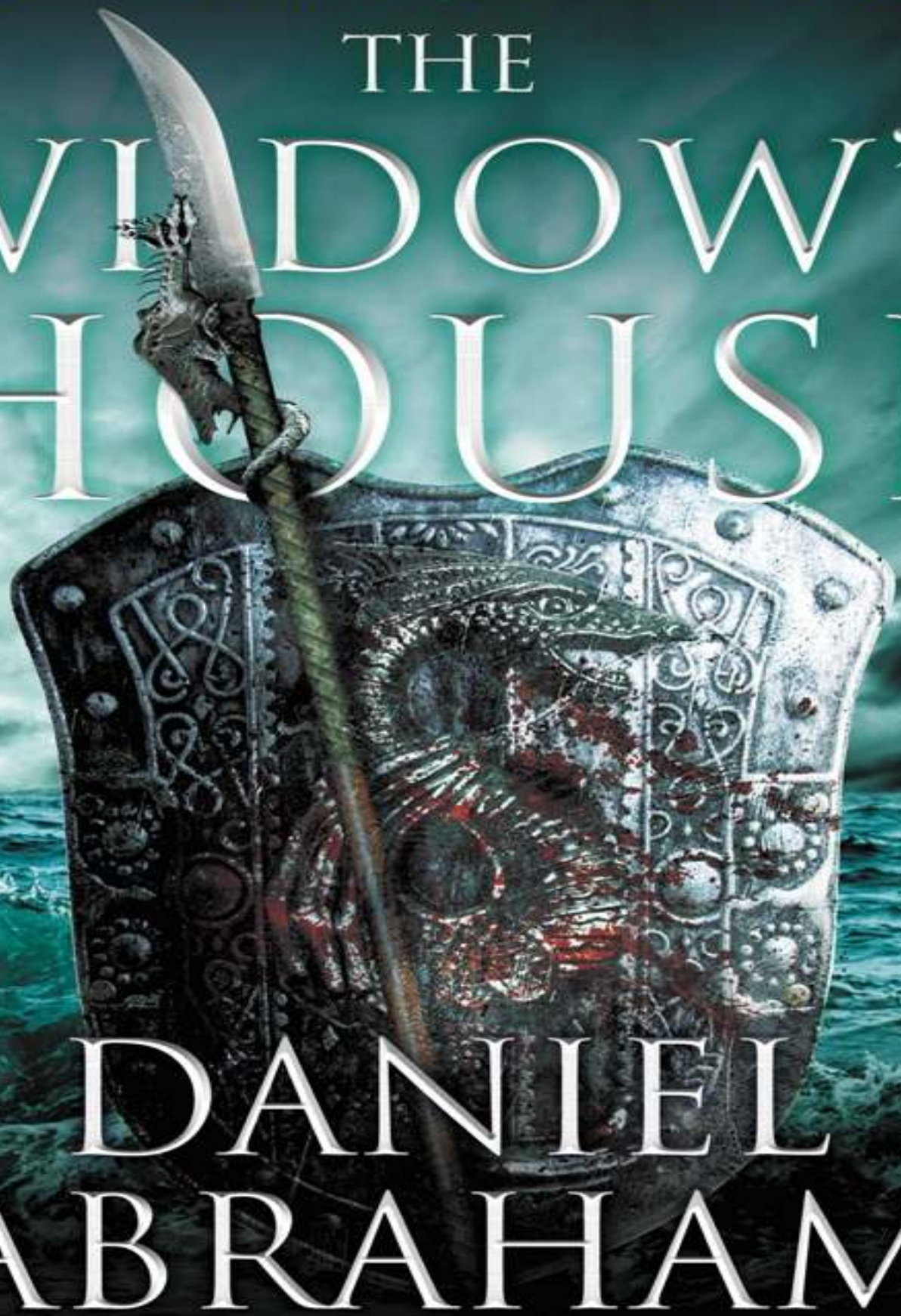


"EVERYTHING I LOOK FOR IN A FANTASY."

—GEORGE R.R. MARTIN, ON *THE DRAGON'S PATH*

THE
WIDOW'S
HOUSE



DANIEL
ABRAHAM

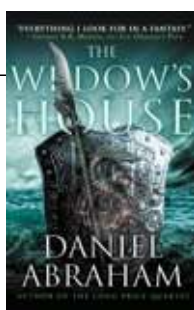
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THE
WIDOW'S
HOUSE

BOOK FOUR OF THE DAGGER AND THE COIN

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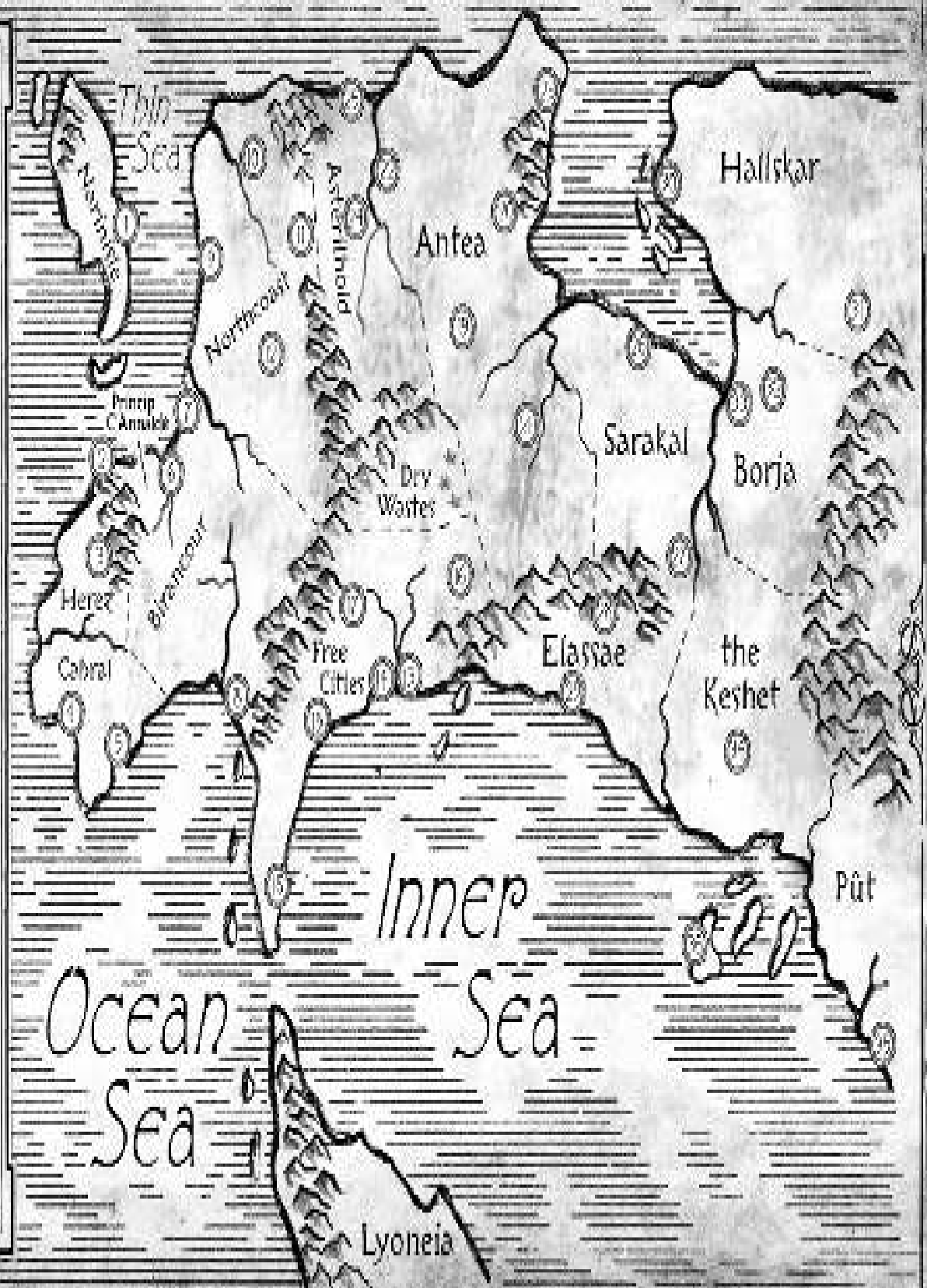
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Prologue

Inys, the Last Dragon

The dragon rose.

