away from Tama before the older woman could see her face. For a little while, they rode on in silence. Then Tama said, “Did I also understand right that you might not have a family of your own?”

“Many Light-Bearers don’t,” Khari said. “We are busy. We have to take care of the tribe.”

Tama turned in the saddle to look at her. “Would you like to have children if you could?”



Khari didn't know how to answer. Lamp-Carriers did what they had to do. She wondered why Tama wanted to know these things. "Someday," she said, "I will probably have a girl to train." If the tribe survived that long. If they could find help in Namora. "She will be like my daughter."

Now she wanted to talk about something else. "Why do you worry today about Bereg Orlon?" The name felt strange on her tongue, and she knew the words weren't quite right.

Tama said, "I'm not sure. I had a feeling." The grass whispered around them. "It was very hard for him, when I left."

Khari thought she understood. "You are friends."

Tama laughed again. "No, I don't think we are. Impera Shurik says those who go against him must die. Silde Orlon knew he ought to kill me."

Khari gasped. Surely she hadn't heard that right. "Kill you?"

"Yes. Because I was going to help you. He knew he should have stopped me."

Khari didn't understand. The Vaia didn't punish by killing. The worst punishment for any Vaia was banishment from the tribe, and the Lodestone would only order that after the worst possible crimes: theft, murder, betrayal of a tribesman or tribeswoman. Why would the Lasska ruler want his people to kill each other? That only left you with fewer people. The tribe's strength lay in its size.

She and Tama rode on through the morning. Then, when the sun hung directly overhead, they ran across a narrow trail through a patch of bare earth and scrub. It came erratically out of the east and veered north.

Tama reined in and dropped down from her horse's back to take a look. Khari joined her. The dust showed the blurred, almost obliterated print of a boot.

"No horse," Tama muttered. "And look here." She pointed to a long scuff mark. "He's hurt. Dragging his foot."

Khari lined up words. “Why is he going north? To follow us, he would come west.”

Tama, still crouched on the ground, looked up at her. “For him, north is home.” Her face showed a strange mixture of anger and pity. “He’s trying to get there.”

“Where north?”

“Thysidich.” She spat the word. “The northern forests.”

The forests? That was weeks of journeying away. Two mountain ranges stood in between. Khari thought Bereg Orlon must have gone out of his senses. Alone and on foot, he would never get there.

Tama mounted up. “He can’t be far ahead of us. Come on.”

They rode on. Khari knew they were close to the place where she and the other Vaia had first seen the Lasska soldiers. When had Bereg Orlon left the rest of his group? When had he gotten hurt? Fear for this man she had never met closed in around her.

Tama reined in again sharply. “Look there.”

Her eyes must be almost as good as Mandhani’s. Squinting into the distance, Khari saw a patch of green, maybe a spring, to the north, and a few low dark shapes near it. Shrubs, she guessed. She couldn’t make out anything else, but as if they didn’t have a moment to lose, Tama dug her heels into her horse’s sides and took off through the grass.

Khari urged her horse into a gallop. The grass whipped at her legs. The green patch grew clearer, and then Khari could see a small glint of water in a clearing, and the spreading shapes of shrubs, and finally, sure enough, another dark shape huddled by the tiny pool.

*The old bear.* Khari thought of the bear in her dream, with its silvering face and scarred muzzle. How strong could this man be?

When they reached the clearing, Tama reined in so hard her horse pawed at the air. She jumped down and threw the reins over its neck. Khari followed, her heart pounding in her throat.

The old soldier lay near the pool, curled up on his side. He wasn't tall, Khari saw, not for a Lasska man, and though he had a stocky build, his hair was almost completely white and his cheeks, stubbled with white hair too, looked sunken. His eyes were closed. Khari couldn't tell he was breathing until she crouched on the ground beside him and saw the too quick, too shallow in-and-out motion of his chest.

"Stupid," Tama snapped. She picked up the old man's wrist and felt for his pulse with two fingers. "Stupid, stupid." Tearing at her shirtsleeve, she ripped off the cuff. "Here." She handed it to Khari. "Soak it in the water, and get my water skin too."

Khari obeyed. Tama turned the old man on his back and unbuttoned his gray coat and the shirt underneath. She snatched the wet cloth back from Khari and laid it on Bereg's forehead, then wiped it across his cheeks and down his chest, muttering under her breath all the time. Khari couldn't catch the Lasska words. Tama wet the cloth again and dampened the old man's hair. As she passed the fabric over his cheeks again, his eyes fluttered open and he caught his breath.

Khari hadn't realized she had been holding her own breath. Bereg stared blankly up at her and Tama. His eyes, she saw, were the gray of the sky during a storm.

Tama said, "Silde Orlon. Do you know me?"