With every stroke of his great wings, his sinews creaked. Before—only hours before, it seemed—he had flown this same coast, this same air, with ease. Now, rising above the ice-cracking waves taxed him. The strength he assumed was gone, and the weakness was also testimony that all his worst fears were true. He set his jaw and pressed himself up, up, up, rising to clouds that frosted his scales as he touched them. Brown earth and green water stretched below him. The snow on the ground matched the chill foam on the wave tops, and he labored.

Before—only hours, moments—the war had been at its height. The trap he had set for his mad brother, the last, desperate hope for victory, had been in its final phase. All that had remained was to convince his imperial brother that he, Inys, the last of their clutch, had died in the fall of Aastapa. And then, when mad Morade went to the island to claim his victory, to mount one last attack and drive Morade and his allies deep into the palaces and laboratories, and sink the island.

All would drown as one.

Inys had sent his friends, his lover, and the servants he trusted most to accomplish what he could not be there to complete. His scent would have distracted Morade and turned the whole business into chaos, so he had allowed himself to be buried in a secret tomb, and invoked the silence. Morade would drown, and his unclean allies with him. The madness would end, and those who remained would come and draw him back to wakefulness. Together, they would remake the world torn to ribbons by the war. Or else Morade would survive the trap, and Inys would die there, hidden in his hole, and the world would end in a delirium made of fire and false certainties.

Those had been his hopes and his fears, only hours ago, it seemed. Days at the most. Not centuries. Not millennia.

What's become of Drakkis Stormcrow? he had asked, and the slave—a Firstblood calling himself Marcus Wester—had answered. Drakkis, the most brilliant general of the slave races, had fallen long ago into legend. Her name had become only a story. The Dragon Empire that formed the world—the world was the world—had fallen so long ago that a full history had grown and fallen and grown again since the last time the masters of humanity had taken to the free air. Word by word, the world was unmade before him, and Inys's great breast filled with disbelief, and then fear, and then rage. And yet the Marcus Wester who had woken him had one of the tainted at his side, and so nothing he said could be trusted. But he had also held a culling blade. By what madness could the corruption and its cure start

side by side together if not the erosion of strange ages...?

~~Nothing could be certain unless it was seen and smelled, touched and tasted. If Morade's weapon showed anything, it was that any report or story might be false. The ages might not have slipped away while Inys lay in the silence, dead as stone but dreaming. Morade might live. Erex might. Even Drakkis Stormcrow, short-lived though her race was, might. *Might.*~~

But the thin winter air was empty of dragon scent.

Inys pumped, lifting his body, and thinking against his will that his weakness was evidence that the Firstblood slave Marcus Wester had spoken truth. Inys did not know how many years a dragon had to abide in the silence to grow weak as a hatchling, and yet it had to be many. The silence had taken Sannyn for a century, and she had risen from it as from a night's rest. Her scales had been undimmed by her laughter as bright and as violent. Inys remembered her as he pushed himself—almost inch by inch—it felt—through air he should have owned. So perhaps the ages had passed. Perhaps the world was new and different and strange.

Still, even if it had been so terribly long, was he not evidence that dragonflesh could weather time itself? Might the same silence have taken others? Or perhaps there were new dragons carrying through the generations, and his incomplete death had simply dulled his senses so that he could not find them?

The land came into sight below him again, the coastline familiar only in the manner of a rough outline. The bays and heights had changed from the ones he knew. There, where the great body of the land curved to the north, had once been a thin spine of stone, just large enough for two dragons to perch upon, wings folded against each other, thick tails entwined. There, he and Erex had first pledged their love. Flying above the water now, he saw no sign of it. The waves themselves denied that it had ever been. The panic in Inys's heart shifted, but he would not let himself descend to sorrow.

Not yet.

He shifted his wings, catching the updraft from the seaside cliffs and riding the rough and unsteady air. With every turn of his gyre, more became clear. To the south, a slave town stank of weak, cold fires. Wood and coal. The thin green thread of a slave path snaked across the ground. The island, if it stood, would be north and west. The hive would be out of Inys's way, but it was so near, and the twin spurs of curiosity and fear bit his flanks.

It was a large town, and poorly designed. The slaves that traveled its streets were scattered. If there was a central task for them, it was unclear. There was a harbor with oddly made ships, a dozen or more spaces inside the town walls where work might be done but wasn't. The air had a rich stink of a thousand different things—tanners and dyers and launderers' yards, forge-hot iron and butchered meat. No purpose seemed to organize its streets, no design gave it meaning. Above the town where a true city would have had perches and feeding tables, there was nothing. If Inys had been set to create an image to capture the idea of a civilized animal that had gone feral, it would have been this.

Grief rose in his throat, and he turned away to the north. At the edge of the land, he sloped down for a moment, landing beside a rounded hut that stank of fish and slave. Birds and tiny winged lizards squeaked and fluttered and fled. Fatigue dragged him toward the bare, frost-hardened earth. His wings settled to the frozen ground and he felt no urge to lift them. He felt the despair beginning to stir in his heart and closed his eyes against it. He could not afford to feel anything, not yet. Exhaustion pulled at him, bearing him down toward a black and dreamless sleep. He let it take him.

Dreams came to him, inchoate and disturbing. He felt himself calling out in them, but could not say to whom, or to what end.

"The fuck are you doing on my land?"

Inys opened an eye. The Jasuru slave held a fisherman's axe in his broad hand, and poorly tanned

furs were tied around him for warmth. His black tongue rolled behind pointed teeth, and the bronze his scales caught the sunlight. The fear-smell was rich. Inys opened the other eye.

“Get on! I’m not afraid of you. This is my place, you get out of it!”

Inys popped the slave’s belly with a foreclaw and watched the amber eyes go first wide and then dull. His grandfather’s sister had made the Jasuru centuries before he’d been hatched, but not as a fisher. They had been pen-keepers of the other slaves, freeing the dragons of that generation to take on other work than the dull maintenance of their servant races. They had been meant as honorable servants, halfway between the minimally altered Firstblood and the dragons themselves. As the slave died, Inys recalled the bronze of his grandfather’s sister’s scales, much the same color. The sharpness of her teeth. The blackness of her mouth. It was an aspect of her design that she placed a part of herself within her creation, as he had put something of himself into the black-chitined Timzinae. The weapon he had brought to the war. His answer to the chaos and madness of Morade’s slave-corrupting blood spiders.

He chewed the corpse thoughtfully. The blood was hot and salty, the bones delicate and crisp. It was terrible that the three brothers and clutch-mates had turned the beauty and elegance of design against one another. To think what they might have accomplished if only Inys had not been so young. If his pranks had not struck so near his brother’s heart. Or if Morade, in his rage and brilliance, had not seen how deeply the others had come to rely on the slave races they had created. When Morade’s vengeance came, the blow fell where none expected it. Not in the wide, smoking air of battle, not at first. But in the lowest. With his blood spiders, he maddened the slaves until all order fell away. Only then did the full scale of his vengeance come clear.

And so perhaps there was something of his brother in the corrupted, just as there was something of his grandfather’s sister in the Jasuru. Madness and the beauty of scales in sunlight. There was a poem in that somewhere, if there were any people left to speak poems to.

Inys yawned and stretched. The small meal had revived what little strength he had. He opened his wings, beating at the frigid air, testing himself. Better. Not well, but better. The shock had begun to fade, and hope was not yet dead. Not quite. There was still the island to discover. Sleep and food made the world easier to bear, if only for the moment.

Inys launched himself out over the reddened sea of sunset, skimming close to the surface until he realized that his only reason for doing so was to see his shadow on the face of the water and so feel less alone. After that, he rose. He knew the way to the island. The path to it was in his blood, as it had been in the blood of all dragons. The seat of the empire and the center of the world. The first eggs, it was said, had risen from the womb of the earth there. The first dragons had sung their songs. It had become more than the seat of the empire; it had become the sign and symbol of all that the dragons were. The greatest workshops in the world had been there. Inys still recalled the first night he had been allowed to attend the gathering, perched beside his father’s massive, fire-hot side in the vast cavern where a thousand other dragons on a thousand other perches had listened to old Sirrick declaim on the virtues of physical love. She had been ancient even then, and the beauty of her face and her form and her voice had taken Inys’s breath away. She had spoken of mating—not of taking a mate or choosing a mate or living long with a mate, but the act of coupling in love—with a seriousness and maturity that would forever define for him what it meant to be wise. If he conjured up the memory, he could still feel the rush of desire and awe. Some part of his mind knew that the memory had been drawn out of him part by the suspicion that he would never know the touch of his own kind again, but that thought was still small enough to ignore.

If he had won, that theater would be drowned as a sacrifice to save the world from his brother. The

anyone would destroy that place was beyond even Morade's madness, and so it was the only place that a trap could be set. Inys the Ruthless, they had called him when he proposed it. True enough, but also Inys the Frightened. Inys the Ashamed.

Inys the Desperate.

He made his long way across the water as the brief winter sun doused its flame in the sea. The stars were light enough, and the moon soon rose to add its brilliance. Though he knew what he might expect, the featureless water still uneased him. The first towers should have been here. Then the Chancel of the Orbs. The oracle's spire. He could not help but wonder whether they still stood and he, in his weakness and confusion, had missed his way. It had been his scheme and intention, and still the absence of the island seemed unreal. Its destruction was a crime too vast to contemplate, even were the crime his own.

Twice he circled the wide water, his senses stretched out beyond him. The only sights were waves upon water and stars in the greater ocean above. The only scents were of fish and salt and the promise of storm weather still days away. This should have been the place, he thought, and could not be sure. Not without looking.

He took in a great breath, rose up in the air, and dove. Just before his vast flesh struck the water, he recalled Erex and the joy she had taken in night diving. He pushed the thought away. That she, whom he loved more than he did himself—she, whom he had felt and touched not more than a day before—might be dust, and ancient dust at that, could not be borne.

The cold and the pressure took him in, and Inys flew through the black water. The great, raging furnace of his flesh answered with heat and strength. For a moment, he was sure of himself as if he were young again. As if his childish folly had not ended everything.

And there in the depths, the ruins welled up, larger than dragons. The spires like mountains encrusted with barnacles and ice coral, until it might almost have been natural. But he knew the workings of the sea too well, and the stone had slept through the long ages with him. Here was a mossy spire that had once been Keeper's Watch. There, a sunken disk of jade lay on its edge, which had once held the emperor's perch. He let the water fill his nostrils, straining for any sign of dragon scent, but there was nothing. Nowhere. The slave's words had been true. Inys closed his eyes, and the powerful, rage-filled urge to throw himself into the pits of the sea, to sink so far that he could never again rise, took him.

It took him, and then it passed. His lungs aching with protest, he turned for the surface and the stars. His tail lashed the water, punishing it, and he scented the fear of fish and eels for miles around him. When he broke the surface, his breath burst from him in a vast ball of crimson fire that turned back upon itself as it rose, unseen and meaningless, above the dark water.

The grief-fire of the last dragon lit the empty world.

On the north coast of Hallskar, Marcus Wester huddled beside the fire. To his right, the winter sea churned white ice and black water in constant and unforgiving waves. To his left, a vast wound had been gouged into the earth. Great slabs of black stone stood cracked and splintered in the frozen ground. It sank deep as a cathedral, wider than a warehouse. A dozen men with axes and shovels couldn't have dug the pit in a month. Bursting from its confinement, the dragon had made it between one breath and the next. Marcus leaned forward and threw another length of driftwood onto the fire. Green-and-blue flames danced in the stone circle of the firepit.

His daughter, Merian, would have thought the fire was beautiful, but she was long years dead now.

She didn't think anything was beautiful anymore. He'd never had the chance to show her driftwood fires. Alys, his wife, would have been with the actors, sifting through the new ruins of the dragon cave. That was unfair. She'd have been here, trying to talk him out of his gloom. Likely, she'd have managed, but she was dead too. He couldn't say that was good, but it did save him from the look of pity in her eyes. There was nothing, Marcus thought, as bleak as a success that brings no comfort.

Master Kit's footsteps on the stony beach were as familiar as his own breath. Marcus lifted a hand in greeting without bothering to look up. Kit sat beside him. With the cold, they had all taken to wearing as many of the theatrical troupe's costumes as they could, one over another. Kit was presently dressed as Orcus the Demon King, only with a thick fur hat and a frilly scarf.

"Any sign of the locals?" Marcus asked.

"A few," Kit said.

"Were they angry?"

"Yes."

"Are they coming back with torches and swords?"

"Probably," Master Kit said. "I believe they had gone to great lengths to keep the dragon's existence secret. It seemed to me they were quite... *disappointed* that we'd woken it."

"All right."

"At the very least, I think we cannot expect their help should another storm come."

"It's Hallskar in winter. Another storm is going to come."

"I think you're right."

Marcus poked at the blue fire, sending up a shower of orange embers. Nearby, Hornet called out something and Smit answered back. In the hazy white sky, gulls shrieked and wheeled. The air smelled of cold and salt. "I was hoping it would be more a situation where if we woke him, he could explain how to defeat the spider priests. That was optimistic, wasn't it?"

"It appears to have been," Kit said.

" 'Well,' he could have said. 'It's simple. They can't stand garlic.' That would have been good."

"I rather like garlic, actually."

"You know what I mean."

"I do," Kit said. "We came and searched because they were searching and we didn't want them to find whatever it was they were looking for. They didn't. We woke the beast because we thought the enemy of our enemy might be our friend. It was a risk, and we still don't know where those choices will lead. It's possible that the things we've done will save the world."

"It's possible that Sandr will marry a Haaverkin woman, stay in Hallskar, and make a brood of little tattooed actor babies. I wouldn't bet a penny on it, though."

"I suppose I wouldn't either. But there is hope."

"Only for the hopeful."

"Are you utterly without it, then? Hope, I mean?"

Marcus laughed. "You remember who you're talking with, don't you? The sum of my hopes right now is not to die on a frozen salt coast anytime in the next three days. That's tricky enough. Let's not borrow anything more until after."

"The dragon may still come back."

"No," Marcus said, rising to his feet. "He won't. Not anytime soon."

"You sound certain."

Marcus nodded up at the empty sky. "Can you imagine what it would be like? Waking up to find everything you loved turned to bone and ash, everything that made the world beautiful gone?"

“I take it that you can?”

“Every day the sun rises,” Marcus said. “It takes some getting used to.”