The old man stared at her with no change of expression and Khari wondered if he had lost his mind. Then, so quietly she had to bend down closer to hear him, he whispered a name Khari didn't recognize.

"No," Tama said. "Tama Leben. You know that."

The old man whispered, "Yes."

Khari drew another breath in relief. At least he knew what Tama was saying. Tama held up the water skin to his mouth. "Drink," she ordered.

He took a deep swallow. “What on earth were you trying to do?” Tama said. The words had an edge on them like a spear.

Khari saw that the old man’s left leg looked swollen against the fabric of his pants, especially around the knee. She nudged Tama and pointed to it. The woman nodded grimly.

Bereg Orlon said quietly, “I had to try.”

Tama said something too fast for Khari to understand, but it ended in a question. Bereg replied. The two of them talked back and forth, question and answer. Then Tama rattled out something else. When Bereg nodded, Tama brought her fist down on the ground. This time Khari understood what she snapped: “Mesha guard us!”

Khari wondered what the old man had said to make her so angry. Tama looked around at her.

“Silde Orlon says he left the group the night after I did,” she explained. Even in her impatience, she knew Khari hadn’t understood what she’d heard. “He says he didn’t know what else to do and he had to try to get home. He doesn’t know where the group is, but if they were tracking him, he thinks they would have found him by now.”

Khari thought that was probably right. But the old bear had thought he could get back to his northern forests alone? No, she realized; he had known he couldn’t. She thought how much he must have hurt for that place he loved, that he would have risked such a journey anyway.

Tama said, “He says the younger soldiers wanted to keep on their search and he doesn’t think they had much use for him anyway. They didn’t respect him, but they were afraid of me.” Khari could believe that. Tama said, “He fell two days ago and wrenched his knee. Today the pain got to be too much.” Her mouth made a hard line, and she added, “He says he was waiting to die.”

That explained why she had lost her temper. Khari said, “But he isn’t going to die now.”

Tama shook her head. She pulled out a knife and started cutting at Bereg’s pant leg.

The old man focused on Khari for the first time. In slow, careful Lasska, he said, “Are you the one who had the dream?”

“Yes.”

He asked her name and she told him. The unfamiliar sound of it seemed to confuse him. “I don’t know how I could help you,” he said, “but I am sorry for what my people are doing to yours.”

Tama had cut the pant leg open. “Mesha guard us,” she said again, quietly this time.

Khari looked. The sight of Bereg’s knee turned her stomach. It was hideously swollen, bruised deep purple as if the blood were trying to burst through the skin. The swelling continued above and below the joint, with more bruises in ugly shades of gray and green. He had done worse than wrench this. And he had tried to walk on it for two days?

Tama said, “You won’t walk on this again for a long time. Maybe ever.”

Khari pitied him. A young man would have felt it more, but in the tribe, the elderly held onto their pride and mobility as long as they could. It would be hard for an old man to lose the use of a leg and have to hobble on sticks and have people help him from place to place. Tama said, “You’ll ride on my horse now, and Khari will ride in front of you. He’s strong enough to carry you both. I’ll take her horse. We’ll catch up with the rest of her people by evening.”

Khari thought even the ride might be too much for the old soldier. She and Tama between them helped Bereg up onto the strong Lasska horse, but he winced and his face went even paler with pain as he had to bend the bad knee. Khari sat in front of him, the saddle unfamiliar under her body and the reins strange in her hands. Bereg put his arms around her waist. Khari willed him to stay conscious and hold on tight. Tama mounted the Vaia horse easily, seeming to find bareback riding natural.

“We’ll get back to the others as fast as we can,” she said. “Then we’ll see what we can do for him.”

Khari thought the old man was keeping himself upright by main will. She tried not to see the ugly colors of his leg or the ghastly swollen knee. They headed southwest directly across the open plains.

The horses loped easily, but Khari felt in her own body how each thud of the hooves against the ground must worsen Bereg's pain. She heard no sound from the old man except his rasping breath. She told herself that when they made camp, they would be able to help him. She and Radavan both had some skill with medicines and poultices. More than ever, Khari missed Vatiri, who had nursed her through childhood sicknesses and the pain of her first monthly bleeding.

She could imagine what Handan would say when she and Tama brought the dead weight of a wounded Lasska into camp. Khari didn't care. The distance to Namora still felt much too great, and the rest of the tribe following them felt too vulnerable and exposed, but in Khari's mind, something had shifted. The presence of the two Lasska soldiers with them, the truth of that pathdream, told her they still had hope.

She held onto that hope, along with the words the old bear had given her. *I am sorry for what my people are doing to yours.*

*End of Fourteen Stones, Book 1*

*Story continues in Book 2, The Zhinin*