Clara Annalise Kalliam, Formerly Baroness of Osterling Fells

The attic of Lord Skestinin's manor in Camnipol was white. The boards of the floor and the plaster of the walls, the casement of the little dormer window, the shelves built into the wall and filled with crates and sacks. Everything was white, and it caught the winter afternoon sun and made something bright of it. Not warm to the skin, but to the eye. It made the little nest glow.

The mattress she lay on was white as well, and filled with down. The blankets pulled up to her breasts were soft wool, rich with the scent of cedar to keep away moths and now also of sex. They had been packed away for the winter season when the court was all gone from the city, and unpacked now in secrecy. Vincen Coe, the young huntsman who had once been her servant and then her lover and now both, lay spent. His long hair spread around his head like a rich auburn halo, and his breath was deep and soft. Clara Kalliam shifted, using her arm as a pillow, and considered the young man's face. The improbably long eyelashes, the soft lips, the dark scattering of whiskers just under the surface of his cheek. He was a beautiful man. Young enough to be her son. A thousand ranks below her socially. Devoted to her in a way no man in her life had ever been, except her husband.

A pigeon fluttered up against the dormer's glass, cooed in confusion, and flew away again. Clara let her body sink into the mattress, enjoying the warmth and softness and languor of her muscles.

She was not a young woman. Her hair was going white. Her skin not so taut as it had been when she was a girl. Vincen was the second man she'd lain with in her whole life, but she tried not to let her greed of him overwhelm her. A lifetime in the vicious meat-grinder of court politics had taught her that there were a thousand different reasons why people had affairs. To satisfy vanity, or for revenge or out of sorrow. From political necessity or love of scandal. To create the story of one's self. Or to retell it differently.

She had never imagined herself as the sort of woman to conduct an illicit liaison. And even now, and despite all evidence, she didn't. Not really. Vincen was simply Vincen, and the woman she was with him, the woman who had risen from the ashes of her husband's failure and execution, who had lived in a cheap boarding house and been questioned by the regent's private inquisitors, was more real than the sugar-and-plaster woman she pretended among the court. But, of course, both were true. Her soul encompassed both of them.

"We should go," Vincen said. "We'll be missed."

"We should," she agreed.

Neither of them moved to reclaim their clothes, strewn on the white floorboards. Their intimate ritual was not done yet. The words were only the prelude to their parting. She breathed in, savoring the dust-smell of the attic and the chill of the air. Through the window, she could see the great tower of

the Kingspire rising above the city. Even with the mattress on the floor, the spire's uppermost floors were too high to see. Only the red banner with its eightfold sigil, the sign and symbol of the spider goddess's temple housed in its high halls. The cloth shifted in the wind as if it were not only a religious cult's marking but the new banner of Imperial Antea. Perhaps it was.

"Are things well?" she asked.

"As well as can be," Vincen said. "I'm still a new man in an established house. It will be some time before I'm trusted. There was some resentment of Jorey."

"Of Jorey?" she said, her heart moving instantly to her son's defense. "Whatever for?"

"He married Lord Skestinin's daughter just in time to make her the daughter-in-law of a traitor."

"Oh. Well, yes. That."

"Now that he's better known as the regent's right hand than his father's son, it's turning about though."

Clara considered the rafters. A spider's web clung in a corner, empty. In the course of three seasons, she had gone from the Baroness of Osterling Fells to the disgraced wife of a traitor to the mother of the new Lord Marshal. And in among all of those, she'd become a widow and a fallen woman, a traitor to the crown in her own right and a patriot more devout than most of the men who had the running of the empire. The court had left her in the autumn a woman barely rehabilitated, her very name tainted. When they returned, they would find themselves jockeying to be in her good graces. It left her dizzy when she thought about it, like looking up at the stars.

"Things change so quickly," she said, "and so completely."

"They don't, m'lady," Vincen said, taking her hand. He kissed the knuckle of her thumb. "Only the stories we tell about them do."

The dreaded moment came when Clara sighed and pulled the blanket aside. Knowing in the mornings that she might hope for these brief hours, she had adjusted her wardrobe to those garments she could put off and on with only minimal assistance from her servants or Vincen. She painted her face only lightly these days. When she'd lived in the boarding house, she had forgone the practice entirely. She descended from their hidden nest first, making her way by the central stair to the third floor rooms, some of which were her own. Sabiha and Jorey's marital apartments were on the same floor, near the street. Lower down, the guest rooms and the private quarters of Lord and Lady Skestinin, who very rarely used them. He was more often away with the fleet or at his holdings in Estinport, and she was famously allergic to the politics of the court. And likely wiser and more content because of it.

But as a result, the household in Camnipol was small. Its gardens were insignificant, and it hardly commanded more land than it took to place the house. Even the kitchens and stables were small, as added as an afterthought. The house belonged to the commander of the Imperial Navy. Jorey Kallian resided there now as the new Lord Marshal, with his brother Vicarian and his mother, Clara. Other estates in the city might boast more wealth and more beautiful grounds, but none had the military power of the empire in so concentrated a form. Except, of course, for the Kingspire.

"It seems like we do this every day." Vicarian's voice came from Jorey's private study. The tone was on the knife edge between amused and annoyed, as it so often was with her boys. "You panic, you come to me, and I talk sense into you. We settle matters, and then as soon as I walk out of the room you start working yourself back into a lather."

"I go back to look at the numbers again," Jorey said, his tone almost of apology. "They are frightening damned numbers, for what that's worth."

"They don't matter. We didn't win the wars on the back of numbers. Antea is chosen of the

goddess. We're going to win."

"With exhausted men, a season's planting that's relying on the labor of recently captured slaves and twice as much land to hold as we had a year ago, it seems that we've put upon the kindness of the goddess plenty long enough."

"You don't understand," Vicarian said. "She will not *let* us lose."

In the half dozen steps from the middle of the staircase to its end, Clara felt her body change as she adopted her role. Her chin rose and a polite smile took its accustomed place upon her lips. Decades she had not felt only minutes before settled on her like a shawl made from dust. She was the mother of grown men now, a widow, and—though her precise status would give etiquette masters belly knots—woman of the court. She stepped into Jorey's study with an arched eyebrow.

"I can't help noticing that my boys are shouting at each other again," she said, teasing. "Surely you can solve the complex problems of the empire in a civil tone of voice."

Vicarian rose from his divan, smiling. Ever since he'd returned from the new temple within the Kingspire, his priestly robes included the swatch of red and the eightfold sigil, and there was a brightness in his eyes that reminded Clara of men taken by fever. It saddened her to see it, but she pretended it wasn't there. He was lost to her now, but she could pretend he would return one day.

"It's Jorey, Mother," Vicarian said. "He's seen the power of the goddess time after time, but he has a doubter's heart. Come. Help me fix him."

Vicarian took her hand and kissed her cheek. His flesh seemed warmer than the fire muttering from the grate could account for.

"I don't believe I've had authority over Jorey's heart for some time," Clara said. "Though it's sometimes pleasant to pretend otherwise. What seems to be the trouble?"

"It's the war," Jorey said, as a farmer might have said, *It's the crops*. "Ternigan's death leaves everything in a muddle."

Clara smiled. That her plot against Ternigan had borne fruit almost compensated for the fact that she had put Jorey in the old Lord Marshal's place. Before that, she'd sent anonymous letters out, reporting on the plans and ambitions of the regent to his enemies as best she could from her diminished position. So far as she could see, it had been as effective as flinging pebbles into the Division. Tempting Ternigan into treason with forged letters and false promises had deprived the army of one of its most experienced minds, she was glad to hear. That it left her still uncertain how to unseat Ged Palliako and his spider priests without unmaking the empire as a whole could only be expected. *You can't make a rug from a single knot*, as her mother used to say.

"The muddle being?" Clara asked.

"Most of the army sitting in the freezing mud outside Kiaria has been fighting for at least a year," Jorey said. "Some of them haven't seen rest since before Asterilhold. I have to go take command of the siege—"

"Which we should have done a week ago," Vicarian said.

"—but I don't know what to do with them. On one hand, putting a holding force outside Kiaria invites the Timzinae to try to break out. On the other, Father always said wars were won and lost over cookfires, and when I look at the supply reports, pushing on seems like begging the army to break."

"They won't break," Vicarian said. "The goddess won't let us lose. Look at all of the things that we shouldn't have won already. The battle at Seref Bridge? Father should have lost that. Would have, if he hadn't had the priests. And when the Timzinae turned him against the throne, he also went against the goddess, and he lost. How many people said we might—*might*—take Nus by winter. And we took Nus, Inentai, Suddapal, and we're camped outside Kiaria. We wouldn't have stopped Feldin Ma

without Geder bringing Minister Basrahip from the temple. According to your numbers, we should have lost already half a dozen times over, and we didn't. And we won't. I keep telling you that."

"And after you've said it five or six times, it even starts seeming plausible," Jorey said. "But sleep on it, and in the morning—"

"My lords," the steward said. He was a Dartinae, and the glow of his eyes made his expression difficult to read. It seemed to Clara that he was excited. Or frightened. "The Lord Regent has arrived."

Clara and her sons went silent. The man could as well have announced that the Division had closed. It would have been as plausible.

"The Lord Regent is in the south," Jorey said. "Geder wrote that he was going to Suddapal. To get here from there, he'd have had to ride almost straight through."

"I've put him in the western withdrawing room," the steward said with a bow.

A cold dread moved down Clara's spine. There were stories, of course, of Geder Palliako's uncanny abilities. That the spirits of the dead rose up to march alongside the armies of Antea. That King Simeon pushed open his tomb to consult with the regent. To listen to all the tales, Geder Palliako was more than a cunning man. Of course, there were also stories that her fallen husband, Dawson, had been the puppet of foreigners and Timzinae, so there was only so much credence such things could bear. Still, as she walked arm in arm with Jorey, her mind was plagued by a sense of dark miracles just beyond her sight. Perhaps Geder was in Suddapal and Camnipol both. Perhaps distance had ceased to have meaning for him.

Or perhaps he'd simply ridden straight through.

Clara had known half a dozen aspects of Geder Palliako, from the awkward boy lost in the complexity of court etiquette to the frenzied executioner of her own husband, slaughtered before her eyes. He had stood over her as half-demonic judge and by her side as an ally against armed foes. He was a violent and unpredictable man, and she feared and opposed him as she would a wildfire or plague.

The thin, ill-looking being on the divan looked up at them as they stepped in the room. His hair was lank and unwashed. His eyes were puffy and red. He rose to his feet slowly, as if in pain. When he spoke, his voice was thick with tears.

"Jorey. I'm sorry. I didn't know where else to go," the Lord Regent of Imperial Antea said. "I don't have anyone I can talk to. So I came here. I'm sorry if I'm getting in the way."

"Geder?" Jorey said, stepping toward the man. "Are you ill? You look..."

"I know. I look like hell," Geder said, then nodded to Clara. "Lady Kalliam. I'm sorry."

You murdered my husband with a dull blade and apologize to me for looking unwell, she thought. "Lord Regent," she said.

"I thought you were in Suddapal. With..." Jorey glanced at her, embarrassment showing for a moment in his eyes. "With your banker... woman... friend."

"Cithrin betrayed me," Geder said, his lips shuddering with the words. Bright tears spilled down his cheeks. "I told her that I loved her, just the way you said, and that I wanted her. And I told Falco Broot that she and her bank shouldn't be interfered with and she..." Geder sobbed, staring at Jorey like a child with a favorite toy that had broken in his hands. "She worked with the Timzinae. And when I went to her, she left. She was gone when I came. I *loved* her, Jorey. I've never loved *anybody*."

Clara nodded to Geder and then to Jorey, and stepped slowly backward out of the room, drawing the door almost closed behind her. Almost, but not quite. She stood in the corridor, her head bowed and listened as the most powerful man in the world, hero and regent and unquestioned leader of the empire, poured out confessions of heartbreak between sobs. Clara knew the name Cithrin. There had

been a part-Cinnae girl, pale as a sprout and as fragile, who'd come to Camnipol in some previous age when Dawson still lived. Clara recalled the girl offering condolences after Dawson's execution like it had been some particularly vivid dream. Cithrin bel Sarcour, assistant or some such to Paerin Clark of the Medean bank.

The same Paerin Clark to whom she had been sending her letters. She turned away, walking down the corridor on cat-soft feet. A thousand questions buzzed in her mind. What did the bank know? What did it suspect? What was its agenda in undermining Geder's plans to enslave the Timzinae? Some answers she could glean from listening to her boys talk in the morning. Others she might have to take on her best guess and be satisfied. When she regained her own rooms, she sent the servant girl away and lay on her bed, her arms spread wide, and laughed silently. It wasn't mirth that shook her, but relief and fear.

The sun fell, turning her windows to red and then grey and then black. She lit her little bedside lamp herself and called for a servant to set a fire in the grate. She had her supper brought to her—beef soup and a thin shank of chicken. Hardly the sumptuous repast she was used to seeing in the houses of the powerful, but a thousand times better than what she would have had in the boarding house. At times, after all, were hard. Afterward, she lit her pipe and waited, her mind moving in silence.

Vincen came near midnight, his soft cough outside her door as deliberate as an announcement. She let him in and closed the door behind him. The warmth of sexuality and love was gone from his expression. And from hers.

"Well," she said. "I think we have the scandal of the season, and the court not even returned from the King's Hunt."

"Does he know, then? Does the Lord Regent suspect you?"

Clara drew fresh smoke into her lungs, frowning. "I'm not in prison or dead, so I doubt it. And what should he?"

"This can't be good, m'lady."

"It may not be. Or it may be excellent. Until now Geder has stepped from success to success. Even his failures have been recast as master strategy after the fact. This is a humiliation, and what's more, a romantic one. If there's anything Geder understands less than war, it's love. It isn't a picture that can be made lovely by a different frame."

"He won't lose power over it. If anything, people will see him with greater sympathy."

"Worse than sympathy. Pity. The hero of Antea will be remade as a victim. And I will wager you anything you like that Geder will take comfort in it. He is entirely too ready to point out the ways in which he's been wronged, when what he ought to do is make light of it."

"So this... is a good thing?"

"You're the one that said it. It isn't we who change, but the stories about us. This will make him less a creature of awe. Less the great man from legend. It may remind the noble houses that Geder and his priests are capable of losing, and if it does, that will be a very fine thing indeed," Clara said. Her tobacco was spent, and she leaned forward, tapping the ashes out into the fire. "I feel sorry for the girl, though. She's done us a favor, and for payment, she's about to become the most hated woman in the world."

Cithrin bel Sarcour, Voice of the Medean Bank in Porte Oliva

The sea had never been home for Cithrin bel Sarcour. Her life had been grown around the Medean bank as a vine around a trellis, and so the great waters of the world had been one part roadway that linked all ports and one part supplier of fish and salt and oil. Vaster than the lands on her maps, the sea had been defined by where it connected and what could be taken from it. That it was also a place she had never entered her mind before now.

The winter days spent on the Inner Sea were brief, bright, and cold. The nights were black. Ice coated the decks and frost formed on the rigging by moonlight, melting only reluctantly with the coming of dawn. The shore was a darkness on the northern horizon, and Cithrin looked at it from the rails wishing she might never touch land again. Behind her little ship was the wreckage of the five cities of occupied Suddapal. Before her, Porte Oliva. One, a city that had fallen to the murderous ambitions of Antea. The other, her home. And somewhere beyond the black line to the north was Geder Palliako, regent of Antea and leader of the spider priests, whom—for the best of reasons—she had embarrassed and betrayed. Every hour brought her closer to the docks of Porte Oliva and the necessity of facing the consequences of her choice. She would rather have stayed at sea.

Instead, she spent her days walking the decks and her nights in her tiny cabin, a plank across her thighs, writing and rewriting her report to the bank. She had left Suddapal with no warning, and was traveling so quickly that no courier would outpace her. The news of her decision to abandon the cities and their efforts there would arrive with her. The ledgers and books in the chest under her hammock would tell the whole tale, but her report was her chance to interpret it, to shape for the others what she had been thinking and why she had done what she'd done. Every night she tried, and every morning she scraped the ink from the parchment and began again until the morning came with no more nights behind it.

Yardem Hane, the head of her guard company now that Marcus Wester was gone, stood on the deck at her side. His great ears were cocked forward, as if he were listening to the waves. She pulled her black wool cloak tight around her shoulders and let the wind bite at her face. The smoke from Porte Oliva's chimneys rose in the north, white against the winter blue.

"Well," she said, "this will be interesting."

"Yes, ma'am," Yardem said, his voice low and rolling as a landslide. "Afraid it will."

The call of seagulls grew slowly louder as the captain angled the ship in toward shore. "I did what needed to be done."

"Did."

"You'd think that would be comforting."

He turned his wide, canine head to her. "Regrets, ma'am?"

"Ask me again when I've made my report."

The seawall of Porte Oliva rose up high above the surf. As the guide boat led them in through the maze of reefs that made up the bay, Cithrin considered the stone. At the top, narrow openings showed where engines of war could be placed should the city come under siege. She had walked by them a thousand times, and only seen them as a curiosity of the architecture. The world had changed.

Once they reached the docks, she paid the captain his fees and greeted the harbormaster's assistant. The docking taxes were a simple formality, quickly assessed and quickly paid. Yardem and Enen saw to the unloading of the cargo: crates and chests, and the last few Timzinae citizens whom Cithrin had been able to bring with her. Most were children, some barely old enough to walk, sent to a city where they might know no one rather than remain in their homes and be used to force the compliance of their parents. Those who had no one to meet, Yardem rounded up, instructing them to hold each other's hands, to watch for each other, and be sure no one was lost. The sight left Cithrin on the edge of tears.

"To the counting house, Magistra?" Enen asked.

"Not yet," Cithrin said. "You go ahead of me. I think I'll spend a moment with the city first."

"Would you like me to deliver your report to Pyk?"

"Yes, if you'd be so kind," Cithrin said. "It's in the chest with the books and ledgers there. Magistra Isadau is there..."

Enen smiled, compassion softening her grey-pelted face. Odd to think there was a time Cithrin had found the Kurtadam woman's expressions difficult to read.

"I'll tell her you're looking forward to seeing her, ma'am," the old guard said, nodding her head.

Cithrin had come to Porte Oliva as a refugee too young to own property or sign contracts. She had relied for her survival on the protection of men of violence like Yardem Hane and Marcus Wester, the counsel of professional deceivers like Master Kit and Cary and poor, dead Opal, and the training she had in matters of finance that taken the place of love in her childhood. Then, she had needed training to know how to walk as woman walked, and not a girl. Since, she had seen a slaughtered priest hurled before his church, had lived in hiding while an insurrection wracked the city around her, had prepared to debase herself in the name of saving others and found that she could not. She no longer needed to remind herself to hold her weight low in her hips or to pull her shoulders back. She walked through the familiar streets of Porte Oliva as if she were older than her years because it was true now. She had become the woman she'd only pretended to be, and the weight of it was more than she'd anticipated.

Porte Oliva had always been a place where the thirteen races of humanity mixed. Otter-pelted Kurtadam with the ornamental beads worked into their fur. Thin, pale Cinnae moving through the streets like ghosts. Bronze-scaled Jasuru, thick-featured Firstblood. There were even a handful of Tralgu and Yemmu, though Cithrin had rarely seen them apart from Yardem and Pyk Usterhall. And the Drowned swam in lazy pods through the water of the bay. She had spent so much time and effort sneaking Timzinae away from Suddapal that she'd expected to see the mixture on the streets of Porte Oliva changed. It was not. There were some Timzinae as there always had been, but she could not say it was more, and after almost a year in Ellassae, they seemed too few.

At the southern edge of the Grand Market, she stopped for a while, bought a cup of honey almonds from a street cart, and watched one of the puppet shows that made up the civic dialogue. It was a retelling of the classic story of the rise of Orcus the Demon King, with the plot and dialogue changed. The Orcus puppet was in the shape of a Firstblood man in a flowing black cloak, and when the puppeteer spoke his words, they had the accent of Imperial Antea. Geder Palliako's reputation had spread even to here, then, and Cithrin was not the only one who looked on his victories with dread.

The war that the wise had said would never spread so far or last so long had swamped her. The soldiers and the priests had not come here—not yet—but the fear of them had. She wasn't sure if that left her saddened or pleased. Either way, it was good that they knew.

She left before the end of the show, dropping a silver coin in the box at the puppeteer's feet, and passed through the Grand Market. The riot of stalls and sellers shouting each other down washed around her, and she felt herself relax a degree for the first time since she'd stepped off the ship. At one stall, a man was selling expensive dresses with the weeping colors of Hallskari salt dye, and she smiled at them.

Banking and commerce were a dance of information and deception, lies and facts and all the power that gold could provide, and she knew it better than she knew herself. She had seen it in the houses of Suddapal, the courts of Camnipol, the theater cart of Master Kit's traveling company. The Grand Market of Porte Oliva was the expression of it that was most her own. If she chose, she could see it in an innocent might. Men and women jostling one another, merchants in their stalls calling or haggling or adjusting their wares. The queensmen in green and gold strolling through the chaos with bored expressions. Cithrin could see all of that, but she could also see more. The way the price of a bottle of wine in one stall rose when the competitor across the market was too busy to call out a lower one. The way that a bag of coffee was priced ridiculously high so that the bag beside it could be merely exorbitant and still seem a bargain. She could track cutpurses and unlicensed fortune tellers moving in response to the queensmen, finding the balance between turning a profit and ending in a cage outside the Governor's Palace, measuring their chances in feet from the law, in the degrees by which their faces and shoulders were turned away. Cithrin could look at the placement of the stalls, drawn by a random lot at the beginning of each day, and see who had bribed the queensmen who controlled the lottery box. The state of the city was written in the chaos like an expression on a well-known face.

She stepped out the main entrance to the market and into the square beyond it feeling calmer. But only a little bit. The distraction was pleasant, but it did nothing to change the facts of her situation. That accounting would come soon enough. She nodded to the head of the guard as she passed, and he nodded back.

"Good to see you again, Magistra," he said. "Didn't know you'd come back."

"I've only just arrived," she said.

"City's not been the same without you."

"Flatterer," Cithrin said and walked on.

So far as anyone knew, she was and had always been the authorized voice of the Medean bank in Porte Oliva. That she had been underaged when she founded the bank, that the documents of her foundation were forgeries, that her notary, the de-tusked Yemmu woman called Pyk Usterhall, was the true authorized power of the branch were all secrets. Another example of the banker's trade of seeming one thing and being another.

She pushed through the front doors of the café and shrugged off her cloak. The smell of the fresh coffee and cinnamon, bread and black vinegar were like coming home.

"Magistra!" the ancient Cinnae man said, his straw-thin, straw-pale fingers splayed in the air, his grin warm.

"Maestro Asanpur," she said, accepting his embrace. "I'm so glad to see you again."

"Come, sit. I will bring you your usual, eh?"

The café had been her idea. Maestro Asanpur was a Cinnae, as her own mother had been. The ancient man with the one milky eye and the touch for coffee that bordered on a cunning man's art had been happy enough to rent her the use of a back room. The café had become her unofficial office. The

center of a bank that held its business in the centers of power all across the world. Or that had, when the world had been a better place. Before Vanai burned. Before Suddapal fell. Maestro Ansanpur put the bone-colored cup in front of her. The coffee was sweeter than it had been in Suddapal, more gentle. Softened with milk and left simple compared with the complex spices the Timzinae used in the country that had been their home. Sipping it was like being two different people—the woman who during her months of exile had longed for the familiar comforts, and also the traveler to whom that particular comfort was no longer familiar. Asanpur stood at her side, his hands fluttering restlessly against his hip, his face open and bright, waiting for her approval.

Cithrin closed her eyes in pleasure that was only half feigned. “It’s good to be home.”

The old man beamed with pleasure and went back to his kitchens. Cithrin sat quietly, waiting for her body to stop telling her that the ground beneath her was shifting with the waves. The moment on the table felt like peace, but the illusion was all she had, and so she cultivated it.

She had almost a full, pleasant hour before Pyk lumbered through the door. Cithrin had never asked how she had lost the great tusks that rose from most Yemmu’s lower jaws, but without them, Pyk might almost have passed for a thick, brutish Firstblood. She strode up to Cithrin’s side, her eyebrows hoisted.

“Magistra,” Pyk said, making the word a mild insult. “Thank you so much for agreeing to meet me here.”

She meant, of course, that Cithrin should have come to the counting house and delivered the report herself rather than sending it with Enen. Cithrin smiled.

“Where better?” she asked.

“Shall we?” Pyk asked, gesturing toward the door of the private room. Cithrin’s belly went tight. This was the moment she had dreaded. One of them, at least. There would be others, and soon. She rose, her coffee warm in her hand. When she’d sat at the table, Pyk closed the door behind them.

“Well,” the Yemmu woman said. “You’ve got balls. Not the sense that God gave a housefly, but balls.”

Cithrin permitted herself a thin smile. It was a mistake.

“If I were you,” Pyk went on, lowering herself onto the bench, “I would have changed my name and headed out to Far Syramys, and never been heard from again. A favor to the rest of us, if nothing else.”

“Sorry to disappoint.”

“Before I send off my recommendations, I want to make sure I’ve understood this. After Isadau left Suddapal, you used your old love affair with the regent of Antea as cover to build an illegal network that helped Timzinae refugees escape the city.”

“No,” Cithrin said. “I started before Isadau left.”

“Thank you for clarifying that. And then when Palliako—who is, by the way, the most powerful man in the fucking world—started writing you love notes and offering to see you, you left him flat and came back to roost in my city.”

“I’d intended to stay,” Cithrin said. “I meant to carry on the masquerade as long as I could.”

“So why didn’t you?”

Cithrin was quiet for a moment, then nodded to herself.

“I did. I stayed as long as I could. And then, when I couldn’t, I left.”

“Well, at least you’ve got standards.”

“The bank supported everything we were doing there,” Cithrin said. “Isadau first and then my Komme knew about the refugees’ network. He created Callon Cane and the bounty system, or allowed

it to be created. I stayed there because if I hadn't, Isadau would have stayed, and she would have been killed, and she wasn't. I saved hundreds of people from the Antean prisons, and most of them were children. Say what you like about me, we *won*."

Pyk folded her fingers together on the table. Her expression was worse than angry. It was patient.

"We're a bank. When we've won, we have less risk and more money. You've brought less money and more risk. You made the classic error. You saw something you wanted, and you bought it. For you it was Timzinae lives. For someone else it could have been fancy jewelry. It doesn't matter. It's the same mistake."

"It isn't," Cithrin said.

"It is," Pyk said, and her tone allowed no room for dissent. "Our job is to get power. Gather it up. Protect it. Not piss it away so that we can claim the moral high ground."

"We disagree about that," Cithrin said, but in truth she wasn't certain that they did. She could imagine her first teacher, Magister Imaniël, saying all the same words that Pyk did, and they held the weight of truth.

"Komme and Isadau and Paerin and I," Pyk said. "All of us were careful. We invented this Callow Cane for the bounties. We hid the payments so that no one would track them back to us. We saw to it that the contracts with the ships never listed our extra passengers. And you? You rubbed the Lord Regent's nose in shit and signed it with the company chop. You declared war on Antea in my name and in Komme's. And Paerin's and Chana's and Lauro's. If Isadau had stayed, she'd have been killed when they found her out, but we could have claimed she was acting on her own. But you? You brought it here. You brought it to me. The latest of my Cithrin *bel Sarcour* messes to mop up after."

She snorted with a grandiose disgust. Cithrin's jaw tightened and her heart raced like she was being attacked. She forced herself not to move, afraid any motion might end with her fleeing the room.

"The conditions are the same as before," Pyk went on. "You're the voice of the bank in name, but you've got no power. Even if you hadn't lit us all on fire, you'd still be my apprentice for a full year, so that's how it is. You agree to nothing unless I say to. You sign nothing at all, ever. Wear your fancy dresses, go to all the best dinners, be pretty for the governor, but try to take one bit of real power from me, and I'll put you in a hole. I'll forward your report and my recommendations to Carse, and we'll see what Komme wants done with you."

"What will your recommendation be?"

"That we wrap you in chains and festive paper and ship you to Camnipol with a letter of apology," Pyk said. "But that's his to decide, not mine."

She had known. Some part of her had known the moment she lost sight of Suddapal that it could be no different than this. It didn't pull the sting, or if it did, not enough.

"I'm sorry," Cithrin said softly. "I did what I had to do."

"You did *not*," Pyk said. "You didn't *have* to. God didn't come up from the earth and demand it. No one held a sword to you. So don't tell me you *had* to."

Cithrin looked into the coffee, the brown swirl at the bottom. The cup had tiny pores all along the inside, and the drink clung to the texture like a man's cheek a day after he'd shaved. She thought for a moment of Marcus Wester.

"You're right," she said. "I didn't have to. This was what I chose."

"And?"

Cithrin looked up. "And I'm not sorry."

[Geder Palliako, Lord Regent of Antea](#)

I'm sorry, Cithrin said.

In Geder's imagination, she knelt before him, chains around her wrists and an iron collar at her neck. Only no, because then she'd just be saying it because she was captive. Her hands were free, the neck smooth and white. Dressed in pale silks. She would have been beautiful in pale silks. She looked up at him, tears in her ice-blue eyes.

I'm sorry to have hurt you. You were only ever a good man to me, and I betrayed you. I have made terrible mistakes in my life, and this was the worst thing I have ever done.

"Why?" Geder asked the empty room. His private chambers low in the Kingspire were warm compared to the bitter spring cold, but there was still a bit of chill. The oak logs burning in the grate and the orange-white coals in the brazier filled the air with the scents of heat and smoke. They weren't quite enough to keep him from needing blankets. The private guard was stationed outside the rooms so that he could be alone with his thoughts. With his sorrow. "Why did you do that to me?"

Cithrin turned her head away. A tear streaked down her cheek. *They misled me. The Timzinae fought it, I told them that I knew you, that you were a good, honorable man. That I loved you, but they made me follow their schemes. I would have stayed for you if I could. I would have warned you if I could. I am so sorry, Geder.*

He shifted on his pillow, cracking his eyes for a glimpse of the real world. The light in the window was brighter now, but still had the paleness of dawn. He closed his eyes again. With his real hand stuffed unmoving in the warm pocket underneath his pillow, he imagined reaching down to her. Caressing her cheek. She looked back up at him, leaning forward. He caught a glimpse of her small perfect breasts, and even in the privacy of his own mind, he looked away. To imagine her body was too much. Too close. The wound was too raw there, even for pretending. But his imagination had shifted toward that, and now she had her hand on his knee. His thigh.

"I've never loved anyone," Geder said through tears of his own. Real ones now. "You were the only one, ever. I've never loved anyone."

I would do anything to erase the pain I've caused you. Tell me. Tell me what you want, and I will give it to you, if only you'll forgive me.

"You don't have to do anything. Of course I'll forgive you," Geder said, as she slid up into his lap. The pale silks were gone now, and the arousal growing in his flesh brought with it a wave of humiliation so profound that his fantasy broke against it like a wave against stone. He was the Lord Regent of Imperial Antea, and he turned his face to his pillow and sobbed.

A gentle knock came from the door, followed by a young man's tentative voice. "Geder? Are you awake?"

Geder bit his lips, forcing the tears back, and wiped his eyes quickly on the edge of the blanket. “Aster?” he called, forcing pleasure into his voice. “You’ve finally come home. Come in, come in. I’m just... a little cold or something. Tired. Come in.”

The prince and future king stepped into Geder’s bedchamber. He was thin and tall, his face darkened by days on the hunt. If he seemed not perfectly comfortable in his skin, it was as much his age as the situation of the moment.

“You’re... sick?” Aster said. His voice held a tightness that didn’t conceal his fear so much as show that he wished it concealed. He had seen his mother die when he was a child and his father wither and fail. All of Antea would one day be his, and it was easy to forget that he was an orphan placed in Geder’s care. Geder had agreed to be the steward not only of the Severed Throne, but also of a boy’s passage to manhood. He saw himself for a moment as Aster did: red-eyed, wasted by travel and despair, tangled in blankets and his night clothes. Of course he would think Geder ill. Of course the prospect would call up other ghosts. It shouldn’t have happened this way. To make up for it, Geder made himself bounce up out of bed.

“I’m fine,” he said. “I rode too hard from Suddapal, and I stayed up too late reading last night. No, I’m nothing but a big sleepyhead. Get me breakfast and coffee, and I’ll take on the world.”

Geder spread his arms wide and gave a comic roar. Aster smiled, the fear at bay again. For now, at least. That was good enough. Hold away the fear and pain long enough, and perhaps Aster would grow out of it. And really, what else was there to do about it? If there was a magic for erasing the cruelty of the world, Geder had never found it.

“Well. Good,” Aster said.

“How went the hunt? I assume it’s finished and everyone’s stopping at their holdings again before the court season starts?”

“Caot’s come to the city,” Aster said. “And Daskellin left his holdings early for something.”

“The war. Nothing to be concerned about. I’m meeting with him later.”

“Minister Basrahip?” Aster asked as Geder walked to his dressing room. There had been a time the servants and guards had been on hand to strip him and wash him and dress him, treat him like a baby and laugh down their sleeves at his belly. Now he dressed himself. Power had some compensations.

“He’s come with me,” Geder said, pulling off his nightshirt. “He went up to the temple to commune with the goddess, I suppose.”

Geder pulled off his night clothes and stepped quickly into his undergarments. The cool air made him feel his nakedness more clearly, and he pulled on the robes he’d been wearing the night before. From the pool of cloth he’d left them in before going to bed. They were wrinkled and had a bit of brown sauce on the cuff, but he could have the servants bring him something better before going out of the private rooms.

“I think I didn’t do him any favors when I put the temple so high in the Kingspire,” Geder called as he tied his stays. “I was thinking it would be safer and exalted, but it’s a damn lot of stairs.”

“He doesn’t complain,” Aster said. “And when the sky doors are open, the view’s like being on top of a mountain.”

Geder stepped back out to the bedchamber, smiling. He hadn’t made himself smile in weeks. Not since the day he’d ridden into Suddapal. There was no one in the world who could have coaxed him into feign happiness except Aster, and the pretense carried perhaps a thin version of the truth with it. His gaiety was a loose scab on a festered cut, but it was in place for now. And if he wasn’t whole, he was able to pretend he was. That had to be enough.

“Come! Let’s get a good table, make those lazy bastards in the kitchen send us a platter of

something decent, and you can tell me all the gossip I missed. Who took honors in the last hunt?"

~~For three hours, they lingered over the breakfast table. Aster told tales of the King's Hunt—which had taken what honors, the incident of the singer who'd celebrated the victories of Lord Ternigan on to find out the former Lord Marshal had been killed for a traitor the week before, and even a surprisingly bawdy story about a young cousin of Lord Faskellan and her handmaiden that left both of them giggling and half ashamed. The winter world of the King's Hunt was done now. The lords and ladies of the court would return to Camnipol shortly, and the work and glamour of the court season would begin. Some of the stories of the winter would persist, others would be forgotten, and the most serious blood sport of the war would once again take precedence. They didn't speak of it directly, but Geder knew that his exposure of Ternigan's duplicity and treason had been the scandal of the hunt. It went as the destruction of his previous enemies had, his prestige in the court would only increase. And the story of what Cithrin had done to him would be common knowledge as well.~~

To his surprise, Geder was almost glad that they would all know how he'd been hurt. Sitting over the ruins of their eggs and oats, laughing over the image of a young noblewoman trying to disentangle herself from her servant girl, Geder had no way to speak about the pain he'd carried since the betrayal. Aster was too young, and he had loved Cithrin too. Had missed her company. Geder wanted to shield the boy from as much of that hurt as he could, and once there were men of the court about again, there would be opportunities to commiserate.

He could already picture himself being strong and stoic. If he practiced it enough, it might even start to be true. And he remembered the relief of telling Jorey. His best friend, his oldest companion, and the only one that Geder really trusted. There wouldn't be anyone in court as good as that to speak with. It would have been too much to ask for.

And, once the day had passed its midpoint, it was to Jorey Kalliam that Geder went.

The council chamber seemed bare and austere. The formed-earth maps that showed the rise of mountains with miniature hills Geder could step over and lakes and seas with basins of blue glass beads had been passed over in favor of charts and papers. This was not a conversation about tactics but strategy. Jorey stood at the table, his expression focused and serious as a man twice his age. Captain Daskellin sat beside him. Geder had expected only those two, but Lord Skestinin—Jorey's wife's father and commander of the fleet—sat at Daskellin's side, and Minister Basrahip smiled placidly at the table's foot, his gaze on the window grate, as if such considerations were beneath him. Lord Mecelli was still on the long, slow road back from the field, touring the captured cities and towns of Ellassae and Sarakal. Geder wasn't looking forward to the man's return.

"Lord Regent," Daskellin said, rising as Geder entered. Skestinin also took his feet. Geder waved them back down.

"No need for formalities," he said. "We've all known each other long enough to dispense with that, I think."

"As you wish, Lord Regent," Skestinin said.

"Where do we stand?" Geder asked. The men were silent, each seeming to look to the others to speak first. Geder chuckled. "What is it? Is there a problem?"

"I'm worried," Jorey said. "The problem is that I'm worried."

"Don't be," Geder said. "I know this is your first large command, but—"

"Not about that, actually," Jorey said. "We have several issues we need to address, and from the reports I've had from Ellassae..."

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